

From Jerusalem to Eilat

The 2007 Arava/Hazon Israel Ride

Practicality flooded my realm today. Waking to find forty others gathered together for prayers overlooking Jerusalem, in its waking hours with its cars and lights, hitting 50 mph on the speedometer along the 20 mile downhill stretch outside of the ancient city, suffering the ogre belches of 18-wheeler's exhaust pipes and trekking a good 50 miles under the desert's 100 degree sun.



We had a police motorcade. There was a point when our cop friends slowed down traffic enough (around 30 mph) for me to have a slight chance to catch up to the cars. I did. Three cheers!

Pulling up the driver's window, sweaty, breathing doglike, I moved my sunglasses down an inch below my eye and made an intense pupil connection. I might have been saying, "I'm doing what you're doing but I'm doing it better," or "so there," or, what I hope: a moment of strong human union. The context – in all of its severities – can be distinguished by its humanity. And I couldn't ask for anything more.

Too exhausted to type. Hardest day tomorrow. Pronouns seem superfluous. Sleep.

The Climb – May 3rd, 5:25am

I woke up this morning with a sharp pull under my knee. My shoulders and neck hurt, but I'm breathing well and still see in normal colors. Mark one down for the humans. Breakfast is waiting.

10:10pm

A miracle happened today. It rained six times, I counted – in the desert. And there was cloud cover, cover from a sun that shows no mercy. The tour guide said that weather like that is unheard of in May.

The morning graced with a 14 mile uphill climb. 3 stops. Lots of pain and love and imagining what the downhill might be like. I live for the downhill.

Going up one particularly steep grade, a fly, a small black fly, landed on my helmet and crawled under the visor and just chilled there, upside down, for a few miles. From my sweaty eyes it looked like someone had stuck a raisin up there. I didn't have the physical or mental energy to flick it away, but I wouldn't have even if I did. Going up 14 mile hills requires a rare type of meditative concentration. I felt it for a few moments at a time last summer while rock climbing in Vermont. Rock climbing requires all the limbs to be working with each other, each holding their equal share of the body weight while the brain keeps all the parts moving smoothly. Tasks requiring every body part to be in simultaneous use yields a sort of alternate mind zone. It's Buddhist in a way, because you are everything and nothing all at once. Paradoxical, because you expend so much yet think or feel so little. The pain comes afterwards, after you crest the hill, then you feel your blood pumping, but everything until then is fierce nothingness. And it's beautiful.



I was given advice for how to do climbs before. A few people told me to keep picking spots ahead of me and essentially ride many small distances. It didn't work – I can't trick my own brain. (Actually lately, my own brain has been tricking me. My alarm was blaring the other morning at 5am, our usual wakeup time, and I kept telling myself it was some lady screaming next door and it could not possibly be my alarm or so early.) Others suggested finding another rider to keep pace with and just ride with him or her. This also doesn't work. I always want to go faster or slower – I guess I follow the beat of my own drummer. My solution: I stare at the ground. Why? I think because when I look directly down at the ground it looks like I'm moving faster and I also don't have to look at the miles ahead of me I have left to go. I get inspiration from the ground, ladies and gentlemen, from the ground – what does that say about me?

I have to look up from time to time so I don't crash – and when I go down hills, my eyes are peeled as far as they can see.

At the second rest stop, they said we'd be passing a highly controversial phosphate processing plant. They handed out flimsy surgical masks for a picture we'd take later as a sign of protest. It sounded like a joke.

Later on the ride, when I saw the plant in the distance a cool breeze blew my way. I inhaled deeply and felt like sand was lining the inside of my throat and lungs. I couldn't exhale. I choked badly and quickly pulled over. A few other riders stopped and generously helped. The mask was doing nothing, I had to cover my face with a bike glove. I coughed and choked till the security car came and gathered all the asthmatics up.

When we got to the plant, we were told that it used to enjoy environmental impunity because no one lived near it – except for the Bedouin population – and when environmental agencies, like the Arava institute, protested, pollutant levels were checked and the plant was producing 4000 times more than the nationally allowed volume. So the main smoke stack was closed a few years ago.



I was riding through with only one stack left and I couldn't breathe because a wind blew my way.

Later, at a bathroom stop, I looked at myself in the mirror and spent a minute picking tiny black particles off my face.

(For those concerned, after the rest stop at the plant, I got back on my bike and rode the rest of the way, with no negative health affects – just a scary memory.)

Once **something** like that personally affects you, you want to get *involved* in environmental action. Then you think of the grey areas, how the plant provides hundreds of jobs and does great things for the struggling *negev*/desert economy. Rarely is **something** simple.

There are two sides, and they need each other for balance, the universe needs its equilibrium, it needs its contrast.

Contrast.

That is what this ride seems to be all about. Contrast from movement to stationary, wet from dry, hot from cool, pain from pleasure, smooth from bumpy, up and down, fast and slow, community and individual.

I know I'm riding with 180 other riders, and we often stretch out a few miles from the back to the front, but when I look up at the mountains and blank blue sky, I can't help but feel solitary. And I find myself back in some sort of meditative state and again, it's beautiful.

At the end of the day we had a killer 2.5 mile up hill at a 7 to 10% percent grade, climbing a good few hundred meters in a very short distance.

Nearing the top – I had 200 meters left up a straight steep incline – two girls from the Arava institute (there are 25 Arava students volunteering on the ride) were playing bongos and singing and cheering us up the hill.

When I finally got to the top, sweaty and spent, a bongo was lodged between my legs and I had no choice but to play my heart out. For a good twenty minutes, I and the two girls stood at the peak of the mighty ascent and slammed the skins, banging the rest of the riders up.



They keep telling you on the ride, the head riders and safety folk that is, to know your limits. I think they mean that if the ride is too tough, if the sun is just too hot, the road too steep, the ride too long, that it's not shameful to be sagged (brought the rest of the way up in the bus). But I can't stop thinking to myself, that it really means, for me, that I don't have a clue about what I can do, and the only way to find out, is to push myself that much harder.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel - May 4th, 5:12pm

The light at the end of the tunnel was Shabbat, the setting sun was hearkening its approach.

We started with 16 miles against the wind. The wind supposedly adds a 5% grade. I don't know the math, but I can assure you it was slow and hard.

When we got to *Sde Boker*, the sight of an army base and Ben Gurion and his wife Paula's graves and vast and stunning desert-mountain views, things were about to go from slow and hard to fast and hard.

We took a quick break then switched to mountain bikes, with wheels three times as thick as our road bikes and frames 20 pounds heavier.



Then we rode 6 kilometers through sand, rocks as big as heads, pools of water and up and down 12% grades to an oasis – a freezing cold spring of fresh water.

I jumped in. Body shock. It was excellent.

We rode back. It was tough. It was thrilling.

What was on my mind, though, was the light at the end of the tunnel.

After a great lunch – special tuna wraps for pre Shabbat – we had a mere twenty miles of rolling hills and two steep inclines. After two miles I had to pull over, the mountain biking just sucked the energy out of me. I sat in a little bus stop and ate an *isogel* bar (it's as nasty as it sounds) which is basically pure sugar in a little jelly rectangle. Riders kept passing me by, asking if I was alright, until I saw the last rider quickly approaching. I jumped on my bike. I don't know if the bar of the last rider's approach did anything for me, but after climbing the impending hill, and seeing the impending downhill from the crest, some wires clicked in my brain and knew just the cure.

'Twas my need for speed. It had to be satiated – *had* to be. So while my fellow bikers decided to rest and coast down the downhill, I switched into my hardest gear, picked my butt up off the seat for the whole way uphill, then sat back down at it's peak, chin to the handlebars (to get under the wind which can seriously slow you down when traveling at speeds above 30mph, I hit 40 on those hills) and pedaled my heart out right up the next hill. "Don't stop, don't stop," I just kept telling myself. Stopping lets the lactic acid into the muscles, and G-d knows I wouldn't want that. So I pedaled for a good 12 miles on my hardest gear never going under 15, even on the up-hills, until I caught back up with the front group.

Though riding like that was probably not the smartest thing to do, especially with a short but sharp incline left before the hotel. So Alma, one of the lead riders got right next to me and brought my tired self the rest of the way up. "Daniel, Daniel, what's the

problem? Daniel, c'mon!" I still hear her Israeli accent in my ear.



While relaxing on my clean sheeted hotel bed, typing this post, ready and waiting for the restful Sabbath, I'm realizing that this is so much more than just riding a bike 300 miles. It's about community, nature, geography, education, spirit and inspiration. There is a severely human element to all of it, and amen for that, because humans, people, is the true business, the meaning, the reason for all.

A gutten shabbos.

The Wrath of the Sun and What it's All About - May 5th and 6th, Written a few days post-ride

How can the wrath of the sun and what it's all about – assuming “it's” refers to some profound understanding of the universe – be dropped together into the title of this entry? The answer might vent whiffs of Hassidism. For as much as our souls and spirits or whatever one would like to call that intense, exquisite yearning for some light above may be at the forefront of our hearts and minds, we cannot simply sail off into the sky and forget about our earthly duties. Humans are spirit and body intertwined, and if the body is baking under a sun breathing waves of heat up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit, one has a curt choice to make: do you wallow in your physicality? Do you spit and cuss and rub your way to the finish line? Or do you realize the impermanence of material, allow nothing except the aim into your mind and let some unseen light, brighter and more brilliant than the sun, bursting out of your core, soak through and lift you the rest of the way? [Such language could be dismissed as chestnut theology, however, when faced with challenges that stifle almost every aspect of your being, as a human, it could be the only thing that works you through the pain.]

The last two days, which were advertised as easier than the first three, proved to be more challenging in almost every regard. In the beginning, G-d provided cloud-cover and miraculous droplets of rain. Wrath beat down on us in the end, and no layer of natural shade ever graced our heated human vessels.

Coming off a restful and, for many, a spiritual Sabbath, Day 4 should have been a piece of cake. There was an energetic and special Havadallah service the night before, that although it did not appeal to me personally – my tastes are a bit more traditional – the

affect it had on usually more hesitant riders was wonderful, especially since many riders in the group seldom exercise any religiosity. It was performed over a 50 mile wide sinkhole in the desert, which produced a stunning Grand Canyon-like affect. As our singing and dancing echoed into the canyons, bonfires in celebration of *Lag B'Omer* lit up like single flames, like candles standing in the vast darkness.



The next morning, we prayed our morning prayers overlooking the sinkhole at sunrise. More than usual showed up. If man gathers inspiration from nature, bless him, for these days, inspiration is rare, but many chose to come, and let themselves float over the vast plain.



We started with a sharp and long downhill, which I think began my hill-ideology transformation. It was fast, with challenging switch-backs, but I did not get the same rush out of it as I've described in the posts above.

The rest of the day consisted of heat and long, seemingly unending straight roads so far off in the distance you can't see the end. It became a brutal mind game.



The last day, though, was the perfect culmination: starting with a 550 meter ascent in roughly 3 miles, and continuing the rest of the day with 30 miles of steady uphill and the last 4 miles with an anything but steady sharp incline.

And it was warm outside, the type of 120 degrees warm like the day before.

I was in the expert group the last day, perhaps the experts of the expert group as some previous experts had opted to be bussed with everyone else up the initial killer climb. So I started up and slowly made our way to the back. Being the back is the worst because you lose all competitive edge when you can no longer see the competition as they've sped off far in front of you, also because you hear the bus and SAG wagon gurgling on behind you, waiting with open doors, beckoning you to its plush fabric seats and air conditioning. After a good 3 miles of this, and another 5 until the next rest stop I approached a nice big hill. I thought that I had not come this far to be sagged, on the last day, and I had to at least try the hill. I switched into low gear, and started the long ascent. Halfway through, though, I had you may call an epiphany, a turn in what literary types might call "character development," and the hill became – as the head riders had urged us to think – my friend.



This mindset led me to switch my gears a bit higher up, lift my numb buttocks off of the advertised as comfortable yet still strangely painful seat, and pedal full force until I felt like I might throw up. I sat back down, shifted my gears back down, and continued to long trek up, but in a different place in my head. Even Anat, the lead rider, who had once biked twice the entire distance of the ride in 4 days, mumbled a grunt of admiration.

When I got to the top, which I swore would be when I would get onto the bus, I looked longingly at the downhill, and asked myself, “why not?” So I went down, and after turning the corner, the next uphill didn’t look bad at all compared to the last. So I went up and down and down and up till the rest stop. The group cheered when I finally pulled in. It was at that brief rest stop that I promised myself to finish the ride.

The group was off and I was shifted like my gears into the back again, but there was a promise to keep to. The last four miles delivered their pain. I was asked to SAG but I negotiated and went on. I negotiated with the hill, the SAG team and myself until I could think no more and simply pedaled – all the way up the final summit.

I stumbled to the edge of the mountain’s overlook and sat down on a rock. I was feeling something unlike I had ever before. There was an ultimate humility as I had given my all, sweated and hurt and fought. There was an ultimate majesty as I had given my all and was victorious. My eyes were red, tired and watery.



Those moments last, the rest of the ride is history. We biked down and down out of the mountains and then along the waters of the Eilat to our accommodations.

I entered an alternate universe up on that peak. I have yet to go back, and I don’t think I ever will.

Epilogue

During the Havdallah service, Nigel, the director of Hazon, asked if anyone had any thoughts or sentiments they wished to share with the group. A man, who was 65+ stood up and told the group that many of his peers get into a mindset, that it’s all over, all downhill (excuse the pun) from here. He said that it becomes true when they believe themselves and that’s why it’s only uphill for him.

The man’s advice reminded me of one of my favorite stories about the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. When walking to synagogue one day, the Rebbe came across a group of Chassidic men cheering happily around a broken down and

severely used school bus. When the Rebbe asked why the men were so joyous they replied that they had started a school and were in desperate need of a bus, and now they had finally found one, at a wonderful price. The Rebbe told the men that if they had higher expectations for a more descent and suitable bus, they would have come upon the better bus, but since this was all they had, in their minds, settled for, this was what they got.

My father once told me, and it has stuck deep ever since, that “in sales, you write your own check.”

