

Rabbi Lewis' Message for May 2008

You can't be in two places at once. That is a truism ignored by the Haggadah, which tells you that you must be in two places at once. It is a mitzvah on Pesach - in every generation, you are required to feel as if you personally had gone forth from Egypt. Somehow, you are to be sitting around your seder table in New Jersey and leaving Egypt at the same time. How can you be both here and there?

The challenge is obviously not a geographic but a spiritual one. The more precise spiritual question is: How can you feel spiritually connected to people who lived in a different time and place?

The internet can help us make connections we once thought impossible. Let me tell you about two recent examples. One happened after our [March newsletter](#) went online. You may recall that I had written about a Jewish Spaniard named Don Yitzhak Abravanel, who had tried to avert the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

I wrote that I had never imagined that one day, I would stand in the Alhambra in Granada, in the very place where Ferdinand and Isabella had issued that fateful decree, and would feel the desperation of Abravanel (and added that I had lived on Rehov Abravanel in Jerusalem) and those Jewish families whose fate hinged on the cruelty of Torquemada. I also had never imagined that somewhere in cyberspace, a Portland attorney named Allan Abravanel would receive a [Google Alert](#) referencing that newsletter article and would send me the following email:

Rabbi,

I enjoyed your latest monthly message to your Congregation (the link came to me via a Google daily update on the name Abravanel). I am somewhat envious that you had the opportunity to live on Rehov Abravanel, which is also one of my favorite streets in Jerusalem. When my family and I lived in Jerusalem in 1990, we looked at Rehavia, but finally stayed in an apartment for three months on Rehov Disraeli -- he was a distant Abravanel relative, but that had nothing to do with our choice of location.

All the best,

Allan R. Abravanel

How amazing is it that, with the help of Google, a random comment on my part could inspire a spiritual connection with someone in Portland, Oregon? And then a month later, as if that one cyberspace connection weren't enough (dayenu), my older son Gideon had occasion to visit Israel on a writing assignment. He knew he would be in Jerusalem with no place to stay, so I sent him the email address of a young American who had made aliyah to Jerusalem.

Josh Weinberg is the son of dear friends of mine from rabbinical school in Cincinnati. He was 18 months old when Gideon was born; we have pictures of them together as babies. That was the last time they had been together until the morning I looked at my computer screen and found myself staring at a photo of Gideon and Josh together in Josh's Jerusalem apartment. Josh's mother in Chicago and I both had the same impulse and ran to find the old photo album. I felt like I was in Jerusalem in 2008 and Cincinnati in 1980, all in the same moment.

We Jews have always believed in being in two places at once, even before the days of the internet. We could live in Russia or China or Spain or Ethiopia and feel that we were slaves in Egypt. No matter where we lived, our bodies could be in America or Europe, while our souls could long for Jerusalem.

Hundreds of years ago, the poet Judah HaLevi wrote, "My heart is in the East and I am in the farthest West." This spiritual connection has never been more important as Israel celebrates her 60th birthday. Even those of us who have never been to Israel can feel a religious connection that transcends time and space. This year's afikomen reading from [Association of Reform Zionists of America](#) (ARZA) suggested that the two halves of the middle matza symbolized the Israeli half and the American half of the Jewish people:

"Both halves of the matzah are critical to the seder; both parts of the people are critical to the narrative of Jewish life. It is a serious mistake for either group to assume that the other's role is marginal, or that the distance between the two means that they are not intertwined and engaged with one another. Let the taste of the afikomen be the taste of the inter-relatedness of the two great parts of our people. That is the taste that we must savor before we can say, at the end of the night, L'shanah ha-ba-ah b'Yerushalayim, Next year in Jerusalem."

We can be in two places at once. This year on Yom Ha-Atzmaut, we might be in the farthest northwest of New Jersey, but our hearts will be in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis