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Next year in Jerusalem

• By ALIZA PILICHOWSKI



THE MASSES gather at the Western Wall this past Tuesday, during Passover, for the Priestly Blessing. Modern Zionism, whether the Herzl or Alkalai version, inspired Jews to no longer think of 'Next year in Jerusalem' as just a prayer, but rather a call to action, says the writer.
(Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

For 25 years, our family has ended the Passover Seder with the same corny joke. After proclaiming, "Next year in Jerusalem," someone tells the joke to everyone else at the table.

The joke begins with an extended Jewish family – grandparents, all of their married children, grandchildren, and even a few brand-new great-grandchildren – all together at the Passover Seder.

The Seder was beautiful, the songs sung in harmony and in unison, the words of Torah informative, and the meal delicious. As the family reached the end of the Seder, they felt inspired, and they got up and began singing and dancing to the words "Next year in Jerusalem!"

It was a beautiful scene, and all were moved except the hostess, who was sitting in tears at her seat at the table. Her husband noticed his crying wife and left the dancing to ask her if she was feeling well.

"Is everything ok? What's the problem?" He asked her, "You put on a spectacular Seder. Everything was perfect!"

In tears, she responded, "It's the song! This year was perfect, and I want it to be exactly the same next year. I don't want to be in Jerusalem next year!" The husband comforted his wife: "Don't worry," he reassured her, "it's just a song."

The tongue-in-cheek joke has a sharp message to it. For thousands of years, the Jewish people have ended their Passover Seder with the prayer and dream that next year it will be celebrated in Jerusalem.

This prayer is more than a wish for a "destination Seder."

It recalls the dreams of a Messianic era, with a rebuilt Temple and the entire Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem, to celebrate Passover together. Yet for many Jews, like the hostess in our story, the dream of celebrating Passover in the

capital city is more of a dream than an actual goal.

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, transformed thousands of years of Jewish dreams into a practical goal for millions of Jews when he proclaimed, "If you will it, it is no dream; and if you don't, a dream it is and a dream it will stay."

Herzl inspired the Jewish people to no longer just wait and dream of a messianic era's promise of a return to Israel and the establishment of a Jewish state. He encouraged Jews to bring the Jewish legend of the people's return to their land to fruition by immigrating to Israel, settling the land, and establishing a Jewish state.

Herzl wasn't the first Jewish activist to encourage the Jewish people to take practical steps to transform the dream of the Jewish people in their land into a reality. Decades earlier, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, a rabbi in Sarajevo, Bosnia, wrote and called for the Jewish people to take steps to return to their land.

An interesting tidbit of Jewish trivia is that Herzl's grandfather used to attend Rabbi Alkalai's lectures. Rabbi Alkalai traveled around Europe encouraging a mass Jewish return to the land of Israel.

At 76 years old, he realized his personal dream of immigrating to Israel and ending his days in the Jewish homeland.

Since the founding of modern Zionism 150 years ago, millions of Jews have turned legend into reality and have immigrated to Israel. Many of the first immigrants to Israel came in the "five aliyot" with dreams of establishing a new homeland for the Jewish people.

Later immigrants, among the wave of Jews expelled from Arab lands following the establishment of the State of Israel, came out of necessity.

As the Jewish state became

more established, Jews from all over the world moved to Israel. Waves of immigrants came from Ethiopia and the Soviet Union when global circumstances made it possible for them to leave their countries.

Aliyah from more Westernized nations, not facing persecution or national upheaval, has been slower. Organizations like Nefesh B'Nefesh have revolutionized how aliyah is thought about in North America and made the dream of moving to Israel a reality for tens of thousands of Jews.

A few weeks ago, the Jewish people finished their Seder(s) with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem." For many Jews these final words simply marked the end of the longest dinner of the year.

For many others, these three words awoke strong feelings and convictions of deep-seated personal and national aspirations. The dream, fantasy, and legend of immigrating to the Jewish homeland are encompassed by these words, words that have the power to ignite the spirit of a Jew and cause

them to think the unimaginable – their personal return to Israel.

For many other Jews, "Next year in Jerusalem" is a prayer for better days. Modern Zionism, whether the Herzl or Alkalai version, inspired Jews to no longer think of "Next Year in Jerusalem" as just a prayer but rather as a call to action.

They heard the call to no longer wait to be miraculously summoned to Israel by the Messiah but to plan their own aliyah. With the establishment of the State of Israel, many of the roadblocks preventing the return of the Jewish people to Israel were removed.

The personal and national redemption that comes with the Jewish people's return to Israel, seemed much closer and more attainable than ever before in Jewish history.

Passover is starting to fade from memory as we count towards Shavuot. The message of national and personal freedom, salvation, and redemption can extend past Passover by incorporating the line "Next Year in Jerusalem" as

more than merely a prayer but as a personal call to action.

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg, senior rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue, recently wrote, "There are legitimate reasons not to make aliyah at the moment. But there are no legitimate reasons to not be struggling and wrestling with when, not if, to move oneself and one's family to Israel permanently."

Israel isn't just a dream; in our days it is a reality. The land of Israel isn't an abstract home of the Jewish people to be realized "one day." That day is today; it is now, and there are many Jews who can transform that dream into a reality easier than they think.

At a time when the Jewish people have been granted the ability to return to Israel, it behooves every Jew to begin planning their aliyah. We can't wait to welcome you home this year in Jerusalem (or Mitzpe Yeriho)!

The writer is a certified interfaith hospice chaplain in Jerusalem and the mayor of Mitzpe Yeriho, where she lives with her husband and six children.