

Come to Israel, Davka Now

I'm often asked whether it's safe in Israel. I can't help but feel a palpable sense of disbelief when I tell people that despite the challenges we have, I feel safer here myself, and raising my children here, than when we lived in the United States.

I understand the disbelief because I see how Israel is portrayed by the American media and the world media. If that's what you go by, how could you not have a sense of terrorism or other dangers being as common as the vast religious and historical antiquities that are part of our legacy?

This week I needed to order a part for my camera. I called a distributor in New Jersey and asked if they could send the part to me in Israel. The whole order took a minute, but I was on the phone with the woman taking the order for over 15 minutes. She couldn't stop raving about her trip to Israel a year ago and how she felt so safe and at home. That's the pervasive feeling among most first-time visitors, and one thing that makes people want to come back. Coming to Israel is more than simply a bucket-list item. It's a place to come back to and have a relationship with the land and its people.

This reminded me of a wedding I attended a few years ago. It happened during one of the times of heightened conflict with Hamas in Gaza, characterized by the terrorists shooting as many rockets as they could to create a sense of fear and dismay, if not harm and death. I sat with Polish business associates of the bride's father. I asked what most surprised them about being in Israel. They each agreed, it was how safe they felt. I didn't have the heart to tell them that wedding location sat in complete range of Hamas' rockets.

Last week I took my 9-year-old son out for shopping and lunch—a little quality father-and-son time. We went to

Jerusalem. When I asked him if he'd like to go out with me, he was excited. When I mentioned going into Jerusalem, he got anxious. If you followed my reports of personal experiences during the war this past summer, many of the experiences I related were through his eyes. He was definitely traumatized, some of which would be quite funny if it weren't so sad and representative of our condition here.

When I asked him why he seemed nervous, he said he didn't want to go to Jerusalem because it's dangerous. He's well aware of the terrorist attacks that have gone on around us recently, some close to our home. In his mind Jerusalem was dangerous because so many of the capital's residents are Arabs.

Of course giving in to terror only allows the terrorists to win, and I wasn't about to send the message to my own child that Jerusalem, of all places, is out of bounds. So I told him that's *davka* (especially) why we were going to go into Jerusalem. Of all places in the world to be off limits to Jews, Jerusalem is not, and can never be, one of them. I'm not so interested in going to Saudi Arabia anyhow.

The funny thing is that my wife was nearby when he expressed his anxiety, and she explained that some people were afraid to come to where we live. The part of the Judean Mountains that we call home is over the "Green Line" that some pejoratively call the "West Bank." But we know it's biblical Judea and, like Jerusalem, for a Jew not to be able to be in Judea is unacceptable.

But because it's home and he's used to our surrounding Arab neighbors here, somehow the idea that home was unsafe or that other people would not come here, even with recent terrorist attacks nearby, never entered his mind.

Another thing happened this week that connected the dots and made me realize that despite being somewhat worldly and aware of what's going on around me, I still live in a bubble. A

pastor friend asked if I know of any trips in which he might participate, *davka* now. He understood that, at a time when Israel might be feeling ill at ease, this was especially the time to plan a trip.

When I sent an inquiry to colleagues who are tour operators and tour guides, other than wanting to be helpful in general, across the board the responses came back that they need business. Honestly, I thought that the negative trickle down of last summer's war had ended and that tourism was more or less back on track. I was wrong. I learned of people who have largely been out of work as guides, and tour operators having to lay off staff due to lack of business. Last summer, when my daughter was working in the reservations department of one of Jerusalem's best hotels, I joked that it should be renamed the "cancellations department." I thought we were past that.

This week, I received emails about particularly good deals on flights. One had a stopover in Europe that was less than \$600, round trip including all fees and taxes. Another direct flight from New York was only \$799. I shared these with friends, including many pastors and others, who I know are dying to come back, or just come here for the first time. I was sure we could find good deals on hotels for those interested.

This all made me think, with prices low and the ability to help Israel by coming here both financially and psychologically, by showing solidarity with Israel, if you've always wanted to come (back) to Israel, *davka* now is the time. There are many people who organize tours and you can find the right one and sign up. If you don't know any, or want a referral, please let me know. Or you can book a hotel or ticket on your own and enjoy Israel more personally, not from the windows of a tour bus. If there's enough interest and demand, I can probably put together a group tour that will be well priced and even more meaningful.

So whether you've been here before, and looking for a way to

come back, or never been here and always dreamed about it, now is the time to come visit. *Davka* now.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for Charisma magazine's *Standing With Israel*. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.