

## Living Together in One Big House

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2009  
Family Service

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What did you do this summer?

I bet no one can guess what I did this summer!

I went to Hebrew school! For seven weeks. A rabbi goes to Hebrew school... That's strange, isn't it? But not really. When you are lucky enough to be a rabbi, sometimes you get to take long vacations to learn more, and I decided I wanted to learn more Hebrew. So I went to a college in Vermont that has very famous language schools. There is one for Spanish, one for French, one for Chinese, one for Japanese, one for Arabic, for all different languages, and there is one for Hebrew.

And what is special about the school is that everyone who goes promises that they will only speak, read, write, and listen to the language they want to learn. That meant I couldn't read American newspapers, I couldn't listen to American music or radio, I couldn't watch American television. Everything I did was in Hebrew except my phone calls to my grown-up children and to my mom. Even my phone calls to my husband were in Hebrew! I was in class for five hours a day, and I had three hours of homework every night – for seven weeks! It was hard!

I lived in a big house with all the other students. Most of them were much younger than I am. Some of the students were Jewish, some of them were Christian, some of them were Moslem. They wanted to learn Hebrew for different reasons. Some wanted to move to Israel, and others wanted to learn Hebrew because Hebrew is an important language to know if you want to study religion or politics.

My room was pretty small. All it had was a narrow bed, a dresser, a closet, and a desk. No curtains, nothing on the wall, pretty boring. I shared a bathroom with the ten other young people who lived on my floor. My room at home is so much nicer than this room this summer.

Sometimes we watched Israeli television in Hebrew. Sometimes we saw movies in Hebrew. And sometimes we listened to stories in Hebrew, children's stories. I heard a story I really liked, so I thought I would tell it to you. It was written by a very famous Israeli writer and poet named Lea Goldberg who came to Israel even before it was a state and when Israel was a very young country.

The story is called *Dira La-haskir, An Apartment for Rent*:

*In a beautiful valley, in a middle-sized town, among vineyards and fields, there stood an apartment building with five floors.*

*Who lived in the building?*

*On the first floor was a fat hen. All day long she stayed at home, lolling around her room. She was so fat she could hardly move!*

*On the second floor lived a cuckoo bird. All day long she would run around, visiting her children who lived in different buildings in the town.*

*On the third floor lived a beautiful black cat with a ribbon on her neck.*

*On the fourth floor lived a squirrel, happily cracking and munching on nuts.*

*On the fifth floor lived a mouse, but a week ago he packed up and left. No one knew why.*

*So the animals who lived in the building wrote a sign, stuck a nail above the door, and hung the sign on the wall that said: "Apartment for Rent."*

*Then, through paths of the fields and roads of the town, new tenants came to see the apartment.*

*First came an ant. She climbed to the fifth floor, opened the door and looked around. All the neighbors came out of their apartments, gathered around her, and asked: "Do you like the rooms?"*

*"They are nice."*

*"Do you like the kitchen?"*

*"It is nice."*

*"Do you like the hallway?"*

*"It is nice."*

*"Then come and live with us, ant."*

*"No, I won't."*

*"Why?"*

*"I don't like the neighbors. How can I, an ant, live in the same house with a lazy hen. I work too hard."*

*The hen was hurt.*

*The ant went away and then a rabbit came.*

*She hopped up to the fifth floor, opened the door, stood inside, and looked around.*

*All the neighbors came out of their apartments, gathered around her, smiled, and asked:  
“Do you like the rooms?”*

*“They are nice.”*

*“Do you like the kitchen?”*

*“It is nice.”*

*“Do you like the hallway?”*

*“It is nice.”*

*“Then come live with us, rabbit.”*

*“No, I won’t.”*

*“Why?”*

*“I don’t like the neighbors. How can I, a mother of twenty bunnies, live together with a cuckoo bird who doesn’t even live with her children. They all grew up in different nests!”*

*The cuckoo bird was hurt .*

*The rabbit went away and a pig came.*

*He saw the sign “Apartment for Rent,” and after he read it, he rolled up, climbed the stairs, and opened the door. There he stood, looking around with his small eyes at the wall, the ceiling, and the windows.*

*All the neighbors came out of their apartments, gathered around him, smiled, and asked:*

*“Do you like the rooms?”*

*“They are nice.”*

*“Do you like the kitchen?”*

*“It is nice, but it is not dirty enough!”*

*“Do you like the hallway?”*

*“It is nice.”*

*“Then come live with us, pig.”*

*“No, I won’t.”*

*“Why?”*

*“I don’t like the neighbors. How can I, a pig, white, the son of whites from the beginning of time, live together with a black cat. This doesn’t suit me! No way! No how!”*

*“Go away, pig, this doesn’t suit us either. We don’t want to live with you. No way. No how!”*

*The pig went away and a nightingale came.*

*He climbed singing to the top floor, opened the door, and looked at the walls and at the ceiling.*

*All the neighbors came out of their apartments, gathered around him, smiled, and asked:*

*“Do you like the rooms?”*

*“They are nice.”*

*“Do you like the kitchen?”*

*“It is nice.”*

*“Do you like the hallway?”*

*“It is nice.”*

*“Then come live with us, nightingale.”*

*“No, I won’t. I don’t like the neighbors. How can I sit quietly and calmly all day when a squirrel keeps cracking and munching nuts. The noise he makes is horrible, ear-splitting!”*

*The squirrel was hurt.*

*And the nightingale went on his way.*

*Then a dove came. She flew to the top floor, opened the door, and looked around.*

*“Do you like the rooms?”*

*“The rooms are quite narrow.”*

*“Do you like the kitchen?”*

*“It is nice, but too small.”*

*“Do you like the hallway?”*

*“The hallway is full of shade. It is very dark.”*

*“So you won’t live us then?” asked the other animals.*

*“Of course I will, and gladly. Because what I like are the neighbors – the good, red-combed hen, the beautiful cuckoo bird, the impeccably clean cat, the life-loving nut-munching squirrel. I know that we can all live together happily and peaceably in such good company.”*

*So the dove rented the apartment and there she sat every day, cooing in her room and visiting with her neighbors.*

*And so, in a beautiful valley in a middle-sized town, among vineyards and fields, stands a building with five floors. And in this building to this day, live all the good neighbors together, happily and peaceably.*

I really liked that story. It made me think about Israel when it was young, and even now, with all the different kinds of people who live there, from different countries, with different backgrounds, and how each one of them is special. And it made me think about my dorm this summer. The room was too small, the walls too boring, the bathroom too crowded, but the people I lived with were so interesting and so different, each with his or her own special talents and gifts. We each had a white board on the door to our rooms, and most of the students drew pictures on their boards, with their names and a picture of something special about them.

So that’s what I want you to do now. Imagine that you and your family lived in that apartment building. Imagine that each family hung a flag outside the door with something on the flag that tells something special about that family, something the family loves to do together or something that stands out about that family. Maybe it is a word or many words; maybe it is a picture. Let’s take a few minutes. Talk with your family about what makes you special – why someone would want to live next door to you, what are some special gifts about your family – and make a flag.

Who wants to show us what your flag is?

Temple Emanuel is like that apartment building, with all these different flags – lots of different kinds of people here together, with very special gifts. We don't pray by ourselves in Judaism; we pray with each other. Together we are even better than by ourselves. In fact, whenever we come together, God is there too. That is part of our name: Emanuel: God is here, among us.