

Lamed Hey: In the Footsteps of Our Forefathers

Growing up in New Jersey, my youth was filled with visits to important places associated with George Washington; where he fought, slept, and ate, and places associated with Thomas Edison and his many inventions. I even grew up next to a house whose sub-basement was a stop on the Underground Railroad. These bits of history as far back as 1775 are vividly etched in my mind still today.

Living in Israel, I have been exposed to a new set of landmarks, some obvious ones going back thousands of years including the Western Wall and remains of Jerusalem's ancient Temples, the burial places of our patriarchs and matriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Leah, Rebecca and Rachel, Joseph and others. These are frequented on typical tourist itineraries, but there are many more off the beaten path, literally and figuratively.

These sites are landmarks in the thousands of years of Jewish history, underscoring our ancient, and modern, connection to the Land.

One example is a path through the mountains near my home south of Jerusalem called *Derech HaAvot* – the “Patriarchs Route.” More than just a catchy name, this winding dirt path is literally one of the ways that people walked south from Jerusalem to the desert, to Israel's southern coast, and residential and commercial areas of the day, thousands of years ago. Did Abraham and Sarah and their children and grandchildren walk these very routes, maybe while going down to or returning from Egypt? There's no archeological evidence of that (yet) but it's intuitive that they did, as this was one of the highways of their day.

There's something awesome and humbling knowing that these very hills, with their hot dry weather, beautiful landscapes, and magnificent sunsets, are the same today as when they lived, connecting us deeply to the Land, and our history. Of course, the most famous Book documents this all, I just have the privilege to live and raise my family here.

As much as biblical events happened all around us, there's a vast amount of modern historical connection we have to the Land as well. A few years ago, we went with friends to visit one of Jerusalem's lesser-known but no less interesting historical spots, the Museum of the Underground Prisoners. This is where the British used to incarcerate Jews who were accused of many crimes including being part of the resistance to the British Mandate and British policies limiting the number of Jewish immigrants, including refugees and Holocaust survivors who were able to reach the shores of our homeland.

Growing up here at that time, my father used to tell me about his friends' older siblings who were arrested and sent to places like this, or exiled to Cyprus, for "crimes" as serious as posting flyers against the British. Back in the Underground Prison, one of our friends we were with, whose family goes back generations in Jerusalem, was raised both with academic lessons and personal family stories of this era. While exploring the museum's exhibit that recounted the experiences of the prisoners, she came across a small Book of Psalms with a sign next to it that it had belonged to her uncle who had been imprisoned there. This little book was a link in the chain of Jewish life and experiences in Israel before 1948 that made the visit very personal to us all, and especially to her children who were fascinated to see a piece of modern history that documented their family's ties to our national history. OK, it's not the same as finding the knife that Abraham would have used to sacrifice Isaac, but it is meaningful all the same.

Every other year for the past several years, most recently

this week, one or more of my kids joined thousands of Israeli teens commemorating the anniversary, an annual re-enactment of a famous hike, that of the legendary *Lamed Hey*. The kids experience for a night the mission, terrain, and weather, of an historic event in modern times, and our unbreakable bond to the Land. *Lamed Hey* are the Hebrew letters that represent the number 35 for the Thirty-Five soldiers who set out on an all-night mission to bring aid to the Gush Etzion region during Israel's War of Independence.

On January 15, 1948, the Thirty-Five set out by foot carrying heavy backpacks loaded with first-aid supplies, plasma, weapons, and ammunition for the embattled Jewish Gush Etzion communities. They were forced to proceed slowly up the Judean Mountains' rocky terrain. They departed before midnight, more than 15 miles away. Other than braving a cold Judean Mountain winter night, they first had to bypass a British police station unnoticed, and continue through hostile Arab territory.

The Thirty-Five walked throughout the night. Near dawn they approached Zurif, the last Arab village before Gush Etzion, four miles away. The unit was detected and shots were fired at them. They were deep in enemy territory without any means to call for outside help. As soon as the battle began, the commander realized that they would not be able to break through to Gush Etzion. They quickly split into two and, with one group covering the other, they climbed to the top of what is now known as "Battle Hill," a strategic defensive location. The Thirty-Five bravely defended themselves against the fierce attacks of hundreds of Arabs from neighboring villages. Toward evening on Jan. 16, the supply of ammunition which the Thirty-Five carried began to run out. The battle ended with the death of the last of the Thirty-Five who, having used all their ammunition, died with rocks in their hands. After the battle, many of the bodies were mutilated by the Arabs beyond recognition.

We are connected to this Land, biblically, historically, and in modern times in more ways than can be recounted. We have paid a heavy price to return and restore Jewish sovereignty to the Land that God gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their descendants, including me and my family.

It is with no small measure of joy and privilege that I raise my children here, 10-15 minutes from Jerusalem, the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, and "Battle Hill" to where each of my four eldest children retraced the footsteps of modern forefathers, recalling their bravery, and our timeless connection to this, our Land, in the footsteps of our modern and biblical forefathers.

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