My daughter Jennifer joined the Peace Corps soon after graduating from college.

The Peace Corps application process was an interesting one. Jennifer was asked to list three preferred countries, but ultimately they needed someone who was fluent in Spanish for an opening in Nicaragua, for that’s where they wanted to send her. Having grown up in the Southwest and having minored in Spanish in college, Jennifer was indeed fluent. But Nicaragua?

Weighed down by a large backpack, and with purse and straw hat in hand, Jennifer flew to Managua, where she was met by a Peace Corps employee who drove her to the administrative office.

First, there was a training period that involved living for two weeks with a host family while she learned the Peace Corps protocols and made preparations for the two-year placement. Jennifer requested an assignment where there hadn’t been any previous Peace Corps workers.

She didn’t want to fill someone else’s shoes; she wanted to blaze her own trail. That’s how she was posted to Las Palomas.

Jennifer had been living in Las Palomas for about four months when I knew it was time for a visit.

The flight from Miami to Managua was short and uneventful. In Managua, I transferred to a small prop plane; at least it was a twin-prop. There were two other passengers besides me.

The captain landed smoothly on a grass airstrip. Jennifer was supposed to meet me there, but I saw no signs of any waiting greeters. I walked over to the picnic table under the veranda – the closest thing to an edifice at the “airport” – and plopped myself down.

While I waited for Jennifer, I wondered what I’d do if she didn’t show up. We didn’t have an alternate plan. To my relief and immense gratitude, Jennifer soon came over to me, huffing and puffing, and almost knocked me over with her hug.

We walked down the path she had taken to get here. The trek to the bus stop was only the beginning of an arduous journey. Once we boarded the bus, we stood, waiting for two seats to open up. Passenger after passenger boarded and departed, live chickens under one arm and bags of food under the other.

After a torturous ordeal of several hours during which the bus snaked down rutted mountain roads, we finally arrived at our stop. How she knew that the wooden chair at the dirt-road juncture was our stop, I still haven’t figured out.

We hiked a mile up the muddy path until we got to a corner market. “Welcome to Las Palomas,” Jennifer announced with pride.

It’s a good thing she told me we had arrived because all I saw was a rickety one-room wooden shack with a hand-painted sign that said “Mercado.” We continued walking uphill until we stood looking up at her house, Jennifer beaming a smile of welcome.
The house was little more than a wooden box on stilts. It had two rooms, a living room and a bedroom. The mezuzah on the front door was surely the only one for hundreds of miles.

The kitchen – a fire pit and worktable with a thatched roof overhead – was outside. The bathroom was an outhouse situated down the hill.

Jennifer offered coffee. No espresso machine here. She took her machete and whacked a mesquite log until she had a bundle of kindling wood, put a metal pot on top of the chicken-wire grate, and boiled water for coffee. We took our two cups inside and were sitting at the table in her living room when we heard someone at the door.

Jennifer hopped up to greet the visitor. “Hola, Padre. Pase.”

My Spanish is a bit rusty, but I knew she was welcoming the preacher, not only because she referred to him as “padre” but because he was wearing the telltale clerical collar.

Jennifer quickly explained to me that the preacher was fascinated by her Jewishness. Neither he nor anyone else in the village of 670 residents had ever met a Jew.

When he found out Jennifer was Jewish, he begged for details of the Temple and the sacrifices. Jennifer told him that the Temple no longer existed, and therefore we were no longer able to offer the sacrifices.

To my utter astonishment, the preacher started sobbing. I watched as he laid his head on his arms and cried from his very soul. Suddenly he jumped up and begged me agitatedly in Spanish to please tell him it wasn’t so, that the Temple still existed in Jerusalem.

Then, spent, he sat back down, his head on the table, and asked if we would give him a few minutes alone. Jennifer and I stepped outside, but through the paneless windows we heard his painful sobbing, then his pleading… to whom I wasn’t sure.

Eventually, the preacher came outside with his head lowered, wiping his tears on his sleeve. He couldn’t even say “adios” as he walked heavily down the path, his life forever altered.

That was a life-changing moment for me. If only I could cry for the destruction of our Holy Temple as the padre had. Every Tisha B’Av, I distinctly recall his tear-streaked face and reddened eyes, and even more his expression of genuine pain at hearing the tragic news that we no longer had our Holy Temple. I too now cry on Tisha B’Av.

How unfortunate that it took a preacher from Nicaragua to provide tangible inspiration, to show me how to mourn for the Temple.

A version of this article originally appeared in Ami Magazine.

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