



Immigrant's Experiences

The Israeli taxi drivers were difficult even two thousand years ago, when Rabbi Zeira moved to the Land of Israel. What can we learn from his experience?

Israeli Taxi Drivers

Any tourist who comes back home from a visit to Israel is guaranteed to have at least one “horror story” to share about Israeli taxis. And unfortunately, the general rule is that these experiences are not pleasant ones.

I know of one tourist whose taxi driver tried to drive all over Jerusalem so that he could charge several times the price. Another one flat-out tried to charge four times the regular price. And, in typical Israeli style, these episodes often end in shouting matches.

However, to be fair, I have to note that this is not strictly an Israeli problem—anytime anyone goes to a foreign country and doesn't speak the language and doesn't know the culture and customs, there will be unethical people who will take advantage.

Even when Israelis come to New York, and don't know the language, the taxi drivers aren't that great either.

Babylonians vs. Israelis

Truthfully, it seems that there's nothing new under the sun, after all.

The Talmud tells us about Rav Zeira, one of the great Amoraim. (The

Amoraic Period of Jewish history, for those of you interested, was the last part of the Talmudic Era. The Amoraic Period ended around 500 or 550 C.E.)

Rav Zeira was born and raised in Bavel, or Babylonia. He became one of the top students of Rav Yehuda, the dean of the yeshivah in Pumpedisa. At the time, that city was the New York of the Jewish world—and the Jewish world at the time was in exile from the Holy Land.

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos, page 41a) tells us that Rav Zeira very much wanted to make Aliya to the Holy Land but his master, Rabbi Yehuda, was opposed to it. Rabbi Yehuda held that “Anyone who goes up from Bavel to the Land of Israel transgresses a commandment of the Torah, as the verse states, ‘They shall come to Bavel and there they shall be.’” And so Rabbi Yehuda believed that Jews must remain in Bavel until the Moshiach, would come and return them to the Land of Israel.

But despite that, Rav Zeira decided that he would go up to the Land of Israel. That’s why he didn’t come to his master to formally say good-bye—he was afraid that Rabbi Yehuda would forbid him to do it. But his heart didn’t let him leave Bavel without seeing his master one last time before he left—so he came by to look at him from afar and hear one last Torah lecture from him, and then he went on his way.

Just before he entered the Holy Land, he needed to cross the Jordan River. But he couldn’t find the bridge—and in his excitement, he decided to cross the river by foot and get his clothing all wet.

Now there was a Sadducee, a member of a sect that split away from Judaism, who saw him trying to cross. The Sadducee said to him: “You guys are a reckless nation! Even at Mt. Sinai, when Moshe asked you in G-d’s Name whether you’re ready to accept the Torah, you said ‘We will do!’ before you said, ‘We will listen!’ Before you even knew what

you were talking about, you already said that you'd accept the Torah! And here too, you have the same recklessness! Look at you, running into the water in your clothes!"

Rav Zeira responded, "Who says that I'll merit to get to a place that Moshe and Aharon didn't merit to get to?"

But regardless of Rav Zeira's humility, he actually did make it across the river to the Holy Land.

But unfortunately, Rav Zeira got a cool reception from the locals. It seems that the residents of the Holy Land didn't very much like the immigrants from Bavel, and Rav Zeira had a hard time acclimating.

The Talmud continues that when he arrived in the Land of Israel, he went to buy some meat from the local butcher.

Now, Rav Zeira was new to the Land, and he was not familiar with its customs and prices. So he asked the butcher, "What's the price for a liter of meat?" And the butcher gave him an answer he had never heard in his life: "Fifty coins and one iron blow."

Just like tourists visiting Israel today, Rav Zeira had a bit of money in his pocket. So he offered the butcher 60 coins for the meat without getting hit with an iron rod. But the butcher wouldn't agree. "Seventy coins? Eighty?! Here—take ninety! One hundred!" Rav Zeira eventually offered him twice the original price, but the butcher wasn't ready to budge in any way. So Rav Zeira gave in and said, "Do what your custom is."

When Rav Zeira came to the beis medrash, the study hall, he asked his fellow Sages what this outrageous custom was all about—how a person can't buy a liter of meat in the Holy Land without getting beaten with iron rod?

The Sages were shocked to hear the story. They asked him, "Who's

this butcher who did that to you?” They immediately sent for the butcher. But the messengers came back and reported that the butcher was not alive anymore.

Well, so much for Rav Zeira’s reception.

But the Talmud has another story about Rav Zeira’s first days in the Holy Land.

Rav Zeira once went out to the marketplace to buy something. He turned to the shopkeeper and said, “Measure well”—meaning, be very careful with your scale. Apparently, the peddlers and marketplace merchants of ancient Israel weren’t all upright people. But the merchant said to him, “Get out of here, you Bavli! Your fathers destroyed the Holy Temple!”

Rav Zeira thought to himself, “Are my fathers not like the fathers of this man?” In other words, the Babylonians indeed did destroy the first Holy Temple—but the fathers of Rav Zeira, who had been exiled to Babylon, themselves were Jews! Just like the fathers of this man who lived in the Holy Land!

[Not to be negative here, my friends, but the same mentality exists today. I’ve heard from many Jews who came here from Russia or the Former Soviet Union how in Russia, they were called “Zhids”—but here, they are called “Russians.” There, they were treated like strangers, like “Jews,” and they were not accepted like equal citizens—and here, they are treated like strangers once again. Everyone treats them like “Russians.” Seems that nothing has really changed.]

Where Did Avraham Live? Where?

Eventually, Rav Zeira settled down in the city of Tiveria, or Tiberias, as it is called in English today. But Rav Zeira didn’t move into the religious neighborhood to be near the synagogue and the yeshivah.

The Talmud tells us that he specifically chose to live in the neighborhood where the ruffians lived, the thieves, the neighborhood where the Jews were far from Torah and mitzvos... so that he could draw them closer to Judaism.

The Sages didn't like his move. They thought that such Jews don't need to be drawn closer. Rav Zeira wasn't affected by the Sages' frowning on his decision. He continued doing his thing. For the rest of his life, he brought the ruffians and thieves closer.

Years later, when Rav Zeira passed away, those same rough people got together and said to each other, "Until now, Rav Zeira would pray for us and ask G-d for mercy for us. He would protect us. But now, we have no one to ask G-d for mercy for us..." So, the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 37a) concludes, they all stopped their evil ways.

Rav Zeira, as it turns out, was following in the footsteps of Avraham Avinu, the first Jew.

Avraham had also lived in Bavel (which is present-day Iraq, by the way). And, as the Torah tells us, Avraham had also left his land and his birthplace to go to the "Land of Canaan," the Holy Land.

Now, who were the Canaanites in those days? The most corrupt nation on earth. They worshiped idols. And not only that, but they were so corrupt that even the Torah found it necessary to explicitly state, "Like the deeds of the Land of Canaan to which I bring you, you shall not do."

On this verse, Rashi comments, "This tells us that those nations that the Nation of Israel conquered were more corrupt than everyone."

So when Avraham came to the Holy Land, he didn't settle in Jerusalem—rather, as our Torah portion tells us, he chose to live next to the one place that symbolized corruption more than any other

place.

Suffice it to say that when you want to say that a place is truly depraved, regardless of what language you're speaking, you say, "Sodom and Gomorrah."

But that's exactly where Avraham chose to live: Just outside Sodom and Amorah. That's exactly where he chose to call out in the Name of G-d—to publicize that there is a G-d in the world.

So what we can learn from Rav Zeira—and, by extension, from our Patriarch Avraham—is that there are many times when we're talking with our kids, or family members, or friends or relatives, and we're trying to influence them with a little bit of Judaism.

And it can often seem that it's not having any effect—nothing has changed, they're acting the same, and they may even be making fun of whatever it is we're trying to "sell" them.

Along comes the story of Rav Zeira and teaches us that we need to continue carrying on doing the same thing, even if it means repeating it 100 times—because the rule is that no message ends up being in vain.

And surely your message has an effect on whoever you're talking to—it's just that sometimes it takes a little longer to notice it.