

As some of you may know, I just returned from a Federation campaign workers' mission to Romania and Israel. From my perspective it would be hard to find a more fitting summary of the last two weeks of my life than the opening words of this morning's Torah reading. True, God directs them to Abraham, but maybe this year He intended them for my ears as well : “לך־לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך” -- Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the place that I will show you” (*Genesis* 12:1).

When God commanded Abraham to leave the comfort of his homeland the patriarch is already seventy-five years old. The Torah tells us nothing of Abraham's early life: how he was raised, what he valued, the nature of his relationships with family, or even why God picked him. The silence of the text offers the rabbinic imagination a fertile field in which to plant a rich crop of *midrash*, but all that is secondary to the fact that when God speaks to Abraham for the very first time, it is to command him to undertake a journey away from everything that is familiar, to travel to a new place where nothing is known. Aviva Zornberg, a noted contemporary scholar of Bible, observes that Abraham's journey is not an act of exile, but in response to a divine imperative. From the dawn of Jewish peoplehood through the ages and down to this very moment, God asks us, no less than our ancestors, to undertake a spiritual quest, to make a purpose-driven journey that hopefully will lead to a better understanding of ourselves, our community, and our relationship to the Holy One.

This morning I would like to invite you to join me in a journey that requires no passport or plane ticket; suitcases, cameras and traveler checks won't be needed, either. Were it not Shabbat I could show you slides that might create a helpful visual context for our trip, but I'd much prefer to create a narrative of sound, a journey of words and memories of music. So for our trip this morning, I'll ask you to grab an invisible pair of earphones from the imaginary flight attendants walking up and down the aisles of the sanctuary. Better yet, consider downloading the memory of what you are about to hear into the internal i-pod that features your own Jewish soul music.

Our first track is recorded in a Bucharest basement bar on a Monday night with a DJ and a Karaoke machine. Strains of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A" fill the air. As someone who was, in fact, born in the USA and lived just a hop and a skip away from Springsteen's hometown of Freehold, New Jersey, there's something ironic about hearing this song played in a Romanian basement cafe. There is nothing Jewish about this scene . . . except there is everything Jewish about where we were and why we were listening to the best of the '80s and '90s. We are in the newly opened cafe of Bucharest's Jewish Community Center, a place where young Jews come together to socialize and meet one another. A JCC that was created out of an abandoned building, and lovingly refurbished by the hands of young Romanian Jews, many of whom are beneficiaries of a leadership development program operated by the Joint Distribution Committee, funded in part by the Jewish Federation of Jacksonville. That day I have the immense satisfaction and privilege of affixing a *mezuzah* to the doorpost of the new cafe. And as we hang the *mezuzah*, the sound of the hammer driving the nails into the wooden lintel serve as a deeply meaningful backbeat to the rock n' roll that brings young Romanian Jews together.

The next morning there is different music to be heard in the *davening* of the Chorale Temple, the site of the only daily *minyan* in the entire country. the service itself isn't exceptional or unusual; one encounter something similar in countless other venues around the globe . . . until you stop to consider that before the *Shoah* there were 800,000 Jews in Romania, that seventy years ago there would have been hundreds upon hundreds of daily services throughout the country just like this one, and that the splendor of Europe's third largest prewar Jewish community has been reduced to a single handful of elderly men praying in one synagogue. There is nothing exceptional or unusual to the *davening* until you look toward the front of the chapel and see the youngest person in the room . . . the 28-year-old rabbi, Shlomo Rosen. Rabbi Rosen is a native of Romania, the son of an assimilated Jewish father and a Gentile mother, who was born at the tail-end of the Communist era and grew up knowing nothing about Judaism, until a chance encounter led him on a journey of Jewish discovery no less meaningful than that of Abraham our ancestor, a journey that led to observance and *halakhic* conversion in Israel, to studies at a liberal Orthodox *yeshiva* in New York, where his tuition was paid for by the JDC, a journey that ultimately brought him back to his birthplace because he passionately believes himself uniquely equipped to bridge the gap between the intermarried and

assimilated Jews of Romania and the beauty of Judaism.

The following evening there is more Jewish music to be heard, this time in the city of Brasov, three hours north of Bucharest at the edge of the Carpathian mountains. In this picturesque town whose cobblestone street resonate with the charm of Brussels or Amsterdam, there are only 300 Jews left and no rabbi. Yet the synagogue holds weekly Shabbat services in its newly renovated building and even manages to maintain a sit-down kosher restaurant that serves dinner daily to residents and visitors alike. We are entertained that night by a singing group that calls itself *B'yahad*, literally "All together in Hebrew." Four men and women sing for us and proudly give us a gift of the CD they have recently recorded. Listening to a rendition of *Hava Nagila* might seem kitsch in a different context, but not when you hear it live from a group of Jews struggling to lead a full Jewish life in one of the most remote corners of the Jewish universe. To sing *Hava Nagila* in Brasov is to attest to our indestructibility as a people -- not just to survive the adversaries who sought our destruction only to be destroyed themselves, but also to throw down the gauntlet and reject the oblivion of assimilation that could so easily be the fate of Romanian Jewry. I cannot tell you the last time I heard music as deeply moving as that. . .

Well, that's not quite true; I can tell you. It was ten hours later standing in front of the Kotel in the darkness of the hour before dawn. We listened to the *Muezzin* at the top of the Temple Mount calling Muslims to the first service of the morning at the end of Ramadan, the most sacred month on Islam's religious calendar; against the quarter tones of the Arabic, the chanting of Psalms by pious Jews at the Kotel served as a counterpoint, to which another level of harmony was added by our group singing Naomi Shemer's *Yerushalayim shel Zahav*, Jerusalem of Gold. Suddenly, a line of Shemer's music made sense to me in a visceral way as never before: "הלא לכל שיריך אני כנור" -- Behold, I am harp for all your songs." Is Jerusalem the harp on which we compose the music of our souls? Or is it the other way around -- are we the musical instruments on which Jerusalem writes the compositions of her triumphs and tribulations? At that moment, in listening to the intermingling of praise songs to God from both Muslim and Jew I was moved to believe that Yerushalayim might one day serve as a symphonic orchestra for the music of all her resident composers -- Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

36 hours later we were back at the Kotel for Friday night services. To be perfectly honest, my most spiritual moments at the wall have been in the middle of the night when the plaza is largely empty. During the day it is hard to create a spiritually reflective moment when a chorus of beggars surround one with the music of their demands, a music whose libretto consists of a single word uttered imperiously over and over: “*tzedakah! tzedakah!*” It is often hard to feel that the Wall is part of who I am, when those who daven there reject my religious identity as a Conservative Jew, and might well threaten me with bodily harm were I to pray there as we have prayed this morning in this Sanctuary. And so, generally when I am in Jerusalem I do my praying at places other than the Kotel. Of course, when you’re the rabbi on a Federation trip and Friday night at the Kotel is *de riguer*, expected and obligatory, you hold your breath and hope for the best. That night, however, was one of the most meaningful and deeply satisfying religious experiences I have ever had at the Wall. And for that I must thank the blessed memory of my father, whose tenth *yahrzeit* began that evening. Had it been any other night, I would have probably brought our small group to daven at the edge of a swaying sea of black hats, but that evening I was determined to lead a service as is proper for someone observing a *yahrzeit*. The Kabbalat Shabbat service our Jacksonville group davened together consisted of familiar tunes and Carlebach melodies that one might hear on any ordinary Friday night at the Center, but in the course of our worship it seemed that every other overwhelmed and intimidated North American Jewish male wandering around the Kotel in search of a spiritual home seemed to find us. And so there we stood, a group of some 15 or so Jews -- along with a Dutch Christian and two ultra-Orthodox Jews thrown in for good measure -- who created an impromptu congregation -- one group of loud singers amidst a cacophony of twenty other groups shouting praise on high. What beautiful dissonance, and what harmony there was in our corporate atonality!

There were so many other memorable musical experiences. Shabbat morning services at *Shira Hadasha*, a liberal Orthodox *minyán* in which there is separate seating, yet women lead various portions of the service from their side of the *mehitza*. It is difficult to describe the enormous spiritual energy that is unleashed when an entire room of people sing together and create impromptu harmonies, a service in which the *shlihei tzibbur*, the prayer leaders do nothing except invite you to join and blend in with your own harmonies, a service in which it is unthinkable to turn down that invitation to sing, hum, clap and sway.

Later that evening I lead *havdalah* outside our hotel with *Har Zion*, Mount Zion, in the background. That night wind and music created a spiritual duet. In a denial of the breeze that kept extinguishing our *havdalah* candle, we stubbornly insisted on re-lighting the candle time and again, as we chanted *havdalah* to a *Hasidic* melody from the extinguished Jewish community of Munkacs, and through the music stubbornly insisted that the candle of Jewish life can never be snuffed out.

My friends, it's good to be home, to appreciate and savor the many wonderful things we have here in our community. Yet to truly understand the nature of Jewish life in Jacksonville and why synagogues matter, and why daily *minyan* matters, and why the Martin J. Gottlieb Day School and Rivergarden and every other institution of Jewish life counts at the deepest level of being, we need to pick ourselves up and journey to places where the faces are new, but the challenges are familiar, and there are no strangers, simply family members that we have yet to meet. The most meaningful route to being at home as a Jew in Jacksonville at some point travels by way of Israel and a thousand Diaspora communities where so much is different, yet the same..

In the spirit of this morning's *parsha* I urge all of us, like Abraham, to go forth to those far away places in which Jews live that are no more distant than our thoughts, and as we do so, may we be privileged to download the music of the Jewish world into the i-pod of the soul, the Jewish heart powered by the battery of God, Torah, and Israel's eternal memory. As the Holy One blessed Abraham's journey, so may God bless our own travels to the far away places that, in the end, are the shortest ways home. Amen.