



**Finding Home -  
6 Months & 6 Lessons  
about Life in Israel  
July 29, 2008**

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Last week, all by himself, Gavi was able to explain (mostly in Hebrew!) to his friend’s mom how to get from school to our apartment. Six months since we left Memphis, now there is a new place we have begun to call home. I know how the light falls through our apartment windows in the morning. The smells, sounds and sights of life here in Jerusalem have become familiar—the heavy pink perfumed flowers outside our balcony and the garbage on the curb, the clanging of construction and the yowling of stray cats, the breeze through the leaves of the palms at the end of the day. I have grown accustomed to the suspicious eyes of the elderly woman who peers down at us from her balcony every afternoon as our children parade home, their voices echoing through our courtyard. I know the feel of the pavement under my feet here and the name of the guy who sells fruit at the corner market. Now we only use the GPS to find our way beyond Tel Aviv.

We have been here long enough that we are outstaying people. They donate their half-finished bags of flour and sugar, their well-loved toys to *us* before they skip town. I am no longer a visitor here, at least in the way I once was. There is a certain ache as we watch friends leave, a feeling that must be so familiar to Israelis in this country of tourists. But even with its losses, I relish remaining and the process of making this place “home.” Taking stock now, six months into our new-home-making adventure, I ask the question: What does a home provide? Below are six answers and six lessons about life in Israel.

Home is where: 1) we dress down 2) we share 3) we trust 4) we ask 5) we begin 6) we matter.

**Lesson #1: Skip the frills**

Our postman has dreadlocks. Yup, I kid you not. He’s wiry and tall, in his baggy shorts, maybe thirty years old. Yes, he *does* wear a red *Do’ar* (post office) T shirt with the jumping-deer emblem. He *does* carry a clip board and often a package or two- so *that* is all very purposeful and official, but his hair extends all the way down his back in magnificent dreads and he rides a beat up mo-ped. “Special Delivery!” Israel is so casual, so bohemian. Meir recently asked a friend if he should wear a tie to an interview. The friend literally laughed at him. “Shabbes-wear dude!” he advised, which (for Meir) means: a button down white shirt (the top 2-3 buttons ignored) and pants that have been washed sometime in the past week. I don’t want to overstate the matter. Of course, Israelis care about how they look. But no one (at least in my circles) is checking to see if my pedicure has chipped. In fact, I don’t even have one. And with all the desert air and sandal walking, my feet have begun to resemble hooves. While not necessarily attractive, it is (at moments) kinda liberating.



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**Lesson #2: Here, We Share**

The first time Adina requested “huuuumuuuus” in her perfect Israeli accent, I was floored. How exotic! How enchantingly Middle Eastern! She’d tried it at day care. Here at “gan”—the kids eat communally. The big tupperware containers come out with hummus, rice and chicken, fruit or whatever --- and the kids eat *together*. As a veteran Lunch-Packer, I am awed by this. I come from the culture of the Zip Lock Bag, all food separated out into sterile and personalized packages. Not all of Adina’s clothes are labeled. If she has an accident, she might come home in her friend’s shorts. No biggie.

But the communal ethos goes deeper. A few weeks back, when the tractor mowed into a busy Jerusalem street purposefully killing three civilian drivers, my two closest Israeli friends called to check on me immediately. I mean, within minutes— even before I heard what had happened. The experience of one of us here is, in some tangible way, shared by all. Yesterday, from the chair in my dentist’s office, I had a view of the Knesset (if one must get a root canal, I recommend this view). The radio was on and my dentist, a Frenchman with a son in the army, kept stopping the procedure to sigh. We were listening to a report about the bodies of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser being returned from Lebanon. Today, as their bodies are buried, a pall has fallen across the entire country. Here, along with preschool lunch, the burden of grief is shared.

**Lesson #3: Forget the Permission Slip**

“I went on a bus today,” Gavi informed me after he had been in school for a few weeks. “WHAT?! WHERE?!” It was some field trip. Where was my permission slip? Where was the letter home giving me a few weeks advanced notice!? Since that time, Gavi has gone on many more bus rides during the school day. I’ve tried to try to figure out where, but six year old reporting is dubious. The ethos here is—“Don’t sweat the details. We got your back. Your kid will be fine.” “MY kid!? The one with the Life Threatening Allergies??” “Yup, your kid.” Israeli’s aren’t big on planning in advance. They trust that the pieces will somehow fall into place. “*Yihye tov*. (Everything will be fine.)” I hear that phrase all the time.

While Israeli children are in many ways indulged, they are also entrusted at an early age with a high level of responsibility. They take care of each other. Last week, I watched a boy who couldn’t have been more than five or six, walk his little sister home, holding her hand as they crossed a busy street, traffic flying in all directions. While I won’t be letting Gavi walk Adina home any time soon, I see him adopting a greater resilience, a greater ability to rely upon himself and upon others. He takes a hard fall off the monkey bars, and before I have even had time to offer him a kiss, brushes off the dirt and runs to the ladder, eager for a second try. “*Lo kara kloom*.” (It’s nothing; nothing happened.) Those are the words, often used with tenderness, to



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comfort a little one with a skinned knee. So each day, I take a deep breath, try to loosen my grip on the steering wheel of life and trust.

**Lesson #5: Get Help Finding Your Way**

Speaking of steering wheels, in Israel, people seem to be constantly asking each other for directions. People will stop their cars smack dab in the center of the road to find out the way to "*Rehov (street) So and So.*" They will even ask me, the Obviously Clueless American. Here, even driving somewhere in your car is a group endeavor. The kibbutz culture, as it once existed, may be no more, and Israeli yuppies may be on the rise. The divisions in Israeli society may be profound and road rage, very much alive but even so, as drivers in Israel we are all pulling for each other.

Thus, explained an Israeli friend, it is not so odd to ask for help with directions even if it means stopping traffic. And of course who is going to continue to drive after realizing that the person whom you have just asked for directions, is an old acquaintance whose sister you dated in the army. You didn't know she had cancer!?! The people blocked, at a standstill, in the cars behind you will surely understand that you have to find out the details.

And who --stuck behind the driver who has stopped in the middle of the road to catch up with his friend-- is going to keep quiet about it? The car horn in Jerusalem is used almost as frequently as the brake. Everyone is in a rush, and everyone wants to know how to get where they are going (and to chat for a while). How different from the neatness of the GPS system, cut off from the world, air conditioned, behind glass. Here, the idea is- if we keep asking, keep talking to one another, keep yelling at each other, we will eventually get where we need to go. In Israel, we are each other's navigators whatever annoyances that may entail. I guess that is what it means to be a *kehilla*, a community.

**Lesson #5: Be a Beginner**

I am starting to be more assertive on the Hebrew front, answering questions about directions (and other matters) *b'ivrit* (in Hebrew). Truth be told, more often than not, I massacre the language—feminine instead of masculine, incorrectly conjugating verbs. But when it comes to Hebrew, Israelis (notoriously impatient and critical) offer me almost gentle *savlanut* (patience). I'm givin' it the old college try (along with thousands of other newcomers here), and they bear with me.

Today I went to Hebrew University for an hour and a half individualized orientation for my Melton Fellowship. Packets of detailed academic information in unvocalized Hebrew were presented accompanied by rapid-fire Hebrew explanations. I am very good at nodding and looking at least somewhat informed, but truth be told, it is terrifying to swim in a sea of new



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language. Terrifying and exhilarating. As adults, we so rarely get the chance to truly be beginners at anything. We choose areas of expertise and develop competence, wrapping our skills and knowledge around us like armor. We learn how to look smart. But trying to communicate in a new language strips you of all that. There you are, groping around for the right prefix, silence, averted eyes, uhhhh.... (don't tell me, don't tell me....) and when you *get* it right, exultation.

In this scenario, the teacher/native speaker has such power to tear you down or to build you up or, to close doors or to open them, to fill you with shame or with hope and pride. I am newly aware of what a sacred responsibility it is to teach, to be the one "in the know." And, as grueling as it can be, I delight in the raw edges of beginner-ness.

**Lesson #6: Be Anonymous**

In Israel, when you are registering your kids for school or wrestling with any bureaucracy (and there is plenty of it here), it's not really about going to a certain office to get a certain form filled out by an anonymous secretary. No, it's about seeing "Chen" (who happens to share your son's middle name). And even if you can't find Chen in her cubicle, the secretary at the next desk just happens to have Chen's cell phone and will track her down on her coffee break. There's kind of intimidating yet intimate, inefficient efficiency to this system.

An Israeli friend who is presently in dating-mode told me she needs to only know three things about any Israeli man in order to know whether a relationship is possible: his family name, where he grew up and his position in the army. The family name tells you his family's country of origin and thus value system and culture. The place where he grew up indicates socioeconomic status, and his position in the army (which is excellent at placing people appropriately) indicates his talents, intelligence, skills and interests.

Here, in such a small and new country, there is no anonymity. Everyone matters. And, since there are virtually no Degrees of Separation, you are always bumping up against greatness. It seeps in through the soles of your sandals, the ancient stones on which you stand. It brushes your shoulders, the passer by on a narrow sidewalk. A few weeks ago, I introduced a writer at the café of an old friend and stood at a little podium in the same roughly hewn room where Amos Oz and Yehuda Amichai have spoken, where Nathan Englander wrote a book... From within these crooked walls, my sense of the possible expands.

Those of us who won't ever "matter" on a grand scale somehow count in Israel. Here, even doing your grocery shopping feels like it has some cosmic and connected significance.