



ISRAEL

Skokie brothers reconnect in Israel

In celebration of Israel@70, JUF News is running a yearlong series of stories to provide a unique window into Israel.

By **HILLEL KUTTLER**

THEIR BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL TRIP was titled "Israel with Israelis," but for Dan and Sam Eisenberg it might as well have been called "Brother with Brother."

The Skokie natives had last seen one another in May of 2017, and have spent precious little time together since mid-2014, when Sam, now 22, left for a post-high-school "gap-year" program in Israel and later enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). He officially immigrated and lives in Tel Aviv.

Dan, 26, resides in Boston, working as an engineer at an agricultural company.

"It's 100 percent happening," Sam happily texted Dan from his army base at 10:21 p.m. on Oct. 25 after receiving permission from his commander to participate in Birthright, which Dan had already registered for.

"When we realized it would work out, I was very excited because we haven't spent more than a few days together since he made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel)," said Dan, sitting across from Sam in a

Jerusalem hotel lobby on Christmas Day. "We've had maybe a week or two together in all that time."

When the Birthright group's airplane landed at Ben Gurion International Airport, Sam, coming straight from his base and still wearing army fatigues, embraced Dan. Throughout the trip, they sat with each other on the buses that ferried the group to each outing and ate their meals together. Sam introduced Dan to his girlfriend, Romy, and the three went out for beer at a pub in Tel Aviv's Carmel Market.

Birthright is a program founded in 1999 that since has provided 500,000 Diaspora Jews ages 18 to 26 with free, 10-day trips to Israel. The Israel with Israelis trip, run by Shorashim, is for Birthright participants seeking a deeper interaction with their Israeli peers.

The Eisenbergs' group was a JUF Chicago Community Trip and included 38 Americans, nearly all Chicagoans, and seven Israelis.

On the trip's last day, the delegation visited an elementary school in Kiryat Gat, in Chicago's JUF Partnership Together region. They played basketball with students and attended their English class, after which the children presented a percussion concert.

The brothers' two-week reunion—Dan and Sam spent two more days together after Birthright's schedule concluded—delighted their father David, who himself served in the IDF in the early 1970s and

fought in the Yom Kippur War.

"It's a fantastic opportunity for them to be together," said David, a psychologist at Chicago's Jesse Brown Veterans Affairs Medical Center. As to Sam's military service, he added, "It's very moving, at times, for me to think about what he's doing. I kind of choke up and feel proud. In a sense, he's fulfilled part of what I did and gone beyond."

Aside from catching up with Sam, Dan reconnected with Israel, which he'd last visited in 2009 as a 17-year-old.

"It's been great to see Israel as an adult and good to be back [for the first time] since Sam's been here," Dan said. Sam's *aliyah* was "a big decision," he added, "so I've learned about the culture, about his decision. It's helped me understand it."

"It's so valuable for me to see Israel with him. It's so educational, because he knows so much about the country, the food, the culture. It's enriching for me. It helps me understand his life so much better," said Dan, who, despite the cold afternoon, was wearing shorts, as was Sam.

"Also, watching him explain American culture to Israelis is really fascinating. He can communicate with them in Hebrew. On Birthright, Sam was a valuable participant, because he was one decision away from being an American on this trip, not an Israeli. Everyone has asked him, 'Why are you here?' The cultural gap that exists between Israelis and Americans—Sam's right in the middle."

Sam attested to feeling similarly, saying he could "easily be on the other side" and be experiencing Israel as a visitor rather than as a host.

As to serving as a resource for the group's Americans, many visiting the country for the first time, "I love talking

about Israel," Sam explained. "I have a lot in common with all these people in different ways."

He added: "I love how my life turned out in Israel."

The boys' Israel roots run deep. Their late grandmother, a native of Des Moines, lived in pre-state Israel, returned to America, and then moved back to Israel in the 1970s. Sam regularly joins their grandmother's sister, Ora Rivlin, for Shabbat dinner at her Ramat Aviv home, near Tel Aviv. The sisters' first cousin is Israel's current president, Reuven Rivlin.

Attending Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago, the Eisenbergs explained, they and their sister Ruth learned to speak Hebrew well and were exposed to Zionism.

Sam's joining the IDF sprang from that upbringing, since, he said, "I was very passionate about Israel."

When he decided to enlist, "my parents weren't hypocrites; they wouldn't tell me, 'You can't do that,'" he said.

What they said before this trip, though, was this: Write home. So, Dan and Sam regularly sent photographs to the family's WhatsApp group of places Birthright took them.

"Their mother demanded a selfie every day—she really did," David said, speaking of his wife, Karen Lobl. "It's great to see them together. We're sort-of along there with them." ■

Registration for summer Birthright Israel trips is now open at www.israelwith-israelis.com.

JUF has provided financial support to Birthright Israel since its inception and provides extensive follow-up programming upon participants' return to Chicago.

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