

Shabbat Behar-Behukotai 5783

Wherever You Go This Summer, Do Something Jewish

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Shabbat Shalom.

Who's ready for summer? Is anyone *not* ready for summer? Has anyone here been to Hilton Head Island?

When I was growing up, my family took an annual summer vacation to Hilton Head, South Carolina. We stuffed the Mercury Sable station wagon with our bags, and filled up the rooftop carrier on top with even more bags for our 14-hour car ride to that beautiful beach. And it was worth it. Our trip resembled that of many other families: days at the beach, sunscreen, sunburns, riding the waves, jellyfish bites, mosquito bites, tennis, biking around the island, Harbor Town, and more. But our trip was different from many beach-goers around us in at least one way: On Friday night, we had Shabbat dinner because it was simply a reflex for my family. Our silver Shabbat candlesticks at home were very large, and it was impractical to pack them. So my mother brought with us two candles, and at the beach house she tore out a sheet of tin foil, scooped out two dollops of peanut butter on it, and inserted the two candles into the two peanut butter globs. You do what you have to do. Each year we vacationed with family friends from Atlanta, who were very proud Catholics. Maggie was my friend who was my age, and she was spellbound by the Friday night blessings and rituals - and perhaps the peanut butter. She turned to her parents and said, "Mom, can we be Jewish too?"

Of course I remember celebrating Shabbat every week at home, which was as automatic as day turning to night. But I have equally vivid memories of celebrating Shabbat *away* from home. Especially the places where it was *more* challenging and unusual, like Hilton Head with its peanut butter candle holders, or on the back of a cruise ship with a fire extinguisher at the ready. Those memories are even more distinct. Shabbat at home was always beautiful. But there's something even more beautiful

about Shabbat *away* from home. In that moment, you feel you have brought your home with you somewhere else in the world.

Finally, the Chicago weather has warmed up - for now. And many of us are preparing for the summer: graduation is approaching, camp is getting closer, we are making travel plans for trips in the coming months. I'd like to add something to your travel plans: When you leave town this summer, wherever you go, consider making plans to visit a synagogue on Shabbat. And the farther away from home, the better.

I remember being on vacation with my family in Venice Italy when I was in high school. On a Friday we checked out the Venice ghetto and its largest synagogue, a dusty relic of a place, cordoned off by red velvet ropes and hundreds of years old. It was long and narrow because of all the canals, and it had what looked like two Bimahs, one for the Ark and reading Torah, and the second at the other end for the service leader. It looked like one of those rooms in a museum that shows: this is what the world used to look like in the past.

At the very end, our tour guide said this was actually an active synagogue, still in use by the local Jewish community every Shabbat. That gave my parents an idea. Every Saturday morning we always went to synagogue, and the next day we would do the same, just a few thousands miles away.

Saturday morning, the room was the same, but the atmosphere was entirely different. The place was packed with people and pulsated with life. Overnight, it seemed as if the space had gone from black and white to full color. Of course I didn't speak any Italian, though I could guess who the Humash referred to when it mentioned Abrama, Isaco, Giacobi and Giuseppe. But because I knew Hebrew, I could follow along and sing along. Some parts of the service were different, but most of it was the same as my shul at home, the same as today at Beth El. At the end I said Shabbat Shalom to people I did not know, nor whose language I spoke. But after services together, we were not strangers, just family who had never met before. Because I knew Hebrew, I felt at home

away from home. On that trip to Italy, *this* was the standout memory for me decades later, and for my family as well.

Each of you has the opportunity to find a synagogue over Shabbat wherever you go this summer. It may not be Italy, but I bet you will come away feeling deeply satisfied and inspired about checking out a different synagogue. And you will feel connected to our people all over the world, not just your own familiar synagogue community. And if you're a kid or teenager who spends the summer at Jewish summer camp, whatever camp it is, I bet Shabbat is truly a special highlight of the week.

These stories are my full answer to a question which many of us have wondered: why must we pray in Hebrew? If Hebrew is not our native language, why not just pray in English? Isn't it important to understand the words we say? Doesn't G-d understand every language?

To state the obvious: Yes, G-d understands every language, and yes, it's vital to understand the words we say. When we pray from the heart, language should not be a barrier. Indeed, for my own personal prayers I use English. But *communal* prayers are something else entirely. If I only prayed in English, and the Italians only prayed in Italian, then we could never participate in the same service. Same with Israelis and Hebrew. If I only prayed in English, each language is a border that cannot be crossed.

Indeed, it's vital to understand the words in the Siddur, which is why we should learn Hebrew. Not easy at all, but worth the climb up the mountain.

It may surprise us to learn that the Mishna itself, the first Jewish law code of 2000 years ago, permitted reciting certain prayers in the vernacular, while insisting others remain in Hebrew. Here's part of the Mishna in Sotah:

"These are recited in any language: the *Shema*; the *Amida* prayer; and Grace after Meals. And these are recited only in Hebrew: the Priestly Benediction; and the blessing on the Torah recited by the High Priest on Yom Kippur; and the portion of the Torah read

by the king at the conclusion of the Sabbatical Year.”

Why must the priestly blessing be said in Hebrew? Perhaps it's because it concludes with Shalom, a word everybody knows. Peace gets the final word, the last impression. But in the Jewish tradition, peace is more than the absence of war. Shalom has a root of Shalem, Shin Lamed Mem, which means “whole, full, complete.” In other words peace is a fullness, a completeness. That can only come across in Hebrew, not in translation.

Speaking of Hebrew, what does that word mean anyway? Ivrit is the language of Abraham's people, and in Genesis he is referred to as Avram Halvri, Abram the Hebrew (Gn. 14:13). The Midrash offers three explanations for this expression: one connects the term Ivri with Noah's grandson Ever. It designates family lineage. The second connects Ivri to the word Eiver, which means "beyond," recalling Abraham as the one who came from beyond the Euphrates River. It designates place of origin. The third refers to Abraham's non-conformism - all the world was on one side theologically - Eiver - while he was on the other. It designates spiritual distinction. Family, geography, unique relationship with G-d- these continue to shape the Jewish people.

To return to the Mishna about the language of prayer: Even though some prayers may technically be recited in English, the goal is always to master the Hebrew. To know Judaism only in translation is, to quote the famous Israeli poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, similar to kissing a bride through a veil.

In 1845, the forerunner to Conservative Judaism was a man named Zacharya Frankel. Originally he was part of a group of Reformers, what would become the Reform movement. But at one point he encountered a dealbreaker: He split with the early Reformers over the issue of Hebrew in synagogue services. The early Reformers had endorsed a resolution saying synagogue services could be led in the vernacular, instead of Hebrew. But for Frankel, Hebrew was non-negotiable. It was the glue that connected him and the Jewish people to each other all over the world, and to each other through time as well. Since then, maintaining a commitment to Hebrew has been a pillar of

Conservative Judaism.

If you are, say, a student in Hebrew school or even a Jewish day school, those answers may seem not satisfying and not worth the effort of learning a new alphabet and new language. As I said, it's really hard. But when that student ventures off to another part of the country or even the world and finds himself able to pray because they know Hebrew, their heart will understand. They will feel at home, and the effort will make sense.

This summer, let us remind ourselves as we people travel the globe, that we are truly a global people as well.

Shabbat Shalom.