

WHY I TELL TALES ABOUT ISRAEL

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Cool puffs of chalk rose from the cave floor.

I was about 20 feet underground at Beit Guvrin, a site from the time of the Maccabees. Today the scene of an archaeological excavation, this was a place where Judah Maccabee could have walked. Now I and 19 other writers on the first-ever PJ Library Author Israel Adventure were about to become one with it.

“You’re going to get dirty anyway,” said archaeologist and guide Missy Stein-Goldman. “So on three, we’re all going to sit down. One, two, three!”

I sat.

The earth felt like lumpy corn starch. I ran my hands through it, smelling its moistness as Missy explained that most of what we’d find here would be chalk rocks, easily breakable with one’s fingers. A meaningful find such as a piece of pottery would be harder, with regular edges. But surely, something like that would take hours, if not a professional, to—

“Like this?” one of the writers asked.

Missy hurried over. She pressed the piece, turned it, rubbed it. Then she nodded and said, “You are the first person to touch this in 2,000 years.”

I’d grown up loving Israel, but not knowing Israel. The only Hebrew letters I saw as a child were at shul or on comical T-shirts from New York’s Lower East Side. Buying an Israeli product felt like scooping up a lucky coin. Israel, itself, was a distant totem.

When I arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport for the first time and saw Hebrew on digital signs, billboards, and menus, my eyes bugged out. I filled my suitcase with snack food wrappers, water bottle labels, and empty packets of sugar because they all had Hebrew on them. For a New York girl who’d sung mandatory Christmas carols in her public school chorus, the casualness of these sights made me laugh—with relief from tension I hadn’t realized I felt. Even a Hebrew clothing tag said, to me, “You belong.”

But back in the US, among loosely-affiliated or largely non-observant Jewish kids like I once was, Israel was still a dusty plain where wars threatened, oranges were picked, and bearded men in black hats made pilgrimages. There were no bustling restaurants, no shopping malls, and no life similar to mine in those visions.

This trip, I came home from the PJ Library Author Israel Adventure with an urgency to share what I’d seen. The Dead Sea holds antique chimneys of salt, yet it also floats day-glo kayaks. You can touch the satin-worn stones of the Western Wall, and also slip beneath the city to edge through a newly-excavated, 2,000-year-old tunnel. Reform and Orthodox Jews pray side-by-side in a synagogue led by a female rabbi, where songs shape the service. And you can see children chase each other through carless streets on Yom Kippur, or crowd into doorways of local

shuls to hear words that are familiar around the world.

Until Diaspora Jews understand that Israel is a living land where biblical structures abut modern boutiques, and the streets are filled with people just like them, Israel is in danger of withering. If a new generation loses its understanding of Israel and its significance, that generation may not support the country. To speak out for something, we must first know it, then come to love it. And to sustain anything, someone must tell its tales.

After all, even a piece of pottery pulled from the earth has no meaning without its story.

By placing stories in the hands of the youngest generations, we can both maintain the past and bring it into the present. For in time, those stories will mature into ideas and beliefs. And, with care, they will bear fruit in the real world.