

Reaping the Benefits of CSS after 40 Years

By Paricia Willner-Martin

I recently returned from my first trip to Israel. I went on the Herzl-Ner Tamid family trip to Israel in July. The trip had been planned for many months but it was only a few weeks away when I noticed a picture of the group planning to go on the trip and thought to myself "What a nice group people going, why aren't I on that trip?" Then I looked at the dates and discovered that the dates coincided with the dates both of my children would be at Camp Solomon Schechter and there were only a couple of matters on my calendar I would have to move and within a couple of days I was signed up for a trip that would change my life. My husband was not able to clear his calendar at a moments notice like I was so he could not go but once I realized I had an opportunity to take the trip to Israel that I had waited virtually my whole life to take, I knew it was Besheret. I had spent many years making excuses for not having been such as money, school, or children, but as I see it now, I wasn't ready until now to truly experience and accept the magic of Eretz Yisrael.

I wanted to share a particular experience from my first trip to Israel in July 2009 that involves lessons I learned as a camper at Camp Solomon Schechter camper some four decades earlier. There were, of course, many rewarding experiences during my two weeks in Israel with Rabbi Rosenbaum and a group of twenty plus members and friends of Herzl-Ner Tamid. My personal highlight was when I made contact with and got to see my childhood camp Rabbi from Camp Solomon Schechter, Rabbi Wilfred (now Zvi)Solomon. Rabbi Solomon was the first Rabbi that showed me that Rabbi's were real people (rather than the imposing figures on the bimah that they had appeared to be to my nine year old self) when he swam across the lake with a group of us Bet Campers at Schechter. I had been to the 50th Anniversary for Camp Solomon Schechter a few years before my trip to Israel last summer and was disappointed when I learned Rabbi Solomon would not be there to share my thoughts with and to sing "Steam Boat Bill" to his now aging campers since he and most of his family had made Aliya some years earlier and they were retired in Israel. I had to quell my disappointment as I learned from their one son who is still living in Vancouver, B.C. that Rabbi Solomon and his wife are very happily living their retirement years in Jerusalem.

So while in Israel, I asked our guide to help me find a phone number for Rabbi Wilfred Solomon in Jerusalem and I called him as we were headed toward Jerusalem. His wife answered the phone and was not certain he'd remember me and as we reminisced on the phone I was not quite certain he knew who I was among the 100's of past campers he'd taught. Toward the end of our telephone conversation I realized he recognized me when he asked me about my brother Stuart, now Shmuel, who had been an early camper and Mahon at the Camp on Whidbey Island and a counselor in the first few years of the

Camp in Olympia. So we arranged to meet on Sunday afternoon at my hotel, the King Solomon Hotel. We had no trouble recognizing each other and though I was not sure I would remember his wife, they looked much like the young couple who were raising children while sharing their love for Judaism and Israel with kids from across the Pacific Northwest in the 1960's and 1970's. So I shared my memories of swimming across the lake with him but after finding the experience and heroism of the Chalutzim in Israel so impactful, I shared my feelings about what pioneers he, Rabbi Stampfer and Rabbi Wagner(z'l) were when they envisioned, created and nurtured Camp Solomon Schechter in the Pacific Northwest. It is abundantly clear to me that Schechter is in large part responsible for maintaining the vibrancy of the Conservative Movement in the Pacific Northwest. I knew the songs we sang on the bus in Israel (from Camp) and it felt so appropriate that my kids were being re-jewvinated at Schechter while I was in Israel. However, the true highlight of my trip to Israel was finding out that my trip had brought my life full circle. While I sipped iced coffee with Rabbi and Mrs. Solomon across the street from the King Solomon Hotel and I told them what they meant to me as described above, I realized for the first time that my lifelong dream of going to Israel was hatched in July of 1967 when Rabbi Solomon cried while singing Yerushalm Shel Zahav in the Hader O'chel at Camp Solomon Schechter just one month after the Six Day War. I was just nine years old at the time but Rabbi Solomon had planted a strong emotional tie to the State of Israel in my being when he probably thought he was simply teaching us a new song completed during and after the 1967 war. It is remarkable to me at my age to still be receiving new dividends from my Camp Solomon Schechter experience four decades earlier and my fervent hope is that my children and my children's children will find their own deep connections with Judaism at Camp Solomon Schechter.