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A journey of three from Eli Korenfeld

Introduction

The first meeting of the "Haifa meets Frankfurt" course opened with the words of academic instructor professor Adital Ben Ari, based on her article "You need three for a dialogue". Indeed, in my personal opinion too, you need three for a dialogue. This is the reason I chose to build my personal column, which summarizes my experiences during the meetings in Israel, Germany and again in Israel in a way that it shows you need three for a dialogue.

In this column there will also be three sides of the dialogue: my personal experience, my family experience and the group experience. I will begin with stories about my personal experience, continue with my family and the group outlook for participating in the academy in general and at this course in particular.

The personal experience

Academy and Religion

Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) in the academy, sounds like an innovative and far-reaching concept in the Israeli reality. Historically, there were many rabbis among Jews in Germany who learned in the academy and completed advanced degrees. The most famous among them are Rabbi Dr Azriel Hildesimer, Rabbi Dr Meir Lehman and more. The famous saying of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rabbi of Frankfurt "Torah with Derech Eretz" led to an integration of Torah, work and education.

True, the German Torah world is not a leading power in the leadership of the ultra-Orthodox sector in Israel. The Torah world of Israel today is mainly yeshiva world which originates from Lithuania. The value of Torah based on the learning is of the highest order and there is a measure of conservatism in the general conduct.

I spent my elementary and high school years in the "classical" ultra-Orthodox institutions, cheider, yeshiva for young boys and then for older ones. A few years ago, I met a Rabbi who told me emphatically: "Either you do something with your life or I won't speak to you anymore". His words, along with my own desire to move forward in life led me to look for a profession where the combination of academy and Torah can be integrated successfully.

A combination of Torah and work seemed possible to me at first in the fields of Economics, Engineering or Law. These fields are accurate, precise and clear. I ended up in a very different field. Given my life circumstances and the influence from people around me, above all my special, precious brother, led me to a place where I can give of myself to others and try to make a difference in the lives of people like my brother. I wished to give these people a true sincere smile of happiness and love.

My brother, if you didn't understand, has special needs. He is mentally limited and can't talk. To me he is an angel.

Social work

The circumstances of my life led me to a profession which in Israel isn't perceived well. In my first class at the university in an ultra-Orthodox branch of the University of Haifa in Bnei Brak, we were sent by the lecturer to take a short trip to the street, "catch" a random passerby and hear from them how they answers surprised us. We heard terrible things about perceive social work. The children who were taken out of their homes without a thought, but at the same time there were comments about helping others and tremendous giving.

During my years in school I bonded deeply with my brother. I learned about the hardships of different sectors. I discovered new worlds of depth and understanding of their plight. Most important, I got to know wonderful people who accompanied me in learning and accomplishing. Through my studies, I met different groups of people whose lives are very different from my own. I learned to "talk the language" and see the other persons world view. I tried checking my boundaries in writing papers and comments. I thank God for his grace and for the privilege of joining courses dealing with culture, language and different communities in society. Hearing different voices, even those who are contradictory of my way of life never fazed me. On the contrary, I find it challenging to deepen my knowledge, understand the human psyche and try to understand the nature of who is standing in front of me. Is he interested in an answer? Does he wants to express his opinion? Is he looking for an argument?

The journey to Germany

As part of the deepening of knowledge, I received an offer to join a journey, a week long journey on foreign land which a language I do not speak and culture I barely know. I feared the following: What will I do for such a long period of time in a place where I am a stranger? How will I manage? What will I eat? Thankfully, Professor Julia Bernstein was the head of the German group from the Frankfurt University. As a Jew who had learned at the Haifa University herself in the past, I felt some level of security regarding the question of common language.

Language and cultural concerns were not the only things which threatened me, I had religious concerns too. How will I keep the Sabbath? What about praying? Four weeks before I checked and contacted the Jewish communities in Germany, I heard good reports about the community in Cologne and decided to stay there for my first Sabbath. The second Sabbath I got invited to stay in the well-known Frankfurt Jewish community.

Looking back, I now realize that my concerns were far-fetched. The Jewish community hosted me graciously. I dined with other students from the community and Torah scholars. I can't thank my hosts enough for their kindness. They made me feel at home.

The family experiences

Grandma and I

As I was preparing to go, I was deliberating how to tell my grandma that I will be traveling to the country whose people killed her family during the holocaust. At the time she was a young teenager, but the scars, the numbers tattooed on her hands and the memories are deeply etched in her. After giving the matter a lot of thought, I decided to go over and tell her in person. "Grandma, the university offered me to join a journey to Europe." Grandma smiled and said, "nice, good luck". A moment later she asked, "where are you going to?" I stammered, "I will go to Budapest for a while..." I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth, that I will be going to the place of here worst fears.

A few days after landing, I went with the student group on a journey to the past, to Buchenwald, where Jews and non-Jews, prisoners of the Nazi regime were sent to, "anti-social" prisoners. My body shivered. I know my family story. My grandfather, may he rest in peace, was placed in a forced labor camp. My grandmother was in Auschwitz and passed the selection of Dr. Mengele as a young teenager. I felt the shivers and the cold. Done my teffilin in a German room heated by a heater which burned the flesh while the spirit remained.

The relatives who lived and those who didn't

Staying on German soil, for me as a third generation of Holocaust survivors, was not an easy ordeal. Landing in Dortmund, traveling on the train through various cities in Germany. Watching the smoke from factory chimneys made me nauseas. The feeling intensified during the four-hour trip to Buchenwald. I sat alone, thinking and preparing myself to see the place where unspeakable terror of the holocaust took place.

Visiting a concentration or death camp is a wide spread phenomenon in the Israeli society. Many people go on journeys like that with their high school as teenagers. For me, this was an important task. Many family members on both sides perished in the holocaust. My grandma, may she live on a long life, worked for months as a seamstress in Auschwitz. My grandfather was put in the German army as an engineer working with a group of fellow Jews to fix German railways that were bombed by the allies.

Living in the shadow of a Holocaust sounds like a terrible thing but in fact, I never felt that the Holocaust clouded the atmosphere of my childhood and family. We have a custom in our family to mourn the destruction on the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av. Grandpa sits on the floor in his home and tells us, the grandchildren, about what has happened to him and his family during the holocaust. Grandpa worked to liven up the memory of family members who perished in the holocaust. He filled up witness pages and recorded his miraculous rescue from the Nazis.

The stories that follows

Arriving at the Buchenwald concentration camp, I was shivering intensely, here I stood, where my people were tortured and judged for their religious identity and I was standing here, with a kippa on my head, tzitzit on my body and tefillin in my hand. The thought of my contemporary reality as opposed to how it was years ago engaged me and did not leave me alone, I couldn't listen to the explanations of the guide, I was immersed in my world, trying to digest what was going on, looking to see what and how.
In my heart I know that no explanation will ever please me.

After leaving the crematorium, I wrote the following passage in my journal:

All my bones

peering out ,Standing, disconnecting from the surroundings and looking across the window, seeing the green, and remembering it is blood
Lifting my eyes, looking and thinking about this place trying to whisper some prayer.

But my head, my head burns

Moving around, whirling thoughts, the great oven stands out reminding me,
Fire, wood and angels' tears are not just part of a biblical story.

But my stomach, my stomach is turning

Passing my hand over tefillin trying to connect, to be a link,
In a dynasty of a nation that sings out loud on its way to the one above.

But my throat, oh my throat is sore

Thinking again, about simple people who went up like smoke from the furnace fire, remember the words of Moses the great prophet how holy is this place, thinking in my head what the sages said "there is no place but prayer"

Tear, oh tear wetting my face

Trying to cry, to say, I just whisper, whisper quietly, feel my mouth twitch, whisper, try to utter a syllable, blared, another syllable, beginning of word, syllable joins syllable turns to a cry a scream, coming straight from the soul in the melody sung by the holy angel who were in this camp and various others, the same melody that a Jewish soul wails and moans for her nation:

"I believe I believe ... I believe"

**I shout, I cry for my people, on the death of six million saints, just me,
alone in this death land the standing with my tefillin, my kippa, my
tzitzis shouting**

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One"

And showing that the Spirit has defeated death!

As I write, tears came from my eyes, soaking my palms and preventing me from continuing, the sensations rattle me. Is standing with tefillin in a concentration camp a success or failure? Is my fear of the holocaust caused by keeping my personal family narrative to myself? I sent out the passage I wrote to my parents and a few close friends. I received warm feedback. "You touched us in a sensitive spot". I accept, understand that the Holocaust has affected me and my family deeply.

The group experience

The Haifa group

Nearly three years of university studies, I learned in a completely separated program for men only. I learned in a Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) program which received tacit consent from rabbis and community leaders. Moving to a mixed group wasn't easy. I came together with a friend from school which made me feel a bit more comfortable. The group I joined was very diverse. People from various religious, social and national backgrounds. It was a challenge to listen and to express myself authentically with all the differences in conduct and outlook on life.

Thoughts of differences and identity soon turned into a shared discussion on things that connect the different identities into one society, though not a cohesive and strong one, but a society that strives to respect and accept others. My conversations with my Druze and Muslim partners helped me realize that in every sector there are people who want to prevent their society from going forward. People who cause splits and hate not thinking about the implications of their actions, will exist in every generation.

The thoughts about the common and the different, led us to in-depth conversations, trying to understand what things were like, how one person's innocent sentence can be tragic for another. I would like to use this opportunity to admit that at times, when we felt the conflicts were great, we met informally to talk, listen and try to figure out how to be authentic while respecting others in a way that will prevent future outbursts. It didn't always work, but it helped me realize how special our group is.

The German group

My integration into the Israeli group was not easy. I would call it a culture shock. Nevertheless, the language issue in this group did not affect me as much as it did in my direct encounter of the German group. When we spent time together in Germany and in Haifa, I felt frustrated that my knowledge of English wasn't wide enough to allow me to lead meaningful conversations. I had many thoughts and questions waiting to come out, but they were blocked by language limitations.

Formal and informal conversations with the German group made it clear to me that our groups were very different from a human and professional aspect. "Our group" is built from individuals who each represent a different profession and a different sector of the Israeli society. Whereas in the German group the participants were all future social workers. The mutual meeting was extremely interesting. The German group was surprised to hear that in Israel there are sectors among the Jews and non-Jews, who do not acknowledge the establishment of the state of Israel.

The difference in identity has led the German group to a dilemma within itself, of how much influence does the conflict have on the policy and conduct. They were very interested in hearing about the situation in Israel even when we were in Germany. At some point I was even getting impatient. I came to Germany to hear about the German culture and heritage. I was also interested in hearing about the Jewish communities in Germany and instead I kept on hearing and discussing Israel and its society.

The large group

The large group is a closing of a circle. We sat there together, students from the two universities in diverse and interesting locations who wish to deepen their understanding and knowledge. There were some funny moments like the reaction of the German students trying to shake the hand of a Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) woman who was our partner in the journey. They were very interested in learning about the different sectors of the Israeli society, the Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) among them.

During the long trip to Buchenwald, as I sat alone, watching the group, I saw how mutual conversations were formed, how serious voices and bursts of laughter were heard simultaneously as members tried to prepare themselves for the experience. To me, this was the climax of the two groups bonding.

My greatest experience of the journey, is trying to arrange my stay on the Sabbath with the prominent Jewish community in Frankfurt. Up to a few hours before Sabbath I still didn't have my eating and sleeping arrangements clarified. I felt the care of all group members trying to do the impossible, giving ideas, looking for solutions till all was organized after much effort. This is when I truly felt: "You need three for a journey."

Epilogue

Hours after Shabbat's departure, me, my classmates and teammates prepare for the way back home. We gather our belongings and meet at the central bus station for the train to take us for the three-hour ride to the airport. We arrive early, find our seats and wait patiently for the famous punctual German train to take us to our destination. It is freezing cold on the platform so we decide to go inside and wait.

Waiting and waiting for the train, the flight back home, the language, the food we know. Suddenly the PA system announces that there is a railway worker strike and our train will be held up by a few hours. Thoughts are racing through my head. What would my grandfather have done, whose whole life was calculated precisely when his family was taken to the death camps by the punctual German railways. What would he have said to a sudden unexpected strike of the German railway workers?

And, do you think we ended up missing our flight? That's correct!

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