

Bread, Matzah, And My Aliyah Problem.

Last Tuesday, somewhere in Jerusalem, or Tel Aviv, or Haifa, or Beer Sheva, some lucky Israeli was consuming his second hamburger-on-a-bun of the day; or she was scooping up her hummus with freshly baked pita bread. On that same day, somewhere in Tiberias, the Negev, or the Golan, some lucky Israeli was quietly drinking a shot of whiskey or a cold beer after a hard day of work. Also on that day, somewhere in Hatikvah Quarter or Qiryat Shemona, Maimuna, the post-Pesach feast of North African Jews was sending Pesach off with a leavened bang. Of course, we Jews in the Diaspora had no such luck or fun last Tuesday. We were counting the hours, the minutes, and the seconds until the end of the eighth day of Pesach: that stubborn "second day of Yom Tov" holdover from ancient times when our sages sagely added one restrictive festival day in the Diaspora to insure that we observe the holiday at the correct times, in the absence of a mathematical calendar. Israelis have plenty of headaches that Diaspora Jews are spared. Yet one of their consolations is that they say goodbye to matzah and hello to hametz, leavened foods, a whole day earlier than we do. "Reason #300" for making aliyah, immigrating to Israel, is what I think with a somewhat bitter chuckle each year that Pesach comes and goes and I sink a bit more into the drying concrete of my well entrenched life outside of the holy land.

I live and work comfortably in the United States. I am a Diaspora Jew whose Zionism, though passionate, amounts to cheerleading from the stands rather than jumping on to the court and getting bruised in a very exciting and energetic game. I have all types of reasons for living in America: proximity to family, not being able to make a living as a Conservative rabbi given the control of the Israeli rabbinate, the value of serving the American Jewish community, the strategic importance of advocating for Israel on Capitol Hill. They are all perfectly valid reasons. None of them changes the reality that my family and I have chosen not to be totally invested in the Jewish people's most compelling experiment in meaningful self-determination since the Exodus. Also, we have chosen not to do this at a time in Jewish and world history when it has never been easier for Jews like us to accomplish.

I am not trying to engage in disingenuous self-flagellation of the "Oh, how I just *wish* I could make aliyah like you guys (heavy sigh)" variety. Israelis are justifiably not interested in such cheap, unhelpful guilt exorcism, and they would have every right to condemn it. Further, I see no reason to walk around all day feeling guilty about my Jewish commitments. I love America and its Jews, and I will continue to serve the Jewish people and its values, my geography notwithstanding. Finally, I truly believe that though Israel is the spiritual and

political center of our world-wide wheel, we "the spokes" are indispensable for keeping that wheel rolling. American Jewish life continues to give birth to supremely important aspects of modern Jewish religion and culture. However, I am trying to remain honest with myself that my choice to not live in Israel does have some less than positive consequences for my Jewish life and the life of the Jewish people.

Israel struggles with genuine spiritual and cultural identity crises that are often the dysfunctional legacies of extreme secularism, the oppressiveness of the rabbinate and constant vigilance in the shadow of our enemies' threats. Yet Israel also thrives as a majority Jewish society whose civil religion, rhythms and values are thoroughly, naturally Jewish and Hebraic, in ways that the Jewish Diaspora's cannot be. Israeli society has yet to deal adequately with a host of pressing moral and political matters vital to its thriving as a democratic Jewish state. Yet Israel's existence as a democratic Jewish state cannot be equaled anywhere in the Jewish world. We American Jews spend enormous amounts of energy just trying to figure out how to survive the challenges of assimilation, when the greatest of all solutions, with all of its imperfections, lies a mere six thousand miles to our east, as the plane flies.

I will not end my life and work in America anytime soon. All the more reason for me not to pretend away the irritating tensions, minor and major, inherent in this decision that should and do make me uncomfortable. No matter how much I complain about the second day of Yom Tov, I continue to observe it, even if it is an unnecessary historical holdover. I struggle with my rich but less than complete Jewish life that is a consequence of not having made aliyah. I live with the preoccupations of minority survival that are the inheritance of life in an extremely open American society. I accept that there are genuine -if not always clear - limits to how much American Jewry and I have a right to participate in Israel's internal dialogue about her policies, values, security and future. Paraphrasing the Hasidic master, Nahman of Bratzlav, I live my Jewish and Zionist journeys with an element of restlessness and a nagging lack of fulfillment: wherever I am going, I am going to the land of Israel.