

From: Ervin Birnbaum

IN THE BEGINNING...

We followed phone-instructions very carefully. “Pass Be’er Sheva, follow the sign to Mashabe Sade, but before you reach the Kibbutz there will be a sign to Yerucham. You follow that sign on a somewhat broken road, but don’t worry, it will bring you to the gas-station of Yerucham, where you pick up the sign for Mitzpe Ramon. That should bring you to Kibbutz Sde Boker, you know, where Ben Gurion lives. You pass it by and another five kilometers you will find the sign for Midreshet Sde Boker. At the gate we will wait for you.”

We did very well, until that “somewhat broken road”, which we learned is designated “Kvish Haneft”. Our three kids in the back, Aiton, Liel and Dani, played counting cars and after Be’er Sheva, when there wasn’t a single car on the horizon, it turned to counting camels. That “somewhat broken road” was so broken, so curvy, in many places so unrecognizable, and so desolate that it looked like a typical moon landscape.

We stopped somewhere in the big nowhere, surrounded by heaps of gigantic rocks, to decide whether to continue or turn around. We reached the conclusion that if we had already gotten that far from Tel Aviv, we may as well brave it and see this unusual journey to the end. It was an age without cellphones (you remember? There was such an age) and we were acutely concerned what would happen if the car breaks down, with no other car, donkey or camel in sight.

The very fact that we are writing this reminiscence shows you, dear reader, that we made it to Sde Boker. What more, despite the frightening aspects of the lunar landscape we encountered on the road, we chose to stay, make it our home, and accept the unusual challenges it posed on numerous fronts:

We liked the idea of starting something new. Not only did we have to learn the Israeli Bagrut system of which we knew nothing, but apply English language textbooks to it which have been written from entirely different pedagogical perspectives. We are talking about a dozen subjects for which there was no English-language equivalent. In addition, there were subjects such as Ezrachut, which had never been tackled in an English-language textbook.

The educational challenge was compounded by the recognition that, if successful, dozens, maybe hundreds of families would be able to make Aliyah who otherwise could not do so because their children could not cope with the Israeli Bagrut in Hebrew. Information supplied by Youth Aliyah made it clear that in the past Israel had lost numerous families owing to their children’s educational maladjustment, and that the pioneering of Bagrut in English would be a signal service to the State.

Add to this that Hadassa and I always liked to work with young people. In my prior work in the USA I ran a pretty big congregation, but I had insisted that I also remain the Principal of the congregational school. I enjoyed the contact with the young students, even though simultaneously I was also teaching at a College.

The first year in particular was a wild year. Luckily, the Israeli High School had a very cooperative Principal, Chachamu, who put his staff at our disposal and gave the English Netiv priority in the arrangement of the timetable. To pull an English-language staff together in the wilderness was no mean task. This was followed by endless consultations with experts to settle on the most practical textbooks – usually more than one – to satisfy Bagrut requirements. There were numerous frustrating sessions with the National Inspector of the Israeli Ministry of Education to convince him that we are on the right track. (The victims of the '71 year may remember that they had to do a Bagrut in Physical Education, and that the Inspector sent his wife down to supervise some of the Bagrut exams!). On top of which I had a commitment to the University of Haifa and once a week I had to disappear for a day to fulfill my obligations in Haifa.

People, I want to tell you honestly, those years at Sde Boker were some of the finest years of my life. I enjoyed the challenges mentioned above. I loved the students – though some were really a handful. I loved the glorious sky at night. I loved the splendid views and stunning landscape. I appreciated the cooperation of the environment – with some notable exceptions.

Everything put together, it all added up to a magnificent tapestry, to which each and every one of the students contributed richness in color. Like in the past so now, our hope is that our students of yesterday are masters of today, each contributing his/her modest share to the building of a better tomorrow.

What's left? BAGRUT, PEOPLE, BAGRUT!!!

Yours with affection,
Hadassa and Prof. Ervin Birnbaum