

It's indeed a small world

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Life is full of surprises and one never knows when a person or name from the past will suddenly re-appear.

Israel, being a land of immigrants from every corner of the globe, the chances of meeting former acquaintances or speaking to someone who knows them is very high. Quite often these encounters can be purely co-incidental which makes it even more exciting. In most cases we may not have seen and spoken to each other for many years and in fact quite likely we have not even thought about them.

As a bit of light relief from the mayhem swirling around the world these days I decided this week to recount some of the "only in Israel" experiences we have encountered over the years. Only first names will be used where necessary in order to protect the privacy of those concerned. Nevertheless there may be some who recognise themselves. If so, Haere Mai and G'day mates.

Apart from meeting up again with former shlichim to New Zealand, who were of immense help to us when we made aliyah 24 years ago, our first encounter with a name from the past occurred when my wife was looking for a good hairdresser, not an easy task in a new country especially when our spoken Ivrit was not exactly fluent. After some false trails she was told by a neighbour from Ireland of a highly recommended hairdresser who hailed from New Zealand and went by the name of Sammy. This did not ring a bell at first but any mystery was soon dispelled on the day. It turns out that this young man's family and ours knew each other very well back in Wellington and that we also knew his siblings. In actual fact the connection went deeper than that. Having taught cheder (part-time Hebrew school) for 25 years in Wellington there are countless former pupils now roaming the globe who endured my lessons every Sunday morning. Sammy is one of them. The amazing thing is that he still remembers those days.

He is not the only former youngster I had taught. Many others also now live in Israel and Australia and I have met some here and on our visits to Melbourne and Sydney. It continues to give me immense satisfaction when I witness how kids from a small and isolated community have grown into adulthood and become involved in Jewish life here in the Jewish State or other countries. Somehow all those sometimes frustrating Sunday mornings spent teaching kids who would have preferred to be somewhere else seems not to have been wasted. Zionist youth groups also played a major part in reinforcing Jewish identity as can be witnessed by the relatively large numbers now residing in Israel.

Other faces from the past whom we have encountered include former Shlichim (youth and education leaders) sent from Israel to the far-flung antipodes. These young couples had an enormous influence on youngsters growing up in communities where Jewish educational opportunities were thin on the ground. At the same time those from religious backgrounds helped sole Rabbis to organize and conduct services and provide other much-needed skills. Talking of Rabbis, we have encountered children of some of them who were either born in New Zealand or grew up there. In fact this week we socialised with someone who on learning our Wellington roots asked if we knew a certain Rabbi from South Africa. Not only did we know him but one of his nephews lives in Efrat, our home town.

This Jewish networking or Jewish geography as it is often called can occur in the strangest of circumstances. A few weeks ago I waited at our local bus stop for a ride into Jerusalem when a woman stopped and offered me a ride. Yes, this still happens here, believe it or not. In the course of conversation I discovered she was from Vancouver and she ascertained that I was from New

Zealand. Well, it turns out that another former Hebrew school pupil of mine, who was also taught by my wife when he started primary school at the age of five, is now a Rabbi and teaches in a day school in Vancouver. A small world indeed.

The last thing one would expect from your local GP in Israel is that he would be acquainted with another name from down under. Our new GP (the previous one having just retired) is from Australia and made aliyah about two years ago. On my first visit to him I asked whereabouts in Australia he was from. He replied, Perth, whereupon I mentioned that a NZ family had left Auckland some years ago and was now living in Perth. Was it, Andrew, he asked? Of course it was and that started an interesting discussion.

My last example of how small the world can really be has nothing directly to do with Israel but illustrates how often a random act can have positive spin offs later in life. It also reinforces my long-held belief that sometimes the best form of Israel and Jewish advocacy results from engaging and befriending those for whom Israel and Jews are complete mysteries. It is common knowledge that anti Israel/Jewish misinformation makes the biggest impact amongst those people whose knowledge about us is nonexistent.

In this particular example the seeds of a future friendship were sown in high school. I attended a State college which in the 1950's was monocultural, mainly European, single sex and definitely Christian of the Protestant variety. At the time there was a large group of Jewish boys there, so many in fact that we were exempt from attending morning assembly which although the school was secular, for some reason launched off the day with hymns and prayers. We had our own seats in the back of the hall which we occupied once the announcements began. One day a new pupil arrived in my particular class who turned out to be the son of the Thai ambassador. He stuck out like a sore thumb because not only was he not European looking he was also not a Christian. Although there was no overt anti-Semitism, those of us who were not part of the majority, definitely felt an undercurrent from time to time. Not one pupil took the slightest bit of notice of this new pupil and he was basically on his own. Knowing exactly what it felt like to be "different" and having parents who had encountered similar attitudes when they arrived as refugees in 1939, I decided to befriend this lonely looking teenager. We sat next to each other, I helped with the language and we became firm friends, so much so that he came to our home where my mother plied him with exotic Jewish food (as he called it) and I visited him at the Ambassadorial residence.

The end result was that by the time he went back to Thailand we had established a friendship based on mutual respect for each other's customs and traditions. He knew absolutely nothing about Jews and their connection with Israel, had no knowledge of the Holocaust and of course had never tasted kosher dishes. Likewise I was totally ignorant of Buddhist beliefs and Thai history. We educated each other in an open-minded and tolerant atmosphere. That could have been the end of the story because we lost contact with each other over the ensuing years. One day out of the blue when I was reading the annual College magazine I discovered that he had visited his old school. Not only that, but after some years in the Thai foreign service he had been posted back to New Zealand to the position his father had occupied in the 1950's. I immediately decided to try and make contact with him and after some inquiries obtained his email address and wrote to him. Imagine my delight when he responded almost immediately with words so warm and emotional. My friendship with him in the face of complete apathy and disinterest, obviously struck a chord. He still remembers the hospitality in our home, the Jewish food and most importantly the discussions we had about Jewish history, Israel and the Holocaust. Every year I receive a New Year's card from him in which he repeatedly stresses the fond memories he retains from so many years ago.

The lesson to be learnt is that in our own small way we can often have a positive and lasting influence on the way people relate to us as a group or nation. Shouting and screaming does not usually achieve changing prejudices and hate. Friendly outreach whether in the religious or political

field usually achieves much more. Exposing lies and mistruths is vital. Refusing to engage with others because they are different or misinformed is not a recipe for success.

It is a small world and the surprise encounters in far away places can be exhilarating and rewarding.

Michael Kuttner is a Jewish New Zealander who for many years was actively involved with various communal organisations connected to Judaism and Israel. He now lives in Israel and is J-Wire's correspondent in the region.