

Shabbat Shalom,

Yesterday I returned from Israel after having participated in the 2007 Israel Ride from Jerusalem to Eilat. I was part of a group of 176 riders from the USA and 4 riders that had formed Team Australia. Our "captain" was David Freeman and Jeffrey Appel, Joe Siegel and myself made up the balance of the team. Before I begin I want to publicly express my thanks to Jeffrey and especially to Rachel for encouraging me to re-enlist in this amazing experience after I had withdrawn my participation for personal reasons in January of this year – it is without doubt one of the best things I have ever done.

Last Sunday whilst davening shacharit on the edge of the Ramon Maktesh at Mitzpeh Ramon my phone beeped with a sms from Barry advising me of the birth of the Rabbi's grandson. It followed the fabulous news 2 days earlier of the birth of Dion & Kylie Appel's daughter. I immediately responded requesting the privilege of addressing you all today – I had something to say!.

There are so many aspects to this ride that I could discuss. Jeffrey in his inimitable style has as usual taken pains to remind me to keep this short. I will try but I am not so sure that I can do justice to the message I am about to give by simply skimming through it.

There are several amazing aspects of this ride that I could spend a considerable amount of time discussing. As you are all most probably aware Jeffrey and I have been riding through various different countryside locations for over 22 years. Significantly we started on this venture with our eldest children Dion who is here today celebrating the birth of his daughter and my own daughter Karen. Over the years we were joined at different times with the rest of our children but of recent times our riding has been just a group of aging men pedaling ever more slowly trying to hang to the last vestiges of our youth. It has always been our dream to do a ride overseas and not just in our own back yard.

So I could talk about the sheer joy and pleasure of undertaking a ride in Israel. Where we were surrounded by the sounds of Ivrit. Where we were protected by Israeli police from the vagaries that are the Israeli motorists. I could talk about how Israel is a really BIKE UNFRIENDLY country. The four letter word FLAT doesn't exist well at least not where we went. The luxurious forests and farmland that we have experienced in Australia were replaced by the stark barrenness of the Israeli dessert. Devoid of life signs. Not a tree in sight. Not a drop of water for kilometer after kilometer not a shrub for shade and always the hills. I could talk about doing a ride with 180 fellow Jews from a multitude of back grounds and beliefs. On the very first night we were urged by the ride convenor to have respect for each other and that in itself is a discussion for another time possibly at our regular Wednesday night shiur.

I have found that in life from time to time you come across defining moments. Marriage and the birth of our children are but 2 of the obvious. But I am referring to moments outside our family life cycles. Moments where you remember for ever - where you were and your feelings and thoughts are etched in your minds forever. For me one such moment was when I went to Auschwitz in the early 90's another occurred last week deep in the Israeli dessert.

The ride was conducted to raise funds on behalf of a tiny organization called the Arava Institute for Environmental Affairs based at Kibbutz Ketura in Israel's Arava. On behalf of Jeffrey and myself I thank you for your sponsorship and I firmly believe that every cent was spent on a wonderful cause.

When I first read about that aims of the Machon Arava (it's easier to say than its full title) I had warm fuzzies about its mission statement which includes the following words: ***"To encourage environmental cooperation between peoples, the Arava Institute is working towards peace and sustainable development on a regional and global scale."*** It sounded great BUT on reflection I had no real understanding of what the Machon Arava actually did.

When it comes to matters environmental my children feel that I am colour blind to the point I do not recognise the colour green. When it comes to matters of peace and politics they feel I am far to the right of Genghis Kahn.

On the first day we had a pre ride tour of the Old City. Our guide explained that one of Israel's best decisions in 1967, actually an initiative from Moshe Dayan, was to hand back control of the Temple Mount to the Waqf. To our little gathering I stated that in 1967 I was extremely proud of Israel's initiative but over the last 5 years my heart had hardened. In typical Tommy Winter style I declared these people do not deserve the benefit of Israel's ethical largesse. The only thing they understand is to conquer or be conquered. They lost – we won and we should not have given it back to them. Let them weep for 2000 years! The guide did not agree with me but several in our tour group did.

On the first night we were introduced to the concept that the Machon Arava is based on the principle that the environment knows no borders. It is a principle that brokers no argument whatsoever – period! What we do wrong in Israel automatically affects our neighbors and visa versa. No fence or border patrol can stop it. We were introduced to the support crew of alumni from the Machon Arava, young kids from Israel, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank. Oh that's nice – very touchy feely I thought but still no real understanding.

On the first day of riding we rode down to the Dead Sea. We were given a talk how the Jordan had ceased to flow. Israel cutting it off in the Gallil and the Jordanians at the Yarmuk river a tributary to the Jordan. Where we were standing the Dead Sea had receded some 500 plus metres and was disappearing at the rate of 1 metre per annum. Who cares I thought after all it is the Dead Sea. All in all a very appropriate name. Nothing lives in it and nothing can live around it. It is Dead!

At Ein Gedi we were told how the mineral water company based there had committed acts of pollution – ho hum more environmental corporate bashing. On the second day as we rode towards Dimona we went past an Israeli phosphate mine company. The ride organizers had provided masks to form some sort of political protest on the basis that this company was not being environmentally responsible. More ho hums as surely my days of student protest are long behind me. As we rode past the plant and this virtual mountain of processed super phosphate suddenly there was a pungent odour. As I pedaled and breathed through my nose I felt a burning sensation. This couldn't be happening. I breathed through my mouth and my throat started burning up – literally. I honestly didn't know how I was going to be able to get past this plant. The tail-enders of the ride did not. They had to be collected by the sag wagon – they were simply overcome by the fumes. Suddenly the message sank through. The organizers hadn't planned for this in fact they were most apologetic. All they had wanted to do was mount a simple protest for the media not put our health in danger in any way. But in 5 kilometers we reached a level of environmental understanding that no lecture or talk could bring to us.

On Shabbat afternoon at Mitzpeh Ramon there were several discussion groups and lectures organized to which the riders could elect to attend. We chose to go to a discussion panel with the Arava Students. There were about 30 of them. Several spoke about their experiences Dana from East Jerusalem, Eric from LA, Rina from Beer Sheva, Mutassim from Jerusalem Palestine – to hear those words Jerusalem Palestine was actually quite a shock. I could feel my back getting up. Abu Alhawa from Hebron Palestine, Hadas from the Gallil in Israel, Amer from Amman Jordan, Sawsan from Amman Jordan and Shira from Israel Tel Aviv. Amer from Jordan told how he had been disowned by his family when he decided to come to Israel to learn about the environment from the Machon Arava. In the Muslim equivalent of sitting shiva his parents said for them he was dead - he was no longer their son. Abu Alhawa talked about his first day at the Machon it was Shabbat shalom this Shabbat shalom that – in his own words he was living his worst nightmare. He wanted out then and there but his fellow students urged him to stay.

On the principle that the environment knows no borders these children are first taught to communicate with each other. They are taught to understand each others point of view both politically and religiously. They are required to live together, work together and eat together. Once they are able to talk to each other they start to learn about the environment. Amer went home and not only was reaccepted by his family in his own words he turned his family's views.

Each student Israeli, American and Arab told similar stories. It was the stuff of tears and goose bumps. For my part I told them publicly what I had said in Jerusalem and that after listening to their stories their efforts and their unbelievable courage I too was prepared to back down from my somewhat intransigent state of mind. They had succeeded in turning me. I told them for the first time I had heard words of Tikvah – hope! The Machon Arava hopes to spread its message via viral marketing. News of the panel discussion got out to the riders who did not attend and there was an overwhelming demand for another panel to make an encore performance the following night at Kibbutz Ketura – the virus had done its job!

When it comes to matters of peace in the Middle East I had become disillusioned because you are what you teach your children. Every day we read how the children are being taught about Jihad and resistance. We have to be honest with ourselves and recognize that the Israeli's are no angels in this regard. They certainly do not preach death but many do teach their children to mistrust and be wary. To me the situation was eternally hopeless and every day becoming more so.

Here I was hearing something refreshingly different – university youth being taught dialogue how to get on with each other. They were being taught how to reverse the teachings of hatred, the teachings of bias, the teachings of their parents. The objective of the Machon is that at some time in the future hopefully some of their alumni will reach positions of influence both politically and administratively. Hopefully these students will have remembered their time at the Machon Arava and know that they can have meaningful dialogue on a range of sensitive issues one of which hopefully will be how to live in peace with each other.

Today in the parsha Behar we learned about shmittah and the requirement to let the land rest every 7 years. The ultimate environmental instruction. In Bechukotai we are taught that if we obey Hashem's commandments He will bring rain and boy do we now know the environmental impact of that.

Teaching our children is everything. On my last day in Jerusalem with despondence I watched on TV as the story unfolded of Hamas using a Mickey Mouse lookalike to teach the children on TV about resistance, about Jihad about Islamisation of the world. On Pesach our fundamental instruction is **וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ** – teach your children! What a fitting coincidence that today Dion has come to shule to name his daughter. Our experience in Israel has dramatically reinforced something we already knew the importance of teaching your children well. Dion and Kylie your gargantuan job has already begun with Ayden and overnight has doubled with the birth of your daughter - Yosia. From all of us

**מזל טוב ובהצלחה לגדל לתורה ולמעשים טובים**

It was appropriate that the ride finished in Eilat where in the space of a few kilometers the same stretch of water – The Red Sea is the meeting point/the sharing point for 4 countries, Egypt, Israel, Jordan & Saudi Arabia. In Eilat I decided I wanted to use the line from Yishayahu for this talk.

**לֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה:**

***Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.***

However in preparing for the talk today I read the rest of the sentence.

**וְשָׁפַט בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם וְהוֹכִיחַ לְעַמִּים רַבִּים וְכָתַתּוּ חַרְבֹתָם לְאֵתִים וְחַנִּיתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמֵרוֹת לֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה:**

***And He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.***

Maybe, just maybe the Machon Arava has found a crack in the wall of hatred between nations through the borderless cause of the environment.

Shabbat Shalom