



On Being Without Being With: Addressing the Presence of Absence

By Shalom Orzach & Zohar Raviv

These past few months forced the global Jewish community to imagine realities that seem daunting, on many levels. Among the many important, if not pressing questions asked in the educational and communal spheres, is how do we create the “Israel Experience” without actually experiencing Israel; the summer camps without the physical space of camp; Synagogues without...; Campus life without...; JCC's without...? We are being plunged back, or perhaps forward, into *Hayinu Kecholmim* – we are as dreamers – forced to strain our imaginative and creative faculties in facing such an uncompromising presence of absence.

The above in mind, it seems that our collective experience as a people, perhaps more than any other, pays remarkable tribute to the ways we not only survive but also thrive when facing such bleak conditions.

In his 1899 piece titled “Concerning the Jews,” Mark Twain famously captured this quality: “The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

Perhaps one element in this so-called “secret” – that which has been enabling us as a people to move forward through time, time and again – lies precisely in the ability to sanctify and master *time* – even when bereft of [a] space. In his “The Sabbath” A.J. Heschel reminds us that “With no physical space we created cathedrals in time; [...] Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent

stream of a year.” Indeed, we have become masters at making time count. This has been true not only in days of blessed routine, but more so when our original spaces (read home, city, temple, homeland) were denied to us and forced reimagination and redesign in bold and ingeniously enterprising ways. The impetus behind such arresting realities is irrelevant here – it can be the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans ... or Coronavirus. What matters is that we must give ourselves the permission to audaciously relocate our creative forces, however temporarily.

The stirring words of the medieval poet, Judah Halevi, “My heart is in the East, and I am in the far reaches of the West” also become the methodology through which we are able to embrace both polarities. While expressing anguish, they inform and inspire our relentless and tenacious ability to adapt to the real that so dramatically differs from the ideal. These skills are in our very ethos. However reluctantly at times, we have become experts on being without being with; masters at extracting the yoke of presence from the shell of absence. Our yearning not only informs our learning, enthalls our cultural senses and dominates our spiritual quests – it has turned us into a people for whom innovation has become a tradition. It is a yearning reflected in Moses’ eyes on Mt. Nevo, as he gets a glimpse of the land of Israel beyond, just as it is woven into our collective experience as a people as expressed in the engraved words on Rachel the Poetess’s grave mark at Kinneret Court cemetery: “Each to his/her own Nevo in this vast land[...].” This quality – the ability to reignite creativity based on a yearning pulse – is fundamental to who we are, as we are all united in undertaking this Exodus in Time.

How do we, as educators now being forced to (re)view our ideal places from afar, lead our people to these sites by bringing them alive in ways that emerge from our rich experiences? And how do we do so *proactively*, rather than *reactively*, namely, take advantage of this challenging reality to harness our regrouping and reimaging to affect positive change far beyond the Coronavirus period? A few points to consider:

a) The uncompromising globality of the Coronavirus showcases the similarity of our most rudimentary needs, regardless of location. **b)** The ongoing personal strains the Coronavirus event provokes illuminate the tremendous worth of interpersonal relations and intimate camaraderie. **c)** Effecting the movements, activities and independence of people usually basking in the glow of hyper individualism and self-sufficiency has reignited in many a deeper appreciation of communal vitality, solidarity, responsibility and support. **d)** The near-existential strife faced by many Jewish institutions worldwide has reiterated the crucial value of mutual responsibility and reciprocal accountability (*Arvut Hadadit*) – a value that has always been inseparable from our evolving Jewish ethos.

First and foremost, we must state honestly and humbly that it is NOT the same! Otherwise, what's the point of grieving and/or yearning? Secondly, we need to focus on the assets we do have and delineate what it is that we are striving to capture within the allotted circumstances. Thirdly, we need to work with our existing spaces to recreate environments that best *correspond* with the absent space and its characteristics.

Where Israel experiences are concerned, we need to re-engage Israel not only through its sites from afar (technology, technology, technology), but also through living Israelis who march through this Exodus in Time as well – a reciprocal familiarity between communities abroad and Israelis through the particular meridians this time forces us all to face. Israel is not merely a tapestry of sites, but a fascinating mosaic of insights – stories that carry meaning, messages and perspectives that transcend one's location. In today's world, *context* and *contact* are arguably even more important than *content*, raising the need for programs that are person-centered, featuring participants from worldwide Jewish communities and from Israel alike. The axis of this particular model propels the educational value of unity without uniformity: our ability to advance unifying elements in our experiences, without dismissing the inherent diversity of our particular conditions and spaces. It offers a sense of peoplehood that transcends borders and defies spatial limitations. The unity of *community* is not about uniformity! In short, we can definitely create a meaningful and on-going experience *with* Israel, if not an unmediated Israel experience.

The rhythm of summer camp is orchestrated through ritual. These zany, energizing, romantic moments bring meaning and, in a sense, tell time through telling moments. Camp community is formed and informed through the precious points in time. Again, the secret is in capturing these moments; starting the day at home, bringing the very ambience of music, announcements, prayer, Hebrew word/phrase of the day (*milat hayom*). Whatever is done is done for a purpose that has significance and immense value both in the specific spaces but also in time. We stimulate memories through associations, and as a people we have been doing this since time immemorial. Being distanced from these natural landscapes invites us to capture the very essence of these acts, so that it becomes possible to relocate, rather than replicate. *Shabbat*, flagpole, mealtimes, song sessions, *havdalah*, are all profoundly powerful moments, strong enough to be anticipated and welcomed into the lives of our community wherever they may be. Being brought together this summer will be all the more needed and desired, the very scaffolding that structures camp will be able to support and reframe what matters most.

Being detached from the places that play a role in who we are and enable us to be (*Lech Lecha*) is hard, to say the least. Indeed, these spaces cannot necessarily be replicated, but their essence can be captured with intention, compassion, creativity

and, perhaps most importantly, cautious optimism. Such revisions will inform and create new realities in turn, as they have done in the past. Judging from the caliber and devotion of contemporary Jewish and Israel educators worldwide, it is truly not in the heavens.

Zohar Raviv is the International VP of Educational Strategy for Birthright Israel.

Shalom Orzach is Senior Consultant to the iCenter, and faculty for the Foundation for Jewish Camp.

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