

## It's About Family: Israel and Parashat Sh'mot

Rabbi Aaron Starr

I am writing to you now from Jerusalem, as I conclude the Winter 2023 session of my fellowship with the Shalom Hartman Institute. With profound gratitude to you, to our synagogue leadership, to our staff, to my clergy partners and especially to Rabbi Dahlen, I am now at the end of three weeks in the Promised Land during which I enjoyed vacation with Rebecca and our children and during which I deepened my learning of Jewish life and law.

During the first several days of the trip, Rebecca, Caleb, Ayal, and I visited with the Schwartz



family. As you might remember, Itay Schwartz – a native of the Shimshit village in the Central Galilee -- lived in the Starr home from March through August 2022 while he was teaching in Jewish Detroit for his *sh'nat sherut* (year of service) through the Jewish Agency for Israel. During that time, Rebecca and I also became close with his parents,

Miron and Hila. Since August we have been excited to reconnect with the Schwartz family and very much anticipated beginning our vacation in northern Israel (and Detroit's partnership region) with Itay, his parents, and his siblings.

In Haifa, we toured the famed Bahai Gardens; we walked the city streets and found the most amazing hummus I've ever eaten; and we took the cable cars from the base of the city to the top of the mountain on which the University of Haifa sits. We visited Nazareth two days before Christmas. We explored the ancient city of Tzipori and the rabbinic burial caves at Beit Sh'arim. At Moshav Nahalal and Kibbutz Ramat David, we exposed our kids to the various stages of Israel's economic development, including spending time with our friend and former Detroit Shaliach Yoav Raban. We also visited with a variety of people during the Shabbat we spent in Shimshit, the small town in which the Schwartzes live.

Most of all, though, it's about family. The only aspect of this part of the vacation better than the food (and the food was "wow"), was to spend time with people who exude kindness, wisdom, and love; the highlight of this first-half of our trip to Israel was simply spending time with the Schwartzes – to be with our family in Israel.



After several days, we departed the north for Jerusalem. In the Holy City, we prayed at the Kotel; we walked the streets of the Old City and the New City; we visited the graves on Har Herzl; and we ate at some of Jerusalem's most delicious restaurants. We also toured the Goldstein Youth Village where, beginning in just a couple weeks, Caleb will spend four months abroad, from January to May, learning at TRY (Tichon Ramah Yisrael): the Conservative Movement's semester-in-Israel experience provided by Camp Ramah.

Most of all, though, it's about family. The only aspect of our Jerusalem vacation better than the food (and the food was, yes, "wow"), was to spend time with people who exude joy, blessing,



intelligence, and love; the highlight of this second-half of our trip was simply to be with the Becker-Bilmes family: Rebecca's sister, brother-in-law, and two of their children, their daughter-in-law (all of whom made Aliyah), and three of their grandchildren (born in Israel). The highlight was simply spending time with our Israeli family.

Then, just after the turn of the secular New Year, Rebecca and the kids flew home while I stayed for my learning with Hartman. 25 rabbis of every Jewish denomination who are leaders throughout North America and Israel joined me for studies in Jerusalem and even a weekend experience in Ein Gedi as part of our shared fellowship cohort that has us learning together already for four years. And the only thing better than the learning (and the learning was, yes, "wow"), was simply to spend time with my colleagues who live Torah, speak Torah, and breathe Torah with every word and every act ... and who are wonderfully funny and amazingly brilliant. Over nearly four years of learning together, these colleagues have become – in many ways – family.

There was, however, one day between the vacation and the learning. By train, by bus, and by foot I traversed Tel Aviv, including strolling the Mediterranean coast and my first visit to the M&H (Milk & Honey) whiskey distillery. That too became about family, because in schmoozing with the gentleman who served me the flight of whiskey, I was reminded that even more important than Jews' connection to the Land of Israel is Jews' connection to each other.

We are family. To travel to Israel is indeed to come home. To be in Israel is to journey with our brothers and sisters.

And as we turn now to the Book of Exodus with this week's Parashat Sh'mot, we are reminded that the eternal Nation of Israel began, quite simply, with one family. As the Torah makes clear, sometimes families fight and sometimes families go in different directions; but at the



end of the day and especially when threatened, family comes together. Family must ALWAYS come together, to stand up for each other in difficult times; to celebrate the good times; and also to lovingly correct each other when one errs.

When I think about my relationship to Israel and when I think about the relationship between North American Jews and Israel, what I think about is family. I think about food and whiskey too, of course, but these are ultimately tools in service to building family. And what I pray for my children is that they should know, no matter what, in Israel they have family. Our family.

Thank you for allowing me the time away and thank you for encouraging my continued learning and growth. Thank you for journeying with me and thank you for allowing me to count you among my brothers and sisters. May God bless the State of Israel and may God bless the People Israel with peace, with prosperity, and with family. And if you're interested in traveling to Israel with Shaarey Zedek – either with the Detroit Mission in March '23 or at another time – let me know.

From Jerusalem, Shabbat shalom!

