

Miral Discovers Israel
Temple Shalom Manitoba
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A few months ago Miral asked if I would give the fundraising pitch over the High Holidays. I asked her if that was a real question or a rhetorical one. She paused for a minute and said “yeah, pretty much a rhetorical one.” I replied that “in that case I would be honoured”. And indeed I am honoured because I believe in what the Reform movement stands for and more specifically, what Temple Shalom means to our community.

The last time I gave this speech I did a **movie review**. The movie was Sunshine, a tale that was important to me personally. It traced the history of a Hungarian family, that was similar to mine, which changed its name and became fully assimilated into Hungarian society in the beginning of the 19th century in order to avoid rampant anti-Semitism. The family was Jewish in name only, lucky to survive the horrors of the Holocaust, with the later generations regaining a connection to Judaism.

Last time was a movie review; this time I propose a travelogue. It is entitled: Miral Discovers Israel and it is about Miral’s first trip to Israel in June of this year.

We arrived in Tel Aviv just before midnight after four soggy days visiting our youngest in London, the weekend of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee regatta.

Our first morning we arose to the brilliant sun pouring into our hotel room and looked at the shimmering blue of the Mediterranean, a colour unlike anywhere else. We had the normal Israeli buffet breakfast (which meant it was enormous) and went for a walk on the beach and later sat by the pool. I had planned the first day to be a slow one, a day of sun, and heat and rest, the exact opposite of the dampness and hectic pace of London.

That first night I asked Miral for her impression of Israel and she said it was “nice” and then “interesting”. I had trouble understanding those words; this was Israel, the home of Judaism and two other major religions. Israel, a country unlike any other. “Nice” and “interesting” could be used to describe other places but not Israel, I thought.

And then it happened. We were at a wonderful seafood restaurant called Goochas, at the corner of Rothschild Blvd and Dizengoff. We sat outside and watched the hustle and bustle of Tel Aviv. Half way through our main course, Miral’s eyes opened, she looked from side to side, put down her cutlery and leaned over to whisper something important: “Did you notice that everyone here is Jewish”. I gave her one of “those looks” and then said “yeeeeeah”. Then I said: “it isn’t everyone but it certainly is most of the people”. “Where else would Jews be in the majority like this”, she asked. “Only at shul, dear” I said, “only at shul”.

It dawned on me later that night why Miral’s reaction had changed from “nice” and “interesting” to the final realization that she was in Israel, the homeland of the Jews, and why it was so

different from my reaction when I had arrived my first time, some three years earlier. On my first trip I went immediately from Ben Gurion Airport to Jerusalem. Two hours after I landed I was in the Old City and on my way to the Western Wall.

On this trip we were tourists in different countries, first England, and then Israel. In our first day in Tel Aviv we encountered the hustle and bustle of a large city with a beautiful beach where most of the people spoke English. It could have been Miami. Correction, there are more people on the beach in Tel Aviv who spoke English than Miami.

For those who have never visited, you must. Israel is unlike any other country in the world. It is a continent squeezed into a country of so many different geographies and cultures. Israel is so tiny it only takes six hours to drive between the two furthest points, from the Lebanese border to Eilat. Six hours from here is Regina, you don't even make it to Minniapolis. At some points Israel is only 8 miles wide. From a military standpoint it would take an F-18 2 ½ hours to fly across Canada, in Israel it would take about a minute at its widest point.

We saw many memorable sites in Israel during our trip: on the coast the history of Old Jofa next to the modernity of Tel Aviv; in Jerusalem we went to the Old City, Yad Vashem, an actual dig in the Old City of David and Mount Scopus, the birthplace of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, founded in 1925 by Chaim Weitzmann with the first governors including Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber, some 23 years before the establishment of the State of Israel. Winnipeg's own Max Steinkopf attended the founding ceremony of Hebrew University almost 90 years ago. The next day Miral went with our nephew Ryan, who made aliyah and served in the IDF, to Mitzadah, baking at the top when it hit at least 120F. A few days later we drove to Zafet in Northern Israel, the birthplace of Kaballah, now home to an interesting combination, the most Orthodox and hundreds of artists. The next day we drove to the Golan Heights, overlooking Syria and to Kyriat Shmonah near the Lebanese borders. You can understand that a mile of land in the prairies is much different than a mile of land in the Golan where geography means everything. Overlooking Lebanon we looked at the nearest village, our tour guide asked if there was something we did NOT see. "People", I responded. He pointed at the closest houses and said they contained at least 1000 rockets. Our guide said that in Israel the question is never "if", it is "when". And they believe the answer is "soon".

But the site that is most engraved in my mind is the Western Wall on the Temple Mount, the Kotel. It continues to draw you like a magnet as it links the present to a world of over two thousand years ago.

What is now visible represents one 1/100th of the Second Temple, the central forum of Judaism when it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Built by King Herod as an architectural marvel to rival the religious shrines built by Caesar in Rome, the Second Temple was the communal centre for Jews, politically, socially, judicially and religiously throughout the province of Judea. It contained the Torah and oldest books of Judaism. But the major focus of the religious program was not prayer, it was the offering of sacrifices by the Temple priests.

That was to end with the Jewish rebellion in 66CE and the destruction of the Second Temple some four years later. After two years without a Temple, a new group of Jews tried to regain Jerusalem but they were crushed by the Romans in 135CE and they were banned from entering Jerusalem and from living in the surrounding area of Judea, not to return for four hundred years.

How does a religion survive when its communal centre is destroyed and its peoples are scattered to the winds?

In Judaism it was through **transformation**, the replacement of the Second Temple, based on sacrifice, with the establishment of synagogues in villages, towns and cities that focused on the reverence and knowledge of the Torah. And it was the movement away from high priests to the lay rabbis.

But it took a few hundred years before the Torah became an important part of synagogue worship. How did this transformation occur? Lee Levine, professor of Jewish History and Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* states that it came in stages.

To memorialize the Second Temple, Jews remembered the holiness of the Temple by facing east with the introduction of the Amidah prayer. By the third century prayers were introduced in place of the Temple's daily sacrifices. Sometime in the third or fourth century the rabbis introduced memories of the Temple ritual into synagogue liturgy, such as the recital of the requisite Temple sacrifices on Sabbaths and holidays. Together with the transfer of Temple practices to the synagogue setting, such as the shofar, luvav and etrog, the synagogue building was gradually accorded a degree of sanctity.

The next hundreds of years Christianity grew under Constantine and later the world experienced the dominance of Islam for hundreds of years. But throughout, the synagogue remained the focal point of Jewish religious life and, with its ability to adapt and rejuvenate, the mechanism to protect and promote Judaism.

And how does this all relate to Temple Shalom in 2012.

This year, we are celebrating the half centenary of Temple Shalom. Some 50 years ago 10 families including David and Janet Boonov, Gabe Broder, Bernie Melman, Hy Cohen, Arthur Midgie, Ben and Gladys Sokolov and Max Cohen had vision of a Reform shul in our community. It did not start in this building, it did not start in any building, it started in peoples' homes and then after many years, expanded to the Viscount Gort Hotel and then a ramshackle house on Stafford and then finally this building.

But, here is an interesting historical fact. According to a wonderful book called "Winnipeg 1912" published by the Manitoba Historical Society, the Reform movement in Winnipeg is almost 130 years old.

As early as 1884 there had been a Reform synagogue called Beth El where sermons and some prayers were in English. In 1912 a Reform congregation, Shaarey Shoyayon, owned the

synagogue on the corner of Dagmar and William, across from the old central public library. The Rabbi, Solomon Philo, proved to be a little too liberal for his congregation, who dismissed him after he performed a marriage ceremony between a Jew and a Gentile. The following year the Reform shul amalgamated with Shaarey Zedek at King Street and Henry Ave then in the Dagmar Street building.

What does this history show us? That the Reform movement has been in this city for almost 130 years, that we have been the liberal element of Judaism here for all that time, that we have taken positions that have been bold but not widely supported by the Jewish community, that we have lost our home but risen again, much like the Western Wall and the State of Israel.

And what are those beliefs that form the core of the Reform movement and Temple Shalom in 2012?

A recognition in the equality of people in our services. Temple Shalom hired the first female rabbi, Tracey Klirs, in the early 1980's. We still have the only female rabbi in Winnipeg.

We are the Temple of Irma Penn, a soferet who created the first Torah scribed by a Canadian woman. The ceremony of May 27th of this year is something we will always treasure. A week later it was commemorated in the House of Commons in a speech by Joyce Bateman, the Member of Parliament for this riding. The Penn Torah will be a spiritual centrepiece of this shul forever.

Temple Shalom also believes in the rights of gays and lesbians to wed. Over a decade ago Temple Shalom passed a resolution to permit same sex marriages and we were ostracized by many in the Jewish community.

The Reform movement believes that life is about choice. But it does not force people to make the ultimate choice, between the person you love in your heart and the religion in which you are raised. So we marry Jews and non-Jews and celebrate that marriage.

I have a friend now in his late 60's who told me of his early years a few years ago. His father was Jewish and his mother was Christian. Saturday mornings in the 1950's consisted of my friend sitting with his father in the family car outside the old Shaarey Zedek on Dagmar Street and watching his zeydah walking to and from shul. His father's own family viewed him as being dead to them and never spoke to him after he told them he would marry outside the faith. My friend knew his zeydah only from the few minutes he saw him on Saturday mornings, outside Shaarey Zedek.

The Reform movement goes another way. It embraces people, it believes the word of God can reach the many, not the select few. It believes in social justice and the need to improve the life and human condition of all peoples in our increasingly small world.

Temple Shalom serves the community's spiritual needs from birth to death. When it was clear there was a demand for people of mixed faiths to lie together in eternity the leadership of this

shul canvassed its members and purchased our own place for burials with the creation of Bet Chaim Mikdash Shalom at Chapel Lawn.

These decisions were not universally supported within the Jewish community of Winnipeg, in fact most were criticized, some we were condemned. But interestingly, over the years, some of the other shuls in Winnipeg have moved to our position, in the areas of the role of women in services, same sex celebrations and the burial of people of mixed faiths. Notwithstanding this shift, they have gone through hoops to convince people that their ways are kosher while ours are not. Rabbi Karen referred to it last year as “the Hierarchy of Holiness”. But in the end, it matters little as we will do things that we believe are right, we are not waiting for the approval of others.

Temple Shalom has many leaders. Our spiritual leader, Rabbi Karen is quite incredible and she has many firsts.

Although she was born and originally from the Chicago area and ordained in the United States, Rabbi Karen was the **first** female Rabbi to serve in Australia. After she graduated from the Reform Jewish Seminary in 1981 she served with congregations in Melbourne until 1989. Rabbi Karen was the **first** female Rabbi to serve in the U.S. Marines, which she did from 1992 until 1996; she was also the **second** female Rabbi to serve in the U.S. Navy, a position she held from 1992 to 2003. In 2009 Rabbi Karen became the **first** female rabbi in the Canadian Forces. In 2011 HUC-JIR awarded her an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. I found all that information on Wikipedia. And here is the final sentence from Wikipedia: “She now serves as Rabbi of Temple Shalom in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.”

What the passage does not capture is what a wonderfully intelligent, compassionate, scholarly and humble person she is. Miral and I have been privileged to have her stay at our home and there is nothing finer than to share a bottle of good red wine with Rabbi Karen. I would recommend it to all.

The next leader I want to mention is our Cantor, Len Udow. In typical Winnipeg fashion I have known Len Udow for most of my adult life, first as a musician and song writer at coffee houses in the 1970s. Len has celebrated almost a quarter century music making and travelling with Fred Penner. This past year he recorded a CD called Shabbat Shalom. We are having the launch at the Temple on October 27th. And rumour has it that he will be available for autographs. Len’s singing is always spiritual and moving and we are blessed to have him.

Janet Pelletier – Goetze is our dedicated choir director, a talented singer, writer, musician and collaborator with Len. She makes every service so much better.

Ruthie Maman, was a volunteer and board member for many years and has taught Hebrew and is our resident Hebrew expert. We are fortunate to have her as our new administrator.

Phil Spevack is our shamus, he ensures everything in the shul is in place for Shabat. Phil also leads the coffee houses here, which have become an integral part of our Temple’s activities.

Steve Goetze is the custodian and he is a magician in keeping our antiquated HVAC system operating. The blessing of duct tape.

I must talk about our lay leadership, starting with the most important person in my life. Miral retired from teaching in June 2011 and friends ask me how her retirement is going. I tell them that Miral exchanged a full-time paying job for a full-time non-paying job. Her weeks consist of Temple business: phone calls, e-mails, meetings, more phone-calls, the mad dash to the shul and more e-mails. I am so glad that she retired.

Miral's dedication and committed are unsurpassed. But that has been the case of all of Temple Shalom's Presidents and I believe on this day we should acknowledge and thank those who have been President over the past 50 years: Gabe Broder, Ben Sokoloff, David Boonov, Len Weinberg, Elliott Levine, Bernie Melman, Hy Cohen, Harvey Nairn, Scotty Barlin, Phillip Schachter, Lorne Sharfe, Rick Wolfson, Jonathan Geiger, David Topper, Joanne Greisman, Judith Huebner, Ruth Livingston and Miral Gabor. From personal experience I can tell you that it takes a very special person to be the President of a Temple, 25% organizer, 25% motivator, 25% mediator and 25% masochist.

Today is the day when we choose to define the kind of person we will be in the next year. Among the many things we must consider is how we will meet our spiritual needs. For each of us, this is a personal or possibly a family matter.

In this regard, the Temple is our most essential institution. We have many other wonderful Jewish institutions in Winnipeg, The Asper Campus, the Jewish Museum, the Rady Centre, the Gray Academy, the Jewish Foundation, to name a few. But they were never intended to address our spiritual needs, and our spirituality is the core of our faith.

We have a very special Temple to meet our spiritual needs and it is very successful at many things. Unfortunately, fundraising is not one of them, at least not to date.

In a speech many years ago, Jeff Frank quoted Maimonides who said "we are not trained in giving and, frankly, we have not given enough to the Temple over the years."

Our financial state means that the leadership of the Temple spends an enormous amount of time on fundraising which it could spend on new and innovative programs. We have been fiscally prudent over the years and we hope to have a mortgage burning party over the winter when we pay off the remaining \$4000 on our mortgage, quite an achievement. But there are always the surprises. Like replacing the large round window at the front of the building which cost \$8000 and the boiler must be replaced which will cost \$10,000. We will find a way to cover these expenses but we look forward to the day when we do not face the same nagging problem each day - money. The financial health of Temple Shalom is something that affects us all.

We ask for your commitment to our future. You will receive the pledge forms. We ask you to be generous and contribute to the future of Reform Judaism in Winnipeg. Your pledge must be more than simply writing a cheque, it must be more than giving to an arts or cultural or other

group. Each of you has different financial circumstances so I ask that your contribution be as generous as it can be ... and a little bit more. Give meaning to your contribution as it will determine the level of spiritual and other services we can provide to you, your family and your family's family over the next year and coming years.

To those of you who are not members, I say: you have graced us with your presence and your friendship. Please take the next step and join us. Many of the finest people I know anywhere are in this sanctuary right now. And I know a lot of people.

On this day of all days it is most fitting that we choose how we wish to live our lives as Jews and what we want for the future of our Temple. The future of Temple Shalom depends on the collective will of the people in this room. Rabbi Karen forwarded me a passage found on the web site of Temple Emanu-el which puts this far better than I can:

“It is only the collective will of the entire community that can sustain the synagogue as the beacon-light for all Jewish activity, on behalf of the collective and the individual. Throughout the ages, it has been the synagogue that stands ever ready to respond to the needs of each and every soul, strengthening our commitment to the task of tikkun middot – the perfection of our inner selves and tikkun olam – the perfection of God’s world. “

Thank you and have a very special year.