

## Fall 2014 Newsletter - Cantor's Notes - Adam Davis

I spent 7 weeks this summer in Israel, studying toward my Cantorial Certification at Hebrew Union College (HUC) on King David Street in Jerusalem. It fulfilled a lifetime dream to live and learn in the land of our heritage. Located in the center of the modern city, HUC is surrounded by beautiful new hotels and residences and the outdoor pedestrian Mamilla Mall, with its cafes and shopping adjacent to the Old City's Jaffa Gate. It was an amazing, intense summer.

On arriving, the situation was tense in the wake of the brutal kidnapping and murder of four teenagers and a steady barrage of rockets launched into Israel from Gaza. Jerusalem initially it seemed immune to rockets being launched from Gaza, but Israel is a small technologically advanced country. Everyone knows someone affected by the news and every smart phone had the "Tzeva Adom" app, ringing every time a rocket launched.

My first day in Jerusalem, the first rocket reached Tel Aviv. Thankfully "Kippat Barzel" (Iron Kippah) prevented considerable death and destruction on Israeli people and property. Still, through technology and constant news coverage, even Jerusalemites were on edge.

An Israeli friend invited me to a performance the next evening at Beit Avi Chai (a wonderful cultural institution) featuring famed singer Miki Gavrielov. Just as Miki took the stage, the Red Alert sounded. The siren wailed loudly. The music abruptly stopped. The entire audience, the musicians and the venue staff crowded into the "Miklat," the safe bomb shelter found in every Israeli structure. Everyone contacted loved ones as the soft thud of the explosion was heard in the distance, followed by the all-clear signal. The crowd returned to their seats and the music picked up where it left off. "They can't stop the music," I said to someone in Hebrew.

I was incorrect, however; as promoters began cancelling performances. They feared stampede conditions in the event of a Red Alert at a venue without sufficient Bomb Shelter space. Besides, the mood in the country was one of solemnity, but not celebration, as 60,000 fathers, brothers, sons and daughters and sisters were called to reserve duty.

The Red Alert became part of daily life; rockets were fired around 10:30pm in order to make the evening news coverage in Europe and America. I began to share the steely will of my Israeli neighbors, heading into a shelter nightly. Whenever I was out in public, I kept an eye open for the closest Miklat. Twice I found myself in a wide open public space without one nearby.

Despite this dramatic aspect of Israeli life, I always felt safe and secure, and moreover, enjoyed my time there. Living in the neighborhood of Katamon, I was a short 20 minute walk to the city center. Often I rode the 18 bus outside my door then after class hopped onto the light rail on Jaffa Street toward Machane Yehuda, where I'd stop for a spicy schwarma and a cold limonana garoos (a mint tea and lemonade slushy) or hang out at Aroma Cafe like a regular Jerusalemite.

Most days we studied Hebrew and Biblical Archeology alongside Cantorial and Rabbinic students spending the entire year in Israel. Afternoons schedule included History of Israeli Music and Nusach (Jewish musical modes) taught by leading scholars. In the evenings and on Shabbat, we learned from the laboratory of Jewish life surrounding us.

Jerusalem's many synagogues reflect Judaism's diversity of cultures, ethnicities and denominations. I ventured to the famed Ades Synagogue of the Syrian Jews, the Great Synagogue, the progressive Kehillat Kol Haneshama, small Yemenite, Italian and Turkish synagogues. I found Kurdish and Persian congregations on Emek Refaim, a large and noisy French-speaking Moroccan one in Baka, a tiny Yerushalmi minyan in Nachalot and an egalitarian community harmonizing in the popular Carlebach style in Katamon.

I loved the "First Station," an old British rail station turned style entertainment complex like Navy Pier, where amidst restaurants and bars, the renewal group "Navah Tehilla" lead a public, open-air musical Kabbalat Shabbat service for hundreds of secular people. I spent a similar Shabbat in Tel Aviv at the seaside promenade at Beit Tefila Yisraeli's lively Friday night services with instruments, singing with hundreds of secular Israelis as the sun set over the Mediterranean sea. There was also the wonderful singing with fellow students at Kehillat Zion and at the Murstein Synagogue on the HUC campus, using contemporary melodies popular in the Reform movement.

Each had their own flavor and melodies and I look forward to bringing some of them to Sukkat Shalom as part of our new Shabbat Nashira service. This new Friday night format will feature singable, spiritual and global melodies led by Rabbi Gordon and myself backed by an instrumental ensemble three times this year.

Beyond the music, the conflict, the prayers and the historical sites are the people. I found Israelis warm and friendly and eager to share, wary of war and hopeful for peace. My favorite thing in Israel was my weekly trip to the open air "Shuk" market. There, vendors in stalls compete, shouting "Avatiach- Shekel v'Chetzi!," a shekel and a half (roughly a nickel) for a slice of watermelon, an Israeli obsession. At the Shuk, everyone comes to meet and mingle in that lively atmosphere. Like the watermelon, my travels to Israel may have seemed from the outside as hard as the rind, but my journey was as sweet as as the juicy fruit inside. I can't wait for another slice.