



# For The Big Day,

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# TRIP

BY MELISSA STOLLER

Visiting Israel around the time my oldest daughter celebrated her bat mitzvah was always a dream of mine. So I started planting the seeds of an intergenerational trip several years in advance.

Organizing my family of five would be easy: my husband Larry was an eager participant, and our three girls, Zoe (the 13 year-old bat mitzvah girl), Jessie (10), and Madeleine (4) were always excited for any exotic voyage. Next, I set the idea in motion with my mother and my

in-laws. This would be the first trip to Israel for all of us – a special post-bat mitzvah journey that would not only be a family bonding experience, but would connect us to the land that we had read about and studied for all these years. During my childhood, my parents always talked about visiting Israel but never did due to the instability in that region of the world. My husband and I decided that we wanted to turn this dream into a reality, and what better time than during a bat mitzvah year.



### PLANNING THE TRIP

After everyone was on board, I started the planning process. I envisioned a trip that would capture the essence of the bat mitzvah year, providing us with a spiritual and physical connection to Israel. Also, we wanted to gain a sense of the history, culture, people, and food of the country. And of course, we wanted to have fun and adventure, and to find activities to please all the generations. Most of all, we wanted to create a trip that would offer us lasting memories and meaningful connections with our family at this special moment in our lives.

To start my research, I asked friends about trips they had taken to Israel, culled information about all the destinations we could possibly visit, and looked at many photo albums of the trips our friends enjoyed. I spoke to at least five travel professionals who had been recommended. I also read several Israel travel books and reviewed many Israel travel websites.

Along with our travel professional, I developed a very detailed daily itinerary to ensure that we had room for all the experiences we planned to squeeze into 12 days. I also left enough flexibility so that our daily plans could change if necessary.

We decided to travel with a private guide and driver in a van suited to our group of eight. Guides in Israel are specially trained in history, culture, geography, politics, Biblical stories, and much more. Our guide/educator not only seemed to know everything, he became a part of our family and immeasurably enriched our learning as well as our enjoyment. He also helped us plan for activities for all the ages and interests of our varied group.

### DURING THE TRIP

Many people told me that I would experience a certain

incredible feeling when I arrived in Israel. I didn't understand what they meant until I was there and then the emotional reality of the voyage struck me. I was so lucky to share these unique and meaningful moments with my family. There are so many highlights of the trip, but here are some gems:

#### IN TEL AVIV:

- Swimming in the Mediterranean and relaxing on the beach
- visiting Tel Aviv's Hall of Independence and learning about the emotional story of Independence
- visiting the secret bullet factory beneath a kibbutz at the Ayalon Institute outside Tel Aviv
- strolling through the chic Neve Tzedek area
- walking through art galleries along the winding streets of Jaffa, outside Tel Aviv

#### IN JERUSALEM:

- Wandering through the Old City, shopping at the bazaars and exploring the Western Wall tunnels
- praying and leaving notes at the Western Wall
- touring the Southern Wall excavations and the Davidson Center
- participating in an archaeological dig at Beit Guvrin outside Jerusalem
- viewing the Chagall Windows in the Hadassah Hospital
- riding "The Time Elevator," a simulator ride through Jerusalem's history
- shopping in the outdoor markets
- seeing the Dead Sea Scrolls at the Israel Museum's Shrine of the Book

#### AND SO MUCH MORE:

- Exploring the ruins of King Herod's palace in Caesarea
- viewing the scenic overlook in Haifa
- walking in the footsteps of the Crusaders at Akko
- planting trees in a JNF forest
- visiting Safed, the city of Kabbalah
- driving to the Golan Heights and witnessing the history of that area at the Bunkers on Mount Bental
- taking a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, and eating lunch and swimming at a seaside Kibbutz
- riding a camel
- floating in the Dead Sea
- touring Masada
- enjoying the delicious and elaborate Israeli breakfasts
- participating in Shabbat dinners at the hotels
- eating hummus, pita bread, and falafel several times a day; and drinking excellent Israeli wine.

We tried to be creative about facilitating meaningful connections with our family during this special trip. During many dinners we asked the grandparents to share stories from their lives in order to bond in different ways with the children. Some good conversation starters were: tell us about your childhood and your Jewish education; how did you keep your Jewish home and raise Jewish children?; what are the most important elements of Judaism to you?; what Jewish experiences influenced you the most?; did you experience any challenges in your life due to being Jewish?; and what Jewish values do you hope to impart to your grandchildren?

One night, my father-in-law talked about his bar mitzvah, and the grandmothers noted that when they were young, Jewish girls didn't have the opportunity to be bat mitzvahed, and how lucky their granddaughters were to be able to study in religious school. This led my father-in-law to talk about how fortunate his family had been to escape religious persecution during the pogroms in Russia. Our talks also evolved into discussions about the peace process and how everyone hoped that our girls would become active participants in their Jewish lives and in the Jewish community. Sometimes you never know where a discussion will lead but I learned that having a good connection question or prompt opens the door to meaningful communication.

We also kept journals of our experiences. Even the youngest travelers can color or write simple words on journal pages, and everyone else can write their quick impressions, tape in souvenirs, or write detailed entries. Each night, we talked about our entries and what was special to us during that day. It was fascinating to note the different perspectives everyone brought to the experience depending on the lens of their background and interests.

#### POST TRIP

This intergenerational Israel trip was a truly meaningful experience and a special gift in our lives. We all felt that we learned about ourselves and each other, and the girls and their grandparents forged bonds through shared experienc-



es. Additionally, the trip helped to solidify the girls' Jewish identities. Zoe is now continuing with her confirmation studies and is active in our Temple's youth group; Jessie is busy preparing for her bat mitzvah in 2012, and Maddie is



starting her formal Jewish education. We are confident that our trip helped to forge strong connections between our girls and Israel, which I believe is crucial to shaping a commitment to Jewish identity. In fact, we are already planning our second trip to Israel for June 2012 to celebrate Jessie's bat mitzvah.

I hope that the connections we made with our family, with Israel, and with the Jewish community will continue to flourish. We felt an intense connection to the land when we were there, especially in Jerusalem, and that has stayed with us all. I hope that my girls will participate in youth group trips and will explore the Birthright program. And I certainly would be thrilled if, one day in the future, Larry and I travel to Israel with our children and their children when they celebrate their bar or bat mitzvahs.

*Melissa Stoller is co-author of The Parent-Child Book Club: Connecting With Your Kids Through Reading (with Marcy Winkler), HorizonLine Publishing, 2009, www.parent-childbookclub.com*

#### HELPFUL TRAVEL TOUR WEBSITES

[www.jnf.org/travel](http://www.jnf.org/travel)  
[www.ujafedny.org/travel-to-israel](http://www.ujafedny.org/travel-to-israel)  
[www.arzaworld.com/israel-travel-guide.aspx](http://www.arzaworld.com/israel-travel-guide.aspx)  
[www.israeltour.com/alerts/barmitzvah.php](http://www.israeltour.com/alerts/barmitzvah.php)  
[www.giltravel.com/bar-mitzvah-bat-mitzvah-tours.html](http://www.giltravel.com/bar-mitzvah-bat-mitzvah-tours.html)  
[www.ayelet.com/barbat2011ratesdates.html](http://www.ayelet.com/barbat2011ratesdates.html)  
[www.margaretmorsetours.com/mitzvah.htm](http://www.margaretmorsetours.com/mitzvah.htm)  
[www.tovagilead.com/israel.html](http://www.tovagilead.com/israel.html)  
[www.isram.com/isram/index.htm](http://www.isram.com/isram/index.htm)





## WHAT THEY ALL EXPERIENCED

**LARRY:** One of my hobbies is to read about the history of Israel and the Jewish people. It was a magical experience to visit with my family, parents, and mother-in-law the places that in the past I could only read about.

**ZOE:** I always enjoy our family trips but I have a special happiness knowing we all made our first trip to Israel in celebration of my bat mitzvah.

**JESSIE:** I realize that I formed a real connection with the spiritual part of Israel. I found that I was really happy there and I felt that everyone in Israel was friendly and kind. I am excited to return for my bat mitzvah!

**MADELEINE:** I loved the whole trip, and I especially remember standing on the terrace with my family overlooking Jerusalem and complimenting the night sky and the Old City.

**CONNIE BERGER, GRANDMOTHER:** I have read many novels with Israel as the background as a member of my Temple book club, but since our trip to Israel, these books have come alive for me in a way which I never would have imagined. Most of all, the intergenerational trip was magical: the family bonding, closeness, and loving feelings were very strong and will continue always.

**MILLY AND IRV STOLLER, GRANDPARENTS:** Israel is a wonderful, welcoming place. The first words we heard were "welcome home." That's exactly how it feels there. It feels like home. To live the experience of being Jews in a place where Jews are a majority instead of a minority, and Shabbat is on the "right" day, was unbelievable. To share the experience with our children, grandchildren and extended family was very, very special. We are so very grateful to have been able to make this trip

## ISRAEL-THEMED BOOKS:

To plan for the trip we read books to enrich our understanding of what we would be seeing while in Israel.

### ADULT BOOKS:

My mother, mother-in-law, husband and I all read the novel *Exile* by Richard North Patterson, and we had great discussions about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Several of us had also read *The Red Tent*, by Anita Diamant, *People of the Book*, by Geraldine Brooks, and *Striking Back: The 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and Israel's Deadly Response*, by Aaron J. Klein, and we talked about the themes in these books throughout the trip.

Post trip, we read *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East* by Sandy Tolani, and discussed the novel in light of our recent experiences. And of course *Exodus* by Leon Uris is a classic. The Jewish Book Council lists many ideas for Jewish-themed adult books and resources for book clubs at [HYPERLINK "http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/page.php?189"](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/page.php?189) <http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/page.php?189>.

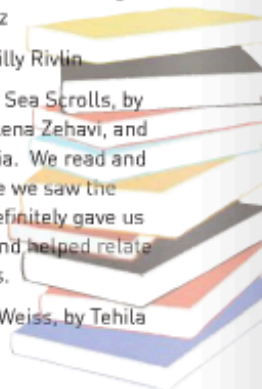
### CHILDREN'S BOOKS:

With our children, we read several Israeli-

themed books and discussed them before and after the trip. A family book club centered around travel helps make connections between members of the group and helps connect the group to the places visited. The Anti-Defamation League offers an excellent list of Israel-related books for children and teens at [HYPERLINK "http://www.adl.org/israel/books/IsraelBooksList.pdf"](http://www.adl.org/israel/books/IsraelBooksList.pdf) <http://www.adl.org/israel/books/IsraelBooksList.pdf>.

### HERE ARE A FEW BOOKS FOR VARIED AGES THAT WE ENJOYED:

- *Sammy Spider's First Trip to Israel*, by Sylvia A. Rouss and illustrated by Katherine Janus Kahn. My youngest daughter still enjoys revisiting the places we saw every time we read this book.
- *Zvuv's Israel*, by Tami Lehman-Wilzig and illustrated by Ksenia Topaz
- *Welcome to Israel!*, by Lilly Rivlin
- *The Mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, by Hagit Allon, Lena Zehavi, Lena Zehavi, and illustrated by Yossi Abolafia. We read and discussed this book before we saw the Dead Sea Scrolls which definitely gave us background information and helped relate the experience to our lives.
- *The Secret Files of Lisa Weiss*, by Tehila Peterseil



## WHAT TO THINK ABOUT WHEN PLANNING AN ISRAEL TRIP:

### GROUP OR PRIVATE TOUR:

Think about whether you want to join a group tour or hire a private guide. A tour group allows you to meet other similarly-situated families and to possibly develop friendships with other members of the tour group. In addition, on a tour all the planning is already done for you, saving time and effort. However, your group needs to be able to fit into a larger group, which might include getting up early to depart for places of interest and moving from place to place with the group.

Travelling with a private guide allows you to plan all the details of your itinerary to suit the interests, ages and temperaments of your group's members. Also, your private group can linger at destinations that interest you and can tailor the itinerary if you choose during the trip.

**DAILY PLANNING:** Think about the age ranges of your group and how to accommodate all the varied interests and ability levels. Think about how many days you have for travel and how much you want to fit in each day. Try to strike a balance between culture, history, adventure, and relaxation. Questions to consider include: how early in the morning do all the mem-

bers want to start touring? Will you all travel together every day or will you plan some activities to suit different members of your group? Try to ensure some down time each day for members of the group to relax and just breathe in the sights and sounds of Israel.

**COST:** Of course think about cost and what will be most appropriate for your family. There are many levels of hotels and dining in Israel, and cost considerations depending on whether you choose group or private travel. Travel insurance, while an additional cost, is very worthwhile to cover any health or travel emergency especially when traveling with older people.