

Shabbat Shalom

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Atzmaut - the Sabbath of independence, because it precedes Yom Haatzmaut - Israel Independence Day. In a few moments we are going to hear a song arranged for today by David Hoffman, written by Ronnie Cass shortly before he died, entitled Jerusalem.

I began writing this sermon while thinking about Israel and, of course, whether we have any cause for optimism in light what seem like very slightly positive overtures coming from diplomatic processes.

As we reach Yom Haatzmaut, our community is once again asked the question what does Israel mean to us? This question reminded me of a period at this time when I had a couple of different experiences as a leader of tourists coming to Israel.

The different tourists were:

- 1) My grandmother, parents and sisters
- 2) Two good friends from university, neither of whom are Jewish

Incidentally, in the three weeks that these visits happened I went to Masada and the Dead Sea four times - I began to feel like a tour guide. Anyway, I want to give you a snapshot of each of these groups, working backwards:

My university friends:

Both my friends are serving officers in the RAF. They had got some leave to come out and see Israel, something they never thought they would do - but then they went and made friends with someone who trained to be a rabbi. There are three things that stand out in the very short amount of time that they spent in Israel. They arrived the day before Yom Hazikkaron - Israel's memorial day for fallen soldiers - which in point of fact would be today.

So, I pick them up from the airport and having dumped bags in my flat I decide to take them on a brief walk around Jerusalem. Not a full tour, we're going to do that later, just a chance to get some air and get my friends acquainted with the

area. We just walk around the streets, up Agron Street, through Independence Park to Kikar Tzion, up Ben Yehuda street and back down King George and finally, to my flat on Bartenura - just next to the Prime Minister's official residence. As we were walking my friends asked questions about society, politics and religion. It was as we went passed the Great Synagogue that one of my friend sat down on a little wall having asked yet another complicated question - I think this time about Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jewry (he'd only just learnt about Orthodox and Progressive), that he put his head in his hands and said, "My head is about to explode." He was incapable of absorbing all the complexities and subtleties that we sometimes miss and sometimes take for granted.

The next day, Yom Hazikkaron, we had hired a car to drive to Masada and the Dead Sea. There is something profoundly moving about the siren that sounds in Israel on Yom Hazikkaron and Yom Hashoah, when everything stops and people get out of their cars and stand next to them, it was even more powerful doing that with two friends who are all serving in the armed forces in Britain.

Along the way to the Dead Sea you pass a series of signs, telling you how far beneath sea level you have got. There is one sign which says "Sea Level", which my friend insisted we stop and take a photo of - I'm not sure what was more scary that day, having to drive a car in Israel or having to stop and watch my friend run across the road on a blind corner to take a photo of a signpost. We arrived, just - we nearly ran out of petrol - we went up Masada and went in the Dead Sea. What I found fascinating was that both of them were more interested in the Roman ramp - which was built to attack the Jewish rebels - than they were in the story of martyrdom and rebellion against Rome by the Jews. The military perseverance of Rome was compelling for them.

When we returned to Jerusalem we were able to go out and celebrate with friends for Yom Haatzmaut - a great night was had by all - enough said about that. The following day, while sunbathing on a beach in Tel Aviv, having experienced fast food Middle Eastern style - Falafel belafa (Felafel in Laffa bread), we were chatting and both friends said how powerful they felt it was moving so quickly from deep mourning of Remembrance day to celebrating with passion Independence day. I think that had the strongest impact on their understanding of Israeli society.

When my family visited my mother had last been in 1965 and was unable to enter the Old City - it was pre-Six Day War. My father had never visited. It was a very emotional trip for them, as we stood on the Tayelet my mother remembered that she thought she stood near there looking out at the Old City some 40 years previously. It made the visit to the Kotel all the more moving.

I spent a good deal of time explaining that I felt the situation was much more complicated than it is presented in the media in Britain. The only thing straightforward in the politics is that nothing is straightforward. And if only it were possible to see the editorial journalism to understand the situation more clearly.

Once again we visited the Dead Sea and Masada. We had a marvellous guide from whom I was able to glean lots of useful bits of information to pass on when my friends arrived. I think it was on that day that we returned to my grandmother who was sitting in the hotel quite proud of herself. She said to us, "I did something none of you have done." What? "I took a bus today."

Now to understand her comment you have to appreciate that the Leo Baeck College had requested that I not take buses, even to the extent that they were prepared to pay for taxis if necessary. Whilst I had been out in Israel, there had been three bus bombings - my parents were used to phonecalls from me telling them that I was ok. So, you can imagine how unimpressed I was with my grandmother proudly telling me that she had taken buses all over the city.

I think my father was surprised how comfortable he felt - almost at home with the extended family.

The next day, I had arranged with an Israeli tour guide friend to take them around Jerusalem. She did a great job, walking from Yemin Moshe, by the windmill, down and up through the valley to the Old City. We went down through the Cado - the old Roman Market street - back up and down to the Kotel and then on the fascinating tunnel tours. My friend did a great job and was too embarrassed to accept money for the work she did, it was like she was family or connected somehow - it would be inappropriate to accept money. Having said that, I know I would want to be paid for taking my family around as a tour guide.

They had a fabulous time and I hope will visit more often than once every forty years.

There was however a great difference between the two great experiences of my friends and my family. It is the defining difference and it has been the subject of a great deal of debate and conversation in the Israel committee here at the synagogue. Crucially, my family were not visiting Israel as tourists who would visit any other 'interesting place'. The people, the history, the culture and the politics have all been instrumental in their self-understanding. When we stand at the Kotel it is not another big wall, it represents the early origins or foundation of ritual practice in Judaism. Standing on top of Masada, the most interesting thing may be the determination of the Romans to get the band of rebels. But more importantly, Masada draws into focus the question of Jewish survival, of diaspora and our relationship with those in power within the diaspora. Finally, a tour guide who feels she cannot accept money for showing her now extended family around her home city of Jerusalem - we learn that our connection is not just to the past. Not just to the impact this sliver of land has had on who we are. As we come to celebrate Yom Haatzmaut this week we have the opportunity to see ourselves not as objective observers - there is really no such thing. Rather we are connected, we are drawn in to the magic, the concern, the hope for peace - we are, at the end of the day, intimately involved.