

Five months ago I had the privilege of leading Or Hadash's second-ever congregational visit to Israel. Our first trip was seven years ago and was a huge success, and another visit was long past due. And so in April, after a lengthy planning process, twenty-one of us set out for an opportunity to travel to Israel on a journey of discovery, engagement, and encounter. I was personally so excited about this trip not only because it's always terrific to be in Israel but also because I had crafted the itinerary with a vision of visiting places and connecting to specific moments and people that I thought were most important for our group to experience. And then leading the trip itself: having the honor to present, frame, and mediate the experiences of our Or Hadash group. This journey was an opportunity to share a place I love with people I love – with all its complexities, challenges, frustrations, and joys.

The same is true with these Holidays – because at this time of year we are also engaged in a journey, not to a faraway country but into our often-faraway *selves*. This journey, like our Israel trip, is also at its core experiential: we understand not by observing but by doing. Like our Israel trip, there are certain key can't-miss landmarks along the way but also opportunities for enriching detours and exploration. Like our visit, it is a journey that we must make for ourselves but surrounded by, and in the midst of, community. And like our visit, I have the daunting honor and privilege of helping to present, shape, and lead us through the experience – to be your guide. Which is why I'm happy to present, as we step through customs and passport control of this new year of 5776, the top ten things I have learned about doing *teshuvah* from leading Or Hadash's second congregational trip to Israel.

Number 10: Prioritize. Israel is such a rich country: there is so much to see, do, and learn and there was no way we could cover more than a small portion of it in the time we had. Putting together an itinerary was often excruciating: everything we chose to include meant something else we couldn't do. I had to do my best to select the things I felt were most important not simply in and of themselves (although obviously some things couldn't be missed under any circumstances) but within the context of what we had already seen and what we were trying to accomplish with our visit. We may face the terrain of *teshuvah* – the intimidating list of qualities we need to work on in ourselves and relationships we need to seek to repair with others – with less enthusiasm, but there is no denying that there is an awful lot to see and do. Like Israel, it's important that we visit; and like Israel, we can't possibly hope to take in everything at once. We have to think about and realistically select what we think is both most important and most feasible to work on. We should seek out new places to explore, even as we realize that it might be most important to revisit a place we have already been a number of times.

Number 9: Each journey is its own process. I had thought, perhaps naively, that because I had already led an Or Hadash Israel trip once before, this one would be much easier. And there were some small ways in which it was, some pitfalls I discovered last time around that I learned to avoid. But, to be honest, it wasn't as much easier as I would have thought. Maybe pieces of the planning – but once you're actually underway, once you're engaged in the process, the journey demands your full self because you have to be present to whatever is actually in front of you. As leader, I couldn't be blasé about, say, the Kotel – a place I have been dozens of times before this trip. I couldn't skip floating in the Dead Sea, even though it's cold and it stings. It was important for me to re-experience everything I had done and seen before, to look at it with fresh eyes so I could be open to the reactions and needs of the

people there with me, not to my expectations or assumptions. This wasn't some trip where I stood out on the sidelines; this was a journey I needed to take along with the people I was accompanying. And the same is true with *teshuvah* – there's no phoning it in, no such thing as doing it halfway or of undertaking the work without fully engaging in the process. Yes, we might have been to any number of the places we're seeking to make changes in our lives before, perhaps many times. But if we want to make meaningful change, we have to allow ourselves to truly *be there* again.

Number 8: Your guide is really important. I led the trip, but I wasn't the guide – that was Francis, the Kiwi-Israeli who charmed us instantly, irritated us occasionally, and loved us unconditionally. For me she was a great partner – responsive to what I asked and what I felt the group needed, but also unafraid to offer her own take and opinions (oh, did she offer her opinions!). We chart our own itinerary when we set out to do our *teshuvah*, but having someone who's on our side, who's been there before, and who knows the terrain is indispensable.

Number 7: Don't let this group near a winery, especially if you want to get some quiet time on the bus.

Number 6: Communication is really important. Before we left for Israel, our group met a number of times to talk about our hopes and dreams for the trip. And during the trip I was constantly checking in with everyone to see how they were, and we scheduled a formal group check-in for partway through the trip to take the temperature and see how we were responding to some of the particularly challenging things we'd heard and seen. I was listening for what I heard – and for what I didn't hear. All of this was vital to my role, including knowing when to step back and let others take the lead. Whether we're seeking to improve our connection with someone else, renewing a strained relationship, or even working on our own shortcomings, check-ins, clarity, and lots of communication truly are essential.

Number 5: Set a demanding pace... but not *too* demanding. Look, we only had so many days in Israel and there was so much to see and do. We talked at our first meeting about how this trip wasn't a *vacation* – we weren't going to fly all the way to Israel to kick up our heels and sleep in. At the same time it wouldn't be good for anyone to run ourselves into the ground. The work of *teshuvah* is emotionally and spiritually exhausting. Like the limited duration of our Israel visit we have to take advantage of the time we have – the thirty days of Elul leading up to Rosh ha-Shanah and especially these next ten days through Yom Kippur – because it's too important to let slide. But we can't push ourselves past the breaking point either or we won't be able to pull back and get the broader perspective and energy necessary to reengage. Yes, we might have six important places to get to and people to hear from before lunch time. But it's important that we also have the chance to take that opportunity to enjoy lunch, and ice cream, *and* a bathroom break, and *shopping* (you know who you are!).

Related to this is Number 4: Preparation and intention are important when it comes either to trip planning or *teshuvah* – but you have to be open to what arises in the process. There were certainly places in our itinerary where I had specific things planned; and I really had put a lot of thought and effort into the planning because I wanted us to get the most out of our time there. But then we might be

running late, or people were tired, or an event we planned to attend was rescheduled. Or, sometimes, there was simply something serendipitous that fell into our laps, like the opportunity to hear from a truly gifted and inspiring speaker like Anat Hoffman or Gershon Baskin, even if the timing wasn't great. So by all means, go into your process of *teshuvah* prepared and with intention. Be thoughtful about what you hope to accomplish and what you hope to have happen. But also be open to unexpected detours and opportunities along the way, because being open and receptive might bring you spiritual insights you never could have *planned* finding.

Number 3: Some things can't be understood by being talked about, they have to be experienced. We had a number of people on our trip who had spent time in Israel before, but also a high number of first-timers, or people who hadn't been in a very long while. Everyone who went on the trip was knowledgeable and thoughtful when it came to Israel. But it's one thing being knowledgeable and another thing experiencing for ourselves. Whether it was seeing the light in Jerusalem as day turns to dusk, whether it was seeing with our own eyes the separation barrier between Israelis and Palestinians outside the hills of Jerusalem, or whether it was sitting down with Israelis, Jewish and Arab, to enter into conversation and dialogue about shared fears, hopes, and dreams – there is literally no substitute for being and doing. The idea here is one of *encounter*: we don't really begin to know or understand something until we have really and truly brought ourselves there. Looking at a picture or reading a guidebook just doesn't give you the experience of being there.

And I say that because we are all holding guidebooks right now, the *machzor* with the liturgy that will take us through these next ten days that open the year. The *machzor* is a wonderful guidebook, with many beautiful and moving ancient and modern words. But we need to do more than read those words: we need to actually *experience* the ideas and emotions they lay open for us, *recognize* the power and dread of the unknown. And we must be open to sincerely and frankly assessing and considering *ourselves* – *our* fears, *our* hopes, *our* dreams – not in some abstract, theoretical fashion but through honestly and openly encountering our deepest selves.

Number 2: We have to grapple with the people and places we love. Our trip was complex and nuanced; it involved some frank and unblinking looks at the realities and complexities of today's Israel, things that can be really hard to face or acknowledge. In leading this trip, it was vital for me that we use our time not merely to paint a pretty picture or have a feel-good experience. Why? Because if we want to deepen our appreciation of and love for Israel we need to understand it more fully and have to acknowledge its shortcomings and the work that still needs to happen for Israel to be the country we all hope it can be. Grappling is an act of true love – apologetics or denials serve our own needs, and indifference is just a sign of resignation. To love we must be in relationship – with the good, with the bad and, yes, with the ugly. Doing *teshuvah* involves lots of grappling – with the people who are part of our lives and with ourselves. Sometimes we need to seek a change in ourselves or in someone else and it's hard, it's painful, and sometimes we might prefer to avoid it all together. But we can't duck out on our relationships with – and our responsibilities to – those we love: to do that hard work, to honestly engage, to try to make things better.

And the Number 1 thing I learned about doing *teshuvah* from leading our congregational trip to Israel: It's so much better with other people. When we first met as a group and I asked people why they wanted to be a part of *this* trip, most people explained that they wanted to visit Israel as part of this congregation. Which is interesting because so much of the work of encounter, of going deep and trying to truly explore something and understand what it means, is profoundly personal. No one can do it for us; we have to show up to do it ourselves. But while an encounter with something significant – with a person, an idea, with a place, or with ourselves – is a highly individual experience we are carried and supported by the knowledge that we are not alone in taking that journey, that others around us are taking their own distinct journeys alongside us. This is the power of travelling as a congregation, and this is the power of entering the New Year as a community. We all have journeys we need to undertake over the next ten days – highly personal and intensely individual journeys. No one can do it for us. But people can do it *with* us, and knowing that we are surrounded by a loving and supportive community that shares our values, and knowing that Jews around the world are engaged in the same process of *teshuvah* at this very same moment, can be a profoundly powerful boost to our own interior work. Because it's hard, and there aren't shortcuts. But standing on our own, yet held in this community's loving embrace, we can travel deeply and travel well.

*Nesiyah tovah* – travel safely on your journeys wherever they take you this coming year, and know you are not alone.