

Friday, January 12, 2024

Hineini - Here I Am

This Saturday night, Jewish people around the world will be completing the weekly ritual of havdalah. This brief prayer service at the end of Shabbat, which literally means “differentiation,” marks the end of one week and the beginning of another. For those of us who like organization and compartmentalization, this clear delineation is quite welcome!

This week, as havdalah ends, I will be boarding a redeye El Al flight to Israel. I've been to Israel many times: on a 10-day Birthright Israel trip, on a 10-month volunteer stint, with multiple JCC professional development groups, and even for a family wedding. Each trip has brought its own unique experiences—some more than others, but all experiences that have, in some way, changed and shaped my life. Just as havdalah marks the end of one week and the beginning of another, my trips to Israel have, in many ways, marked the various chapters of my adult life.

One reason that I am traveling to Israel is because I am extremely confident that I will experience something that will again change me in some way. The Israel of today is not the Israel of Oct. 6, the day before Hamas terrorists murdered 1,200 people in Israel. It is not the Israel of two years ago when I last visited. I understand that the national mood has changed. There is a sense of anger that this happened and the fear that it could happen again. This is a country in which every single person is worried that they could get a knock on the door any given day telling them that a loved one was killed in the line of duty. Where literally everyone knows someone who was killed or taken hostage on Oct. 7. Where children do not get a good night's sleep because rocket warning sirens continue to be a daily occurrence.

I am going to Israel because I have something to bring there, and something to bring back. When a loved one is sick in the hospital, you go to visit to show that you care and support them. Israelis are hurting and are suffering right now. Knowing that people care, are thinking about them, praying for them, and supporting them in this time of need, is critical. Little things like sharing letters written by day school students, distributing “bravery” value tags worn by our campers, and showing both our love and concern for them is even more meaningful during these times.

I don't know, however, what I may bring back. I don't know what I will find, what I will learn, or what I will feel. If I knew, then I might not need to go. But there is a reason that we send teenagers on the March of the Living to Auschwitz, and a reason we send college students on Birthright Israel. You can only truly experience something by being there. In this day of interactive and multimedia communications, there is still value in being physically present.

In the coming days, I will be sharing my experiences via e-mail with this group. I look forward to sharing my experiences with you both during my trip, and when I return. I hope you will join me in thinking about, praying for, and showing our support for our brothers and sisters in Israel.