

A private giving of the Torah

5:30 dawn, Shavout day.

The pilots in the helicopters that were circling above Manhattan could not help it but noticing an extraordinary phenomena: on the roof, under the sky there was standing a group of young men and women, dressed in white.

They had seen this group before chatting, flirting, drinking cocktails and listening to music. But this morning something was different. Today they were standing there and praying.

Well well, New York, they must have uttered to themselves.

On the roof at sunrise I am standing and looking at the helicopters. The darkness gives way to the light in colors of pink, light blue and orange and welcomes the new day. I look around at my friends, the ones that I have just spent the whole night with one floor down from here, I look up again and I smile.

4 years earlier

I am working in a kosher restaurant. The guests are strangers to me and strange. I look at them as an anthropologist would - half amused-half confused. But the encounter with Hebrew makes me homesick. The months go by and home is drifting further and further away.

Yom Kippur, 5 in the afternoon

I am standing at a bus stop on my way from work. The city surrounds me with its usual routine. Blue sky, grey buildings, cars up and down the street, a million taxis, a fire truck siren, four police cars, the subway is shaking the ground underneath. A typical street corner on the upper west side.

I am in love with this city. But when a Jewish family is rushing by, all dressed in white, I feel like crying. I realize just how far home really is and the fact that I carry it with me everywhere I go is not enough anymore. To belong to a place a million light years away, or at least, that was how I felt then, is nice. But I am here, feeling that all that I brought with me from home will soon be lost between the subway stations and the concrete.

The following day

I need another job, that's all that matters now. I decide to utilize my teaching diploma and look for Hebrew students. A girl comes in to the restaurant, she works somewhere in some Jewish or-

ganization. I ask if they need a teacher. Yes, she said. Wow, I am happy.

But we are a non-profit organization, our teachers are volunteers.

OK, I will be there.

I know just how desperately I needed that money, but I know that more than that, I needed something else.

On 86th Street there is a beautiful

and welcome. How was your class? Is there anything that you need? Thank you again. See you next week"

Right. so I just met "the Rabbi"? Could have bet he was one of the gang.

Around me there's a celebration. Music, good food, Bar. Some kind of a party I guess. I run outside.

I came. I taught. I ran.

ish Experience.

I chat with the other Hebrew teacher, Merav.

Why don't you stay? She asks.

No, I don't feel like a party.

Not a party, Rabbi Wildes is talking.

About what?

Every-time something else. Stay, listen. it is worth it.

So I stay, I stay and listen.

In no park, river, museum or a garden I have found such peace. This is a class about Yom Ha'Atzma'ut (the Israeli independence day) and the miracle of the state of Israel. Mark Wildes demonstrates so much knowledge, historical and modern, regarding the wars, the birth of the states of Israel and its achievements so far. He speaks clearly and softly and when he talks about what each and every one of us could do to help, you cannot help it but being moved,

It was the first time I believed what I heard, .. Because it was clear to me, that this person, who dreamed and founded this community, and the people who were sitting there with me in that beautiful cosy room, really and truly are dedicated with love to my home, Israel, and this captured my heart.

Fun on the roof

The "Manhattan Jewish Experience" is the dream of Rabbi Mark Wildes, a young guy at the age of forty, that out of true love and dedication to all the beautiful relevant things that Judaism has to offer, decided to start an organization that will open its doors to every one who wishes to find out what it is all about.

"There has got to be something more to life" - he quotes his wife, Jill.

Jill, a woman with a baby face, freckles and ever laughing eyes, is an inseparable part of the organization. Their home is two buildings away and everyone knows that it is always open. All you have to do is knock.

Together with their four children they host every Shabbat at least 20 members of the community. Their grandfather Leon Wildes is also very active, and the organization was founded in the memory of the late grandmother Ruth. It turns out that Three generations of the Wildes are always present at the Manhattan Jewish experience.

Good spirits and loud laughter are typical to the classes that are taking place there in the evenings.

It is allowed to ask anything you want. At the end of class I have questions about a custom I don't understand. I am not sure how to articulate but it doesn't



Rabbi Mark Wildes. Opens a door to a new world

building I had not noticed before. I go to the 11th floor, pass an interview and two weeks later stand in front of 16 young men and women that are waiting for me to start talking, in Hebrew of course.

Class is a success. I am happy. But the second it's over I rush out.

OK-Bye-Thanks-See ya

On my way out, a young blond guy is approaching me with a big smile. "Hello, I am Mark, nice to meet you. I am so happy you joined us. Thank you

During the following few weeks the story repeats itself. Every now and then I go to a dinner at some organization and never coming back. I don't belong here. I am an Israeli, a Sabra.

But every Monday, on my way out, Rabbi Mark Wildes finds his way through the crowd to say thank you. Your students love you. How are you?

Soon I'm going to realize that attention and appreciation are the definition of the community that I have, apparently, joined. It is called the Manhattan Jew-

matter. There are no holy cows in here and it is ok to ask anything you want. It is recommended to ask anything you want.

What's left?

Alone in New York i realized, the tradition remained in Israel. What is left? What keeps me the way i am? What connects me to my country and to my family? What is it about this tradition that had passed the test of generations?

If i don't create this thing by myself, it simply will not exist.

The fascinating life story of my father and my mother made me think and question issues such as heritage, tradition and the tie between the generations.

My father who was born in Azerbaijan and became an orphan at the age of 8. Except an aunt, who took care of him, he had no family. He never sat at a Shabbat table, never went to a school, surely did not get formal Jewish education.

How come his Jewish identity and pride, especially as a Cohen, was so great?

Who taught him the Priestly blessing - Birkat Hakohanim?

Who taught him how to lead a kiddush and all the holidays customs?

And why did he insist that i only go out with Jewish guys? What does it matter?

My mother left the life of the Rich in Persia, only to move into a transition camp, living 4 years in a square aluminum shack with 7 more members of her family.

She taught me gratitude long before i knew that it is part of the definition of a Jew.

Where did her optimism come from? Her serenity? Her way of modesty, endless kindness and warmth, her unquestionable belief in the good and in divine supervision - where did they all come from?

I realized that there was something there. Something strong. Something that i wanted to find. Now i found the place that handed it to me on a golden platter, plus perks, because an Israeli like me could only dream of a place like that.

A place where the door is open in any way. That people say hello, how are you, and they mean it. A place in which with time, i have found that i could have conversations no less deep than the ones that i have with my Israeli friends.

I had to come all the way from Tel Aviv to New York in order to find it.

Understanding

Images from the holidays as a child, Kiddush on Friday night, my mother is teaching me the "Shema", my father giving me Birkat Hakohanim the first time i left home - they all echo all that i am learning here at the Manhattan Jewish Experience.

I understand just how much i do not know. I understand i have a huge gift.

I understand the power of identify, belonging and the tie between the generations.

I understand the phrases that have become a part of every day speech such as "do not take anything for granted". "Live the moment", "Anger is not good for your health", " You create your own reality" had been written generations ago.

I learn about the real position of women according to Judaism. The respect and protection Torah protects womens rights. The first feminist revolution.

I learn the connection between body and soul. The to give is to receive. The to say " i am sorry" is to show strength. The to really live is to open up to another person even if it means yuo are going to get hurt. That making mistakes is ok. That it is never, but never, too late. 3000 years old coaching wisdom. And most important: i learned that it is okay to be a good person. It is very good to be good. Because this is our way and the basis for everything else.

What appears to be an old document written on a pale parchment contains within it all the best psychology books i have ever read.

A class by the lake

I decide to join a 4 days spring vacation at the Poconos. We are staying by the lake, small wooden huts around and in the center a dining room with a big balcony. All is green around us. The weather is perfect and we spend most of the time outdoors. The MJE staff kids are running around and rid-

to do and at which pace.

We are about 40 people, some i know some not yet. I choose a class that teaches how the Torah got to us from Sinai to here.

Then Rabbi gives a class about the differences between men and women when it comes to relationships. Every now and then he is cracking us up and i am amazed of how open he is regarding talking about the subject.

In the afternoon, after coffee and cookies, we take kayaks to the lake, some take the time to workout. At night we have a kumzits, bon fire, just like in Israel only with marshmallows instead of potatoes.

Rabbi wildes on the drum, our cantor on the guitar and we stay up to sing until 3am.

Back to Manhattan, Shabbat morning Rabbi Wildes is leading the service. The singing is beautiful and addictive. Later he takes an idea from the Torah portion we just read and talks about it. I listen fascinated.

In my mind, this sermon was flawless. He is talking about commitment, about the great benefit of long term relationships. He is talking like a father or a brother giving advise to his doughtier or sister. Avigail, the youngest doughtier, pulls his shirt "Aba, Aba" He picks her up and continues the sermon.

In the kiddush that follows Jill comes over and gives me a strong hug. She asks how i am and wants to know the details. She always knows how to listen and totally gets it. At that moment, i feel like i am the only one in this room. At the times when i desperately needed

The future

I have tears in my eyes when i think about inevitable goodbye that will happen when i get back to Israel. The first thing that comes to mind is, how much i am going to miss MJE. To me, a warm house from which i leave and to which i come back is the base for everything. What comforts me is knowing that each year Rabbi Wildes, with his family, takes an MJE group to Israel.

I know that at almost at any given moment there is an MJE member in Israel.

I am looking forward with great joy to open my home to my friends from this community of mine. I know that the connection that we have is as strong as the connection that they have with Israel itself.

"And you shall know this day and take it to your heart" (Deuteronomy, 4, 39)

On Sunday evening we will celebrate the holiday of Shavout again and i will celebrate my private giving of the Torah.

Each and every one of us deserves such a connection with people who will show him, patiently, gently with caring and love, just how beautiful and relevant to his life - yes, every day- is the Jewish heritage.

I know that wherever in the world i will go, my home will go with me.

On the road, at the sunrise of Monday i will look up and say "Thank you".



ing their scooters.

I realize that i have no cellular reception and instead of "OY" comes out a "YEY"

The day is full with activities but at MJE, you can choose what you want

advice of a mother, sister or brother and could not get it, Jill and Rabbi Wildes were the ones who gave me that gift. It is their spirit which is instilled in every person here and in the MJE team, here at the upper west side, on the east side and downtown.

I would like to thank Merav Miller and all my friends at the Manhattan Jewish Experience for the loving support and help in making of this article.

מרתן תזרחה פרטי

מיכל כהן

ביום ראשון הקרוב, ערב חג השבועות, תחגוג מיכל כהן את הגשמת הדרך שלה מתהיה אל קהילה