

August 19, 2014

Dear Rabbi Davidson, Rabbi Ehrlich, Rabbi Zeidman, Cantor Corrsin and Mr. Kaiserman,

On a cool winter morning in July, I sat on the floor of a hotel room in Cape Town and repacked my suitcase with books. These weren't *any* books but books I collected from our bookshelves and my friends' bookshelves, from the library at my synagogue and from members of the Temple Emanu-El family who so generously donated books over the last few months. I brought the books home and sorted them for their long journey to Temple Israel in Cape Town, South Africa. I collected so many books, that I could only take about 10 percent with me.

Before, we left New York, I carefully packed the books, first weighing myself, then the suitcases and then the books we were to take with us, all while keeping the weight of the luggage within KLM's 50 lb. limit. Finally, we were packed and ready to go. First, we travelled to Amsterdam, and then a few days later, we continued our journey to Cape Town. The books travelled 9,641 miles and went through security twice! I cringed each time our suitcases were weighed. Our bags were hand searched on each step of our journey!

As I dragged my heavy suitcase along Upper Portswood Road on that winter morning, I came to a freshly painted cement wall. Behind the imposing wall and metal gate, I saw the Hebrew letters on the temple, a new building opened just a few years ago. I rang the bell, and the gate opened slowly. Our arrival was eagerly anticipated, and we were warmly greeted by everyone we met.

Temple Israel was founded 70 years ago, by Lithuanian Jews. The synagogue operates out of three locations in Cape Town, and like at Temple Emanu-El, there are three rabbis. Temple Israel follows Progressive Judaism, which is like Reformed Judaism in the U.S. The synagogue has 1,000 members, down from 1,700, as many Jews immigrated during the political unrest in the mid-1990s. The synagogue has a religious school, and 130 students attend two to three times per week, and most have *b'nei mitzvah*. The older children engage in mitzvah projects, such as working on a farm and conducting various "drives." They would be interested in Skyping with Temple Emanu-El's students; there is only a six-hour time difference, so maybe this is possible. The rabbis conduct a service on Saturday mornings that is followed by a luncheon. In the sanctuary, men and some women wear yarmulke and tallit. Other than the rabbis, Temple Israel has a head of the religious

school, an administrator, a funeral director, a custodian, a cook and a few teachers. Cape Town has a Jewish day school, but unlike Temple Israel, the school is Orthodox. There is limited contact between the Orthodox and Progressive Jews. Following the passing of Nelson Mandela late last year, the Temple Israel community felt a tremendous loss. The synagogue held a special service that was very emotional.

We met with Eric Beswick, executive director of the religious school, who gave us a tour of the synagogue. We saw the main sanctuary, the classrooms, the social hall used for *b'nei mitzvah*, Shabbat meals and other functions, and even the kitchen (which is vegetarian.) And of course, we went to the library, a simple room with bookshelves on three walls and a large table. On the table, I arranged the 84 books we brought with us: children's and adult fiction and non-fiction, board books and picture books for small children, cookbooks, books on tape and textbooks. While we were unable to meet with Rabbi Greg Alexander, the senior rabbi, who was not in Cape Town that day, he was very grateful for the donation of books, because English books cost five to six times the prices of the same volumes in the U.S. or U.K.

Dear Lauren

I have arrived back to see the fantastic books that you and Meredith brought through to the synagogue. The textbooks are great for us, the kids' books really look fabulous (especially the board books), and the fiction/non-fiction are already generating queues.

Thank you and yashar koach on helping us connect to your family and your synagogue through this mitzvah, and mazal tov in advance to Meredith for her upcoming bat mitzvah.

L'shalom,  
Rabbi Greg

This trip was such a special one. I am humbled that collecting these books has made such a difference in the lives of Jews living at the tip of Africa. I am humbled that this simple act could mean so much to them. I am humbled that so many in the Temple Emanu-El community reached out their hands to support me. I am humbled that the clergy and the religious school have supported me every step of the way.

Since we have returned from South Africa, we have continued to stay in touch with our friends at Temple Israel. While I made this journey during the year when I will have my bat mitzvah, I do not view this as a project connected to this life event. My mom and I are developing a network of people with connections to South Africa, from our neighbors to my mom's co-workers and the director of my sleepaway camp. And we are still searching to

create a path so the remaining books can be sent to Cape Town, whether with individuals who are traveling to Cape Town or reliable shipping companies.

With warm regards,

*Meredith G. Silfen*