

Rabbi Lewis' Message for December, 2010

The night before I left Israel, I went shopping in Jerusalem with a friend. Our trip had been so packed that it had allowed no time for shopping. We were both looking for last minute gifts to bring home. I had hoped to find some Israeli dreidels to bring back to the [Sunday School](#) classes.

You might know that Israeli dreidels are different from dreidels you find in the States or anywhere else in the world. Outside of Israel, the dreidel's Hebrew letters - nun, gimel, hay and shin - stand for the words Nes Gadol Haya Sham, "A great miracle happened there." Inside of Israel, the Hebrew letters - nun, gimel, hay and peh - stand for the words Nes Gadol Haya Po, "A great miracle happened here." That one small difference in letters means a world of difference in spiritual geography. The miracle of Chanukah, however you understand it, took place on the very soil where modern Israel exists today. The dreidel's letters remind us of that simple fact.

I couldn't find dreidels anywhere. My friend commented: "Here it is three weeks before Chanukah in Israel, and you can't find a dreidel anywhere. Can you imagine shopping in the States three weeks before Christmas and not being able to find Christmas items?" That was always the second miracle of Chanukah for me – waking up in Israel the day after Christmas and realizing I had missed it. It isn't that both holidays aren't celebrated in Israel, it is just that they feel so different there. You have to know where to go to find Christmas celebration; and, while chanukiyot shine from the apartment windows during Chanukah, gift-giving is much less a part of Israeli tradition than it is ours. I had to settle for buying Israeli candy bars and Israeli bazooka bubblegum (with the comics in Hebrew).

All trips to Israel have the strange quality of visiting an old friend and a new one at the same time. Things change so rapidly in modern day Israel, it is hard to keep up. That's why everyone has to make that first trip to Israel, so you can go back again afterwards and see how much the country has changed. I learned new ways of thinking about planning a congregational trip to Israel. Last Shabbat, when I spoke about Israel from the bimah, I said that trips to Israel used to be about making a connection with the place and now have become about making connections with the people. I am more convinced than ever that we should take a congregational trip to Israel in the near future. As I figure it out, I will share the details with you.

Chanukah is early this year, as we are wont to say, although purists will point out that it always falls on the 25th of Kislev. As you light your chanukiyot and chant your blessings, may you meditate on the miracles of your lives and pray for the miracle of peace.

Chag Chanukah Sameach.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis