



**Rosh Hashanah 2009**

**"EVERYDAY COURAGE"  
by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

About a month ago, I was walking with my son, Oren, who is eight, along Central Park South. We came to a spot not far from Columbus Circle where there was a minyan of idle pedicab drivers. "Let me take you for a ride," one said. "Come, let me show around the park," said another. "Come with me," said a third.

We respectfully declined. After we got out of earshot I said to Oren, "What does that remind you of?" He immediately said, "It's just like the store owners in the Old City." He was exactly right, and it was gratifying to see what he had absorbed from our trip to Israel. We had just gotten back from ten days in Jerusalem where one of the required experiences of any trip is to be politely badgered by the local storeowners to enter their shops. We declined them too, except for the one we went into on our own because Oren spotted a T-Shirt he wanted. It said "Ani ohev at Sponge Bob." "I love Sponge Bob." Oren was also excited to see in a bookstore a Hebrew version of "A Diary of a Wimpy Kid" and a few other books he knew from home.

This was my first trip back to Israel in 25 years after living there for a year, and volunteering two prior summers on an archaeological dig. Despite the profound effect of those trips, I obviously hadn't rushed back.

Until three years ago, my wife, Myrna, had never been to Israel herself, but then was invited to go to Tel Aviv for a unique opportunity to honor the benefactor of her work at the Center for Cultural Judaism. When she got back she told me that she couldn't wait to return. And this time she wanted us to join her. I was glad she had had a good trip, but I didn't exactly react to her idea with enthusiasm. At the same time, knowing Myrna, I realized that it was a foregone conclusion that we would eventually make this trip together and that I could no longer avoid confronting my ambivalence about the country and my anxieties about safety.

We had hoped to organize a congregation tour for this summer to coincide with the World Congress of Jewish Studies, which Myrna was participating in through her foundation. When we didn't get enough interest in the group tour we made plans to go on our own. However, the trip still almost didn't happen. Both of us had health issues this past spring that threatened to derail our plans. Myrna has a chronic pain condition that developed since the first trip and she recently had unrelated surgery that took an additional toll. In my case, I suddenly had such extreme sciatica that I was also laid up. Fortunately, I received some very beneficial epidural injections that took away the pain at least for now. As for Myrna, she gradually felt well enough to travel but still relied on incredible fortitude and courage to endure her condition in the face of the challenges of a long flight, the demands of a conference that went all hours, and a visit to a country that was surprisingly not particularly friendly to disability.

We flew on a Friday night, which meant that for the only time in our trip we were away from observant Jews. Otherwise, Jerusalem has become much more religious than when I was there last. Our hotel was a

healthy mix of secular and religious, sitting side by side in the dining room or at the pool where Oren had a good time hanging out with a group of boys at the ping pong table, some with head coverings and ritual fringes, and some without. Our bedroom overlooked a courtyard, which gave us a great view one night of an Orthodox wedding. It also meant we had to explain to Oren why the bride was walking around the groom seven times and why we didn't like that custom. In fact, Israel was a series of one teaching moment after another. And some were not easy.

Like talking about the issue of security. For example, every restaurant has a guard outside, usually wearing a bright green or orange smock with the word "bitachon" or security on the back. I suppose one tends to overlook them after a while, but they are a constant reminder that life isn't normal.

At the same time, this situation did give rise to a humorous moment. One night, Myrna tried to reach room service, but kept getting a recording in Hebrew. "This makes no sense," she said. "The message should also be in English for all the tourists." "I don't understand," said Oren, "Aren't they the ones who try to hurt people?" "No," we said, "those are terrorists." As Gilda Radner would have said, in her role as Emily Litella, "Never mind."

But one thing we could not "never mind" was the controversial Separation Wall that has been built, and continues to be expanded, as a barrier between Israel and the Occupied Territories. On more than one occasion we saw this intimidating structure up close driving right beside it. The barrier stands excessively tall in stretches. We understand that it brings added security, and even our friends grudgingly accept it, but at what cost? We saw a number of checkpoints designed to slow traffic down and scrutinize who was going where. We were always waved through without hesitation. Occasionally, I would hear a police siren or a helicopter fly by and I would wonder if something had happened, but mostly I felt as secure as I do on the Upper West Side.

During the time of our visit there was a horrifying attack on the Gay and Lesbian Center in Tel Aviv that killed two and wounded eleven others. Accusations were immediately directed at a pattern of inflammatory statements that had been made in the Knesset and by the Orthodox community, but the killer remained at large and it was unclear if there was any connection. In contrast to that rhetoric, I also learned that gay life in Israel, far from being delegitimized, is a frequent theme of movies, theatre and literature. Same-sex couples can legally adopt children and their marriages abroad can be registered as legal in Israel – no different than secular Jews who also marry outside the country because they don't want an Orthodox ceremony.

While Myrna was at her conference, Oren and I saw a variety of sights. We had the benefit of some very knowledgeable child-friendly guides who brought the experience alive for Oren. We walked along the walls of the Old City, we sloshed with head lanterns through the ancient water tunnels underneath, and we visited an archaeological excavation where we got to dig around in the dirt, a particularly fun time for Oren and his father. We also went to a children's learning center where Oren and the other kids got barefoot and stepped on grapes to make juice which we decided not to drink.

We, of course, went to Masada and the Dead Sea. Masada, as you may know, was a fortress built by Herod as his winter palace. It's a stunning triumph of construction, with bathhouses, cisterns, storerooms, and other remarkable structures carved out of the side of the mountain. It was later the last hold out of the Zealots, a resistance group that committed group suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. That act has since given rise to the slogan, "Never again" - "Never again will we be victims or be defeated." It's a proud and heroic statement, but one that has also has debatably legitimized excessive militarism and separatism.

Now, a few summers earlier, Oren and I had climbed a rather insignificant mountain in the Adirondacks, though it was no small hike for him. Now he was determined to climb Masada, by the steep, winding trail known as the Snake Path, and then we would take the cable car down which would be easier on our legs. Remarkably, just a few months earlier I was having trouble walking, and now I was ready to climb myself. When we told our guide, Hannah, our plan she paused at first before answering. She said that when it gets too hot they close the Snake Path down as a precaution. And then she added the ominous words - that we really didn't need to know - that not long ago a man had died of heat stroke.

That particular day was cooler than others, a mere 38 Celsius, which converts to 100.4 Fahrenheit. It was already 9am when we got to the ticket booth. We were told the path was open and we were determined to climb. Hannah pointed us in the direction of the path, but was going to take the cable car up. She would meet us on the top.

It was okay climbing at first, but then it got tiring. And hot. Really, really hot. And that's when Oren started to say, right on cue, "I'm going to die." Which he kept repeating over and over again. Now I wasn't exactly prancing up the mountain myself and I thought, "What have I gotten us into?" We still had quite a way to go. We took lots of breaks, we drank tons of water, and we found all sorts of inner resources to keep going. I kept telling Oren what I had learned from years of mountain climbing experience: Don't look at the top and how far away it is. Just look at your feet and take it a step at a time.

After nearly an hour and a half of this insanity, we finally neared the top. Hannah had been tracking our climb and now that we were in range she yelled down at Oren. Suddenly he was no longer going to die and, defying the Angel of Death, he scampered ahead. I was cheered on by his new lease on life, but I trudged along the remaining distance without that same new-found burst of energy. Finally, I, too, reached the top and gained a new understanding of the slogan, "Never again."

A few days into our trip Oren suddenly expressed an interest in learning Hebrew, beyond a few rudimentary phrases I had already taught him. He learned the alphabet and took pleasure in sounding out words. This was very satisfying for him and for Myrna and myself. Then one day he told us that he might want to move to Israel. That was a bit more alarming. For some Jewish parents, this is a fantasy come true. Bring your children to Israel and instill in them a connection to their Jewish identity. Or is this laying the groundwork for an unfolding nightmare when our children will not just move really far away but put their lives in danger in ways we can't imagine.

There's a postscript to this story. Two weeks after we got back Oren spontaneously said to me, "If I moved to Israel, I'd go to Tel Aviv." "Why?" I asked. "You've never been there." "It's more secular," he said, which he learned a day or so earlier from Myrna. And then he added, "But I'll probably stay here." We'll have to wait and see.

I also learned that the Israelis have an expression that they use all the time. One asks a clerk at the hotel, "Can I have a map of the city?" and the answer is "No problem." Or, in a restaurant, "Can we have some more napkins?" and the server says, "No problem."

I thought, why not say, "Sure," or "Of course." Why not be more positive, more affirmative? Why the double negative? And then I thought: This place has tons of problems. It's over run with problems. There are too many to list. But maybe this is their way of saying, We'll get through them one at a time, one step at a time, one day at a time, one problem at a time.

As we were heading home for New York, Myrna shared with me how hard the trip had been for her. As

much as she loved her conference and being in Israel, I wondered if she was toying with a version of her own “never again.” We talked about how to make the trip easier next time – perhaps take it in stages. I also thought of women who have said after giving birth, “never again,” and then they have gone on to have more children. Perhaps we would both benefit from a kind of selective amnesia that comes with time.

I have come to accept that our lives daily include one challenge after another. It’s rarely free-sailing. One doesn’t need to go all the way to Israel or climb Masada in hundred degree weather, not to mention live in a place where security is a constant issue, to know this. Our daily struggles may be much less dramatic, but no less real. No matter where we are, we often need determination and fortitude and possibly real courage to face what lies ahead. To face pain, physical and emotional. To face loss, regrets and misgivings. To face temptations that can lead us astray. To face opportunities that can vitalize us if only we would grab a hold.

Now, as we enter this New Year, let us look inward with strength and resolve. Let us look ahead with hope and determination. And let us follow a path of possibility and challenge, and maybe even some crazy mountain climbing.