

MEXICO— a meeting place of my Jewish soul

By Yaela Orelowitz



Yaela Orelowitz

Young people attending Chabad of Cozumel

“YOU’RE GOING where?”

“Mexico.”

“But all the Mexicans are trying to climb over the fence to the US, and you’re trying to get in?”

“Seems so.”

“But haven’t you watched [the TV series] *Narcos*? It’s really dangerous there!”

“I don’t watch Netflix.”

“And what about kashrut, Shabbat, community, language, being a woman alone there? Are you crazy?”

“Yes, probably so, but I have been told by some dear friends that there is something about Mexico that belongs to me, so I am going to go, I am going to trust, and I am going to find it for myself.”

And so, inspired by the journey of Abraham in Parshat *Lech Lecha*, I left, and I truly did find it for myself, and continue to, here in Mexico.

Let me tell you my Mexican story.....

It was November 2021 when I left London to escape the impending winter and my symptoms of long-COVID that apparently only vitamin D could heal. It was supposed to be a vacation and, as I type this from my Mexican island one year later, it clearly became much more than that. I work in the field of mental health, and during the COVID-19 pandemic it was impossible to deny that all the repressed dysfunction of our lives and society began to surface. In some ways, I was in Mexico for an answer, for a new approach to life that might

enable me to better help those that are suffering – including me.

I knew that I was in the right place when, just as I landed and waited outside the airport for my bus to the town, I was met by, well, a bus that never arrived. I turned to a man nearby and asked for his help. “Sometimes the bus arrives, sometimes it does not,” he told me. “Don’t you get stressed by this?” I asked. “Look around you,” he replied. I did. I saw many smiling faces, laughter, traffic, dogs running, children playing, hugs and screams, food everywhere, sunshine above it all. People look happy here, but how? “In Mexico we don’t expect life to be easy, but we love to laugh anyway”. Simple words of the greatest wisdom. The words of our people, the descendants of Yitzhak. Yitzhak, named because Sara laughed when she learned that at 90 years old, the impossible was possible; she would birth a son who would become the future of the Jewish nation. We are a people born from laughter: Laugh in the face of contradiction, laugh at miracles, laugh at life, for God is running the show, and laughter is a release of the falsity of control and a welcoming of true *emunah* (trust). Something we Western control-freaks have long forgotten, perhaps, and I was here to relearn.

☐ ☐ ☐

Life is chaotic and loud in Mexico, and perfectionism is not a part of the vocabulary here. I am taught this lesson every day. I speak a terrible Spanish, and Mexicans laugh with me and encourage me to keep speaking, never switching over to English, even if it would

be easier, but rather joining me in the messy journey of learning. My neighbor here is a barber who is deaf and whose barbershop door is open to the street, where he sits every day sharing his bright smiling eyes with all who pass by. I am reminded of a story of the Lubavitcher Rebbe who met Israeli war veterans in the summer of 1976, many of whom were missing limbs and other faculties. “If a person has been deprived of a limb or a faculty,” he said, “this itself indicates that God has given him special powers to overcome the limitations this entails and to surpass the achievements of ordinary people. You are not disabled or handicapped but special and unique, as you possess potentials that the rest of us do not. I therefore suggest that you should no longer be referred to as ‘disabled’ but as ‘special,’ which more aptly describes what is unique about you.”

Last week, the Ironman competition was held on the island of Cozumel where I now live, and I watched as blind, wheelchair-bound and elderly competitors ran by, the streets aroar with support. A true example of the Mexican spirit, powerfully capable of surviving and thriving in the face of all of life’s challenges. Just look at Mexico’s iconic plant, the cactus. Its robustness speaks for itself. In my time here, I have yet to meet a beggar of any sort. Everyone, even children, find something to sell, something to do, something to contribute. This is a culture that defies victimhood, another Jewish quality, and has a sense of humor. Smiles, no matter the circum-

stances, and morning greetings are as easy to come by as a summer day.



The numbers of expats and digital nomads in Mexico have risen substantially since 2020, where many people have become disillusioned with their current culture and politics and have found an alternative way of living in the pulsating creative lifestyle of Mexico. Mexico is a complex and expansive country. With the Chiapas region comprising indigenous, independent groups; the north made up of farmland and cowboys; two coastlines with diverse coastal plains; colonial cities; ancient ruins alongside reggaeton fiestas; jungles; and the birthplace of Tequila, Mexico is a lot. As a Jew, I have found Mexico to be a place where its people deeply respect religion, heritage, and spirituality. On their annual Day of the Dead, for example, families gather to remember the lives of their ancestors, much like we do on a *yahrzeit*. But here, instead of only lighting a candle, they create colorful shrines dedicated to each deceased family member. My Mexican friends have described how these rituals keep families close and maintain their connection to their heritage and family values.

There are thriving Jewish communities and Chabad houses throughout Mexico. On my first Shabbat in Mexico City, I went to synagogue and received a personal welcome from the rabbi, who noticed a new face in town. And I was inundated with invitations for Shabbat meals from the incredibly warm, generous, and hospitable members of the Jewish community. Although they have high aliyah rates (as well as immigration to Miami), the Jewish community of Mexico City maintains approximately 40,000 to 50,000 members, with thorough infrastructures of schools, community centers, *chevra kadishas* (burial societies), charity organizations, and more. Throughout Mexico there are both local communities and Chabad houses catering to residents, as well as travelers. After my time in Mexico City, I spent a few months living in a small *pueblo* (town) on the Pacific coast of Mexico called San Pancho, a place bustling with community projects, from circus training for impoverished youth to libraries, craft centers, arts-based education projects, and artisan training for adults who have not received a higher education. This otherwise poor and unremarkable town has found a place on the map and is doing impactful work in upskilling and empowering its local communities. I worked in the local theater there, and on Shabbat went to the closest Chabad house in the nearby city of Puerto Val-



YAELO ORELOWITZ

Rabbi and Mushkie Hecht of Puerto Vallarta

larta. In Puerto Vallarta, Shneur and Mushkie Hecht established a beautiful Chabad house six years ago. The young couple are vivaciously innovative and started their Chabad house by raising money through selling baked goods from their home to friends and family. All Chabad houses are self-funded. The Chabad headquarters do not offer financial support, which makes it truly inspiring to witness the personal sacrifices and belief in their cause that these young couples embody. They run a kosher shop, Shabbat meals, large gatherings over *chagim* (religious holidays), daily Torah classes, and events throughout the week. From the moment I walked through the Hechts' door, I felt right at home and made Jewish-geography connections within five minutes. Rabbi Hecht's words mirror my sentiments about Mexico: "Some call Mexico 'the land of second chances,' a place to start anew in a fresh environment, with a new community and culture. What we've experienced is a little different. We've met many who have come here looking for something new, but instead have found something ancient, yet relevant to their current life. They discover their souls, which may have been forgotten or ignored for years, only to be uncovered right here in Mexico."

I don't quite know what it is, but there is something about Mexico.



After my time in San Pancho, I lived in the charming colonial town of San Cristobel de las Cases in the mountainous Chiapas region

of Mexico, where Rabbi Oren and Einat Raz head up a dynamic Chabad house. Theirs is a family affair, with their nine children continuously running around, coordinating events, giving orders in the kitchen, cooking, and attending to the every need of Jews entering their gates. Now I am based in Cozumel on the Caribbean coast, where Rabbi Dudi and Chani Caplin run one of the most popular Chabad houses in North America. Every Shabbat is a vibrant celebration with hundreds of guests, singing *nigunim* (Jewish tunes), sharing stories of miracles over lunch, and dancing at Havdalah. We brought in Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) together with approximately 1,000 Jews from all over the world. Throughout the week in Cozumel, Chabad hosts daily *minyanim* (prayers), *shiurim* (classes), communal BBQs, and women's challah bakes. There is a *mikveh*, (ritual bath), a Jewish school, and four kosher restaurants on the island. One can snorkel in one of the best coral reefs in the world, learn to salsa dance, enjoy the Mexican sunshine, and remain deeply connected to Torah and *mitzvot*. It is truly a miracle what Chabad has created and a great privilege to be a part of our global Jewish family.

In conclusion to this short introduction to the vastness that is life here in Mexico, I would like to end by asking some questions. Questions that have been helpful for me and therefore may be helpful for you, too. What is it about a culture that stays close to its ancestors that feels so relevant right now? Why is sunshine one of the most useful cures for the disease of the pandemic? What is it about laughter that is drawing Jewish souls to this place? What have we forgotten that we are called upon to remember now? In Mexico, I ask questions; and because perfectionism is not a value here nor is my Spanish good enough to be understood, I am left with no answers, and further questions. And that is just how I like it. ■

The writer is a South African-born therapist who worked in Jewish and rural communities in South Africa, Israel, and the United Kingdom before becoming un-settled in Mexico. She is the founder of The Lighter Life (www.thelighterlife.net), where she works online with individuals and groups who are on a quest to empower themselves, overcome challenges, and discover their inner light. Her work is inspired by the laughter and colors of Mexico, the warmth of its people, the joy of learning Torah, and the privilege of being a Jew in the world. Contact Yaela on lighterlighterlife@gmail.com