

DEAR TORAH TIDBITS FAMILY

RABBI AVI BERMAN

Executive Director, OU Israel



There is something truly humbling when you realize just how powerful *Am Yisrael* is in our diversity, and the subsequent responsibility we have to embrace one another with open arms and loving hearts.

Eretz Yisrael continues to serve as a home for Jews of all types. Perhaps the most obvious place to witness this phenomenon is the *Kotel* on Friday night. In the sea of people you can find Jews ranging from the ultra-Orthodox to the unaffiliated, all of whom have come to experience *kirvat Elokim*, closeness to the Almighty. I spent this past *Shabbat* in *Yerushalayim* with some lovely family friends (I'll tell you more about them next week) and was eager to walk with them to the *Kotel* to welcome in *Shabbat*.

It just so happens that this past week the *Kotel* was noticeably fuller than usual, with tour groups and OU summer programs in full force, in addition to the upcoming 2022 Macabiah Games which brings athletes, their coaches, family and friends from around the world. As you can imagine, the *Kotel* plaza was filled to the brim. While there were pockets of *minyanim* organized throughout the crowd, many newcomers were clearly trying to make sense of the scene before them. It is a scene I imagine is very familiar to Torah Tidbits readers...

Jews of all backgrounds raise their voices in prayer. *Minyanim* of all types respond out loud to their *chazan* in their customary tune.

Tour groups sing traditional Jewish songs. *Yeshiva* students dance as they sing *lecha dodi*. Men stand arm in arm, some wearing *shtreimels*, velvet *yarmulkes*, *kippot* *srugot*, black hats, while others wear the white silk *kippot* that were handed to them when entering the *Kotel* plaza.

As someone who grew up religious I can easily take for granted the customs which allow me to join my fellow brethren in our service of *HaShem*. While standing at the *Kotel* I overheard conversations between people of different backgrounds asking about our traditions and appreciated the patience and integrity with which each response was provided, bringing more of our brethren into the warm embrace of *Am Yisrael*.

Although I've been to the *Kotel* on Friday nights many times, something new struck me on this particular visit. While the stones of the *Kotel* are of the holiest we can come in contact with today, their beauty can easily be missed. Many visitors looked upon the Friday night scene with curiosity and even perhaps confusion. In response, I saw precious members of *Am Yisrael* lean over to explain what was unfolding and invite them to join in, so that those who did not know the tunes or how to perform our customs felt comfortable participating. By reaching out a hand to embrace a stranger, these holy Jews brought the *Kotel* and its symbolism to life.

Earlier in the week I attended Yom NCSY, a gathering of the OU's 21 summer programs. This year's event was the largest Yom NCSY

in its history, with more than 3,000 campers, staff, alumni, parents, and university students from JLIC programs. The event featured a performance by Mordechai Shapiro, a bar-becue and a *siyum mishnayot*. Even in the sea of people, I noticed OU staff members looking around to find campers standing on the fringe, and inviting them to take part in the festivities.

On *Shabbat* morning I visited Rabbi Glenn Black, CEO & Regional Director of NCSY Canada and some members of his staff who are leading some of the Anne Samson Jerusalem Journey (TJJ) programs. Leading TJJ, a four week touring experience in Israel for public school students, these staff members have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to help campers uncover the beauty of *Eretz Yisrael* and connect to their roots as members of *Am Yisrael*. Many of the staff shared how invigorated they felt seeing *Eretz Yisrael* through the eyes of their campers. It reminded me of my own experiences leading TJJ during the summers of 5764 and 5765 that have left an indelible impact on me and my *avodat HaShem*.

We are entering into the period of *Bein Hametzarim* (the Three Weeks), commemorating the beginning of the destruction of the first *Beit HaMikdash* which was destroyed due to baseless hatred among *Am Yisrael*. My experiences this past week have left me with a tremendous sense of responsibility toward my fellow man.

Eretz Yisrael provides a home to Jews of all types, offering a rich history to learn from and a culture in which we can immerse ourselves. But it is up to us to make our fellow Jew feel at home.

The *Kotel* and other holy sites throughout the country provide a place where Jews can connect to the *Borei Olam*. But we must treat one another with respect and dignity, bringing the presence of HaShem closer.

The *Torah* provides the guide by which we must live our lives. But we must extend ourselves toward our fellow man with care, respect, understanding and patience so we can help them feel the warmth

of HaShem's embrace.

Whether we are leading an OU summer program or simply standing in line at the grocery store, there are always opportunities to connect with others and help them find their place. Reflecting on the unity I witnessed this week, I can only imagine how proud *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* must have been when seeing His children reach out to connect to his fellow man. May we continue to foster our unity, see the beauty in one another and welcome in the *Geula Shleima* together.

Wishing you all an uplifting and inspiring Shabbat,



Rabbi Avi Berman
Executive Director, OU Israel
aberman@ouisrael.org

