

## Rabbi Lewis' Message for March 2009

Landing in Israel on El Al is a familiar experience. The moment you hit the ground, the passengers applaud. Landing in Israel on Continental Airlines had been an unknown experience for me before last Friday afternoon. We landed. I waited. No one clapped. The flight attendant made the English announcement, "We have arrived at Ben Gurion airport. Have a nice weekend." Staving off feelings of disappointment, I held my breath through the Hebrew announcement until the end when the flight attendant concluded with the words, "Shabbat Shalom." Now I knew I was home.

My Israeli friend Varda met me at the airport. She now lives in Tel Aviv, although when we met 35 years ago, she was living in Jerusalem. We have been reminiscing about that initial meeting. Not surprisingly, our memories differ.

Varda lived in the same building as the American friends with whom I first stayed upon arriving in Jerusalem in the fall of 1974. The following December, we both ended up on the same Nature Preservation Society *tiyul* (tour) to Sinai (then still part of Israel). She remembers it was by design that we went on the same trip; I recall that it was accidental. We plan to take out the old photos in hope that they will spark our memories. We do both recall climbing Santa Katerina, a mountain crested in snow despite its location in the Sinai desert. For some reason, the Nature Preservation Society had eschewed the well-worn path up the side of the mountain in favor of pushing and pulling us up its uncharted craggy face. We also both remember how our young Bedouin guide flew bare-footed with ease up and down the mountain as we struggled for traction. I remember wishing I had brought warmer gloves.

Although I have returned to Israel a number of times since 1974, it is that maiden voyage (begun as a student fare on the cruise ship Michelangelo) that occupies my thoughts today. When I first arrived in Israel, I carried only what I could fit in the pack on my back. This time, I packed more for ten days than I did then for a year. When we returned to Varda's apartment from the airport, we walked to the beach and welcomed Shabbat by listening to a drumming circle that harmonized with the crashing surf. Yesterday we walked around Tel Aviv and Old Jaffa. If the weather in Tel Aviv has been unusually rainy and windy, Jerusalem promises to be that much colder.

We watched "CSI: New York" on Israeli TV last night. My hope was that reading the subtitles would reawaken my dormant Hebrew. So much has changed since that first visit. At the time, Varda was my only friend who had both a television and a land-line telephone. (That many years ago, you applied for a phone and then waited years for it to be installed. I remember being told that Israel had difficulty laying the phone cables because each attempt at digging uncovered an archaeological site that required

preservation. I don't know if that explanation was true or apocryphal, but I believed it at the time.) Israeli TV gave you access to two channels, one the state-run station and the other a Jordanian channel that showed endless reruns of Kojak with Arabic subtitles.

Now cable TV has come to Israel and with it thousands of programs I wouldn't watch in the U.S. Thankfully for me, cell phones have arrived in Israel as well and I have rented one for the duration of my trip. Somehow the country feels less isolated now that it has acquired satellite TV and cell phones, although that feeling remains illusory when it comes to international politics and geography.

Tomorrow I go up to Jerusalem. We always speak of "going up" when it comes to Jerusalem, both because of its higher altitude in the Judean hills and because of its spiritual status. When I get there, I will walk to the Western Wall and place in it a "petek" containing my prayers for you.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.  
Rabbi Ellen Lewis