

Rabbi Josh Beraha  
Temple Micah  
Rosh Hashanah 5777

In an old, black, Nike shoebox that lives in a storage closet in my parents' home are loose photographs from my childhood. Some are protected, arranged neatly in the plastic sleeves of an album. But for whatever reason—time, probably—many remain in the shoebox. Among these photographs is a picture of me from my first trip to Israel. It's a strange picture, at first glance, and even at second glance. There I am, my 16-year-old self, just off the plane from New York's JFK airport. I'm bending over, kneeling almost, my lips touching the dirty, light gray airport tarmac. I must have handed my camera—do they make those anymore?—to a friend and asked them to capture the moment. I say this is a strange picture because, *why am I kissing the ground?*

How can I explain, so many years later, that upon deplaning and breathing the fresh Tel-Aviv air, my first thought was to hand my camera to a friend, drop to my knees, and touch my mouth to the grimy ground below? I cannot get in touch with the 16-year-old me. He has long since grown up (and lost all of his hair). Who knows what I was really thinking?

In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall writes that “A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings.” And it is the individual—me!—who strategically forgets and spins meaning to my desire. Me! And for *your* life story, you! We are the authors of our stories. The truth of the matter is there is no truth of the matter. In telling you the reason for my actions at the airport on that warm summer day, I am authoring a story of which there could be multiple versions. Who am I, *now*, to say what that young boy was thinking, *then*? But since storytelling is what we do, and who we are, here is the story I *choose* to tell.

I kissed the ground because I was home. And what a tremendous privilege it was to be home. Moses never had this moment. Nor did most of the Beraha family who lived in Salonika, Greece. My great-great grandfather, Nono Isaac, for whom I am named, was lucky to have fled Salonika for the *goldene medina*—America—but most of his family stayed behind. For years, Isaac exchanged letters with the

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family he left behind, but at the beginning of World War II, the letters from Greece suddenly stopped. Isaac never again received another letter from abroad.

How many of my relatives perished or were displaced throughout history because they had nowhere to call home?

Israel was no more than a hope, a dream. “When the Lord *restores* Zion’s fortunes,” wrote the Psalmists, “we will be like dreamers.” But the dream was not at all our reality. The tiny land across vast seas and continents lived only in our prayers.

And yet—here I was! In the land of Israel! A dream for so many was a reality for me—little Josh Beraha from Providence—who by accident of history, in 1997 got on a plane in Queens and ten hours later landed in Tel-Aviv. The mind can hardly comprehend such a thing. To even the casual student of history, the fact that I—not to mention the other couple hundred doe-eyed American Jewish teens who were aboard the plane with me—two thousand years after the expulsion from Jerusalem, landed, almost effortlessly, in Israel. My God. If the Berahas of Thessaloniki could see me now.

I wonder about 16-year-olds today who go to Israel for the first time. Or the throngs of twenty-somethings who are handed a free trip to Israel, for it is their “birthright,” we say.

When they look back at old pictures and stare at their younger selves, when they hold a glossy photo that reflects back to them, for example, the time they once wandered the ancient alleyways of Jaffa, all tan and happy in dark sunglasses, surrounded by new friends they met hours ago—but a lifetime ago—*what story will they choose to tell?*

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Will the memory of history call upon them to see the uniqueness of Israel? Will they feel compelled to tell a story of deliverance and assert, “despair not, the arc of history bends toward redemption!”? Will the dream live on in their stories? The dream of sunny vistas from the Golan Heights overlooking the *Kinneret* and the sweet smells coming from the *shuk* in Jerusalem on Friday morning as the people busily prepare for Shabbat. The dream of a lively Tel-Aviv restaurant, an excited conversation between lovers in a small, quiet desert kibbutz.

The dream kept us rooted, but the dream-tree roots are rotting. Too often, I fear, American Jews only see the top of the tree, and we get stuck in its thick, thorny branches. We talk of settlements and borders. Netanyahu and Obama. AIPAC and JStreet. Anti-Semitism and BDS. Occupation and Jewish extremists.

The dream-roots are dry and in need of water. And so we stand on shaky branches. To me, they feel ready to snap. It’s only a matter of time.

But trees can be grafted into new soil, or the dry soil and its roots watered, given new life by loving hands and caring souls. This of course requires that one sees the roots, and recognizes their need for water.

There was a time when our dream was only a dream. Fantasy. A *delusional* fantasy even. But in our own time, before our very eyes, our dream was realized, actualized, and now the nation of Israel lives. **Thus, in a space of growing complexity, I wonder how we can hold the complexity in complete awareness, but not forsake the dream!**

“Root growth,” writes one science writer, “is essentially *opportunistic* in its timing and its orientation. It takes place whenever and wherever the environment provides the water, oxygen, minerals, support, and warmth necessary for growth.”

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The dream of Zionism, in other words, will continue to take shape, no matter *who* is tilling its soil. We—liberal American Jews—can be Zionism’s gardeners. We can help author the story we want to tell. *But the story must be rooted in the dream.* Despite tension and despair, moments of complication and regret, we have the choice to keep the soil watered.

When I was 16, I instinctively felt that Israel was home. And what a glorious feeling it was to carelessly roam her streets, hike her mountains and play merrily in her deserts. Like a dream...

But along with aging comes a loss of innocence.

And yet I hold the dream so dear, so deep, that it can never be taken from me. It lives at the root of the work I do and unfolds in my daily interactions with you—the Temple Micah community. Though I know full well our dream is depicted as a nightmare for others, I also know that the dream lives and is in need of care.

We care for it by going to our old, new land, by seeing the country in its fullness. This year, buy a ticket and go! Or if travel is not an option, connect with Israel through its filmmakers, authors, musicians. Meet Israelis. Hear their stories. Feel the spirit that carries the anxieties of war and army service but produces a nation that is creative and innovates, warm and vibrant. Connect their stories with your life and your dreams. Or simply, find your place at Micah and discover how you connect to our rich heritage, for underneath the politics that have us nearly stranded on a far off branch is a magnificently human tale born of love and compassion, born of historical necessity and a hope that is centuries old.

“When the Lord *restored* Zion’s fortunes, we were like dreamers.”

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*Avinu shebashamayim*, Protector and Redeemer of Israel, may the dream continue to be felt by us and by future generations. May its roots grow strong. Establish peace in the land and fullness of joy for all who dwell there. Amen.