

Report from Israel
Kibbutz Ketura, January 7, 2016

Are you someone who follows Israeli news on a regular basis (not from the Times, but from Israel itself)? If so, you might find my reports out of sync with what you read in those news releases (though certainly not in contradiction to it). I for one try to read three Israeli news outlets every day, including editorials. I can't imagine going a single day without that information. But what I'm trying to convey to you in these blogs are our group's experiences with people and institutions on the ground, not our reaction to the day's legislation or major events.

We designed our trip around people, not sites (or do I mean "sights"?). We have spent our precious time with individuals and groups who are plying their own quirky version of the famous Israeli "start-up nation" concept. Our speakers are not in high-tech (though some of them actually are, in a way). They are "start-up" in the sense that they are pushing the envelope of Israeli society to make desperately needed social or environmental change. And they are blowing our minds at each and every stop.

First, I must mention Daniel, who is our participant Grace Rapkin's nephew. (By the way, the running joke on the tour is that each of us actually ran into someone in Israel who was *not* a relative of Grace's!) Daniel is a *baal teshuvah*. He finished college and came to Israel to join a *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) community. He studies Torah all day, including acting as a sort of TA in a yeshiva. He doesn't work, though he is now in one of those pioneering work force training programs designed for *haredi* men. That's a start-up by itself. But Daniel's thing is to go to Tel Aviv once a week, sit himself down in the middle of Rothschild Boulevard, and start conversations. He brings a chair, a sofa, and a hat rack to simulate a living room, and a sign that says "let's talk." His goal is to get Israelis to see beyond each other's obvious social type-casting, and to get the long-overdue conversation going. We met him and his wife for dinner. The wife, it turns out, uses her social work training to counsel *haredi* couples suffering from various degrees of domestic violence. Talking about breaking the silence!

We went north to an old kibbutz, Ein Shemer, to visit someone who has now become a folk hero in Israel. Avital Geva was one of the paratroopers who captured Jerusalem in the 1967 war. He is a working artist of some renown. But his claim to fame is his “greenhouse,” which he started in 1977 as a youth hangout on the kibbutz. It morphed into an elaborate botanical laboratory in which the teen participants design and carry out science experiments in order to solve global problems like water and food shortages and unsustainable agricultural practices. The real trick, though, is that the greenhouse brings in Jewish and Arab teens from all over Israel to work together on these problem-solving ventures. In the process, they meet each other as human beings. Do I need to say more?

Avital and his son Noam told us that some of the Arab parents are wary about letting their kids go to the greenhouse these days. Arab parents in general are afraid to have their children go out among Jews in the current atmosphere. That’s a terrible thing to have to report to you, but it’s part of the truth of this tense time. Reminds me of what some black parents in the US have told us recently, I’m sorry to say.

Avital (now a wizened, aging fellow – a sort of secular “rebbe” to my way of thinking) told us that the greatest threat to Israel, in his opinion, was the internal strife between and among Jews. Then he told us – waving his hand around to indicate the vastness of the Rube Goldberg-esque greenhouse – that most people think of “ecology” as having to do with the environment, resources, pollution, and the like; but that there is also a “human ecology” that must be maintained and sustained. I think none of us had ever experience so profound an example of living *tikkun olam* (“world repair”).

On our way out of Jerusalem we stopped at Yvel, which is a high-end pearl and jewelry factory. Why would we go there? Because it is primarily a school to train and license Ethiopian immigrants in jewelry design and manufacture. They follow the Maimonidean principle of giving tzedakah by giving the needy a trade and going into partnership with them.

Their new marketing representative to the US is a kid named Daniel (okay, he was a bit over thirty), who told us his story of walking the

hundreds of miles from Ethiopia to Sudan to get airlifted to Israel during Operation Moses (1984) when he was a boy. Thanks to this “start-up” jewelry school, Daniel went on to serve in the army with distinction, to finish a master’s degree at Hebrew University, and of course to become both a human resources expert for his own Ethiopian community and a business executive for a slick product. And, as with several other presenters we met, everyone wanted to take Daniel home with them, and everyone wanted our own teenagers to meet him and experience his story.

We went into the Knesset and met with a very new member of the Opposition list, Yael Cohen-Faran. She comes from the Green Party, and got into politics to influence environmental legislation. She is also a member of a Masorti community (that’s like Conservative Judaism in Israel, which like Reform, is not officially recognized or funded by the State). As such, she is engaged in legislation to further religious pluralism, which for many American Jews is one of the biggest roadblocks to their full emotional embrace of Israel. I think that as much as we enjoyed speaking with her, we also got a kick out of going through the security screening and getting into the inner sanctum of the Knesset, much as we had done on the previous day at the Supreme Court.

Our group met with a young *olah* (new immigrant) from California – only twenty-four years young! – named Ariella, who works at the only municipally sponsored community center in Israel that serves both Arab and Jewish populations together. Naturally, it’s in Jaffa, smack dab in the middle of a neighborhood of drop-dead sea views, which is why half the homes house Arabs who live way below the average income line, while the other half are home to gentrifying Jews whose stunning villas reflect the fact that their earnings far exceed that average. Yet they come together in this social work version of a “start-up” to help find a way to empower the Arabs to find their rightful place in a society that goes by way too fast for them.

The “entrepreneur” who began this center is a fellow everyone simply calls Ibrahim. Under his *chutzpadik* guidance, the center runs an assertiveness training workshop for Arab women. It also offers children a dance class that is actually a series of trust-building movement

exercises; and arts and crafts class run entirely in simultaneous Arabic and Hebrew; and a music class with a spinoff of three interfaith choirs. It was the teen choir from this center that sang at Israel's Presidential Mansion for the state visits of Angela Merkel, Barack Obama, and others.

I was thrilled to have our group meet Rabbi Sharon Shalom, the first person from the Ethiopian immigrant community to receive Orthodox ordination. His new book (just out in English in the last two weeks with the title "From Sinai to Ethiopia") has gotten him into a heap of trouble. The regional head rabbi declared him an *apikorus* (kind of like a heretic) and took away his right to perform marriages. But his Orthodox/Ashkenazi/Shoah survivor congregation in the development town of Kiryat Gat loves him and stands by him. His goal with the book was to give Ethiopians (shy by nature) the self-confidence to be proud of their ancient Jewish traditions, many of which conflict with the norms of Rabbinic Judaism that most of us practice today. Here's one: Ethiopians take literally the biblical belief that Shabbat mustn't be desecrated by fasting, even though sometimes Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat. In that case, they recite a kiddush over challah (and eat the challah!) after the morning service on Yom Kippur. Since they have been practicing that custom for millennia, they would be breaking their own *halakhah* by *not* eating that morsel on Yom Kippur. How to integrate themselves into the mainstream of Jewish Israel and still maintain their proud tradition? That's Rabbi Shalom's mission.

He said to us: "Who is normal? Who is Jewish? *What* is Jewish? What will the new Jewish identity become in this place? Our principle must be to judge other Jews' practice not with *chashad* (fear that they are doing it "wrong"), but with *kaf z'chut* (the benefit of the doubt that they are practicing their own tradition with utmost integrity). Easier said than done, but we were stirred by his passion (and his disarming humor).

We visited the start-up Rujum winery deep in the desert. There they are defying the Rabbinic rule that only an Orthodox-observant Jew can make wine or supervise its manufacture if it is to be considered kosher. They work under the supervision of the first female overseer (*mashgicha*) who gives them Masorti certification. They are themselves secular Jews who nonetheless care about the environmental and ethical

values the Torah itself conveys through its rules of labor, harvest, fallow years, and tithing for the good of the poor and the community. In this sense, theirs might be the most “kosher” wine in all of Israel.

We saw an organic alpaca farm. Again, a start-up dedicated to maintaining ethical work practices, environmental integrity, economic stimulation in a region of underemployment, and the making of a beautiful product that Israel can be proud of. And it was lots of fun to feed the alpacas and llamas!

Now we’re hunkering down for the remainder of our trip in the deep south. We’re stationed just north of Eilat at Kibbutz Ketura, home of the Arava Institute for environmental experimentation and development. This is the start-up of all start-ups! Vast fields of sunlight are “farmed” here. New sustainable energy technologies are tested here. Wind, sun, and water are being “harvested” here in ways you wouldn’t readily imagine. Here we plan to spend Shabbat with some crazy idealists who combine the best of Israeli scientific prowess, Zionist dreams of communality, Jewish humanitarian values, and egalitarian religious tradition.

Last night, sitting around a fireplace at our lodge on the rim of the great crater, the *Makhtesh Ramon*, we talked about what we’ve done and seen so far. People mentioned *tikkun olam*. They mentioned “entrepreneurship” for social change. They talked about the people we’ve encountered as “disrupters,” a term some of us liked and others didn’t. All in all, they felt rather positive about what Israel could be, and what it in fact has already become – if you know where to look. It is a place teeming with persons who are “ready to fail,” as our young business consultant speaker, Assaf Luxembourg, put it to us. Apparently it will continue to do a bad job of promoting itself and making its case in the world. And because it takes risks, it might indeed fail altogether, God forbid (especially if it doesn’t figure out a way to take the greatest risk of all, which might free it of the burden of occupation, but which would require even greater risk-taking on the part of the occupied themselves). But so far, those we’ve encountered have chosen to deal with “the conflict” by dealing with things *other than* the conflict, but which nonetheless try to solve the conflict itself by breaking it down into workable tasks: sunlight; wine; a dance class based on trust; a

multi-ethnic choir; a teenage free-for-all greenhouse; a sign that says "let's talk."

We fly home Sunday night. Please get us some good weather for our Monday morning landing at Kennedy. I'll try to write one more posting from the plane. Meanwhile, have a sweet Shabbat and think of us thinking of you.

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