

From the Rabbi

☆ **The “Perfect” Time to Visit Israel** ☆

by Rabbi Mitchell Hurvitz, Temple Sholom

At every Temple Sholom Bar and Bat Mitzvah, we provide the child with the gift of her or his “Birthright” – a certificate that covers the \$250 registration fee to be used for the otherwise free ten-day trip to Israel, valid from the time the young person turns 18 until the age of 26.

“Birthright Israel” has become the largest educational tourism organization in the world, and was created almost 20 years ago so as to “strengthen Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and connection with Israel and its people.” We are blessed that the gift of “Birthright” is supported by the State of Israel, philanthropists, the Jewish Federation system, the Jewish Agency for Israel, and Synagogues, along with parents of trip participants, alumni of the program, and many, many individual donors from around the world who believe in the Birthright mission. (See: <https://www.birthright-israel.com>.)

Every so often I am asked: “How can I send my child to Israel at this volatile time?” One response I offer is that for those of us who have traveled to Israel, we know that anyone reading or watching the news about America, while in Israel, might wonder how we could return to America, or travel anywhere

else in the world. But, I also don’t wish to minimize the parent’s emotional fear, even if it’s not quite rational.

The reality is that bad things do occur at times in Israel, just as there is senseless violence elsewhere, in our country and around the world. Israel experiences incidents of terror, and there will never be a “perfect” time to visit our Promised Land. But, I can personally think back to some of my many visits to Israel. I was there during the first Lebanon War, and also during the first Persian Gulf War, gas mask in hand. I was there after the infamous Purim bombings, and I was in Israel at the height of the second intifada. Each time I went, some people thought I was crazy to go.

I firmly believe that for 2000 years we prayed for our people’s return to the land of Israel, and now we belong to the Jewish generation that has lived to witness the fulfillment of our Zionist dream. The reality that we must still address effectively is that for many Jews there will never be a perfect time to go, and the vast majority of Jews have never visited Israel.

In fact I read once that more American Jews have been to Israel and visited the Vatican than have been to Israel.

Considered this way, most

caring Jews understand that this is a serious problem. There may not be the “perfect” time to go to Israel, but, there’s usually never a perfect time for the most important items of life that take time, resources, and effort. The noted violinist, Isaac Stern Z’L, delivered a speech during the Gulf War when he was receiving an honorary doctorate from Ben Gurion University. He spoke of why he loved Israel, and he recalled his first visit to the Holy Land, a year after the recreation of the Jewish State. He said he was especially impressed by the personal involvement of every Israeli citizen in the life of the country. He recalled how after giving one of his first concerts there, he returned to his hotel and the night porter, who was washing down the walls of the hotel, put his mop down and asked, “Why did you change the Beethoven piece at the concert? I wanted to hear the Beethoven piece that was originally announced.” Stern said, “After this incident, I decided I will keep on returning to Israel as often as possible.”

He went on to note about the challenges in the Middle East when the then mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek Z’L, complained to him, “that Europeans and Asians, and American Christians are com-

ing to Israel, but American Jews are afraid to go.” Stern said to Mayor Kollek, to the gathering at Ben Gurion University, and throughout the rest of his life: “We’re not afraid to go. We will go – we will share. For it is for this sharing that we are grateful, because it gives us the strength to belong – not only to Israel – but most importantly, we belong to ourselves; we know who we are.”

Isaac Stern knew the spiritual charge to the Jew of “Lech Lecha” that God commanded of our Patriarch Abraham, thousands of years ago: “Lech Lecha – Go!!” “Go from your homeland, your birthplace, the house of your father, to the land which I will show you.” God proclaimed: “Lech Lecha – GO!” Not Go Later; Go NOW to the land that I will show you. This Divine charge of Lech Lecha applies to each and every Jew. It’s not just our birthright to visit Israel; it’s the fulfillment of what it means to be a complete Jew: “We belong to ourselves; we know who we are.”

We go to Israel in good times and bad, and everything in between because we belong to our People, and we affirm in concrete action this power of belonging. We have to make sure our Israeli brothers and sisters know they are not alone, that we

will stand with them both figuratively and literally.

Lech Lecha – Go NOW and start planning your travel to Israel.

Lech Lecha – Go NOW and pursue the Jewish power of belonging to our People.

Lech Lecha – Go NOW to make sure that our Israeli brothers and sisters know that we really care.

Lech Lecha – Go NOW because Israel needs our support now more than ever.

Like anyone we love, when they are in need, the best thing we can do for them is to go to them and be with them. And, when we are unable for whatever reason to be physically present, then the next best thing we can do is show them that we care with our daily offerings of time and resources.

As we pray three times a day: “May God who makes peace in the heavens above, make peace for us, and for all of Israel – Amen!”

Editor’s Note: The rabbis of Greenwich alternate in providing messages for each issue of the Greenwich Jewish News. These comments are those of the Rabbi alone and are not meant to reflect the opinions of UJA-JCC Greenwich.



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Welcome to Greenwich!

WE’D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

We are delighted to welcome and introduce you to Greenwich. If you know of newcomers in town who would like to learn more about our vibrant and exciting Jewish community, please contact us at 203-552-1818.

We will extend a hearty “Welcome!”

Bonnie Citron, Chair, UJA-JCC Greenwich Newcomer Committee