

“The City of Air”

My first night in Tzfat, a town high in the mountains of northern Israel, was spent winding through alleys and wandering up worn, limestone steps. I was exploring simply for its own sake and had no real knowledge of the city or plans for the evening. Jet lag was taking its toll on me, but I decided to keep squeezing past the various late-night study and shawarma throngs and follow the most well-lit paths until I felt like stopping. Tzfat is one of the four holy elemental cities in Israel, frequently associated with air. I was told many times that Tzfat has the purest air in all of Israel. In spite of that, my chest was heaving as the steps steepened and the passageways tapered into mere cracks between buildings. After some intentional “wrong” turns and a couple more thousand steps, I found myself at the very top of the city on a hill, captivated by the most glorious view of a distant, glowing, almost majestic mountain. Little did I know that this mountain, Mount Meron, has an iconic role in both Jewish and Kabbalistic history.

Just three days later, I would find myself on that very same mountain across the valley from Tzfat amongst half a million people, hauling myself up the precipitous incline and inserting myself into the most emotionally charged, impactful experience of my life thus far. Throughout the course of my time in Israel I would come to learn the intimate details of the reasons why I was on that mountain in the middle of the night on a Wednesday. I would study the significance of Lag B’Omer, the lasting importance of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and Rabbi Isaac Luria, and the origins of Kabbalah, but none of that information was necessary as I passed thousands of ferocious bonfires, paper streams of

Chabad literature with the ever-recognizable face of The Rebbe at my feet, and hundreds of small boys losing their whimsical curls, leaving piles of hair behind them.

I could feel the air change due to both the elevation and the excitement as the collective mass of souls inched closer and closer to the looming grave of Rabbi Shimon. Excitement flirted with aggression at the entrance of the gravesite. Sweat was exchanged copiously and tears landed on my arms as the visitors who had soaked up enough of Rabbi Shimon were shoving their way out of the narrow opening in the cave wall and patrons who had been planning this visit for months were crushing their bodies as close to the door as possible.

Here I was, trapped in a horde of women, about to catch a glimpse of the resting place of the infamous Rabbi Shimon. A Russian lady with two small children dancing around her and tripping on her skirts directed my attention to my right, explaining that Hillel and Shammai were buried not too far away from here. I was holding a Siddur and a Zohar from my studies earlier that evening, but she transferred my books to one hand and filled the other with wine and candy. We walked in and found space to stand as sweets were zooming all around our heads and date pits rolled around under our feet. Standing there with a couple dates in my stomach and an overflowing cup of pomegranate juice in my hand from an insistent neighbor, I had no idea what to think.

One of my mentors and close friends, Yonina, had told me the previous day that people come to Meron on the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon's death from all over the world because they are searching for something. I laughed at the

thought that there were people out there that weren't searching for anything and I knew that I definitely was. But that self-awareness didn't translate into anything palpable for me to try and conceptualize on the mountain. I thought for a while and finally settled on a couple of words of appreciation for being in this place on this day, and proceeded to leaf through the Zohar. My fingers stopped on the translation of the word Kabbalah. In English, the word means, "to receive." Looking around and soaking in the emotion, the tears; the pure, authentic life that surrounded me on the mountain...I couldn't help but feel like I was receiving something. I don't know if it was divine wisdom or the secrets of the Kabbalah like some say happens on Meron, but I do know that whatever I received on that mountain profoundly impacted the rest of my experience in Israel and my life beyond.

Until recently, I had always considered it almost paradoxical to feel like I was deserving of accepting something from the universe. I was raised in an environment where it is not important to take, but rather to give. Even at Rice, a lot of priority is placed on what we can contribute to society and offer to the world with our university education. Whether it is through research, community service, academia, or teaching, I have been focused on determining what I should devote my time to and how I should direct my efforts. This fellowship through the Jewish Studies Department allowed me to realize that the habit of driving my energy away for the sake of others without concurrently dedicating myself to soaking up the vitality and beauty of the world and people is a misguided practice.

Learning about Chasidic Judaism, Kabbalah, art, meditation, and mysticism in Tzfat was one of the most rewarding opportunities of my life. The ideas, feelings, and questions that I began to unpack in Tzfat are going to be relevant and meaningful for the rest of my life. The secrets of the Kabbalah may not have been unveiled to me during my fellowship, but the air of Tzfat will always linger with me and imbue me with the breath to ask questions, earnestly search for answers, and continue to pursue my curiosities in the Jewish realm and otherwise. Tzfat filled me with the emotional energy to keep moving forward in my exploration of religion, spirituality, and culture amidst uncertainty.