



**Shabbes at the Mall
March 4, 2008**

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We’ve been in Tel Aviv for four full days, soaking up the cosmopolitan vibe here: lattes on the beach as the sun sets over the Mediterranean Sea and watching the kids dance and scream as the waves lick their toes, dense urban living with the hard edges of Israeli life but also techno flare. The air is moist and the temperature perfect. I could linger here for a while... saunter down the greenway that accompanies the Yarkon River to the Sea-- playgrounds and bikers, sushi bars and boutiques, high rises and open fields, hipsters and ultra-orthodox Jews. I don’t know what to expect here. This place is alive.

We met friends in a park the other day—yes, yes it was Shabbat and we probably should have been at *shul*, but this is a wonderful couple and family, and we’ve been planning for months to spend some time together. They live up above the Sea of Galilee. Sheri grew up in Memphis. She and her husband Moshe have come to Tel Aviv for the day with their three kids and magnificent golden retriever, “Rocky.” “You’re not in Jerusalem yet!” Sheri reminds us. In other words, “Live a little. There’ll be plenty of time for *shul*.” And I quite agree. Doesn’t take too much arm twisting.

So we meet. The park is PACKED with families picnicking and children everywhere. God, Israelis love their kids. It’s palpable. The vast majority of these people would surely say they are not “religious,” but here they are on shabbes... together, drinking in the sunshine. There absolutely needs to be another definition of “*shomer*” shabbat. As far as I can tell, they are “*shomer*” in the truest sense of the word. The air is different on the Sabbath, even in Tel Aviv.

So the kids run, climb, fall and get back up, spin round and round... The playgrounds we have encountered here have some element of danger, climbing structures that wouldn’t have passed the safety codes back home, but I guess safety is a relative term. Gavi and Adina are in heaven. We chat with our friends and end up at a restaurant. As a rule, Meir and I don’t do restaurants on Shabbat but well, not much is “normal” these days. Once we are seated at the table, I run through the usual drill—assessing available food options for Gavi and figure out that there isn’t much that I feel safe offering him. This is a meat restaurant. (No mixing milk and meat here but hmmm, they are open on Shabbat. Go figure. I guess we are all constantly choosing our own idiosyncratic codes of observance.) This place makes phenomenal humus. You can smell it everywhere, but Gavi cannot tolerate sesame (tahini mixed in with the chickpea-based humus). I tell him he can have a piece of pita and pull out the hypo-allergenic lunch options I have already packed for him from home.

It was probably about a third of the way into the meal that Gavi started to act strange—whimpering and clingy but that can often happen in the onslaught of life in this dazzling, loud and foreign place. I try to eat lunch with him on my lap but the itching has started – in the crooks of his arms the way it always does- and he is becoming increasingly fidgety and impossible. So we head outside for some quiet. The welts are coming, now on his neck and



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under his arms and Gavi is crying. I am impatient, wanting to befriend the couple that has come here to be with us. I have seen this kind of reaction before. It will pass. I pop a Benadryl in his mouth. But nothing calms him, not “Rocky” our canine companion who eats a slab of schnitzel before our eyes, not the cool compresses... We decide to walk, all of us, back towards the park. Movement is always good. But I can see Gavi’s little face over Meir’s shoulder as his *abba* holds him, bouncing down the sidewalk. His eyelids are starting to swell. This is not good.

I don’t know how long ambulances take and I don’t know where this allergic reaction is going, but I do know little throats close quickly, and if you wait too long to deliver the epinephrine, it can be too late. So we do it. We have rehearsed this moment so many times, but have never had to use the epi-pen. Gavi senses what’s coming. “No! Don’t! Don’t!” We pull down his pants. Meir holds him still from the waste up. My heart pounding, I grab his legs to keep him from kicking and jab the epi-pen into his little thigh.

One loud scream, and then it’s done. I’m crumpled and weepy on the sidewalk, but in an instant, literally an instant, Gavi is calm. I pull the needle out. (It’s long. I hope he doesn’t notice.) “Could we pull up my pants please?” he asks.

The hives vanish. The ambulance pulls up. It’s all a bit dream-like from that point on. Adina is bouncing around on my knee, our stroller and multitudinous bags rolling around in the hold of the ambulance while Meir sits up front. (God bless him for figuring out our health insurance.) Our little boy is peaceful and alert, strapped down on the stretcher while they take his blood pressure. The ambulance siren sounds so far away. “Did you know that sound is *us*?” I ask. Gavi continues the conversation. “We have to send a letter to Miss Stentser (I love how he reverently mispronounces his beloved kindergarten teacher’s name.) and tell her to tell my friends that, in Tel Aviv, I went to the hospital in an ambulance.”

I struggle to accurately answer the questions of the young paramedic—basic stuff like: “Where do you live?” I can’t really answer, so I say: “Now, I guess we live here.” “Congratulations!” she responds.

We end up at the Dana Children’s Hospital. The care in the emergency room is excellent. Our only job for the ensuing four hours is to hang around so the doctors can check on Gavi to be sure the reaction does not return, so we head out to the sorry little patch of grass in front of the emergency room entrance to waste some time—not much there but cigarette butts and a few crumbling statues of enlarged penguins, “Happy Feet!” as Adina likes to call them.

There are three others sharing our little faded green plot, biding time—two Muslim women and their little boy- with black, silken, curly locks and a shy, piercing gaze. They eye us suspiciously and barley warm up when Gavi offers to share a few of his snacks with the boy. We do get



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authentic grins, however, as they hear us call Adina away from the curb, "Didi! Didi! Adeeeeeeeena!" The little boy's name, it turns out, is "Dina." We share broken conversation with the women until they head back into the ER. I wonder why they are here. This Muslim family knows their child will receive only the best care here, but would they do the same for us?

It's almost impossible to keep the kids out of the road and we still have a couple of hours to kill, so we follow the lead of the ER doctor and head to the mall, (which is a part of the hospital complex strangely enough). Wait, the mall?? OK, we may not observe Shabbat in an Orthodox sense, but the mall is not a place we go on the Sabbath. In fact, I often describe my Shabbat observance code by saying that, "Yes, I would drive to see a friend on Shabbat, but I would certainly not drive to a mall." I have also said that malls are not places where I would ever take my kids in Israel—too crowded, too risky in terms of terrorism...

But here we are *mishpacha* Feldman prancing off to the mall on Shabbat. On the way we pass an orthodox family cradling their baby as they sit on a park bench. There is no *halachic* (Jewish legal) issue with the drive they took to get to the hospital today... *piku'ach nefesh*. When you are saving a life the *halacha* bends, teaching us what's most important -- to honor and promote life. "Shabbat shalom!" They say... "*O lo...*" ("Or perhaps not," I respond with a gentle smile.) But truth be told, I do feel strangely peaceful.

We arrive at the mall only to find that most everything is closed, of course. So I feel pretty safe physically (in terms of terrorism, this is no target) but spiritually, it's a slippery slope. A few shops are indeed open: *Café Aroma* and *Toys R Us* and we, no surprise, get sucked in— and enjoy our coffee (they DO know how to do it here—Starbucks tried to make it in Israel and simply couldn't, too much competition). We put our shekels in the little "Bob the Builder" ride so the kids can sway back and forth and listen to *Bob Habonai* as he heads out to the construction site. "Can he fix it? Yes he can!" We even end up in *Toys are Us* which is, incidentally, decked out for Purim. Even the attendants are in costume. Kinda religious! Or not... I buy the kids a few toys preceded by a long overly pedantic explanation about the fact that we are *only* doing this because Gavi has had a *hard* day and this is a very *unusual* Shabbat.

During my first year of rabbinical school, I used to go to a little café just across the street from my apartment and order *Café Hafookh* (cappuccino, but literally translated, it's "upside down coffee"). On this, my first Sabbath in the Holy Land, everything is just that- *hafooch*, intoxicating-ly so.

We return to the hospital. Having watched us now for several hours, the guard at the ER entrance finally initiates a conversation. He is fifty-something, slightly stooped with salt and pepper hair and a thick Israeli accent. "I grew up on a kibbutz," he says. "Are you Jewish?" "Yes," Meir answers. It's not obvious. Given our latest consumer indulgences, Meir has



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covered up his *kippah* with a baseball cap. “So why don’t you live in Israel?” the guard asks. He and Meir get into it. I only catch bits and pieces. My primary role is keeping Adina off the street. “I have changed,” says the guard, “Now, I never pass any judgment until I have all the facts.” I can’t hear the rest.

It’s dusk, and the doctors look Gavi over one last time. I watch tired parents comforting their children. There’s a whole new round of little ones who have been admitted to the ER since we got there. I eavesdrop on fragments of conversations—in Hebrew, in Russian. We pay the bill.

Meir runs after Adina who is already halfway out the door, and Gavi takes my hand. Slowly, we make our way down the long hallway that leads to the exit. Before we reach the end, he pulls me close. “*Eema*,” Gavi says, “As much as I love being here in Israel, I love you even more.”

Pregnant Pause.

“And thanks for buying me the “Ben Ten” action figure... even though it is Shabbat.”

Stars have begun to appear in the sky. It’s time for *havdallah*. I hope we can find a cab. Tomorrow we leave for Jerusalem.