

## **“Why am I on a plane heading “home” to Los Angeles?”**

Rabbi Daniel Greyber

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As the Director of Camp Ramah in California, one of the great pleasures of my job is that I come to Israel to participate in a Jewish Agency Seminar for the training of our *shlichim* – a group of Israelis who will join our American staff and bring Israeli language, music and culture to our Ramah summer community. As I get older, the kids stay the same age – each year a new group of Israelis finishes the army and confronts “what next?” by agreeing to come to an American Jewish summer camp with little or no idea of what they’re getting themselves into. Israelis start arriving to Kibbutz Shefayim south of Netanya by bus, *tramp*, relatives dropping them off in cars, or in groups of three or four piled into a small taxi. My Hebrew comes back to me and my head begins to whirl as I’m thrown into the cultural “festival” that happens every time a group of Israelis this large comes together.

The seminar goes along for two days at an exhausting pace. To keep everyone going, there is a constant supply of milk, crackers, hot water and three types of instant coffee – it’s all the same to me in the America but here there is fine Elite instant coffee, a more coarse Nescafe brand, and for the full Middle Eastern experience, Turkish coffee all consumed in high volume. Sessions on insurance and visas, the American summer camper, the meaning of Zionism and Jewish identity all blend together for hours upon end until 11pm each night. Finally, after two days, the organizers program a bit of fun into the schedule: Dudu. Who is Dudu? He’s “Dudu.” “*Ma od yesh lomar?*” “What more is there to say?”

Dudu comes with a stereo system, a microphone, and at the first techno beat, every Israeli in the room starts to dance and laugh and sing with innocence I rarely see in Americans this age. The dancing is sensuous and playfully flirtatious but not raunchy or degrading. As I walk passed “*Pestival Dudu,*” (there is no “f” sound at the beginning of a Hebrew word; “feh” becomes “peh” so “festival” becomes “pestival”) and peer in through the window, I manage to hide from my American colleagues who are also taking in this scene the tears welling up in my eyes. I am overtired, jetlagged and jazzed on one too many Nescafe but still, “why am I crying?”

A part of me imagines these young Israelis dance so easily and unabashedly because they seize upon every moment away from the pressures of the army to have a good time; to relax, to party, to get away. I think about how a few days ago, some of these kids were on patrol at checkpoints, marching through the night, or just passing time at a base while their friends prepared for this or that operation that keeps Tel Aviv and Jerusalem quiet, for the most part. When I read in my American newspaper that Israel foiled 130 terrorist-attacks this week or conducted an operation on “such and such” terrorist hideout, I realize

these are the kids who fight an ongoing battle I only read about, or don't. I am crying at once for the profound joy I feel at seeing them dance and the overwhelming pain I feel it exacts from them to fight a war to defend the country the Jewish people count on. Teenagers, year after year, dance to Dudu's music. Let them dance, dance, dance. *Magiah lahem* – they deserve it.

If I am honest with myself, I admit a part of me cries too because I am on the outside looking in. I peer through the clear windows of the dining room where Dudu's party is in full swing and I don't just feel old; I feel American. As a rabbi, as a Jew, I want this for myself but it is not mine. As an abba, I realize I want this for my children. I don't want them to grow up with so much of the just plain garbage that pervades American teenage culture. I don't want them to care about Brittany Spears or Justin Timberlake or whoever is on the cover of the latest issue of the latest magazine. I want for them to drive on streets like "HaTanaim" – the name of sages who lived in the time of the Mishnah. I want them to stand still with an entire nation at 11am on Yom Hashoah and listen to sad, poetic songs on Yom Hazikaron. I want them live in a country where the lowest voter turnout in the country's history is greater than America's highest election-day turnout in a century. And when they dance, let them not dance empty gyrations to a techno hip hop beat at yet another club in another city. Let them dance with relief and a deep joy because *magiah lahem* – they deserve it.

After prayers and Shabbat dinner, the sessions continue on Friday night as the seminar winds towards its conclusion on Sunday. Instead of reviewing the camp schedule, the staff structure, and the hundreds of other things we could talk about in preparation for the summer, I set aside one hour to tell them my story; to tell them why it all matters to me – God, Torah, the Jewish people – and to somehow convey to them how much their work at a Jewish summer camp will matter to the lives of thousands of children and families for years to come. I try to explain how since Camp Ramah in California opened 50 years ago in 1956, our campers have returned home and asked/demanded more from their parents' Jewish homes. They have wanted to keep kosher, yearned to keep Shabbat, thirsted to learn and pray and mark Shabbat's end with candles and spices and wine in a circle with friends and family. I explain how proud I am that our staff members have married Israelis and made aliyah.

Sitting on the damp grass in the dimly lit Shabbat night, one young woman raises her hand: "Rabbi Dan, what if one of the parents calls the camp and is angry because their child wants to make aliyah and they don't want them to? What will you say?"

I pause and listen to the quiet of the night around us. What a great question. "Let me share a few thoughts with you," I said, looking up at her and each of the faces around the circle. "First, never be afraid of sharing too much with our campers how much you love Israeli music, the army, the Negev and Galilee and

Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. At our camp, you need never be afraid of helping our kids to fall in love with Israel. Second, if and when a parent calls me and is distraught because their child loves Israel and wants to move to Israel because of Camp Ramah in California, that is a conversation I love to have – not because, God forbid, I want to create strife between parents and children, but because it means that camp has meant that much to that child. It means that you, our *mishlach* made a deep and lasting connection with a child, and that that family will begin to wrestle with the question that I think every serious Jew in the United States must wrestle with at some point or another: why don't I live in Israel?

“But most of all, I want to tell you something personal. In a few years, I too am going to send my children to Camp Ramah in California. I want you to know something from the bottom of my heart. If Alon or Benjamin or Ranon comes home to me and Jennifer one day after camp some summer and says, ‘Abba, Ima, I want to make aliyah,’ do you know what I’ll do? I will bless you. I will bless you over and over and over again in words I can’t even begin to describe. My heart will tremble. I will be afraid as any parent would, afraid of losing them, afraid of them being so far away, but I pray God will give me strength to thank you from the depths of my heart.”

I’m writing this on the plane back from Tel Aviv to Atlanta and then Los Angeles with a profound sense of sadness that I may be heading in the wrong direction. Aliyah is complicated. It’s complicated because we have families – we have aging parents who need us in their old age. We have siblings and aunts and uncles who might not understand and who we won’t see as much when we live so many thousands of miles away. I have an aunt and uncle and cousin who I love very much and who have lived, for the most part, alone and isolated from the rest of our family since 1977 because they made the decision to make aliyah 30 years ago. I missed them growing up; I think I miss them even more now and I wish they lived closer, that they would visit more often. They have missed us too. It wasn’t easy for my cousin to grow up in Israel without a close extended family. Every holiday for her was a reminder of the price my aunt and uncle decided to pay, and that she would pay too. It’s complicated because each one of us must figure out the special role God wants us to play for the Jewish people in this life. I believe as a matter of faith that God calls some Jews for some times to do His service here, in Diaspora, for now.

But maybe I’m just making excuses. Maybe it’s really not all that complicated. “Many plans rise in human hearts, but Adonai’s designs are fulfilled,” says the siddur. What are Adonai’s designs for me? Maybe I’m trapped in the designs of my own heart. Maybe God wants me to move to Israel and I’m just not listening. Maybe I’m just scared. Or maybe in a dark place I’d rather not show the world, I just don’t care enough. Am I choosing luxury over homeland? And if so, what does that say about me? Am I choosing the perception of safety

over existential meaning? Am I really better off living in “safety” in Los Angeles than I am speaking Hebrew and living in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, participating in the rebirth of the Jewish people in our own land after thousands of years of wandering and exile? The questions demand to be asked over and over again; they haunt me. They should haunt us. Why am I on a plane heading “home” to Los Angeles?

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