

Michael's speech at Yonatan's Bar Mitzva Lunch, Shabbat 8th November 2014

אני רק אנסה לומר את החלק הראשון של הנאום שלי בעברית, אז אל תברחו...

I am only going to attempt the first part of this speech in Hebrew, so do bear with me!

ברוכים הבאים מקרוב ורחוק לחגוג איתנו את בר המצווה של יונתן. חשוב לנו מאוד ואנו שמחים, כהורים, לחגוג את בר המצווה של יונתן לא רק ככלל ישראל, לא רק בארץ ישראל אך כאזרחי ותושבי מדינת ישראל.

It is my great pleasure to welcome all our guests from near and far to celebrate Yonatan's Bar Mitzva. It is very meaningful to Riva and myself, as parents, that we celebrate Yonatan's Bar Mitzva not just amongst Klal Yisrael, not just in Eretz Yisrael, but as citizens and residents of Medinat Yisrael.

לפני עשור יצרתי קליגרפיה מאויירת של ציטוט של לוי אחר, יהודה הלוי, כמתנה ליום ההולדת של ריבה. הציטוט הוא משירו המפורסם ביותר של הלוי המתאר את כמיהתו של העם היהודי לארץ ישראל:

Ten years ago I made an illuminated calligraphy of a quotation from another Levi, Yehuda Halevi, as a gift for Riva on her birthday. With a representation of Jerusalem it quoted what is perhaps his most famous poem of the yearning of the Jewish people to return to Eretz Yisrael:

לְבִי בְּמִזְרַח וְאֲנִי בְּסוֹף מַעֲרָב
אֵיךְ אֶטְעֶמָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲכַל וְאֵיךְ יַעֲרֵב
אֵיכָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נְדָרֵי וְאֶסְרִי, בְּעוֹד
צִיּוֹן בְּחַבְלֵי אֲדוֹם וְאֲנִי בְּכַבְלֵי עֲרָב
יִקַּל בְּעֵינַי עֶזְבֵי כָּל טוֹב סְפָרַד, כְּמוֹ
יִקַּר בְּעֵינַי רְאוֹת עֶפְרוֹת דְּבִיר נְחָרֵב.

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west—
How can I find savour in food? How shall it be sweet to me?
How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet
Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?
A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain—
Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

ועכשיו ציון לא בחבל אדום, ואנחנו הגענו למחוז חפצנו

Well now Zion lieth not beneath the fetter of Edom, and we have come where our hearts are!

ועכשיו באנגלית!

And now in English!

We have found ourselves guided, perhaps by the **אֶצְבַּע מִיְשָׁרָת אֶת צְלָמֵי** (the great finger of Hashem which strengthens our selves), featured in the poem by Hamutal Bar-Yosef which our friend

Eran El-Bar has set to music recently, to a special place with room to grow: Eshchar. With un-nerving ease we have found new, yet lifelong, friends and kindred spirits, a wonderful community, a great home, peace and everything that we need. Riva immediately found not only work, but her true vocation, and two new “sisters,” Yael and Ilanit, whom everyone in Eshchar knows are so much more than mere *ganenot*, and we are so pleased they are able to join us with their families here. I have even found a fellow Liverpoolian, Yoel Ben Natan, with whom I can share my Scouse humour, and with whom, incidentally, you share your *Bar Mitzva parasha*, Yonatan – happy birthday Yoel! And latterly, after two years enjoyable if mildly worrying mid-life retirement, I have found work. Amber is excelling in everything she achieves, and you, Yonatan, are following a similar path to success. Today we celebrate the true start of your journey into adulthood. What more could we wish for?

It is appropriate even at a family *simcha* of such great joy to remember, Yonatan, my dear father and your grandfather, Menachem Mendel, *alav hashalom*, for whom you are named Yonatan Mendel, who passed away 22 years ago, and whom you never knew. Nevertheless through his profound influence on me, through the personal example of a life lived according to *Torah* principles, though by the time I knew him he was not religious in a formal sense, he is here in spirit and I know he would be proud of you, Yonatan. There have been other family losses in recent times, on Riva’s side, and I know that Riva’s mother’s parents were so proud of her and of you and Amber. I also want to mention Riva’s grandmother on her father’s side, Yoni, who passed away the same time as my father, because she was also *my* relation. My father, Mendel, and Yoni were first cousins, but despite the insistence of Amber and Yonatan when they were young, I am not Riva’s second cousin once removed, but her husband! Yoni was a great spiritual influence on Riva. Riva remembers accompanying Yoni to *shul* on *chagim*, and today she uses the *machzorim* which her grandma used. Riva and I share an occasional thought that Mendel and Yoni are *shepn naches* (שעפן נחת) for us above, as he enjoys her chicken soup.

Also there is sadness that my dear mother, Valerie, could not make the trip here for your *Bar Mitzva* through ill health which, though debilitating, is, thank G-d, not life threatening, and we hope she will be able to visit with us here soon.

So you see, Yonatan, that there is in fact happiness in sadness, through our memories of the people we loved who are no longer with us.

Now, at the risk of making far too serious a speech, I want to tell you something, Yonatan, about the important connection between your Judaism and our new home in Israel. In preparing for her *Bat Mitzva* in Liverpool three years ago, Amber prepared a wonderful project which some of you have had the pleasure of seeing. That project was entitled, “*Aliyah: My Love for Israel*,” and described the importance of *Eretz Yisrael* in Judaism. She wrote both of Israel’s centrality in her *Bat Mitzva Parashah (Vayigash)*, and its centrality for members of her family, past and present, who had made *aliyah*. It was written in Amber’s fervent hope (but yours too I remember) that we would make *aliyah* ourselves imminently. Indeed by the time she reached *Bat Mitzva* we had started the process and set the date for our *aliyah*.

Yonatan, I know that the transition from an English life to an Israeli one has been a great challenge, perhaps not foreseen in your enthusiasm to make *aliyah* when you were younger, but you have approached it with determination and vigour and you are making a success of it. You used to mourn

your high Victorian English bedroom, with its plaster mouldings and slate fireplace. You said your room was larger than our entire house in Eshchar, which is almost true, and that the ceiling was so high that you could fit another floor in, which at around three metres is again almost true. Like a battery hen suddenly released, at first you didn't understand your freedom here to be independent and outdoors. But now I think that the life here may be beginning to grow on you!

Yonatan Mendel, though you are named in the merit of my dear father, may his dear soul rest in peace, you have followed physically in the footsteps of another namesake. Menachem Mendel Levitt was, as you know, my great grandfather and your mother's great, great grandfather, so let's just say he was an ancestor of yours! We know that he was a pious and devout man, a *talmid chacham* who, towards the end of his life, around 1911, made the arduous journey to *Yerushalayim* to live and to study and to end his days in his homeland, *Eretz Yisrael*. He is buried on *Har HaZeitim*, the Mount of Olives, where we visit his grave, found and restored by your great grandmother, Yoni, whom I mentioned before, just metres from obliteration by a mosque built over our ancestors' graves when the Mount was in Jordanian hands.

So you see, Yonatan, that we have not just come home metaphorically, or in terms of our religion. We have very real connections here, as evidenced by the many relations that have come here from across Israel to be with you.

Yonatan, you have followed in Menachem Mendel's footsteps but at the start of your life, not near the end. And a *Bar Mitzva* is a beginning in Jewish life, not an end in itself. As you know, the *Shabbat* after Amber's *Bat Mitzva* we did not stop our routine but went to *shul* as normal, implanting, I hope, that message for both of you. The result was that Amber did not follow the pattern of giving up *cheder* after her *Bat Mitzva*. And today she remains strong in her love of *Yiddishkeit* and has recently begun passing that on through the newly-established *cheder* here in Eshchar for the "*Yeladoodas*."

What do we mean by "a beginning?" Our sages have noted that the *Bar Mitzva* day is the true birthday of a Jew, being the day from which he moves from a state where he only keeps *mitzvos* for reasons of his education to one in which he is obligated to do so. The *Midrash in Koheles Rabbah* states that it is on the day of the *Bar Mitzva* that the *yetzer tov* is united with the person completely, so that from this age you may really be successful in waging war on the *yetzer hara*! Quite a challenge, still, for a teenager! But many say that the teenage hormonal upheaval is the very reaction of the *yetzer hara* to its sudden realisation that its reign is coming to an end. It is through continuing in *mitzvos* and *torah* that you will enable yourself to remain the *mensh* you are, throughout all the difficulties life may bring. You have made a great start with your new devotion to *tefillin*.

Yonatan, you have completed a project yourself, and presented a talk based on your studies. In it you write sagely about some themes which you have taken from what is a complex *parashah*, *Vayeira*. You have come to understand, in particular, the importance of hospitality, the supremacy of our obligation to do the right thing always in life, and the unique value Jews place on children, which you have learned from the difficult story of the *akeida*, which is so controversial in some circles because it is so much misunderstood. I commend your project to our guests, who may see the bound copy here or even request an electronic copy from us later.

The sages explain the significance of the *akeidah* with a metaphor:

Once there was an untamed wilderness. Not a trail penetrated its thick underbrush, not a map charted its forbidding terrain. But one day there came a man who accomplished the impossible: he cut a path through this impregnable land.

Many trod in his footsteps. It was still a most difficult journey, but they had his charts to consult, his trail to follow. Over the years, there were some who made the journey under even more trying conditions than those which had challenged the first pioneer. While he had done his work in broad daylight, they stumbled about in the black of night; while he had only his determination for company, they made the trip weighed down by heavy burdens. But all were equally indebted to him. Indeed, all their attainments could be said to be but extensions of his own great deed.

Avraham Avinu was the pioneer of self-sacrifice with the binding of Yitzhak. Avraham bequeathed to us the essence of Jewishness: that at the core of one's very being lies not the self but one's commitment to *Hashem*.

I am no *talmid chacham*, but I have travelled a long way personally in my Judaism in the last two decades, and the fertile community which is Eshchar is enabling me to continue my journey. The story of the *akeida* may perhaps be summed up as "first do and the feeling will follow," and that has been my experience in starting to "do" Judaism relatively late in life. I was inspired by another Mendel, the son of Liverpool's Chabad rabbi, to take out the *tefillin* which had lain in a drawer since my own *Bar Mitzva*, and use them daily. I am happy that you have been excited to start using your new set in a way I did not experience at your age. I was inspired by what Riva will agree is a very special community in Liverpool, still one of the most Zionist and supportive of Israel, to renew my own Jewish education, which had ended after *cheder* and *Bar Mitzva*, and to help that community's children to come closer to their inheritance through Riva's and my work with the *cheder* there. But all I have really done is to take to heart our daily recitation,

ושננתם לבניך ודיברת בהם בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך

(And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up), and to try to do it for you and Amber as much as I am able.

Yonatan, may you continue to bring your parents, grandparents and family much *nachat* and may you continue to be blessed with good health and happiness in all you go on to achieve.