



THE ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

by Josh Eisner



It seems that all the Alumni Perspectives so far have discussed the transition we've had to make since leaving Israel. This one will be no different. How can we discuss anything else, with the memory of such an unbelievable year still fresh in our minds? It seems like only a week ago ("yesterday" seems a bit to cliché) that we were met at *Ben Gurion* by Rav Binny, when he proceeded to give us our count off numbers and Israelphones...

But another memory that is, unfortunately, just as fresh, is the memory of the emotional goodbye that we all had to make to each other; to the dorm; to Israel, and to part of ourselves. Spending that last *Shabbes* with almost every incredible personality we met throughout the year really put the whole year into perspective (Ooh, I get it now! *Alumni Perspective*) for me – and I'm sure for the rest of the guys as well. I have been, unjustly, comparing this year to an extended version of summer camp (an experience that I never really wanted, but have heard so much about). You know, the feeling when you're surrounded by a great group of guys but then have to leave them just as things are getting great. To witness each student's personal growth, and feel like you contributed in some way to it, is one of the most empowering feelings I have ever experienced. And to wonder how, if we had each had a little more time with one another, we could have even done more, is awe-inspiring. So, when I had to say my goodbyes (or, as someone so elegantly changed it to, our *L'hitraots*), I felt like a huge part of me was being stolen right before my eyes and there was nothing that I could do about it.

I was fortunate enough to not have to say all of my goodbyes at the same time. A couple of the guys (Michael and Aryeh) and I had planned a trip through Europe on the way back from Israel; so, for 19 more days, I would still have a tangible part of Orayta with me. But I was still nervous that we wouldn't have any other Jewish connection throughout the trip. What a shock we were in for.

We spent our first few days in Rome, the center of Christianity, and also home to what claims to be the oldest Jewish community outside of Israel (going back to the Maccabees). I knew about the Jewish ghetto, but having visited

there previously with my family, we had not planned on visiting the area. Nevertheless, on our way to the Vatican, we passed a building with Hebrew writing on the side: *Ein ze ki im beit Elokim* (This is not but a house of God). By complete accident, we had found the Great Synagogue of Rome. We asked about *minyán* and found that each evening they have *Mincha* and *Maariv*. That night we went and had an incredibly meaningful *davening*. It was amazing to see how many people from this small community showed up for *davening*.

On our last full day in Rome we visited the Roman Forum, which is home to the “great” Arch of Titus. This is the famous arch that celebrates the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the end of the Second Temple period. All of us have heard about the famous carving of the Jews carrying out the *menorah* from the *Beit Hamikdash*. Now that the Jews have returned to sovereignty in Israel, my friends and I decided it would be appropriate to stick it to the Romans and have a *chevruta* right there under the Arch. We discussed various topics that we had learned throughout the year. At one point, we got stuck in our discussion and really wanted to figure it out. There’s no price for *Torah*, so we spent the money on a phone call to Israel to get help from Rav Binny. It really made his day (and ours) to hear from us, and even more so to hear what we were doing. We could hear the excitement in his voice as he helped us through our questions. It was a truly unforgettable experience.

The next day, we went to Florence and visited the great synagogue there. The first evening we hoped we would be able to go and *daven*, but the *shul* was closed. Apparently the only services they hold there are on Shabbes, but there were visiting hours the next day. So in the morning, I wandered back over and saw the *shul*. The inside was magnificent; it reminded me of a church without any of the Jesus stuff. It felt wrong to be in such a beautiful *shul* and not say any *teffila*, so as I walked around and noticed all of the intricacies of the architecture, I said the *shma*. I was able to leave Florence with a beautiful image ingrained in my mind. And throughout the rest of the Italy part of the trip, we would smile amongst ourselves whenever we heard Hebrew (usually Israeli tourists).

We then flew to Amsterdam for what turned out to be, at least for me, a huge disappointment. However, there were a few highlights. We woke up early on our first day to get to the Anne Frank House before the line grew too long. Just reading about that line should make everyone pause in bewilderment. A Jewish memorial, in Amsterdam of all places, has a minimum 30 minute wait, if you don’t get there before the museum opens! Even if we did have to wait on line, this museum was worth the wait. The justice the curator did to the Frank family is indescribable. I would recommend going to Amsterdam just to see the Anne Frank House.

One other beautiful thing about Amsterdam was the amazing *Shabbes* we had there. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a meal for Friday night, but that did not deter us from having a meaningful evening together. At lunch on Friday, we each ordered an extra sandwich to have for dinner. As *Shabbes* approached, we realized that we didn’t have wine or *challah*. (We still have something to learn about planning better). Unsure of what we could make *Kiddush* and *motzi* on, if we couldn’t find kosher wine or bread, we called Rav Noam. Luckily we caught him just before he made *Shabbes*. He explained to us the *halachot* of *Shabbes* meals and instructed us on what to buy. It was

great to hear his familiar voice and he really helped us make the most of our Friday night.

We did, however, arrange to attend a *Shabbes* lunch with the *Chabad shaliach*. So on *Shabbes* morning, we went to *shul* and made it in time for Torah reading. During the reading, I looked around and again realized how beautiful the old *shuls* of Europe are. The two aspects of this *shul* that really caught my eye were the amazing stained glass windows and the grandeur of the *Aron*. After *shul*, we walked for an hour to our host's house and had an amazing home-cooked meal. The food was almost as good as the *Shabbes* food at Orayta. When we started singing *zmirot*, our host deferred the first choice of *zemer* to us. Aryeh spoke up and chose *yom ze mechubad*. It reminded me so much of the incredible *zmirot* we all sang at the Orayta tables on *Shabbes*. And when the huge bottle of scotch came out (4 liters!!), boy, did the memories start flowing through my brain.

I have really been thinking a lot more seriously about these memories since I heard a *Dvar Torah* my dad gave last week on *parshat Matot-Masei*. In the beginning of chapter 32 of *Bamidbar*, the tribes of *Reuven* and *Gad* seem to reject going into Israel because they found land across the Jordan that would be more suitable for their cattle. In great fury, *Moshe* reprimands them saying "Should your brothers go to war and you should sit here? And why do you turn away the heart of Israel from going into the land which *Hashem* has given...and if you do not go, behold, you have sinned against the Lord." After this reproof, the tribes agree to enter the land to fight the war, and only afterwards will they return across the Jordan to settle their land.

Moshe's reaction teaches a clear message to us. It is the message of Jewish unity and responsibility for one another. The struggles and travails of one Jew do not just concern him and those who are close to him. They concern every single Jewish soul. No Jew can hide from their obligation towards their brothers no matter where in the world they are.

I have never felt this message so much since I have left Israel. This year, I fell in love with my Judaism and the Jewish People. I now feel real joy just being around other Jews. I now really feel pain in others' pain – where I feel a need to go and help that person out. Even alone in Europe, I didn't want to be without a sense of Judaism, and I was so lucky to find a piece of it everywhere I went.

It's so easy to forget about everything when you are no longer a part of it. So easy to stop caring about something that takes much effort to care for. My wish is that we all keep the message of *Moshe* - and the message our Rabbis drove home so well during the past year: No matter where we live, we are one people, and our destiny is linked to the destiny of every other Jew. I also pray that all of us who learned together this past year will always be able to care - and be there to fight - for one another. Whether we are in America or Israel, whether it is this year or in the future, may we always have this sense of connectedness that we have all grown to love and appreciate this year.

Have a great *Shabbes*!
Josh