



## Real Face Time: Getting back to Visiting Communities

**Following a year in which all interactions with Diaspora communities were done online, mainly through Zoom, I finally got back to visiting in person and discovered that there is no substitute for the live encounter.**

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Just before Pesach this year, I was privileged to be a free man. After a year of being at home and in the office and thousands of hours Zooming with the Jewish world, I was once again able to visit Jewish communities. Meeting Jews and communities was like a breath of fresh air for me. I felt the atmosphere of the Land of Israel permeating the long exile of the Diaspora.

For a year, my communication with the Jewish world took place virtually. It was a good and productive connection, one where we got used to meeting communal leaders, rabbis and synagogues through the camera, giving lessons and lectures to a wide audience via the internet, and seeing Jewish faces peering out through Zoom boxes. However, now that I have gone back to travelling, I realized that the relationship in the past year was not the "real thing".

The face-to-face encounter with Jews around the world creates a dialogue that opens the heart, penetrates inner-depths of both speaker and listener, seeps into them and forges deep connections. As I sat with Jews in New York, Miami, Guatemala, and Mexico, I felt how much I missed the personal conversations, the actual faces in front of me, the real thing. The personal encounters create a sense of shared destiny and empathy. In the Zoom sessions, while it's possible to exchange opinions and formulate ideas, it's not possible to figuratively walk in the other's shoes, to fully open-up and share dreams, challenges and life-long yearnings. While the Zoom meetings created personal acquaintance and enabled the transfer of information, only a personal encounter produces real inspiration and closeness.

### **Not yet at full strength**

The secret of a true journey is not to be a "guest for a moment who sees every fault," but to be both an observer and a participant - to meet and converse, see the sights, have experiences, filter insights. A journey in Jewish communities requires respectfully and empathetically understanding the community, its needs and unique situation. Not simply as anthropological researcher studying a phenomenon, nor as a tourist seeking to take pictures of community life, but as someone who looks at everything eye-level, out of a sense of partnership and in recognition that Jewish existence is a secret that needs to be understood and deciphered.

Beyond the personal conversations, the renewed journey to Jewish communities reinvigorated me with energy from the many Jewish experiences that came my way in each place. On this first trip after the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, I experienced the beautiful



range of Jewish life and experiences: I was the *sandek* in a circumcision, conducted a wedding on the Caribbean shore, attended Shabbat meals in various people's homes, gave classes and sermons, discussed with community leaders the future of the community, helped in the construction of a new mikveh, spoke with families about *aliya* to Israel, and participated in baking hand matzah in the jungles of Guatemala. The varied and colourful encounters are what create the feeling of a journey towards the Jewish people, and teach me a lot about the character and culture of the Jews in the world.

Unfortunately, the Jewish world has not yet fully returned to where it was. The pandemic in various countries has not concluded, many places have yet to receive vaccines and many synagogues are still closed. Jews continue to sit alone in their homes and are afraid to take to the streets of a city and join the *minyan* and communal activities. Others have become accustomed to working from home and managing their lives from the living room, not realizing the need to go out and return again to a Jewish life that has human and personal encounters. Even in synagogues that have been reopened, there are restrictions on the number of participants and no Shabbat meals or *kiddushim* are held. We do not know whether Jews will return to the Jewish lifestyle that was previously accepted, or whether it will be necessary to create a new model of Jewish life.

The dilemma of returning to the community becomes even more significant when addressing the gaps between the Orthodox community and other streams and the non-religious public. A Jew who maintains a *halakhic* lifestyle and feels committed to public prayer will make every effort to return to it. However, a person who does not come to the synagogue to perform a *mitzvah* except when in need of Jewish belonging and meaning, may look for other alternatives to preserve his Jewish identity even without having to return to the community physically.

### **The long road and the short road**

Last Shabbat I sat in the Jewish community in Cancun, Mexico, on the shores of the Caribbean Sea. Tourists from all over the world have started returning to luxury hotels and the beach, but the local Jews are advancing slowly, and not flocking en-masse to the synagogue. The small community in Cancun is run as one big family. Dozens of families participate in community activities and take care of each other. Shabbat meals have been the crown jewel for years, giving people a sense that community is home. On the Shabbat that I visited Cancun, the community decided to hold its first mass Shabbat meal in a year, which restored the joy and sense of community belonging to the hearts of the community members.

There is a short way that is long, and a long way that is short. You can embark on a Jewish journey on the wings of Zoom and thus embark on a short journey that is long, reach communities and people with the click of a mouse, visit several different communities around the world on one day, and all this without leaving home. But the road to the hearts of Jews requires a long journey, long flights and seemingly a waste of valuable time sitting on a plane. But this effort brings with it a blessed result of a short way - a face-to-face meeting, touching



communities and people, and penetrating the hearts of our brethren in every place in the real world, and not just the virtual one.