

AN EDUCATION FOR A LIFETIME

A young seminary
student reflects on a year spent in Israel



By Naomi Lustig

*O*h, American seminary student: who can compare with thee? With thy 210 pounds of luggage, thou embarkest on a journey to the land of bagged milk and bisli, the land of schwarma and falafel, to spend a year growing, both spiritually and physically. With thy telephone attached to thy side, thou spendest a year immersed in the study of the holy texts. Thou attemptest to learn the ways of a foreign culture, and yet returnest to thy homeland speaking only English, thy Hebrew in a very sorry state indeed.

Like many students before me, I packed my bags, bid my parents farewell, and flew off to the Holy Land to spend a year learning and (like the proverbial flower) “growing.”

Our lessons at Michlala, a women’s college for advanced

Naomi Lustig lives in Teaneck, New Jersey. She graduated from Bruria High School and received a full scholarship to the New Jersey Institute of Technology. She chose to defer college and spent the past year at the Michlala College for Women in Jerusalem.

Jewish studies, were delivered by experts. After all, our teachers had literally “written the book.” Rav Cooperman, author of a commentary on *Meshech Chachmah*, taught us *Meshech Chachmah*. Rav Hartman, author of a multivolume commentary on *Gur Aryeh*, taught us *parshah* with a liberal dose of *Gur Aryeh* sprinkled in. Rav Nissel wrote *Rigshai Lev*, a book about women and prayer. Ergo, he taught us *tefillah*. (No, I have not been paid to promote their works.)

Our teachers’ enthusiasm for learning was contagious. “Let’s hear a *Michlaladike sevarah* (opinion),” Rav Hartman would sing through the portable microphone always clipped to his person. Rav Ginsburg’s frequent one-sided conversations with himself never failed to catch our attention: “Am I right about that? Of course I’m right. I’m the teacher.”

But learning in Michlala also gave me clarity and an understanding of Judaism that I had never had before. After taking a class in *Derech Hashem* (The Way of God)—a *sefer* I never learned so thoroughly previously—it gradually dawned on me that what I was learning was not just an

Illustration by Caryl Herzfeld

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interesting text but was, in fact, the ultimate reality. There was a sublime sensation that “What I am learning right now is all that matters. World history, politics, sports...they are not real. This is world mechanics in a nutshell.”

Israel must be the only place in the world where a young student can call a complete stranger and declare in broken Hebrew, “I got your number from a friend. Can I spend the weekend with you?” Strangers would welcome Americans into their homes, and students like me would have a family for Shabbat.

My favorite weekend getaway was the Old City. As I walked the pathways of the Old City to reach my Family of the Week, smelling the aroma of Shabbat perfuming the air, and dwelling on the timelessness of the Old City, I was at peace with mankind and the world. It was as if Shabbat would go on forever and never come to an end.

On Friday afternoons, Shabbat would unofficially begin when the *chiloni* (secular) bus driver would wish me *Shabbat Shalom* as I descended from the bus.

The driver’s farewells never ceased to amaze me. Then there was the Shabbat siren, the piercing wail announcing that the bride had arrived. For me, that wail was yet another indication of the stark difference between life in Israel and America: a Shabbat siren was light years away from anything that existed back in my New Jersey hometown.

It was not long before Israel shifted from merely being my campus to being my home. During the weekdays, when I needed a quick spiritual boost, the *Kotel* was only one bus punch away. No matter what

time of day or night it was, at the *Kotel* you could always be sure of meeting someone you knew. And if it was one of those rare times when nobody was there that you knew, there were enough characters wandering around the *Kotel* plaza to keep you amused.

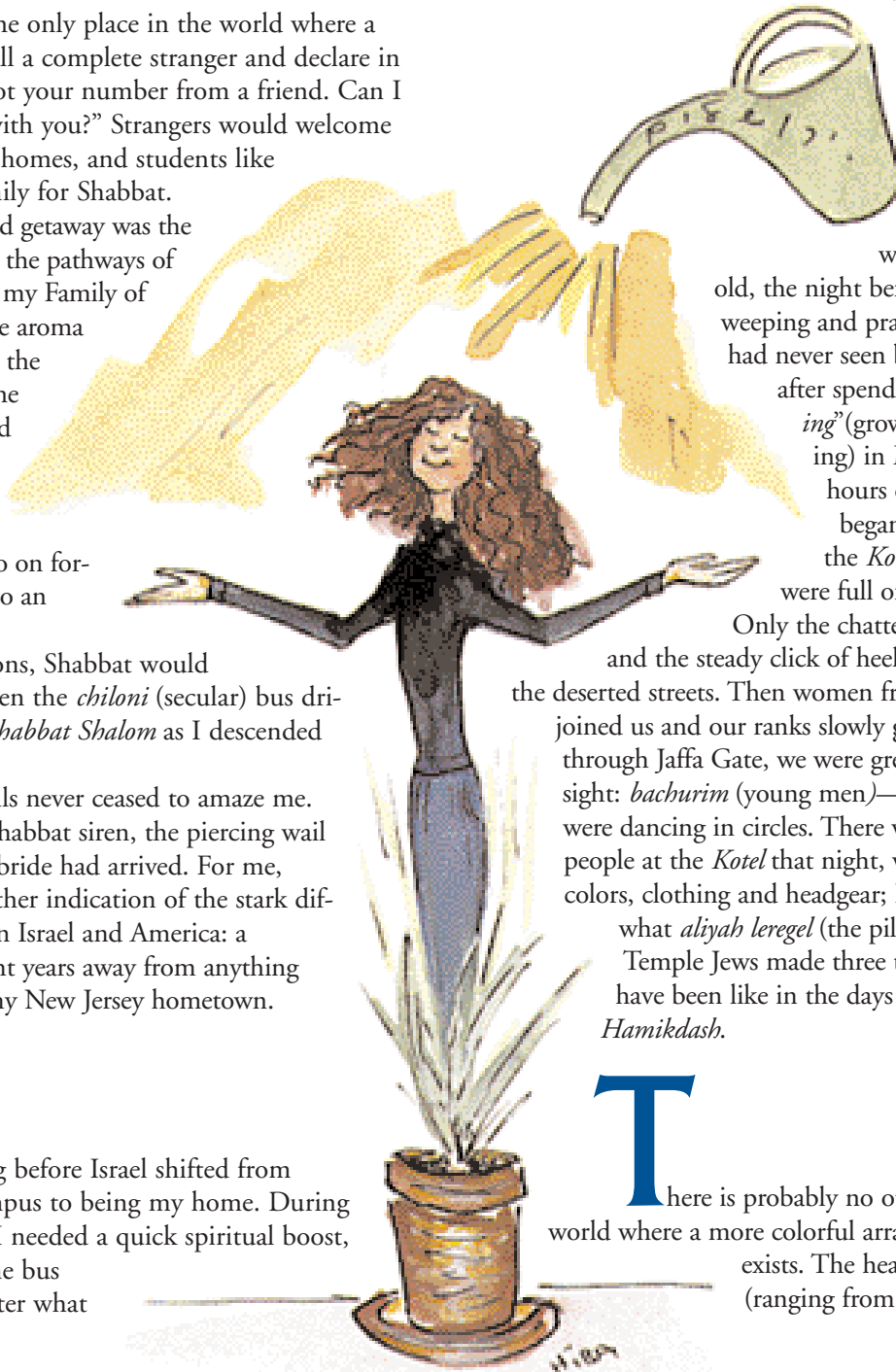
I will certainly never forget the man who claimed he was *Mashiach* and came riding up to the wall on a white donkey. Ultimately, he was arrested, but what if he was *Mashiach* after all?

How can I describe the awe I felt at the sight of hundreds of

women, young and old, the night before Rosh Hashanah weeping and praying with fervor I had never seen before? On Shavuot, after spending the night “*shteiging*” (growing in Torah learning) in Michlala, in the wee hours of the morning, we began the one-hour trek to the *Kotel*. At first, the streets were full of Michlala students.

Only the chatter of excited voices and the steady click of heels could be heard in the deserted streets. Then women from Darchei Binah joined us and our ranks slowly grew. As we walked through Jaffa Gate, we were greeted by a wondrous sight: *bachurim* (young men)—hundreds of them—were dancing in circles. There were thousands of people at the *Kotel* that night, wearing all kinds of colors, clothing and headgear; I then understood what *aliyah leregel* (the pilgrimage to the Temple Jews made three times a year) must have been like in the days of the *Beit Hamikdash*.

There is probably no other place in the world where a more colorful array of personalities exists. The headgear of Israelis (ranging from Chassidic *streimels* to



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knitted yarmulkes to bare heads) is as diverse as their philosophies. And yet, although Israel masquerades as a secular country, religion pervades it in infinite ways...in the separate beaches that grace the white shores of the Mediterranean, the Kineret and the Dead Sea...in restaurants such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and Nathan's that are kosher...in supermarkets with the name Birkat Rachel...and in the fact that Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg and other *gedolim* are but a bus ride away.

This past year, the conflict was not merely cold, dry news which I read about in *The New York Times*. It was something I lived, breathed and felt. In the beginning, the *matzav* (situation) presented itself in the form of restrictions: no going to the *Kotel* on Fridays, no traveling on the number 1 and 2 buses, and no vacationing or spending Shabbat beyond the Green Line. A day did not go by without some disturbance rippling through the land: riots on Temple Mount, Palestinians hurling stones at the *Kotel*, shootings between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers, and brutal murders. Bomb scares became routine. There were evenings when we would sit in Michlala, (which is situated in Bayit Vegan and borders Gilo) attempting to study as we listened to the shots exchanged

between Gilo and Beit Jala. A certain uneasiness pervaded the air whenever a loud blast was heard in Jerusalem. Once, a few nights before Pesach, I was alone in my *dirah* (apartment), growing increasingly frightened by the sounds of shots in

the air. It was only later that I learned of the heavy fighting that had occurred in Beit Lechem that day.

I still remember the solemnity of the frequent Tehillim groups formed to pray for those who lay dying in hospitals, victims of yet another attack. Although the tragedies always seemed to occur to people we did not know personally, looking at the drawn faces of the members of the Tehillim group, one would have thought we were praying for a member of our own family.

But it was a few days before I was supposed to return to the States when the Al-Aqsa *intifada* became very real to me. I decided to go on a tour of the Muslim quarter (accompanied by armed guards) with a few other people. As we walked along the claustrophobic passageways of the Old City, a stone was suddenly thrown at us, narrowly missing the group.

The victim was no longer a faceless name in the paper. The victim had been me.

Israel truly does have a pull; if you close your eyes and let yourself feel it, you know that you are standing in the center of the universe. Existence anywhere else seems less meaningful. The land's spirit enfolds you as you look about and observe the people living life as it should be lived: with zest, meaning, and an understanding

that life is precious and the days are short.

Now that I have returned to my American home, the pull to my "other" home remains. Wherever I am, I know I will be able to draw upon my memories of the life, the land and the learning in Israel. **JA**

