

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

This inspirational article by Daniel Reingold and Debbie Drelich describes an Israel experience trip like none other, with a group of residents from the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale. They remind us that learning does not end with retirement or relocation to a nursing care facility, and that support of Israel and connection to Israel can be developed at any age. It is clear from their story that the Israel trip offers even more than a connection to Israel — in this case, life long learning and the opportunity to dare to dream.

The Experience of a Lifetime: The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale's *Chutzpah* Mission

DANIEL REINGOLD AND DEBBIE DRELICH

When one thinks of aging and living in a nursing home, the images that come to mind are not always positive. Old age is associated with physical, emotional, and cognitive losses. At The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale (the Hebrew Home) the emphasis is on the positive; here the definition of advanced age means a time for greater leisure and the opportunity to pursue life long dreams. Instead of focusing on memories, we help our residents continue to pursue dreams and goals and consequently maintain a sense of purpose in life.

One of the Hebrew Home's most important missions is to demonstrate the possibilities of aging. To that end, this past Spring we embarked on one of the most extraordinary endeavors ever undertaken by a nursing home. In March 2004, a group of residents and staff from the Hebrew Home, boarded an El Al jet and flew 6,000 miles to Israel where the residents walked (or were wheeled) through the streets of Jerusalem, visited Masada, went to the Dead Sea, met with government officials, spent a night on a kibbutz, and even road a camel.

Known as the *Chutzpah* Mission — because it takes a lot of *chutzpah* to take frail elderly people and travel thousands of miles to tour — the mission pushed the boundaries of what is possible for nursing home residents. Several of the

residents who went to Israel were in their 90s; the youngest was 78-years-old. These residents broke the mold about what is achievable at any age and they have become role models for others.

A crucial aspect of this incredible trip was the opportunity for residents to have the learning experience of a lifetime. Each day while in Israel, the Israeli tour guide for the group gave lessons in Jewish history, archeology, politics and even a smattering of Hebrew. The mission was the ultimate field trip. The residents proved that no one is ever too old to learn and experience new things. They demonstrated how crucial it is for learning to continue at any age. In fact, the learning process challenged their minds and kept them sharper and more alert. Upon returning from Israel they have been eager to pursue studying even more about Israel and Jewish history. The entire experience energized them in both body and mind.

In addition to the educational component of the trip, the residents who participated in the mission gained a tremendous sense of accomplishment and empowerment. They were not only learning, they were also actively doing something to show their support of Israel. If despite their ages and frailties, they could fly half-way around the world to Israel, so could anyone. They faced many obvious obstacles (most need walkers and wheelchairs and all are

on medications) yet they grew more enthusiastic as the journey progressed. Their daily triumphs built upon the success of the days preceding it and each day they became more confident in their ability to meet the simple daily challenges of getting around in a foreign country far thousands of miles removed from the safe and protected environment of the Hebrew Home.

Throughout the entire trip the group felt special. This notion was reinforced time and again by Israelis from the moment we landed. Upon arrival at Ben Gurion Airport we were greeted by a delegation from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism which presented every participant with a Certificate of Appreciation as Ambassadors of Goodwill to the State of Israel. The very night of our arrival Israeli television ran a story about us on the evening news. As a result, throughout our trip we were recognized and greeted by Israelis, young and old, who were inspired and uplifted by our show of support for their country.

Perhaps the experience of the *Chutzpah Mission* is best conveyed by the actions and remarks of one of our residents, Mr. Rosenberg who is 82-years-old and of sound mind but frail body. We spent an afternoon at Masada, which we reached by cable car. Mr. Rosenberg was not able to walk – even with the use of a

walker – over the very rocky terrain. One of our nurses therefore pushed him in a wheelchair. However, after listening to the rich history lesson of Masada presented by our tour guide, Mr. Rosenberg stood up and proceeded to walk. He stated emotionally, “If they can die here, I can walk here.” He then proceeded to walk the entire rocky pathways of Masada.

It was a privilege of a lifetime to be a part of this innovative and historic mission to Israel. The implications of the mission go far beyond simply having the opportunity to tour the beautiful country of Israel. It touched on the very essence of life, and posed challenging questions about the meaning and purpose of life as we age. The mission demonstrated that older people can dare to dream and have those dreams fulfilled. It also gave the staff and community at large an example of what can be accomplished in later years, and that new goals should be pursued despite the complications of growing older.

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Editor’s Suggested Discussion Guide:

- This article inspires us all to dare to dream. What dreams do you have for Jewish education? What dreams might you have for Israel education? Are there forums in your community for sharing such dreams and bringing them to fruition?
- How would your community benefit from an Israel experience trip such as this one?
- In the current environment, how has your community or agency promoted unique Israel experience trips for other populations who have not had the opportunity to experience Israel (e.g., those with special needs)? Have there been subsequent benefits not anticipated in planning the trip that have been identified? How might these move forward the investment of stakeholders in promoting such experiences?