

Pesach 5779

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My Last Day in Galut & Arrival in Israel

Approximately three thousand five hundred years ago, seventy direct descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov left Eretz Yisrael for the exile of Egypt as individuals within a family. Two hundred and ten years later their descendants left Egypt numbering in the millions to return home as a nation. Two thousand years ago we as a nation were exiled from our land to eventually return home as individuals from 100 different lands to merge, coalesce and regroup into the great nation that we are today, as each and every oleh brings with him the richness of their worldly experiences.

The following is an excerpt from my forthcoming autobiography (be'ezrat HaShem) depicting my last day in galut and arrival in the holy land.

Feiga and I were greeted at Idlewild airport (today's JFK) by our many relatives and friends. I recall looking around and wondering, how many of them believe that we will return to America after facing the realities of life in a country beset with economic hardship and security dangers; while I believed how unfortunate they are for not wanting to face the challenges of rebuilding our ancient homeland.

The public address system announced that all passengers on the EL AL flight to Israel should now embark on the plane. After

last minute kisses and hugs we descended into the warm June evening air to enter into the cavernous jaws of the winged “eagle” that will bring us home.

The spirit of Israel pervaded the plane. Israeli music was playing and the crew, and most of the passengers, were speaking Hebrew. The fact that I was able to understand and converse with them brought home to me the new reality of our lives. The moment of truth arrived. The plane rolled away from the boarding area. We saw our family and friends waving from the visitor’s deck, as the plane began to taxi down the runway to prepare for takeoff.

Shemot 19,4:

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבִי עַל כַּנְּפֵי יְהוָה

“And I shall carry you upon the wings of eagles.”

“How ironic”, I thought, “that that which was prohibited for the great Moshe Rabbeinu, who for all his suffering wanted nothing more than to enter the Holy Land – is now so readily granted to us”.

In addition to the requirement that we follow the Torah, every Jew has unique goals in this world which only he or she can fulfill. One of my goals, I believed, was to bring my family back to its roots in Eretz Yisrael. The first steps were taken that night; the final one would be taken ten years later, when my parents, Feige’s parents, and Meir and his family came on aliya. Feige and I crossed the bridge but when the rest of the family came, the bridge was burnt.

After a stopover in France and Italy, the plane took off for its final destination – Eretz Yisrael. As we flew over Cyprus,

I recalled the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda (Tractate Gitiin 8a) that the western border of the Holy Land extends far over the Mediterranean Ocean. Thus, we are now essentially over the Holy Land. A thin line of land became visible to the east. As it loomed larger, the city of Tel Aviv appeared. It was very much smaller than today and surrounded by intermittent patches of green fields and yellow sand dunes. The plane descended and made a turn to put it on line with the runway.

Those first few moments will never fade from my memory. The plane touched down. The doors opened and the first gusts of avira de'eret zisrael (the air of Israel – which grants one understanding) filled my lungs. We descended the stairs and were greeted by an Israeli policeman; a real live Jew in a handsome uniform greeting us in our ancient revived language – the language of the holy Torah.

We knelt down to kiss the dust about which the great Yehuda HaLevi wrote in his classic poem

:אֶרֶץ אֲדָמָה וְאֶרֶץ אֲבָרָה

'אֶרֶץ אֲדָמָה וְאֶרֶץ אֲבָרָה אֶרֶץ אֲדָמָה וְאֶרֶץ אֲבָרָה אֶרֶץ אֲדָמָה וְאֶרֶץ אֲבָרָה'

"I shall fall prostrate on your land and shall greatly desire your stones and shall love your dust".

We took our first four steps in the land of Israel, the reward for which is a portion in the World-to-Come.

The airport consisted of a modest building with a tower. The arrival hall was a small room with a long wooden table resting on removable legs, with a ceiling fan which made more noise than air. I felt insulted that the customs official was inspecting my bags for smuggled goods – as if I, Nachman Kahana, would do something against the law of my newly-adopted land.

Waiting for us was my aunt Shoshana, her son Ya'ir and a representative of yeshivat Nechalim where I was scheduled to teach. We arrived at my aunt's home in Ramat Gan, where we ate our first meal in Eretz Yisrael. I never realized that a tomato could taste so good, that a modest cucumber could be as appealing as a frankfurter with mustard and sauerkraut, and that a glass of water could be as delightful as fine champagne. It was like eating the manna in the desert, where one's thoughts influenced the taste of what was being eaten.

Early the next morning, I went into the street and met a man who I asked in Ivrit "where is there a bet kneset?" He answered with directions which I understood. I arrived at the central bet kneset of Ramat Gan where I took my place with the other kohanim in reciting the Kohanic blessing. Though I was used to reciting it only on holidays, however, this was truly a holiday.

That morning, we went to Tel Aviv where I learned my first and most fundamental lesson in absorption. We went to the main branch of Bank Le'umi to open an account. In America, banks are conservative institutions where the clerks and clients are expected to act with great reservation and speak no louder than a whisper. Despite the June heat, I was wearing a suit and tie as I was accustomed to dress in America. I approached one of the clerks who was wearing short pants and an open shirt. He began filling out the necessary forms while holding in one hand a tomato sandwich which was dripping on the form. I thanked him for his help, which went further than he could have ever imagined. I removed my jacket, took off my tie, rolled up my sleeves, and exited the bank a different man than when I had entered.

On the second day after our arrival in Eretz Yisrael, we went up to Yerushalayim. I was drinking in the rapidly changing landscape, from coastal plain to agricultural areas, from the beginning of the Judean foothills, to the rapid climb on the Judean mountains from sea level to 800 meters. We were

traveling in a shayrut (taxi service) in a stretch Desoto limousine the likes of which I had never seen before. My inquisitiveness got the better of my manners, and I asked the driver how he obtained such a magnificent car? He replied, "I enrolled my two sons in a missionary school in Jaffa and they helped me purchase the vehicle".

I was overtaken by a mixed sense of disbelief and disgust. Here I was sitting in a car purchased by the sale of two innocent Jewish souls, by a father whose greed had made him sell his own soul to the devil, and here in Eretz Yisrael.

After arriving in the holy city and walking around for several hours, we entered an imposing building called "Heichal Shlomo", on King George Street (Israel is the last former colony of the British Empire to retain a major street so named). At that time the building housed the Israel Chief Rabbinate, and the appellate division of the religious courts. We entered the court, where an elderly couple were noisily taking their turn in mutual accusations. They were the surviving son and daughter of their deceased mother and were arguing over the estate. The daughter accused her brother of never really loving 'mama', but was only after her money, and the brother retorted with similar barrages of sibling niceties.

Here too, I was gripped with a feeling of great disappointment.

Little did I know that G-d and His hashgacha prateet (divine providence) was "setting us up" for a great lesson.

We left Heichal Shlomo and found ourselves standing in front of a lovely white building on Betzalel street – the municipal community center of the area (Beit Ha'am). The door was closed, but I knocked anyway. The custodian appeared and was seemingly annoyed because his siesta between the hours of 2:00 and 4:00 P.M. was disturbed. To his question of what we

wanted, I replied that we are olim chadashim (new immigrants) who had arrived just two days ago. In a more affable tone of voice, he ushered us inside and said that he has something very interesting to show.

We ascended three flights of stairs and arrived in a very large hall with rooms off to the side, at the end of the hall was a barred area that contained a perfectly made bed military style, a night-table upon which rested a book and a book mark, with a pair of neatly placed slippers and several other items. What made the entire scene look like a Kafkaian apparition was the fact that this small chamber was enclosed with bars. At that moment I heard the words, "You are standing before the cell of Adolph Eichmann."

Eichmann, who organized the transports of millions of Jews from all parts of Europe to the various extermination camps, escaped to Argentina and was brought to Israel by the Mosad where he was put on trial and sentenced to be hung for crimes against humanity and against the Jewish people. The film of the court proceedings of that day were flown to the States, and we would be "frozen" to the television every evening to relive the unprecedented tragedy which befell our nation at the hands of this man Eichmann and too many like him. He was hung one week before we came to Eretz Yisrael; his body was incinerated and the ashes thrown into the wind over the ocean, and here was I standing before the cell which housed the "master butcher" of my people.

At that moment I felt the hand of hasgacha prateet. The message was loud and clear: there were and will always be individuals like the taxi driver and the brother and sister whose arrogance and greed pervert their conduct. But the collective entity of a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael stands higher than the human frailties of its individuals. Only such an entity, which consists of a Jewish army and covert organizations such as the Mosad, with courts of law and a national conscious, is capable of actions on the highest

national level.

It is our religious duty to become part of that collective and imbue it with the spirit of Torah, so that its actions will be a kiddush HaShem on a global level, which indeed is in our hands if enough G-d fearing Jews come home.

Among the things which I remember when standing before Eichmann's cell, one stands out and affects me to this day – the book. There was a book on the table and within its pages stood out a bookmark. When he was taken to be hung, this “master” of order and discipline returned the bookmark to its place, because to do otherwise would not be “correct”.

He was hung in Ramle prison. His ashes were thrown into the ocean, as the Gemara relates (chapter 5 of Gittin) regarding the ashes of Titus, the Roman general who destroyed the Holy Temple. Titus ordered his body to be burned and the ashes thrown into the ocean, so that the Jewish G-d will not be able to inflict punishment upon him. The Gemara relates that daily G-d retrieves the ashes, inflicts punishment upon the body and returns it to ashes until the following day.

From here we continued up Jaffa Road, in an easterly direction towards the Central Post Office. About one hundred meters after the post office, a high wall blocked any advance. This was the wall that the Jordanians erected in order to divide the holy city into two – the eastern part which included the Old City and the western part called the “New City”. This wall stood for the first nineteen years of the State of Israel, and it was not rare for a Jordanian soldier to shoot at random at a passing Jew. At that time there were only two cities in the world divided by a wall, which were eventually torn down – Jerusalem and Berlin. The destruction of the Berlin wall resulted in uniting east and west, when the Jerusalem wall came down after the Six-day war, heaven and earth became united.

From there we made our way to Mount Zion, where we climbed a high minaret from which one could look into the Old City. I was thinking to myself that maybe my grandchildren or great grandchildren will have the opportunity to stand before the Temple Mount. It did not enter my thoughts that in just five years, I will have the monumental privilege of being able to stand on the mountain where my Kohanic ancestors served G-d in the Holy Temple.

I am writing this 57 years later, who could have believed!? We are so thankful to HaShem for all He has blessed us, including children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, all of whom are here in Eretz Yisrael, and for all the miracles He has shown us to this very day.

The holiday of freedom – Pessach – appears in two forms. There is the Pessach of the Jewish nation when we are freed from foreign domination, and Pessach of the individual Jew who is freed from state of galut.

The exodus from Egypt was the national Pessach, but every Jew who escapes the punitive state of galut to return home experiences his personal holiday of Pessach.

Chag Pessach kasher vesamayach.

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