

"You can never have too much of a good thing." It's a saying I'm sure we've all heard at some point in our lives. We may have even said it when referring to one thing or another, but I'm not sure most people have ever really sat down to think about it.

Is there such a thing as too much of a good thing? On the one hand, maybe you can say, "Yes, there is too much of a good thing."

Shakespeare used this precise wording in praise of moderation in *As You Like It* (4:1): "*Can one desire too much of a good thing?*" Can someone have too much money? Sure -- if it gets you into trouble. Can you eat too many hamentashen on Purim? Been there, done that. We can have too much time on our hands. We can be too nice. We can even be too committed a cause.

But on the other hand, there's a logic to say that there's no such thing as too much of a good thing.

Can a person have too much integrity? Can someone be too appreciative or too happy? I don't think so. Can a bride be too pretty? There's a Yiddish expression "*A khisorn az di kale iz tsu sheyn*" meaning literally, "The [only] drawback is that the bride is too pretty." It's a saying that makes fun of excessive fault-finders and kvetchers.

Can you spend too much time in Israel?

Just before I was supposed to return from my recent Israel trip, I realized that I had an extra day to spend in the country. I was chatting with Chani on Monday, and she asked me when I was coming back. I said, "Wednesday." She said, 'Really? Can you send me your itinerary?' I emailed it to her. There was a pause. "Honey, you're coming back on Thursday, not Wednesday."

How did I make such a mistake? I could blame it on the felafel, but I didn't eat any felafel in Israel. What happened is a long story, but suffice to say that I had an absolutely marvelous last 'extra day in Israel'. But more important, my 'extra day' helped remind me that at least when it comes to spending time in Israel, there's no such thing as too much of a good thing. I'd like to share four experiences from my trip that demonstrate why I believe this to be true.

1) My son Chiyya took me to visit a place near Rechovot that I don't think most visitors to Israel see. It's official name is 'The Ayalon Institute.' It's unofficial name is "The Underground Bullet Factory."

During the three years between the end of the Second World War and the founding of the State of Israel, a top-secret operation was taking place to produce ammunition for the pre-State Jewish defense organization, the Haganah. Despite the constant vigilant eye of the British who controlled the area at the time, a top-secret underground bullet factory was constructed -- camouflaged above by a kibbutz laundry at one end of the factory and a bakery oven at the

other. The facility had a total area of 300 square yards, 13 feet underground with nearly 2-foot-thick walls and ceiling. The entire project was completed in 22 days and operated right in the middle of a regular kibbutz with living quarters, a communal dining hall, a chicken coop, cow sheds, and all the good stuff normally found on many kibbutzim.

Forty-five people -- many or most of whom were 18 to 20 years old -- worked below ground in two shifts. The work was difficult, in a relatively dark, dusty, claustrophobic place. It was also dangerous. There were not only the health risks associated with working with gunpowder and machinery, but the workers lived with the concern that the penalty for engaging in such illegal activities during the mandate period was death. The kibbutz was constantly watched and often visited by soldiers.

Those incredibly brave, dedicated Jews produced over 2.5 million bullets during the three years of the project. At one point on the tour, they pulled back the kibbutz industrial laundry machine, and we saw the secret passage to the underground factory. When I clambered down to the secret ammunition factory, I was deeply moved by the realization of the great sacrifices made so that today, we can have the State of Israel, and the Land of Israel.

2) My son Avrumi - a tour guide -- took me to Ammunition Hill in Jerusalem. I lived in Israel for 8 years before returning to America -- but to my regret and embarrassment, I had never previously visited this important national memorial site. An estimated 200,000 visitors tour the site each year, including 80,000 soldiers. Ammunition Hill is also the main induction center for IDF paratroopers

Ammunition Hill, known in Hebrew as *Giv'at HaTahmoshet*, was a fortified Jordanian military post in the northern part of Jordanian-occupied East Jerusalem. It was the site of one of the fiercest battles of the Six-Day War. The site was built by the British, but The Jordanian Arab Legion seized control of the Hill during the 1948 War, cutting off the link between Mount Scopus and West Jerusalem. The post consisted of tens of bunkers built along the three main trench systems surrounding the hill, with fortified gun emplacements covering each trench. The living quarters for the Jordanian defenders of the hill were in a large underground bunker.

At the time of the Six-Day War, the post was defended by a reinforced Jordanian company of 150 soldiers. A decision was taken by the Israeli Jerusalem Command to forgo an aerial attack on the hill due to its proximity to civilian areas. Instead an artillery barrage was to be focused on the police post, followed by an incredibly dangerous ground attack by a Paratroop company. I stood on the hill facing west, and was easily able to imagine the brave Israelis charging up the hill. I climbed into the trenches and peered out through the sniper holes, seeing the clear line of fire the Jordanians had at the advancing Israeli troops.

Thirty-six Israeli soldiers gave their lives at Ammunition Hill -- a large percentage of the 182 Israeli soldiers who fell during the Six-Day War. If not for their heroism and bravery at Ammunition Hill, the Old City and the Western Wall would have remained in Jordanian hands. I lived in the Old City for four years, and learned and studied in that same Old City for eight years.

Standing on Ammunition Hill, I realized what sacrifices were made so I and many others would have access to such an important part of our land.

3) I'm certain you remember the tragic terrorist attack in the Har Nof synagogue this past November. My daughter Chasi and family live in Har Nof. In advance of my trip, I resolved to make every effort to visit that shul, pray there, and bring a generous amount of tzedaka given to me by some of our own shul's members.

In the late afternoon this past Sunday, I began the 15 minute walk to the Kehilas Bnai Torah. As I walked, I wondered what it would be like to daven in the same place where four praying congregants lost their lives in an attack with axes, meat cleavers, and a gun. I wondered if there would remain any noticeable signs of the attack in or on the synagogue where a responding Israeli Druze police officer also was killed by the two Arab terrorists. And I wondered how I might be affected, if at all, by a visit to the site of such a horrific tragedy.

Following the conclusion of services, I stood outside the synagogue building, reflecting upon the significance of what had occurred in November, and the now-flourishing shul that was filled with men studying Torah and praying. At that moment, I heard someone call, 'Rabbi Smason?' I turned around to see a young man who I didn't recognize. Ezriel identified himself as a friend of my son-in-law Eliyahu. Ezriel was aware that I was in Israel for a family visit, and surmised that I was indeed 'Rabbi Smason' by (as he noted) the similar facial features of myself and my daughter. Good detective work, Ezriel!

Ezriel, well-acquainted with Kehillas Bnai Torah, invited me to re-enter the synagogue. As we approached the Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark) in the central area of prayer, Ezriel showed me a small hole in the *paroches* -- the beautiful velvet curtain draped before the Aron Kodesh. I fingered the opening that was created by a terrorist bullet. I drew back the *paroches*, expecting to see a hole of similar size through the wooden door of the Ark. Although there was a noticeable indentation in the door, the hole didn't go all the way through. Apparently, the depth and strength of the wood stopped the bullet before it entered the Ark chamber containing the Sifrei Torah (Holy Torah scrolls).

I was stunned by the apparent metaphor; We, the Jewish people may be wounded, but in the merit of the Torah and the land of Israel, we will never be completely pierced through.

4) Finally, I spent a half day in another place not visited by many tourists -- the Holy city of Hebron. Hebron is most well known for the Tomb of the Patriarchs (*Ma'aras Ha'machpela*), the burial site of the Patriarchs, including Abraham and Sarah. My prayers there were meaningful and inspirational. But Avrumi took me to one particularly moving site -- the ancient cemetery of Hebron

On that site, for thousands of years many holy Jews had been buried. But our use of the cemetery ended with the horrific 1929 Arab massacre of the Jewish citizens and students of

Hebron. Following the massacre, the British forbade the Jews to use the cemetery. During the Jordanian occupation from 1948 -- 1967, the Jordanians desecrated and completely destroyed the cemetery. Monument stones were taken to be used for their buildings. And even after the Six Day War, the Israeli government didn't want Jews to use the cemetery, reasoning that to do so would antagonize and provoke the Arab residents surrounding Hebron.

But thanks to a very special woman, the cemetery was (as if to say) revitalized. In 1975, Sarah Nachson, a resident of neighboring Kiryat Arba, lost her four-month old son, Avraham, to natural causes. Despite the ban on the use of the Hebron Jewish cemetery, Sarah decided to bury her son in our holy ancient site. After nightfall, Sarah began to walk through the streets of Kiryat Arba carrying the body of her deceased son, accompanied by hundreds of residents.

The young Israeli soldier, standing guard by the ancient Hebron cemetery, didn't have the heart to prevent the bereaved mother from entering the cemetery with the lifeless body of her child. Following the burial of her son, Sarah turned to those who had accompanied her, and said,

*Thousands of years ago Avraham buried Sarah his wife in Machpela, and that is how he acquired Hebron. Today I, Sarah, bury my son, Avraham, and so too, we reacquire Hebron.*

The hundreds who were there, crying, realized they were present at a historical occurrence.

What is the common denominator of my four Israel experiences? There are many ways we can create attachments and connections in a visit to the Land of Israel. One can experience *dvaykus Hashem* -- a connection with the Almighty -- by praying at the Western Wall, Hebron, and even by simply walking upon the holy soil of our homeland. One can create a wonderful connection with family members and others by traveling with them and touring, and certainly by visiting those who are blessed to live there.

But a deep connection to Israel can be established in the manner expressed by our Sages: *Eretz Yisrael Niknis b'Yissurim* -- the Land of Israel is acquired through great difficulty. On a basic level this means that Jewish access to Israel requires great personal sacrifice. In both ancient and modern times we have had to fight for *every inch* of land. And we have paid for that gift with an abundance of blood, sweat and tears. The blood spilled on Ammunition Hill and in the synagogue of Har Nof. The sweat in the underground bullet factories. The tears shed in the cemetery of Hebron.

A connection to Israel is created through the realization of the many sacrifices made for Israel, and through gratitude to those who have enabled us to have the land and country of Israel available for us to visit -- and if we so choose, to reside in.

So my message to you today is: Go to Israel. Spend as much time there as you can. When it comes to Israel, there is certainly no such thing as too much of a good thing; the more time you spend in Israel, the deeper the connection you make. Visit Israel. Make the land yours. The Land and country of Israel is very much a part of what being Jewish is all about.