

Dear Friends,

I'm at Ben Gurion Airport in Israel awaiting my flight back to New Jersey. Yoni and I have completed our four day hike through the north of Israel. We're tired but exhilarated! I've written "Notes From the Trail"- a brief diary of my experiences while hiking. I had hoped to send it one installment at a time, but, alas, there was no available internet connection on any of the evenings. So here is the record of all four days of hiking. I look forward to talking with you in person when I return.

Rabbi Cooper's Notes from the Trail

Day 1- Monday, March 24
Nachal Dishon to Mt. Meiron Field School
5.5 miles

We're up early today- 6:30 A.M.- to have breakfast and start our first day of hiking. We spent the night at the Hacienda Resort Hotel in Ma'alot where we had an orientation and met other hikers. The hotel was hit hard by rockets in the 2006 war with Lebanon and Hezbollah and had to close for a period of months to rebuild. Now they're open for business again and eager for customers.

We took a bus from Ma'alot to the starting point of the hike- Nachal Dishon and the Ein Aravot Spring in the Upper Galilee. By the end of the day we'll have hiked more than five miles through the area of the spring along a dry wadi (stream bed in Arabic, Hebrew is "nachal"), enroute to the SPNI (Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel) Field School in Meiron.

The smells along the hike route are irresistible and unforgettable. Flowers are in bloom, wild grass, trees, shrubs and plants give off their fragrances. The sounds of nature- croaking frogs and singing birds calling- can be heard without the distraction of city noise.

A theme for this first day of the hike is the experience of wonder. Our guide - Dr. Eilon Schwartz, Director of the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership - is an expert in the teachings of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Eilon has carefully selected passages- both Jewish and secular- to guide our discussion about how the experience of wonder in this world can lead to meaning.

Eilon begins the discussion on wonder with a strikingly simple question- to what do you respond by saying "wow!?" What grabs your attention, shaking you out of the complacency that is fueled by routine? Is it something in nature, like the setting or rising of the sun, the meticulousness of an insect hard at work, or the birth of a baby? Do you say "wow" when you see a jumbo jet up close and ponder how it takes off, or perhaps when you see a beautiful painting or hear a magnificent symphony? At some point we ought to ask if there is a difference between the awe we feel when we observe something in the natural world and how we respond to the work of our own hands. But an experience of wonder begins with a basic emotional expression that comes from the depths of our soul and leads to a spiritual encounter with the world.

We closely observe some of the flowers silently present with us in an open field and discuss their intricacies. We find ourselves immersed in our curiosity and intrigue about nature. We read passages by Ellen Goodman (a columnist for the Boston Globe), Mary Midgely (a British philosopher), Grace Paley (an American author and poetess), Mark Twain, Martin Buber and, of course, Heschel. We stop to focus on a sentence from Who Is Man- "Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the world becomes a market place for you."

We ponder how easy it is to forfeit our sense of awe amidst the hectic pace of life, yet we realize how true Heschel's insight is.

The group arrives at the field school tired but triumphant. A makeshift shuk (marketplace) has been set up for us under a tent in the parking lot. The vendors are people whose businesses were on the verge of

collapse after the 2006 war. To help them recover, a consortium has been set up to attract new customers on the internet and around the country. I buy a couple of items because it's the right thing to do. Our dinner is provided by a woman whose restaurant had to close after the war but who is making a comeback hosting parties in people's homes.

We have a 3-hour block to rest, but I use my time to meet and talk with the Israelis who run the office at the field school. Danny, the manager, so loves the work of the SPNI that he commutes 90 minutes from his home in Haifa; Aliza, the secretary, tries hard to help me get online using the internet connection at her desk.

The day ends with a briefing on the next day's trail- almost 11 miles to Tzefat. We get to bed early prepared to face a day that will be long and challenging but exhilarating.

Day 2- Tuesday, March 25

Mt. Meron Field School to the City of Tzefat

10.8 miles

An even earlier wake-up call today- we're up at 5:00 AM so we can begin the long and difficult ascent up Mt. Meron. We can't go as high as the summit because there's an army base there that keeps a careful watch over the north of Israel. But we climb almost to the top and are treated to spectacular views of the lower valley and surrounding towns.

After a healthy breakfast shared outdoors, we head down the other side of the mountain enroute to Ein Zeved and Kfar Shamai. There is a sense of timelessness to Israel's landscape. The land often looks like it must have thousands of years ago. The flock of thirsty and curious goats that come to drink at the small lake near our rest stop reinforces that image. Back on the trail, we make our way to Kfar Shamai where the tomb of the Talmudic sage Shamai is said to be. Of course, no one can know with certainty that Shamai is buried in the grave housed in this simple stone structure. But every power that has ruled this land has given the area of the tomb a name in their own language that acknowledges Shamai. Down the hill from the tomb is the legendary grave of Shimon Bar Yochai- the Talmudic sage who is supposed to have authored the Zohar- the central work of Jewish mysticism.

The grave of Shimon Bar Yochai is the site of the world's largest annual gathering of Jews anywhere in the world. On Lag Ba-Omer (the 33rd day of counting the days between Passover and Shavuot), 200,000-300,000 Jews gather for Hilula, an occasion for praying and meditating at the grave of Shimon bar Yochai. People camp out for days for a good spot next to the grave and pray for all types of Divine intervention in their lives.

We continue our hike toward the Sichvi Pools, a cool retreat from the hot sun where streams gather and small waterfalls offer relief for aching feet. The park is packed with Israeli teens visiting from as far south as Eilat. They are sassy and eager to speak English and demonstrate their knowledge of American pop culture. It's thoroughly delightful to chat with them.

We have an option to get on the bus and be driven to our hotel in Tzefat, but Yoni and I have committed ourselves to hiking "point-to-point"- walking every inch of the trail from Monday morning to Thursday afternoon. The hike out of the gorge where the pool is located up to the road is grueling- perhaps the hardest hiking of the entire trail. After 45 minutes of climbing rocks and an uneven trail we come to the road that leads to the Tzefat Cemetery.

Tzefat is built on a mountain and the cemetery is another 15 minutes up a steep hill. It's still in use, and there's a funeral taking place when we arrive. The sign above the entrance to the military section reads: "Anywhere someone is buried in the Land of Israel it's as if they're buried under the Temple Mount"- a sentiment that's perhaps a comfort to some and likely no relief for grieving parents. We stop

at the memorial to the 22 children killed in Ma'alot in 1974. They were from Tzefat and on an excursion to Ma'alot when their lives were mercilessly ended by ruthless terrorists. A North American Jew provided for the memorial and built the special section of the cemetery to honor their lives.

Continuing our climb up and out of the cemetery, we pass by the graves of Joseph Caro, the scholar whose commentaries graces the pages of the Shulchan Aruch- the great medieval code of Jewish law, and Isaac Luria- the "Ari" (the Lion)- whose powerful spiritual passion gave life to the mystics of Tzefat hundreds of years ago. People pray by these graves with reverence and sincerity.

After climbing hundreds of steps we finally arrive at the Rimon Hotel, exhausted and feeling unable to take another step. We settle into our room and prepare to rejoin the group for dinner.

Our trip is sponsored by the Heschel Center and Hazon, both pioneers and leaders in the Jewish environmental movement. The Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership was founded in 1998 by Dr. Eilon Schwartz and Dr. Jeremy Benstein- two American born Israelis and friends from their teenage years who found a way to channel their academic and social passions into a plan for real action. Today, the Heschel Center, located in Tel Aviv, has a staff of 25 people and an extensive and growing array of programs. Their staff is working together with the Hazon staff to organize our hike and the educational components that give it depth and meaning.

After dinner I sit down with David Pearlman-Paran, the Heschel Center's Director of Resource Development. David has been with the Heschel Center for the last three years and has worked there on and off over the past ten years. He moved to Israel from Australia in 1994 and quickly became involved in the environmental movement shortly after his army service ended in 1996. Here are excerpts from our conversation:

Tell us about the mission of the Heschel Center.

The Heschel Center, established ten years ago, is working to create a sustainable society for Israel based on ecological health and social justice. We aim to help Israel create a society that manages resources and makes decisions to create the best possible future for all its citizens. Our center is named for Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose teachings about the world are profound and inspiring.

What would you say are Israel's most crucial environmental problems?
What solutions do you try to implement?

Israel is facing severe environmental challenges, including climate change, which contributes to the problem of water scarcity. Over-population also contributes to water scarcity, as well as water pollution. Air pollution is caused by over dependency on car transportation. A recent study revealed that over 1,100 people die per year in the Tel Aviv area alone from diseases stemming from air pollution. The Haifa Bay area has massive polluting industries all located in a very densely populated area. Israel faces the significant problem of disappearing open spaces, particularly north of Be'er Sheva. More than disappearing open spaces, there is a problem with limited access to open spaces.

To combat these problems, the Heschel Center is trying to redefine the question as a broader one connected to social, political, economic and cultural factors. For example, if you create an economy where it's more worthwhile to create more waste than to create solutions that reduce waste and an economy that encourages people to consume more rather than to consume things that are good for them and for their surroundings, We need economic solutions that are good for the whole and not just about using financial gain as a measure of its worth.

Toward that end, sustainability- different from environmentalism- is about questioning how we run things and how to create the greatest benefit not just for the current generation but for the future as well.

The Heschel Center embraces the notion that ideas + people = change. So we run programs like the Environmental Fellows Program, which brings together professionals from a wide array of fields and from across the breadth of Israeli society and trains them one day a week for an entire year. These professionals implement projects for change within their areas of professional training. For example, a prime time television journalist can run a series on climate change and raise awareness. Our Green Schools Network, established by one of our fellows, operates in over 160 schools over the country and works with the students, teachers and principals to create change opportunities in the school and community. The Local Sustainability Center works with communities from the Mayor down to the citizens to develop sustainability projects such as carbon emissions reductions. One of our biggest achievements recently was to persuade the mayors of Israel's 15 largest cities to commit to initiatives that will reduce carbon emissions by 20% within 12 years (based on levels measured in the year 2000).

How tuned in are Israelis to basic environmental concerns such as recycling and reducing our carbon footprint?

There is an increasing level of importance and awareness, but the knowledge level is relatively low. Some say that Israelis just won't be bothered to do things like separate their garbage. But when green cages for plastic bottles appeared on the streets of major towns, with no advance notice or promotion, they were instantly full. The problem is severe but there is reason to hope.

How does sustainability differ from environmentalism?

Sustainability encourages holistic solutions to the challenge of living that is healthy and protects the environment. Finding holistic solutions requires that we look at the totality of factors that are causing a problem. Rather than just figure out how and where to build more recycling centers- something that could be considered an "environmental" solution- sustainability tries to determine the cause of human behavior and seeks to develop a broader approach to problem solving.

What is the relationship between the Heschel Center and Hazon?

In some significant ways, we are quite similar, with one key difference being that Hazon addresses a North American audience and The Heschel Center is concerned with Israeli society. The hike would not have been possible without our collaboration.

Day 3- Wednesday, March 26 **City of Tzefat to Kibbutz Hukuk** **9.7 miles**

We start our day by hiking through the Arab town of Akbar and Wadi Akbar. There is a Kabbalistic legend that the treasures of the Second Temple were hidden in a cave along the wadi. It's said that when Napoleon heard that such valuable treasures were hidden in a secret cave in the mountains along the wadi, he ordered the opening of the cave be blown open. We can see the enlarged opening of the cave, and can imagine Napoleon's disappointment at finding it empty. Akbar was once a Jewish town and, while we don't have time to see them, there are ruins of a synagogue up the hill.

We hike along the wadi under Israel's tallest and longest bridge which towers above us. The bridge connects the north-south road from Rosh Pina to Kiryat Shemona with Tzefat. Before the construction of the new road and the bridge, people had to drive around Tzefat to arrive at its vital medical center. We

get a sense for the conflict between priorities in Israeli society. Whose claim is more valid- those who advocate that more roads be built for the sake of convenience and easier access to emergency services, or those who advocate reducing carbon emissions and Israel's dependency on car transportation? The conventional approach sees the problem of unbearable traffic and seeks to build more roads. Those who are concerned with sustainability seek to reduce the use of car transportation and encourage the use of trains and bicycles.

We reach the end of Nachal (Wadi) Akbar and stop at the top of Nachal Amud (another wadi) for lunch. We meet with 4th, 5th and 6th students from Netanya who are part of the Heschel Center's Green School Initiative. They've studied oceanography and other aspects of sustainability and are part of a broader effort to increase awareness in their school community and their town. The Heschel Center has begun this program in over 160 Israeli schools. The children make a presentation of what they've learned while we have lunch. To make the meal more interesting, we've collected Chubeza (mallow) along the trail and watch as our guides mix it into omelets. The Chubeza omelet in pita with olive paste and sundried tomatoes is the best lunch of the week.

We hike with the children along Nachal Amud- a rocky and uneven terrain that makes every step difficult. I think of the verse from Proverbs- Chanoch La-na'ar al pi darko, gam ki yazkin lo yasur mimena- Train a child in the way he should go and, when he is grown, he will not depart from it. It's apparent that the Heschel Center's strategy of reaching children and making them partners in the sustainability movement makes sense.

We stop near the end of the wadi to observe the massive water siphon that was built in the 1950s by the State of Israel to bring water from the Sea of Galilee to the Negev. The 12-foot pipe (that's 12 feet, not 12 inches) is massive and encased in concrete and stone. When it reaches the top of the wadi, it dips down one side, snakes under the wadi bed and climbs up the opposite side. We talk about the issue of water scarcity and usage. Desalination is not necessarily a good solution. Since desalination plants are coal fired and located in a small area near the Mediterranean coast, it can have a negative impact on air pollution. The overwhelming use of water is for agriculture, not domestic use. Why, then, should Israel invest so much money and time in agriculture - why not import food? Reasons include security, national pride, and the development of agricultural technology for export. But the issue of water usage remains one of Israel's toughest problems.

We come to the end of Nachal Amud and see the beautiful stone formation that rises high above the canyon walls- this is the "Amud" (the pillar) that gives the wadi its name. Still determined to hike "point-to-point," we venture up an unmarked trail, walking through wild brush, enroute to Kibbutz Hukuk. The kibbutz was reestablished by Israel's first female air force pilot, who left the air force to start an environmentally friendly kibbutz. We are drained but again feel triumphant that we walked every inch of the trail.

After dinner we meet Guy Rilov, an organic farmer and wine maker. His olive oil has just been judged among the 100 best in the world in an international contest. We learn that organic farming is a growing industry in Israel. There is a Federation of Mediterranean Organic Farmers that includes Italy, Egypt and even Syria. It's clear that the environmental movement transcends Middle East politics.

We learn that an Israeli company – BioBee - is one of two leading world exporters of "beneficial enemies" (second only to the Dutch). These creatures- which eat bugs that destroy crops- are one of many organic alternatives to spraying crops with carcinogenic materials.

At the end of the presentation on organic farming, we learn that Israel- along with other countries- is participating in Earth Hour. For one hour (8:00-9:00 PM on Thursday, March 27), businesses and residences throughout the Tel Aviv area have agreed to shut off their lights to show how much energy is often wasted and how much can be saved. A concert is planned for Rabin Square- the energy for the concert will be provided by stationary bikes connected to generators. I learn about the new "Israel Biking

Association"- Yisrael Bishvil Ofanayim (a play on words, meaning both "Israel is on a bicycle path" and "Israel is for bikes"). The association is planning a national bike path from the north to Eilat, and promotes the cause of mandatory bike racks in front of public buildings and showers in businesses as an incentive for workers to bike to work.

We're exhausted and quickly fall asleep as we think about the next day.

Day 4- Thursday, March 27

Kibbutz Hukuk to Kibbutz Nof Genosar on the Sea of Galilee

6.3 miles

We rise early and leave the Kibbutz along the same path we took to arrive the day before. Our destination is the top of the mountain next to the kibbutz, which proves to be an arduous and painful ascent for tired legs. Near the top we meet several horses who belong to the kibbutz- they seem disinterested in our presence. At the summit, we can see the City of Tzefat, the bridge over Wadi Akbar and Mt. Meiron in the distance. It's astonishing to contemplate that we walked from that distant point to where we are standing.

Today we're accompanied by participants in the Heschel Center's Fellows Program. We meet civil engineers, urban planners, university professors, politicians, the founder of the women's movement in Israel, school teachers and other professionals who give one day of their week to find ways to promote sustainability in Israel through their work.

This is Israel's new brand of "exceptionalism-" the Jewish state is making great strides in sustainability and environmentalism, although there is much work to be done. The Fellows gives us a sense of hope and confidence that Israel is trying to bring meaningful, lasting solutions to the challenge of creating a society that is healthy and just and that ensures that the world we bequeath to our children will be clean and fruitful.

We arrive at the shores of the Kinneret- the Sea of Galilee- tired but inspired to finish the journey. We learn that resorts along the Kinneret typically put up fences on the edge of their property all the way to the water. But the environmental movement objects to the "privatizing" of the Kinneret and knows that it's illegal. Signs are posted with a phone number citizens can call to report illegal fences. We spend some time clearing brush from a trail way to help create a pathway around the circumference of the entire sea. The work is symbolic but meaningful.

We arrive at Kibbutz Ginosar and have reached our destination. We enjoy a relaxing lunch and discuss the ups and downs (literally and figuratively!) of these four powerful days of hiking and learning along "Shvil Yisrael"- Israel's national trail way. The experience has been exhilarating, even as it has been exhausting.

This has been my most unusual, and in many ways, most memorable visit to Israel in my life. I've learned about hiking, gained a new commitment to exercise and fitness, and seen my love of Israel enhanced and deepened.

I return to New Jersey eager to share these four days with you.