

ISRAEL

An accidental tourist finds nothing's left to chance

In a first-time visit to Israel, a man finds his faith — and his father.

BY KEVIN DEUTSCH
Cox News Service

JERUSALEM — I stand before the Western Wall, chanting a bar mitzvah prayer, thinking about how long it took me to become a man.

At 25, I am in a place I never thought I'd visit, reciting Hebrew words I have not spoken since I was a child. Prayers flow from me naturally, as if imprinted in my soul.

Blessed are you Lord, our God, king of the universe who chose us from all the peoples and gave to us his Torah.

All my life, I'd imagined what it would be like to have my father here at this moment.

I think of the only video I have of him: He looks to be in his late 30s, and he is saying prayers in flawless Hebrew. After the prayers, he is smiling, vibrant, cracking jokes for the camera.

I've watched the video a thousand times, memorizing his face. A face just like mine. A face I last saw when I was 3.

Now I have finally had my own bar mitzvah — in this holy place, surrounded by 3,000 years of my people's history. Here, the power of my family's faith has changed me.

"Things in this land are never accidents," a graying man who runs a Judaica store in Jerusalem told me. I was browsing for souvenirs when he asked my Hebrew name. Before I could speak, he called it out: Yisrael.

"You think it's magic, but such is life here," he said. "Nothing is an accident in Israel."

MAKING A CONNECTION

I had come to Israel thinking it would be a free vacation, a way to escape the daily grind on someone else's dime. Seven months ago, I learned of a program called Taglit-birthright, which sends Jews between the ages of 18 to 26 on a free 10-day tour of Israel, providing they've never been there before on an organized trip.

It's a journey meant to spur a connection between young Jewish people and their religious homeland.

But as I board the El-Al plane in New York, I am thinking not of my journey but the journeys of those I loved and lost.

Four of my relatives died within the past five years, their lives cut short by a heart attack, a stroke, Alzheimer's, cancer. All Jewish, they had perished without ever setting foot in Israel. And each suffered at the end.

As we land, I wonder how any God — Jewish or otherwise — could rip a family apart that way.

I step off the plane, into the heat of the desert, and feel nothing. No feeling of belonging or self-fulfillment. No excitement about flying around the world to the center of Judaism.

The past few years, laced with my regret for things left unsaid, have left me with no connection to a higher being.

But as I take my first walk through Jerusalem, my peers from South Florida and Atlanta around me, something stirs in my gut.

There is an energy in the air, a vitality in the people's eyes. As the country unfolds before me, I see the mountains jutting into the cloudless blue sky. The most colorful flowers I've ever seen are growing in concrete cracks, on mountain sides, in open fields. Ancient temples seep with history.

The land seems endless and covered in magic. I have never felt this way in America.

On our first full night in Israel, we mark the Sabbath with dinner, wine and singing at the Shalom Hotel in Jerusalem. I remember few of the traditional songs I learned as a child, but within minutes, I am singing on the hotel deck, hand in hand with 47 new friends I'd met just hours before.

I look at my new friends, then out to the ancient golden stones of Jerusalem and think: I am part of this. I belong.

In Israel, you cannot run from your past. It is all around you — the joy and pain and history of your people and yourself.

The only choice you have is to stare it down.

MEMORIES OF MY FATHER

So, on this summer night in Jerusalem, with a cold breeze beginning to whip through the city just as my bar mitzvah ends, I march toward the wall, thinking of my father. One thought snowballs into another, and suddenly I am flooded by memories of a man I hardly knew: my father, Howard Shulman.

My father suffered from bipolar disorder and sometimes veered off his medications. Although he was brilliant — he became a lawyer, graduated from Cornell University and wrote about a wide range of subjects — my mother could not deal with his erratic moods. She came to fear him.

She got on a plane with me when I was 3, and we left New York for California without telling my dad we were going.

My mother is Jewish, but in the chaos of those years, faith was not a priority. I grew up mostly without Judaism, without my father — and without his last name.

Three years ago, I looked up his phone number for the first time, held onto it for weeks and finally gathered the courage to call.

His mother — my grandmother — answered the phone. I asked to speak with Howard. She cried a little, then told me he was gone.



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GETTY IMAGES

CHANGED BY FAITH: Above, journalist Kevin Deutsch, second from right, is flanked by friends during their trip to Israel. Far left, young Kevin with his father, Howard Shulman. Left, Jewish men pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

I was one year too late. On a cold day in November 2002 in the Bronx, my dad collapsed in his mother's living room and died of a heart attack. He had tried to find me several times over the years and never gave up hoping we'd meet again, my grandmother said.

The regret followed me, even to Israel, even as I move closer to the glistening rocks of the Western Wall. Bearded men in black hats rock back and forth, muttering prayers, hands on the cool stone. I find an open spot in the corner, seek out a small crack in the wall, and place in it a prayer for my father that I'd scribbled back at the hotel.

When I place my hand on the rock, I feel an energy I cannot explain or forget. I am suddenly alone in space and time. My mind empties of any anxiety. And I see my father, standing in my place, looking like he did just before he died: hunched, tired, a bit overweight, with the light of intelligence illuminating his eyes.

I see the lines on his brow, the exhaustion spurred by 50 hard years of struggle against his demons. I think of how much younger, how much happier he must have looked before my mother left with me on that plane to California and eventually Florida, flying out of his life forever.

I tell him I am sorry for everything. And I imagine hearing his voice, deep and rhythmic like mine, telling me that he, too, is sorry for the way things turned out. I had long felt I'd somehow abandoned him; that by waiting so long to call him, I'd squandered any chance at a relationship with him.

My guilt was compounded by the fact that I'd stopped using his last name. Although Shulman is on all my legal documents, for as long as I can remember, I'd used my mother's last name, Deutsch. At school and then in my professional life, the name discrepancy was a source of confusion. I wanted to change it legally to Deutsch but felt I

could not live with myself if I let my father's name die with him.

But as I stand at the wall, my father appears more vividly than in any memory I have of him. For the first time in my life, standing at the holiest site in Judaism, I feel like my father's son, no matter whose name I use.

"These things you think are magic; you can only feel them in Israel, nowhere else," the graying man in the Judaica store had said.

He was right. I had arrived here disenchanted with my life and faith. My Jewishness seemed not to fit. It was a stranger I traveled with always. As the week went on, our group traveled to key sites in Israel's history: Masada, the mountaintop fortress that became the last stronghold of Jewish zealots nearly 2,000 years ago; Rabin Square, where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a fellow Jew in 1995; Independence Hall, where Prime Min-

ister David Ben-Gurion declared Israel a nation in 1948, and more.

FINDING MY RELIGION

I began to understand my Judaism. It is a religion; it is also a path on which one lives ethically, treating others as they want to be treated. A path in which one studies, learns and passes on one's knowledge. If Judaism is to survive, my new friends and I will have to play a part.

I came here to learn about Israel, but I learned much more about myself.

In the country that fathers my people, I have found my own father.

Perhaps it was just random luck that brought me to him in this land, this place I now consider my second home.

But now I believe it is something much deeper — a birthright, born of generations of blood and sweat and shared faith.

As a wise man once told me: Nothing is an accident in Israel.

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