

LAPP(LAND)ING IT UP - WHY CAN'T JEWS JUST LIVE TOGETHER IN

ISRAEL?

Being Jewish together seemed to make Lapland glow... So what happens in the Holy Land?

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There's the famous story of the Israeli visiting London. "Occupation?" enquires the customs clerk. "No, just visiting," replies the sabra.

It's a funny anecdote, but even funnier in Lapland, where the local ice-hockey team played "Hatikva" before an exhibition match and the only foreign language adverts in our hotel were in Hebrew. Planeloads of tourists pour into Rovaniemi every week, direct from Tel Aviv. Two Jews live in the capital: a doctor and Simon Biton from Kibbutz Yagur, who married a Finnish volunteer, moved with her to the Arctic Circle and turned the snowy wonderland into a destination holiday for his compatriots.

Lapland – who knew? – has more reindeer than indigenous Sami people. It's so cold that at the beginning of each winter, an entire hotel is built of ice, complete with ice tables and ice beds, icy chandeliers and statues. The only thing that's hot is the chocolate drink, downed sitting on ice chairs. Then, between a moonlit forest walk and fishing on a frozen lake, the tour boards an ice-breaking ship so brave souls can dunk in ice chunks in the Baltic Sea. Trust me: even with a flotation suit zipped over clothes, the brief dip turns your blood cold.

Lapland is flat; there's no spectacular natural beauty. But frozen waterfalls, glittering icicles dripping off trees, the nightly hunt for the Aurora Borealis (yes, eventually we saw the elusive Lights!), snow owls and polar bears make up for missing Alpine peaks. It's a non-stop adventure – on with the heavy gear, and forget about good hair. Neck-warmers and face-warmers wreak havoc with the most obedient curls; without protection, frizzy locks would freeze along with your brain. So, hatted-up, it's dog sleds, snow-mobiles, and sliding down snowy slopes on plastic bats. There's even a visit to the (Kosher? Not kosher? Partly kosher ... check the app!) Chocolate Factory, with its lusciously creamy licorice (Kosher! kosher! kosher!).

I went to Lapland on an AACI tour; an easy way to ensure a Shabbat-friendly, food-friendly experience for the observant. The planning was meticulous; days slid by effortlessly, the group leader was fabulous and the guide gets a perfect score.

The food, however, flown in from France and served on paper plates with cheap plastic cutlery, was a challenge. On one side of the hotel dining room slumped lukewarm cholent and oily coleslaw; beyond the "mehitza," succulent lamb stew and Scandinavian herring

beckoned. But even as I cracked and crossed the floor to eat with other Israelis in secular groups, I could see the attraction of being part of the exclusive club that checks, always, whether mint chocolate is okayed by the app.

I'M NO stranger to Judaism: 12 years in a Jewish day school and thousands of services in shul mean I can daven mincha and ma'ariv with the best. Shacharit, too, though I usually sleep through that. Still, a week of total immersion was interesting.

Kosher is one part; then there's Shabbat. It's nice, I have to say, it's so nice, to all be scrubbed, coiffed, and in dresses and heels to greet the Sabbath. Especially after the bulky suits. It's warm and wonderful to light candles so far from home and have kiddush. Being part of age-old rituals is comforting; it feels fabulous to belong.

Fussing with string attached to room cards that, if maneuvered mystically, can turn handles without activating an electrical pulse and avoiding sensors that slide open doors – that's a bit lost on me. But still. It all adds to the embracing ambience. Mixed with kiddush wine and nibbles over a good dvar Torah, being part of the tradition feels intoxicating and safe.

I highly recommend AACI trips and I can relate to the delight of living a whole life according to the rules we lived by over the course of that week. There's a secure, constant rhythm to everything; men come together for minyans, strong friendships are forged over fish balls and a schnapps.

So what goes wrong between the idea and the reality? What is the shadow that falls between the motion and the act? Why do many Jews like me relish the rituals abroad, happily spend hours sitting in shul, even change our dishes for Passover although we eat anything “out,” yet in Israel align ourselves fervently on the secular scale? Why, in our own country and free at last, do so many of us disconnect from our heritage?

I thought about this a lot as we traversed the wintry wonderland. The participants in our group were lovely: Manfred Goldberg, nearly 89, who retained his faith and good humor despite the Holocaust; the petite police officer from London/Jerusalem married to the Australian solar energy engineer who, together with an American lawyer (and our stand-up comic), raise thousands of shekels each year for Akim. The lawyer's pretty wife instigates regular singles events, as well as working in a haredi start-up. The list goes on and on.

Being Jewish together seemed to make Lapland glow; lovely people feeling friendly, feeling family. So what happens in the Holy Land? Why is there such a divide here between “religious” and “nothing?” Why do the secular often view the rules as a choking stranglehold, splitting the nation?

In Lapland, as I lifted the mehitzta to savor unkosher fare, the government coalition didn't

crack and crumble. No one judged, no one dictated; everybody did their own thing. I think that's the secret ingredient.

As I see it, religion can't be mandated, and doesn't necessarily make people "good." Thousands of Israelis who smother their lamb stew in yogurt protect our country with their bodies and start soup kitchens or tutor underprivileged kids. And plenty of people who wait hours between meat and milk batter their wives or cheat on taxes. Religion is between the individual and his God; it can't be in statute books. When the state stipulates that buses can't carry people to the beach on Shabbat, or to family on Friday nights; when couples have to beg and lie to have adopted babies converted; when the ruling coalition can fall over buying milk on the seventh day; and when kashrut and marriage licenses mean corruption and cash; that's where religion loses its allure.

Don't you think?

I am writing these words days before the elections; I don't know what April 9 holds. How I hope that things will have changed for us, that religion and state in our lovely country will finally be separated and we can all relax into our own relationship with our Maker.

Hag sameah to us all, whatever way we celebrate our freedom.

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