



Instead of traveling abroad, Rav Olami is traveling in the realms of the spirit

The Corona era has forced me to take a break from my intensive journeys around the Jewish world, but it turns out that they can be continued from within the four walls of home.

By Rabbi Eliahu Birnbaum

These days I am completing a period of 120 days devoid of journeys to the Jewish world and Jewish communities. My last visit was to the Jewish community of Guatemala on Purim, and since then I am fulfilling the verse "Blessed are those who dwell in Your house" – and office! Over the years, I was used to traveling almost every week to different Jewish communities, altogether close to 220 days a year, to visit the Straus-Amiel emissaries, give *shiurim*, hold sabbaticals, research communities and distant tribes, and in particular to meet Jews and live the Jewish world up close. Now that flying is impossible, due to canceled flight, restrictions on entry into different countries, synagogues that are closed for the duration and the risk of having to self-quarantine, I find myself contemplating the significance of my journeys to the Jewish world.

I always say that I am not traveling to *tour* the world, but to *journey* around the Jewish World. I believe there is a deep difference between a tour and a journey. One goes on a tour to see the views, take photos, visit museums, get acquainted with the local culture and sometimes also taste the local food, buy mementos and return back home.

A true journey is different. A journey has a route and a destination. One goes on a journey to search, meet, hear stories, deal with challenges, questions and dilemmas. Behind the journey there is a motive and a reason which defines it and accompanies it along the way. A journey allows a different view of the world. A journey is not only a geographic movement from one place to the other, it is also movement in time, a journey in the spiritual and historic worlds. One goes on a journey and returns a different person. The journey leaves its mark, influencing one's way of thinking, emotions and acceptance of the other.

Indeed, over the years I felt that one Eliahu leaves on a journey and a different Eliahu returns from that journey. The question is not how you leave or which route you take, but how you return. Throughout the journey one undergoes a deep and complex experience and returns different from the way he or she left.

I am not referring specifically to exotic journeys to lost tribes, but to any journey, to classic and well-known communities, small or large, close or distant as well. Throughout the journey I discover the secrets and charm of the communities and integrate these discoveries into my personal and Jewish world.

The artist draws inspiration from visions and views he encounters on his journey. The painter, sculptor and composer receive outer enrichment when they go on a journey and come across a new world. But I believe there is also a Jewish creation born from journeys, when through our affinity with the world we discover, a new creation results.



The secret to a true journey is not to be an outsider, but to be a simultaneously both a viewer and a participant. Organizing meetings and conversations, seeing sights, undergoing experiences, formulating insights. During a journey to Jewish communities one must understand the communities and their needs, the Jews and their situation, with empathy and respect. Not as a researcher studying an anthropological phenomenon and not as a tourist asking to photograph pictures from the community's life, but as an equal, as a partner and with the understanding that the Jewish existence is a secret that must be understood and deciphered.

In perpetual movement

I am asked over and over, "what is the most interesting, beautiful and exotic community you visited?" Well, I don't have any preferences for one community over the other. I love communities and Jews in the east and west, small and large ones, old and new. My journeys around the Jewish Diaspora opened a wide perspective for me, and only one who is familiar with how widespread Jewish communities are around the world can understand this. Acquaintance with the community in Armenia is nothing like visiting the community in Guatemala. You cannot compare the Jews living in India to the Jews in Turkey. The spiritual experience of a Shabbat with the Bnei Menashe in India is quite different from the Jewish experience of Shabbat with the Amazonian Jews in Peru. Prayers in the impressive great synagogue of Rome are very different from the prayers in a Polish synagogue. The Jewish world is far from homogenous, but the beauty and charm of the Jewish world is in its variety of circles and colors.

There is Jewish travel literature from the beginning of the twelfth century until today. Although its scope is much smaller in comparison to the Christian travel literature, it has historical and personal significance. Usually the travel books were written about long journeys through Christian countries to eastern countries or to the New World. There were also emissaries who left Israel to visit their brethren in many communities around the world, in faraway, foreign locations – from the story of Eldad HaDani, the mysterious tourist who arrived in North Africa in the ninth century and presented himself as coming from the country of the ten lost tribes; through Christopher Columbus, to Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail of our generation.

Other famous travelers include Rabbi Benjamin of Toledo who left his town in Spain in 1155 and returned after traveling through Europe, the middle east and Africa, in 1162; Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura of the 16th century; Rabbi Yaakov Sapir in the middle of the 19th century, who wrote of his travels in his book "Even Sapir"; and the Chida (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulay, 18th century), who wrote a fascinating travel book called "Maagal Tov" (The Good Circle). I see these figures as my teachers and masters of the world of travel.

Not only individuals, but also the Jewish People are in constant movement and on a constant journey. It seems that the Jewish people suffer from the "Wandering Jew Syndrome". Jews continue to keep the commandment given to our forefather Avraham "Go out from your country, from your birthplace and from your father's house" and are on an everlasting



journey. Both the Jews and the non-Jewish surroundings see the Jew as one who travels over hills and valleys in continual motion. I believe that the Jewish characteristic over the generations is one of searching for new horizons and experiences, new inventions and starting over, being in perpetual motion and discovering new worlds. Therefore, instead of using the term "Wandering Jew" (which did not originate from a Jewish background), I prefer to use the term "Journeying Jew".

The internal journey

During the Coronavirus we stopped traveling by air, but must be consoled with journeys in the spiritual world and via Zoom. During these moments the Chassidic philosophy, which knows to translate the territorial journeys into personal and collective ones, comes to our aid. Sometimes the journeys are the Jewish meeting place and experience more than the synagogue and Beit Midrash are.

Rabbi Moshe Ephraim, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, wrote in his book, *Degel Machane Ephraim*:

Know that I heard in the name of my grandfather that all the journeys... are within each person from the day of birth until passing away... because from the day of birth and leaving his mother's womb... travels from journey to journey until arriving in the supreme Land of Life.

So, it turns out that although the dictionary defines journey as "travel, movement from place to place, especially places far from each other", a journey is not only through space and territory, seas and continents, but also into a person's heart. A journey is movement, but one can take a spiritual journey as well as a geographical one.

Rashi comments on the verse "before the eyes of all the people of Israel, and so it was through all their journeys" (Exodus 40, 38) "their place of camping was also called a journey". A person can stand, be enclosed between the four walls of a room, and still be part of a journey. There is a journey between one place and the other and there is an internal journey, without external movement.

Do I miss the journeys to the Jewish world? Yes. Although I am not unemployed, I discovered I miss the route, the journey, the meetings and *shiurim*. I miss seeing the faces of Jews from east and west and listening to their stories. I miss hearing the various *nusachim* of prayers. I miss seeing the diligent and impactful activities of the Straus-Amiel emissaries, who, each in his and her way, adds a layer to the existence of the Jewish People. I miss the special Shabbat experience in Switzerland, Mexico, the Himalayan mountains and the jungles of the Amazon in Brazil.

Besides the real journeys, which describe places and situations through an observant eye, there are imaginary and mystical journeys, spiritual journeys. All are true words of G-d and what is important is to depart on a journey.