

Failing, then Coming Back and Succeeding

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Jerusalem is a magical place. Here's a report I wrote in the middle of my trip to Israel last week:

First, I went with my daughter to the mountain (the Arbel Caves) that defeated me last time I was here. In the novel I'm (trying...still learning a new genre) to write, the main characters spend many years in a cave outside of Tiberius. I had tried to climb up to see the caves but had to turn around because, living in Houston, I don't have many climbs, or even inclines, on which to develop those muscles.

As soon as I knew I'd be coming back, I started climbing stairs until I could go up and down 20 flights of stairs without stopping. (The physical therapist had told me that descending is actually harder on your muscles than ascending.) Thanks to Ira of Da'at Tours and my daughter, we made it to the caves. They were both endlessly patient and helped out with my "balance issues" (read: clumsiness) and literally saved my life. When we arrived at the caves, it was better than I'd hoped. So many things I'd written already as fiction turned out to be true in actual fact. It was almost as if I'd already been there and seen it.

Then, we went down to Jerusalem where I am spending the week teaching via a program to honor Rabbi Sally Priesand, our first woman rabbi. The first year class from North America, and the Israeli Progressive Movements rabbinical students, are everything you could hope they'd be: bright, questioning, searching, prayerful, and interested in the texts on their own terms. Their questions are brilliant...always the best sign of active minds.

The College itself has changed beyond recognition from 1980-981 when I was a student. Then, it was a rectangular building facing the Old City with no windows pointing in that direction. When the College was planned, Jordanians still controlled the Old City and could shoot through any window in their line of sight, so there were no views of the Old City. Now the library is much larger, there is a youth hostel, meeting rooms and vistas of the Old City and many more classrooms.

As beautiful as the building is and as welcoming as the faculty and administration have been (they are the most gracious hosts!) I think what I'll take away most from this week is the impression the student made on me. We can truly rest easy putting our future in their hands.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had a goal, failed to hit it the first time, then planned and trained to hit the goal and made it? What's the difference between hoping to reach a goal and planning to reach it?
NOTE. DON'T DO THIS: After 22 hours in transit, I arrived in Jerusalem around midnight and set off on the climb at 8:00 am. This was not such a great idea.
2. Right outside my window was a towering cedar tree. The birds live in the tree...it's kind of its own complete little ecosystem and they begin to chirp long before dawn. It was a spiritual high to be wakened by those birds and be able to say the first morning blessing, "Blessed are You, God, who gives the bird understanding to differentiate between day and night" while my eyes were still closed. It's such an elegant blessing: you're thanking God for the birds' special talent and your own ability to recognize that gift. It was wonderful to think that this is the sound the sages' thought of when they created this blessing.
3. Not a question but an invitation: if you haven't been to Israel lately...what are waiting for? It has hiking, beaches, history and beauty.

Looking forward to your answers and insights as always!