

I have struggled, almost since I left for my holiday in Australia, to think what I would talk about today. It was as Michelle and I were leaving that the conflict in the North of Israel and Lebanon began. It was difficult enough keeping abreast of news as we travelled around Australia, let alone consider what I would say that would sound vaguely intelligent or thought provoking. I know many of us here today have family and friends who we are thinking about at the moment.

Then as we flew back to Heathrow on Thursday we read, mid-flight on the BBC website, about the arrests in Britain and the terrorist plot. Could I muster anything sensible to say about this on a Shabbat morning, suffering jet lag and having spent 24 hours on an aeroplane less than two days before.

Probably not, was my conclusion and it probably would not be appropriate anyway. I am devastated by the events that have unfolded around us in the last four weeks. I am depressed by how bleak the future looks. And it was in this low that I turned to the Torah portion today. And there in front of me was a memory of a different Israel – not one on the television where the only name we know is that of the reporters, not one painted in black and white, not one full of horror and violence. Let me take you back two years...

Within the first day of arriving in Israel for a year of study in my third year of training I had to find a flat. So I set off with my intrepid future housemate (a friend from England) to search through lists of flats for rent.

Day one – we set off to look at a flat that we've been told about by a website listserve. It's on Yochanan Ben Zakkai, which for those of you who don't know is towards the South of Jerusalem. If you've been to Kol Haneshama – one of the Reform Synagogues in Jerusalem then you will have probably crossed the road where Ben Zakkai begins. It's still August and the sun is shining – I love it.

Until we decide that to get acquainted with the city we need to walk the streets. Sure, it was a wise thing to do – but as we set off the temperature rises and the perspiration begins to roll off my forehead. When we finally get to the flat, having walked for 40 enjoyable sweaty minutes (not forgetting to drink plenty of water), we knock on the door and go in.

It's a very small two bedroom flat with a common area. Only thing is there is a family of seven Americans living there at the moment. Two adults and their five children – talk about cramped. It's not suitable – I'm no snob but this was a run down building and poorly furnished. We politely make our goodbyes and turn to the uphill walk back to our youth hostel accommodation. It's midday. The exhaustion of packing and flying the day before is catching up on us and when we finally get back to our room I flake out on the bed and sleep until the early evening.

Our next flat was found, after much unsuccessful email correspondence, by paying a small fee to an agent for their

accommodation lists. Within minutes we have identified a suitable flat in the right location and promptly telephone the landlord.

*Shalom*

*Shalom*

*Errr efshar l'daber im Avraham Chovav b'vakesha*

*Ken, m'daber Chovav*

*Err, yesh lekha dera l'haskir*

*Etc*

The stilted Hebrew must have been painful even for a kindergarten child, but as we were to discover our landlord did not speak a word of English (at least that's what he made out to us. We're still convinced he was fluent but through sheer stubbornness he refused to use it with us – we needed to learn).

Having seen the flat and decided it was eminently suitable – being located five minutes from where we were studying and in the lovely area of Rechavia – we telephoned Avraham to arrange contract signing.

Avraham we were soon to learn was a sweet septuagenarian who I think really loved the fact that we had come to Israel to study. He duly invited us to his apartment to sign contracts and meet his wife Margelit. He picked us up in his old red car and after a few moments panic that he could be taking us anywhere we settled in for the journey – full of painful conversations and rapid attempts to decipher the magical language he spoke.

With the contract out of the way (it was in Hebrew, but we had already had it checked with a lawyer friend), he offered us drinks and food in the true style of the hospitality you might expect in the Mediterranean. “Sit, eat, my wife made the cakes.” She spoke much better English – apparently she once taught English in a primary school. It was then that he brought out the wine.

And that’s why I was reminded of this moment today. Because just as Moses reminds the people about their duties upon entering the land and describes it as bountiful with the seven species (including pomegranate) so were we entering the land and sitting down with our landlord to...yes homemade pomegranate wine.

Now this was a little more than we expected and though reluctant to drink alcohol in the middle of the day we felt obliged to partake. Only it wasn’t just wine it was fortified wine and very sweet – like a sherry. If you can imagine kiddush wine – stronger and sweeter – that is how it tasted. No jokes about cough medicine I can tell you. My housemate wanted to describe it as having a certain sharpness – but in the dictionary the word was *charif*, a word usually used in the context of spicy food. A quick panic to ensure we hadn’t offended our host vanished as he smiled in that way that people who think you’re mad trying to speak their language do.

His wife then brought us some delightful herbs from the garden. One of them smelt slightly lemony and she insisted we take it back with us to our flat. It was called Melisa. Now I promise you we did clean true Israeli style – sloshing the floors with soapy water – but

nothing could bring us to throw out that little sprig of herb until Pesach.

Just before we left his home Avraham showed us his photos of army service. It transpired that he believed that as long as any Israeli was capable he should fulfil his duty to protect the land. Imagine the seventy-year-old sitting in an armoured vehicle surrounded by 19-20 year olds. Avraham and his wife were born in Israel before the state was founded and the family had been there at least for two generations prior to them.

It was whilst applying for a reduction in the council tax (we were students) in the city municipality that Avraham revealed to us a treasure of a story that you only pick up when you meet new people. He was trying to ask us if we had been scared that morning – a suicide bombing on a bus had occurred metres from our flat as I waited for him to turn up. The windows had shaken with the blast and seconds later the sirens began wailing. Scared – how could I not be?

*Aval ha horim shelachem mephachdim?*

Yes. Was the feeble answer we could give.

He then, spontaneously, began to recount a scary moment in his life. He told us that he was a member of ETzeL – one of the radical groups campaigning for the foundation of the State of Israel in opposition to the British mandate. He wasn't really a radical – he was around 10 or 11 years old and used to fly post around

Jerusalem. Putting up propaganda posters. He and his friend did it together; you can imagine the scene now if you try. But this time they were unlucky – a British officer caught them. He and his friend were taken back to the police station and interrogated.

Of course his parents were not called he responded to our foolish question. It was then Avraham pointed behind us through the windows of the municipal offices to a low building across the road. “That was the prison where we thought we were going to be taken (it’s now a museum),” he commented.

Avraham said he was so petrified he started crying. He thought the British were going to hang him. Actually he was given a serious warning and sent home. They didn’t fly post again – at least they didn’t get caught anyway.

As we left Jerusalem on my last day in Israel Avraham drove us to the airport. He had offered to give us a lift – as if we were his extended family. His last words before we took our bags to the departure lounge were:

*D’ash lahorim shelachem.*

Send good wishes to your parents and if you ever come back and visit give me a call.

Maybe I will, but then again perhaps I’ll never speak to him again. Who knows. But I’ll never forget his pomegranate wine, made from fresh pomegranates grown in his front garden.

“A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey;” I have not yet eaten my fill...I shall be back and perhaps I'll see you out there as we talk over a glass of Avraham's pomegranate wine.