

Join Me Inside

Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert
Temple Etz Chaim, Franklin, Massachusetts
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It's nineteen stories high and massive side to side. As you approach it, you have the impression that this is an important place where important things happen. And you're right. You're facing the Ein Kerem campus of Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. If you enter at all, unless you're a patient, you've probably come to see the stained-glass windows that Marc Chagall painted for display there. But the hospital isn't principally an art museum; it's a setting for vital human action.

This summer, as part of my annual study at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I went on a *tiyul*, basically a field trip, to Hadassah Hospital. There I saw in real life what the Israeli media critic Michael Handelzalts wrote of medical dramas on television: that they deal with a closed world where people are struggling with “an insoluble dilemma[,] ... the never-ending contest between life and death.”¹ I went into that closed world, and I want to bring you in there too. Join me inside.

Julie Benbenishty is a commanding woman in her early sixties. Having grown up in New Jersey, she made aliyah as a teenager and went into nursing, eventually finding her way to the trauma unit at Hadassah. Eight years ago, she helped care for a severely injured Palestinian truck driver. His pelvis had been crushed, his abdomen had hemorrhaged, and his left foot needed to be amputated. Three months later, he was finally ready to go home to Hebron, in the West Bank.

Benbenishty found that she had no way to locate or communicate with the Palestinian nurse who would be treating him. This wasn't the first time, either. As she put it, “I felt awful that despite this relatively short distance of under 20 miles I didn't know one nurse there.”

She talked it over with her friend and colleague Na'ila Hayek, an Israeli Arab nurse from the Galilee. They called around and got names of nurses in the Palestinian Authority. Hayek phoned them, and they all met for coffee.

So began Nurses in the Middle East. As Benbenishty described it, “our goal is to promote regional health and connect nurses to each other, regardless of political, ethnic, or religious identity.” Their board consists of nurses from both Jewish West Jerusalem and Arab East Jerusalem. They do research and advocacy. They hold conferences every two years in Jordan, where both Israelis and Palestinians can go easily. The first conference in 2011 drew 17 nurses. The most recent one was attended by 140, including

¹ Michael Handelzalts, “It takes more than McDreamy: Why medical shows are so popular,” *Haaretz*, Nov. 5, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/life/television/.premium-matters-of-life-and-death-1.5417831>.

people from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. And for Benbenishty and Hayek, this is all a volunteer activity for their spare time; they continue to work as nurses at Hadassah.²

Sandra Kudsieh is a young woman, a pediatric social worker. Because she is Palestinian, she often works with Arab patients, and she has developed a special focus on Syrians. With the civil war having raged for years there, many people are desperate for medical care. Some will even risk seeking it in Israel, knowing that if they are found out, they and their families could face death upon going back. Kudsieh has to help them navigate their stay and their return.

One mother had brought her baby in. While they were at Hadassah, her village was invaded. Everyone left, including her own other children. She had no idea what had happened to them throughout the two weeks that she was in Jerusalem. The hospital helped, and at the last minute, on the day she was scheduled to return, it found her family, all safe.

Victor Kokali is a rugged looking middle-aged man. He lives on the West Bank, in Bethlehem. He has been an OR nurse at Hadassah since 2000. He recalls that during the Second Intifada, which started around then, an Israeli and a Palestinian were being brought in for surgery at the same time. One had shot the other. Not knowing who each other was, their families were eating at the same time in the same hospital cafeteria. This is some of life at Hadassah Hospital.

The day continued at Hadassah, but now we weren't dealing with medical dramas anymore. We were on to that other closed space where insoluble dilemmas are presented daily. We were going to talk about Jerusalem. We met in a conference room. Join me inside.

Yossi Klein Halevi is a senior fellow at Hartman. He told us that the hospital was a perfect place for him to speak to us, because it exemplifies a truth about Jerusalem. Israelis and Palestinians are thrown together there in ways that seem remarkable to outsiders and are normal for residents of Jerusalem. In 2011, the same year that Julie Benbenishty and Na'ila Hayek reached out to nurses in the Palestinian Authority, a light rail system reached out across Jerusalem. Israel annexed a reunited Jerusalem after the 1967 War, but Palestinians and others dispute this status. The light rail system caused controversy, as does much of what takes place in Israel, because it runs through both parts of the city. And yet, as a practical matter, Arabs and Jews ride it together every day. You can see the other's humanity if you're riding with them for stop after stop.

As for Hadassah Hospital itself, the Psalmist tells us, *sha'alu shalom Y'rushalayim*, "pray for the peace of Jerusalem."³ As Klein Halevi told us, "If the peace of Jerusalem is more or less maintained, this [hospital] is one of the main reasons."

² Barbara Sofer, "People of Israel: Julie Benbenishty," *Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 27, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Jerusalem-Report/PEOPLE-OF-ISRAEL-Julie-Benbenishty-552877>. See also Nurses in the Middle East website, <http://middleeastnurses.squarespace.com/what-we-do>.

³ Ps. 122:6.

We then left the light rail system and joined a game of backgammon. We actually did play backgammon. But first, we learned why we were going to play. Join me inside.

Jerusalem is a city of walls. There is the Western Wall. There are the walls of the Old City. There are the walls of the city limits, not brick and mortar walls this time, but a sense that people are immured in this place together. And yet, within those limits, there are other walls, again metaphorical ones but real nonetheless, walls that keep Jews and Palestinians, Orthodox and secular, each in their own enclaves. Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”⁴ In this case, that something is Kulna Yerushalayim.

Zaki Djemal is a well-spoken, 31-year-old Israeli from a Syrian Jewish family. With his scruffily-shaven beard, he looks every inch the hipster. Djemal came to our area for college, graduating with an honors degree in behavioral economics from Harvard. He could have had a successful business career in the United States. But he returned to Israel because, as he explained, “I thrive on being close to where it’s all happening and being confronted with so many issues that need to be solved. I didn’t want to come back and be complacent. I see a lot of opportunity in [Jerusalem.]”⁵

With some friends, he helped found Kulna Yerushalayim. Kulna means “Together,” in Arabic and sounds like the Hebrew word Kulanu, which means “All of Us.” And of course, Yerushalayim is the Hebrew for Jerusalem. They started with a series of sing-along events in Hebrew and Arabic designed to bring Jews and Arabs together around a shared love of Middle Eastern music. That worked fairly well, but it still wasn’t enough.

They had a difficult brainstorming session one day, trying to figure out what to do next. They were looking for “an activity that would let people engage with one another. They ended up playing backgammon.”⁶

As Djemal explained to us, there’s science behind this. Games have a powerful role in our lives. They are important in our evolution as social beings. Recent studies show that games actually build empathy. For example, researchers at McGill University found that fifteen minutes of play will transform someone you didn’t know into a friend, at least for the moment.⁷

And if you’re going to play a game in the Middle East, it’s going to be backgammon, or sheshbesh, an Arabic word that’s also made its way into Hebrew. Not only is the game

⁴ Robert Frost, “Mending Wall.”

⁵ Abigail Klein Leichman, “Jerusalem Jews and Arabs Bond Over Backgammon,” *Israel 21c*, March 19, 2017, <https://www.israel21c.org/jerusalem-jews-and-arabs-bond-over-backgammon/>.

⁶ Isabel Kershner, “In Jerusalem, Looking for Peace in Backgammon and Music,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/world/middleeast/jerusalem-palestinians-arts.html>.

⁷ See Loren J. Martin, et al., “Reducing Social Stress Elicits Emotional Contagion of Pain in Mouse and Human Strangers,” *Current Biology* 25 (2015), 326-332, [https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(14\)01489-4?returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982214014894%3Fshowall%3Dtrue](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(14)01489-4?returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982214014894%3Fshowall%3Dtrue).

central to the culture, but it has no hierarchy of players. You can't tell who's going to be good based on their money or their education.

Take Sam Araj. He's a soccer player who lives in the Shoafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem. He's played on youth teams of both an Israeli and a major European club. In 2015, however, he was falsely accused of having committed murder as a terrorist. The police admitted their mistake but still charged him with stone throwing. He says that his confession was false and coerced. He spent nine months in prison.

A few weeks after being released, he was opposite Israelis again, but this time at a backgammon board. The tournament was held in the Beit Hanina neighborhood of East Jerusalem, at the house of Mahmoud al-Rifai, the son of a well-known preacher at the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount. Several religiously observant Orthodox Jews participated in the tournament. Many of the Palestinians were, like Sam, residents of the Shoafat camp, which an article about the tournament described as "one of the most forlorn and volatile places in East Jerusalem."⁸

As you can see, this isn't just an event for the "usual suspects." As Kulna's own materials put it, "Attendees are not the moderate elites one might expect to find at events of this sort, but a true representation of the Jewish and Arab populace in the city: bus drivers, university professors, car mechanics, religious leaders, sanitation workers, artists, peace activists, youth workers...."⁹

As Mahmoud al-Rifai, the host of the tournament, said, "We have to ask not whom Jerusalem belongs to, ... but who belongs to Jerusalem, because belonging comes with commitment."¹⁰

That's part of life in Israel, figuring out not who Jerusalem belongs to but who belongs to Jerusalem, figuring out belonging and commitment. Even backgammon leads us to think about the big questions. And my moving in one day from life and death to light rail to sheshbesh shows how varied life in Israel is, and how charged every moment seems to be.

These stories aren't what you hear about Israel all the time. They aren't speeches in the Knesset or in the United Nations. They don't make it on television or on the front page of newspapers. The news stories are real, certainly, but they're real in a different way from what I've been describing. They're an arms-length view of Israel, not a view from the ground.

Last November, I went with several members of this Temple and two other synagogues on a civil rights journey to the South. One of the highlights of our trip was a visit to the

⁸ Nir Hasson, "Palestinians and Israelis Confront Each Other – Over Backgammon," *Haaretz*, Aug. 21, 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-palestinians-and-israelis-confront-each-other-over-backgammon-1.5427209>.

⁹ Amplifier.org website, <https://www.amplifiergiving.org/organization/1394/kulna-yerushalayim/>.

¹⁰ Hasson, *ibid*.

Equal Justice Initiative Museum and Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. These are the brainchildren of the lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson frequently speaks of “the power of proximity,” that we can only understand something by getting proximate to it, getting close enough to experience it.¹¹

In April, this Temple will undertake its first ever trip to Israel. We’ll have a chance to get proximate, to see it not at arms-length but from within. And so, I’m asking you to join me inside.

Oh, we’ll see all the things you’d expect on a trip to Israel: The Western Wall and the Old City; Yad Vashem; Masada; a jeep tour of the Golan Heights; ancient S’fat; modern Tel Aviv. But we’ll also go inside. We’ll travel to an Israeli settlement town to meet with the founders of Shorashim/Roots, a grassroots movement of understanding between Israelis and Palestinians. We’ll join with members of an Israeli Reform congregation for Shabbat dinners in their homes. We’ll speak with students and faculty at the Leo Baeck Institute in Haifa and learn about the innovative educational programs they have developed. We’ll have a chance to experience the Nalaga’at Center, where members of the blind and deaf community will first be our waiters and then will perform a play that they wrote. We’ll see how Israel changes within twenty-four hours from the solemnity of *Yom Hazikaron*, Israeli Memorial Day, to *Yom Haatzma’ut*, Israeli Independence Day. Join me inside.

I’ve always loved this poem by Yitzhak Yasinowitz, which is included in our *Mishkan T’filah* prayerbook:

One does not travel to Jerusalem,
one returns,
one ascends
the road taken by generations,
the path of longing
on the way to redemption.

One brings rucksacks
stuffed with memories
to each mountain
and each hill.
In the cobbled white alleyways
one offers a blessing
for memories of the past
which have been renewed.

One does not travel to Jerusalem,
one returns.¹²

¹¹ Bryan Stevenson speech, “The Power of Proximity,” 2018 Skoll Forum, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1722691321087397>.

¹² Yitzhak Yasinowitz, “One does not travel to Jerusalem,” reprinted in Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Mishkan T’filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conf. of Amer. Rabbis Pr., 2007), p. 479.

One returns. One ascends. One goes up and up in intensity, maybe even in holiness.

That intensity, that holiness can't be adequately experienced except by going inside. The rabbis understood this. In the Mishnah, there are several rules about how a shofar is to be constructed. But there is one other rule that goes toward the essential mitzvah of the shofar. For that mitzvah, that commandment, is not to sound the shofar. When we gave our blessing a few minutes ago, we didn't say anything about sounding the shofar. What we said was *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu lishmoa kol shofar*, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who has made us holy with your commandments and commanded us to hear the shofar." Not to sound it, to hear it.

And the one piece of halachah, of Jewish law, in the Mishnah about hearing the shofar is this: it doesn't count if you hear an echo. You have to hear the actual sound of the shofar.¹³ You have to hear the actual sound of the shofar.

Today, we have followed halachah. We haven't heard an echo; we've heard the actual sound of the shofar. But the standard news reports that come to our ears seem again and again to have been generated in an echo chamber, and that doesn't count. For those who can, I hope you'll join me inside Israel this April to hear and see and sense the real thing. And if you can't, I hope that you'll be prepared to talk to those who go, to see their pictures, to hear them tell what they saw, as I've told you today what I experienced. Because together, whether you go or whether you learn from those who go, we can all be changed, we can all gain a deeper understanding of Israel. This coming year, may each of us perform the mitzvah of truly hearing its shofar call.

Kein y'hi ratzon, be this God's will.

¹³ M. Rosh Hashanah 3:7.