

## A Trip of a Lifetime

By Arlene Hisiger



The eighth grade class at Hillel Community Day School was adamant. They were not about to settle for a class trip (marking their passage from grade school to high school) to run-of-the-mill-meet-your-senators Washington D.C., or any other place else for that matter – they were intent on going to Israel!

Given their children’s determination to visit the Holy Land, the parents of the eighth grade and Middle School students (who were joining their upper classmen on the trip) quickly set about examining the nuts and bolts of making their children’s dream a reality.

From the outset, all agreed (borrowing from the Bush Administration’s “no child left behind” education policy) that in this case as well; no child would be left behind due to safety concerns or monetary issues.

Inherent in any trip is a plethora of details and logistics, but the degree of planning that this trip to Israel entailed was positively mind-boggling especially as this was the first trip of its kind sponsored by the school.

There were many matters to consider: sourcing an appropriate Israeli tour company, booking the flights, securing scholarship monies, finding appropriate leaders for the trip and not least of all, security – how did parents really feel about sending their children to a destination that was not only geographically removed but known world-wide as a security hot spot.

“It was the most incredible experience”, says Karen Zivan, recalling the parent’s initial pre-trip planning meeting, “we all sat around the table and not once did anyone say that the kids shouldn’t go...there was never a ‘what if’ conversation. It’s a testament to the parents’

courage, faith and commitment. The fact that there were parents who never had been to Israel and were sending their kids there for the first time...it always makes me teary-eyed, she continues, (eyes welling with tears), ...I don't know if I could have done it – have my kids experience Israel without me.”

“I tried to push this idea five years ago”, John August explains, “because I had spoken to parents from other Day Schools who had met with great success in putting a trip like this together. But, we weren't able to galvanize our parents; he continues with a sigh, they kept focusing on the obstacles. However, I strongly felt that, for the kids, this would be a fitting culmination of their studies at Hillel Community Day School – particularly in light of Zionism's prominence in the school curriculum. We owe a great deal to the Jewish Community Federation for so graciously providing scholarship monies for this trip.”

It was an idea, whose time had come, but one that clearly required meticulous planning, financial largesse, and the total commitment of all parents for it to come to fruition.

Francine Stein allows that she and her husband, Todd, were at first indifferent to the idea “because the area is so volatile – the world is a big place”, she recalls thinking, “let them go some place safe. “Now”, she says, “our family is planning a trip to Israel next summer.”

Hope Rosenbaum describes the trip as “a dream come true”; the perfect ending to her son Jacob's studies at Hillel Community Day School.

“We want Aviva to have a lot of fun on this trip”, says Elaine Schaffer, who along with her husband Stan, was largely responsible for attending to and planning the details of the entire trip. “She has had a positive experience doing and seeing things that we (the family) did not do last summer when we were there. The trip is meaningful in a way that is different than when she traveled there with us, because the itinerary reflects everything that she has studied with her peer group over the last –almost nine years. We want her to have this experience and we hope she will remember it always.”

For Maurice Zauderer, this trip represented a chance for his son, Jordan, to relate first hand to the “miraculous rebuilding of the religious, cultural, and economic life of the ancient land of Israel”. Asked if she had any security concerns (in light of the recent suicide attack in Tel Aviv) Susan Zauderer, Jordan's mom, replies “I could not help worrying about this in the

same way that I think Israeli parents must worry about their children everyday. But we discussed this with our son and our family's feeling was that we could not surrender to fear of terrorism in Israel any more than we can surrender to fear of terrorism in New York. If we had one regret about the itinerary, it was that, because of security concerns, it was not possible for our children to meet with Palestinian children as well."

"To be able to fully release your child to other people says a lot," remarks Cheryl DeFraine, whose daughter, Harley was a trip participant. In so doing, she underscored her faith in the trip leaders, Rabbi Shaya and Nechie Kilmnick, and the carefully planned itinerary.

Miriam Rudnick calls the trip an "experience of a lifetime" and was confident that it would be "a wonderful educational and enriching experience" for her son, Joel. She hopes that he will "gain a greater understanding of our roots and heritage."

Following a "not a dry eye in the house," send-off ceremony held at Hillel Community Day School, (replete with a formal fare-thee-well blessing from Rabbi Laurence Kotok, of Temple Brith Kodesh), the students embarked on their inaugural trip to Israel carrying their parents' hopes and tearful good wishes along with them.

But would their parents' expressed aspirations be realized?

Thanks to Elaine Schaffer's meticulous planning, an invaluable feature was built-in to the trip. She arranged for the kids to rent cell phones "It was a very good deal, " she explains, " we only pay for the minutes they use, no rental fee, no drop off fee, and no insurance fee – it's all included." Thanks to her research and superb planning the parents did not have to wait for their children to return in order to gauge the trip's impact on them – they were able to assess their children's reaction to all they encountered in "real time." The miracle of technology facilitated and contributed to the immediacy of the experience.

During the two-week period that the kids were away, one would invariably hear snippets of conversations floating through the community. One mom, feigning disappointment, laughingly complains, "My son never calls me!" or "I just got off the phone with my daughter, and she said, 'I love you' in Hebrew, gushed another. Notes were compared, status update emails were hurriedly dispatched, the parents were abuzz with vicarious excitement as their sons and daughters traversed the Holy Land.

"Climbing Massada was such a great experience", Mickey Zivan enthuses, "we started when it was dark, reached the top when it turned light, and just as we were reciting the *Shema* the sun came up!"

When asked what was the most impressive experience that she encountered Aviva Schaffer unequivocally replied the kotel – more specifically “going to the kotel with Jews from all over the world.”

Jordan Zauderer was impressed with “seeing so many Jews and seeing how well developed Israel is. “But”, he confides, “Israelis are not as addicted to cell phones as people say they are!”

“I have changed as a result of this trip by becoming more Zionist”, says Jacob Rosenbaum in earnest, “and I want to make Aliyah even more now.”

Ari August was most impressed with the kotel. “It’s special”, he states with authority, “because it’s from thousands of years ago.”

Joel Rudnick was also quite impressed with the kotel and notes, “people really concentrated on davening (praying) there – not just talking!”

For Eitan Zivan, it was all about spirituality. A spirituality that manifested itself in the way women in Jerusalem “squeezed the challahs” to make certain that they were bringing home only the freshest challah in honor of the Sabbath, in the way the people just seemed to be “on a spiritual high” on Shabbos. And, having returned, he admits to feeling as if he too were still on his own spiritual high.

His sense of spirituality was greatly heightened by having the privilege of exploring Israel with Rabbi Shaya and Nechie Kilimnick. “It was great to go to Israel with such knowledgeable leaders it made it so spiritual to learn things like “this is the closest spot to the holy of holies,” he excitedly explains.

“They were really well behaved!” Rabbi Kilimnick somewhat incredulously exclaims.

“It was wonderful, echoes his wife Nechie. I’ve been to Israel so many times but it was usually in the company of adults. It was great to experience Israel through the eyes of the kids, she adds.”

As the trip progressed, both leaders sensed the kids’ growing excitement and comfort level. For example, Rabbi Kilimnick was amazed how easily they adapted to the currency exchange. And, he was happy to see how well the kids connected with their host families in Modiin (Rochester’s sister city) when they stayed there for Shabbat. On their last day in Modiin, they had a picnic box lunch. Their bus driver (who lives in Modiin) and some of his children, as well as other kids from Modiin, joined them for lunch. “We were like one big happy family,” Rabbi Kilimnick says.

“It wasn’t so much what the kids said or did, explains Mrs. Kilimnick, rather that you could sense their excitement at hearing and learning new things. They became increasingly more comfortable speaking and understanding Hebrew. “It was, she says, like coming home.”

A sentiment echoed in Brianna Stein’s summation of her experience: “Two weeks is a long time, but even on the last day I was not ready to go home. There was something about Israel that felt like we, as Jews, belonged there.”

Rabbi Chaim Hisiger, Hillel Community Day School principal, felt, from the start, that this trip was essential in that it encapsulates all the values, text, and culture the school endeavors to transmit to its students. “The added bonus”, he shares with a good deal of satisfaction, “was that as a result of the trip our students came back not only wiser but mature beyond their years.”

“We knew this trip would be meaningful to the kids – to allow them to visit places they’ve learned so much about”, affirms Naomi Silver, Hillel Community Day School president. “But, the impact that it has had goes beyond what we had hoped. This is truly something that will last a lifetime.”