

48 Hour Witness to a “Jacobite” Promise: Breadth and Depth on the Streets of Rome

Parshat Vayetse begins with Jacob’s famous dream. In it, he is given the promise of eretz Yisrael (Gen 28:13)

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לֹא אֶתְּנֶנָּה וְלִזְרְעֶךָ:

the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.

And the promise continues in the next pasuk...(Gen. 28:14)

וְהָיָה זֶרְעֶךָ כְּעֹפֶר הָאָרֶץ וּפְרָצְתָּ יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וְנִגְבָּה וּנְבָרְכֶךָ בְּכָל-מְשֻׁפְחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה וּבְזֶרְעֶךָ:

Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.

In identifying the role of that second pasuk, the Em HaMikra and the HaEmek Davar, Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh and Rabbi Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, also known as the Netziv, (both 19th century rabbis) share that this is actually a promise that we will be spread throughout the earth, not only in Israel.*

While the image of north, south, east and west is a physical picture of the inhabiting of our people around the world, this past week, I saw this image differently.

For 2 days, I participated in the Yael Foundation International School Leadership Exchange Program, a program designed to match experienced European principals with principals in the US. I had the great honor to visit the Renzo Levi Jewish Day School in Rome.

On the streets of the Jewish Ghetto in Rome*, this promise of east/west/north/south, struck a different chord.

Yamah va kedmah, east and west is not only directional, it can point to the horizontal lens—connecting to others. Whether it be across beliefs, or across oceans or across cultures, as humans, as educators and as Jews, we are a people that have a common voice and a common cause.

On the other hand, *tsafonah va negbah*, north and south, can be seen as a vertical lens—connecting to the vertical plane, to a particular place and space in a deep and grounded way. In that way, all of us see the world through the blessing of distinct cultures, beliefs and voices – being deeply grounded from where we come.

In a 48 hour period, I witnessed this reading of this promise come alive.

יָמָה וְקִדְמָה - *The Horizontal Plane-What We Share*

When I walked into Renzo Levi School, I immediately noticed the mission of the school, just like everyone does when they walk into a room at Ramaz. And the words were familiar, "Our school educates Jews to practice Judaism consciously and be active, learned, supportive members of the Rome Jewish Community." As Jewish educators, we all share a common cause and common mission. (Photo #1 Below)

When I sat for hours with the Principal, Rav Benedetto Carucci Viterbi, Rav Roberto Colombo, the Judaics Principal, and Roberta Spizzichino, the MS Principal, I realized that we were of one mind in the challenges that we have as Jews and educators. We are all trying to create environments where students and families are connecting academically and spiritually to Torah. We are all struggling with the monumental challenge of a changing world and how to best prepare our students to be contributing members of it. (Photos #2 and #3)

When I sat at lunch with the Student Government, they shared their activities. And while there are so many differences, kids are kids. They have dreams of running businesses in Italy or serving in Tsahal,. They are articulate, amazing teens who want to be heard, want to lead, want to grow, and also want to fill the snack machines and wear hoodies:). (Photo #4)

Whether I entered tefila, or a class, my neshama sang. While we all know intellectually that Jews all over the world are sharing a language and a rhythm, listening and seeing is a whole other level in the powerful experience of horizontal connection.

When I watched 5th graders singing Maoz Tsur with excitement for Chanukkah (or Chanucca' as written on banners in the halls), or when I learn a sugya about the challenge of belief in Italian or when I daven with over 60 students during Shacharit, the power of what we share makes that global, horizontal experience as a Jew come alive. (Photos #5-#6)

And finally, in the most intense of the experiences, we are all connected in our love and dedication to Israel. As one walks into the Jewish Ghetto, one cannot help but be taken by the hundreds of stickers tributing the fallen IDF soldiers. (Photo #7)

During my visit, there was a chesed program that welcomed children cancer patients from Israel to the Roman Jewish community and to the school. As I danced with the students and the Israeli visitors from Rachashei Lev Organization to "Od Yoter Tov and Am Yisrael Chai" and as we sang "Hatikva", the only words I could think of, as I wiped away tears of pride and joy, were "מִי כְעַמָּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל", there is no people like our people. (Photos #8 and #9)

We are physically separated by oceans and miles, but our common threads as humans, as educators, as Zionists and as Jews, link us hand in hand, with a common, iron-strong chord across the globe.

צפונה *The Vertical Plane-Being Uniquely Grounded in One's Space* **ונגבה**

According to my tour guide Dino, Jews have been in Rome for at least 2000 years, if not more.

And it is not a simple history. From the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash where Jews were taken to Rome as slaves and leaders murdered, to Nazi roundups and even up until 1982 there was a terrorist attack at the Synagogue, it is a community that has been persecuted, oppressed and terrorized.

And, even while carrying all of that, this is a community that lives with incredible joy, love and pride in their heritage as Jews and as Romans. So many of the people I met have connections to extended family in Israel, but they choose to be in Rome consciously to invest in their community and keep the story alive.

We walked on the streets of the Jewish Ghetto , streets where Jews were rounded up, that are now hot real estate and thriving with Jewish life,business and culture.

Emanuele and Dino, my tour guides, both had a gleam in their eyes as they told the long history of the Jews of Rome—of their prolific scholarship, of their incredible art, their architecture, and of their incredible resilience. They also took great pride in showing me sites of the broader culture of Rome.
(Photo #10 and #11)

Shmuel, the alum of the school, who now works in the kosher restaurant, could not serve me enough amazing Jewish kosher dishes—sharing proudly the recipes passed down to generations.(Photo # 12)

Emanuele Di Porto, the Secretary General of the Rome Jewish Community, taught me about the unique structure of the Roman Jewish Community as it is one that is run by an elected central council that oversees Jewish life.

When asking him what he would want people to know about the Roman Jewish community, he simply said “that we are important.”

There is not a shortage of reasons for the Jews of Rome to feel despair, but when one spends time there, that word doesn't even enter one's mind. It is a place of deep, deep connection where the iron strong vertical chord of history grounds this community in a most powerful way.

One final image:

As I walked the halls, as is often the case in any school especially here in the US, I noticed that students were wearing school swag at the Renzo Levi school. On the back of the school sweatshirts was written the phrase “Proud to belong.”

I could not think of a better phrase to describe this trip and this community and what I learned from them.

They are proud to belong to a people that dreams, davens and dances as one.

They are proud to belong to a people that has both a deeply rooted connection to their home and to our Homeland.

I will carry these lessons forward—dedicating myself to the lifelong task of working to create spaces defined by both comprehensive unity and eternal pride.

עם ישראל חי!!!

*Em Hamikra, כאן רמז לגלות ישראל בד' כנפות הארץ, and HaEmek Davar,

שגם בגלות ובשפלות יהיו נפרצים בכל פנות הארץ:

** While we use the term “ghetto”, negatively, this is the term they simply use for their neighborhood.

PHOTOS

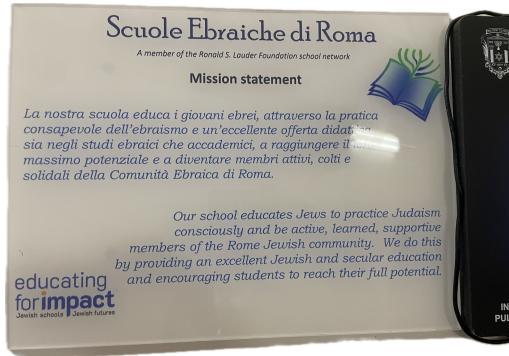


Photo #1-Mission



Photo #2-Principal, Rav Benedetto Carucci Viterbi, Judaics Principal, Rav Roberto Colombo



Photo #3-MS GS Principal and N-8 Principal



Photo #4-Student Government - Bennedetta, Miriam and Meir



Photo #5



Photo #6a and #6b



Photo #7



Photo #8



Photo #9



Photo #10-Dino, my first day guide



Photo #11-Emanuele Carucci Viterbi my second day guide



Photo #12-Shmuel the proud restaurateur and alum of Renzo Levi