

## Where We Call Home Michal Roness

When boarding the 497 egged bus, you join the microcosm of Israel that is represented in Beit Shemesh, as people from all walks of life embark on their journey out of the city. You can tell by their dress where each one is heading. One girl is heading to the Tel Hashomer Base in her uniform, the other is going with her friends to the teachers' training seminar in Bnei Brak. One man is on his way to Bar-Ilan University to lecture in the Brain Science Department; the other is joining his kollel for another day of learning Torah.

Only two weeks ago, Beit Shemesh was alive with elections. Each party presenting a doomsday future for the city if their representatives were not voted onto the city council. The voice of elections rang out loud and clear, "Only 'our leaders' will ensure the future coexistence and defend the rights of everyone.". Each side sank deeper into the rhetoric of despair. Each leader describing the opposition as a group that not only doesn't care about us but also doesn't want us here.

At the height of the heat, a poster appeared with representatives of two communities of Ramat Beit Shemesh Aleph standing side by side. The heading "שבת אחים גם יחד". A picture of a Religious Zionist man learning with a Haredi man. A photo of a Haredi rabbi standing smiling next to a Religious Zionist rabbi. A very different tone to the many 'pashkevillim' (bulletin board signs) and election posters that until then were pasted to every wall and scattered on the sidewalk. The poster focused on the day after elections – that no matter who won we could still live together.

Now the elections are over, and the question lingers over our heads. Can we live together? The answer is yes of course we can. We do and we can – but only if we want to.

Everyone chooses their home according to different considerations. Some choose their home because of its physical location. Some make their choice based on the type of schools available for the children. Others may decide based on the facilities, the parks, the family or the friends in the vicinity. No place has everything. Most

places have something. When the balance changes, the reason to live in the place called home may change. But if the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, then the choice will be to avoid the change and continue to call that place home. Once we have made the choice of where we call home, we must make the choice of how we live where we live.

We live differently, with different ideals and different priorities but how different are we? Once while walking in the street on Shabbat, I greeted the passerby. My son asked, "Do you know him?" I was astounded by the question. Do I have to know the person in order to greet him on Shabbat. Isn't he a Jew who is enjoying his Shabbat just as I am. Yes, he enjoys his Shabbat differently to me but is it so different that I would think not to greet him.

At times we feel so different to each other, that we forget how much we are the same. We are challenged to emphasize the bridges that exist between us. The challenges may accentuate when I am worried how I will pay the supermarket bill because my stipend from the kollel was just cut. The challenge may become more difficult when I am struggling to manage between my obligations at work and the latest call I received to report to my Miluim (army duty) unit. However, when Shabbat arrives and I walk in the street to my shul, the bridges to my neighbours' way of life do not have to be that narrow. Greeting my neighbor can be my way of emphasizing that the bridge is still there. It may be a greeting in Yiddish of "א גוט שאַבאַט", in English 'Good Shabbos' or in modern Hebrew "Shabbat Shalom.". But does it have to matter which way I say it? Cannot the essence of the greeting overcome the way I say it?

If I greet the passersby, not because I know him but because I live next to him won't that show my children that the bridge between us is not so long, not so dangerous. It is our choice. If we are both here to stay, it is in our hands to remember that our community represents Israel and the entire Am Yisrael (Jewish people). We have representatives of everyone in Beit Shemesh . We have Olim (immigrants), Vatikim (old-timers). We have Sefardim, Ashkenazim. We have Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox), Dati Leumi (Religious Zionist), Masorati (traditional) and Hiloni (secular). If in Beit Shemesh we can greet each other on the street, then hopefully that greeting will be able to be extended to the national level as well.

We have the challenge not to be the microcosm of the conflicts in Israel but rather the microcosm of co-existence. It isn't an easy challenge. But if we start just by greeting each other from a distance, we may have a chance of meeting each other on the bridge as well.

Postscript: It seems that the elections are not yet over. At the least the struggle over their result has not ended. This only increases our challenge to bridge the gaps. The politics and court cases will continue to attempt to push us off the bridge, to make us feel like we want to run away from this city of conflict. But it is our choice. It is in our hands to bring the residents of this city together. It is in our words and our actions to bridge the divide instead of strengthening it. We can live up to the challenge.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> Adar, we can all make an effort to start to live up to that challenge. Greeting someone who is different from us, is such a small thing. It seems so meaningless yet if on the 9<sup>th</sup> Adar we can greet our neighbor then it will be the start of the effort to make that connection with others who we feel so far from. Saying hello can bring us closer together and help us build on our differences rather than tear us apart.

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