

My Jewish Moment

By Betty Jacobs

Israel, September 2007. Dick and I arrived in Jerusalem for our spur of the moment trip - which serendipitously coincided with my layoff from a job I wasn't unhappy to leave.

It was the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, an unusual time to visit Israel and a quiet time for the country. With Jerusalem as our base the first few nights, our private tour guide took us north, south, east, and finally west. We climbed Masada, explored the Galilee, wandered through the labyrinth that is old Jerusalem, navigated the winding streets of Safed, and marveled at the beauty of the Bahai Temple in Haifa. Our tour ended as Yorem dropped us off at our Tel Aviv hotel. It was the night before Yom Kippur.

The next day, the morning of Erev Yom Kippur, we explored Tel Aviv on foot and by taxi. The quiet time got quieter; by early afternoon, the country had pretty well shut down.

We wanted to attend Erev Yom Kippur services, but where to go? The Reform Temple was across town and we had no way to get there as all vehicular traffic stopped. The Orthodox temple was a few blocks from our hotel, so I put on a black skirt and long-sleeved blouse like a Good Jewish Girl, and off we went.

We got to the synagogue and walked in - no tickets needed. Of course, this Good Jewish Girl wasn't allowed in the main sanctuary with the men, so I dutifully went upstairs to the balcony. While the women were friendly, I found it stifling, isolating, and not at all the meaningful Yom Kippur experience I wanted. So on a pretext of needing to use the restroom, I went downstairs to the foyer. And stayed there.

What I found in the foyer opened my eyes to a whole new way to honor Yom Kippur. The area was filled with people - men, women, children, speaking every conceivable language and conversing animatedly about anything and everything! I was stunned - in my temple in Virginia, if you were out in the hallway during a service - not encouraged at all - silence was the rule. Here in Tel Aviv, it was a community event!

In the foyer, on the way to the main sanctuary, there was a bookshelf filled with prayer books for men (and presumably women?) to pick up on their way in to pray. There was no consistency, no standard siddur - the books were a hodgepodge of siddurs in languages, formats, and condition.

After the Erev Yom Kippur Service, we walked back to our hotel. We spent some of the next day languishing on the beach (not a bad way to spend Yom Kippur!) and went back to the synagogue in the afternoon. Once again, Dick headed to the sanctuary; I stayed in the foyer chatting with the regulars.

The service concluded, in Tel Aviv as it does all over the world, with the Neilah service. But then something remarkable happened - the entire congregation spontaneously broke out into song - the Israeli National Anthem, Hatikvah.

Dick and I stood awestruck in our tracks. I still get goose-bumpy recalling that Very Special Jewish Moment, that moment when we felt connected to Israel and the world; felt the pride and determination of the Israelites as they prayed and committed their lives and souls to make this

impossible dream of life in the desert, life as an independent Jewish state, life in a country surrounded by enemies, survive and thrive.