Q&A 50 STATES

RACHEL AND LEAH BLEICH

BY CHAYA SARA BEN SHACHAR

Can you name all 50 states? Rachel and Leah Bleich can...they visited all of them! *Aim!* spoke to Rachel and Leah to find out all about their incredible adventures!



Leah and Rachel in Kansas, at the very center of mainland America.



Rachel and Leah in California, enjoying a view of the Golden Gate Bridge.

HI RACHEL AND LEAH. CAN YOU TELL US HOW YOUR ADVENTURES BEGAN?

RACHEL: I'm nine now—but it all started when I was just three years old. We had visited around ten states—lots of them very close by—and my parents decided to set a goal of visiting all 50. For six years, on *Yamim Tovim*, midwinter breaks, and other vacations, we'd tour one, two, or three states at a time—until we reached them all!

LEAH: I'm seven now. I was one when we first started visiting the states. Even before Rachel and I were born, our parents loved traveling and visited lots of places. After we were born, they didn't stop—they took us along! I obviously don't remember the beginning, but I do have lots of memories that start from when I was around four.

HOW DID YOU BALANCE THE TRIPS WITH SCHOOL?

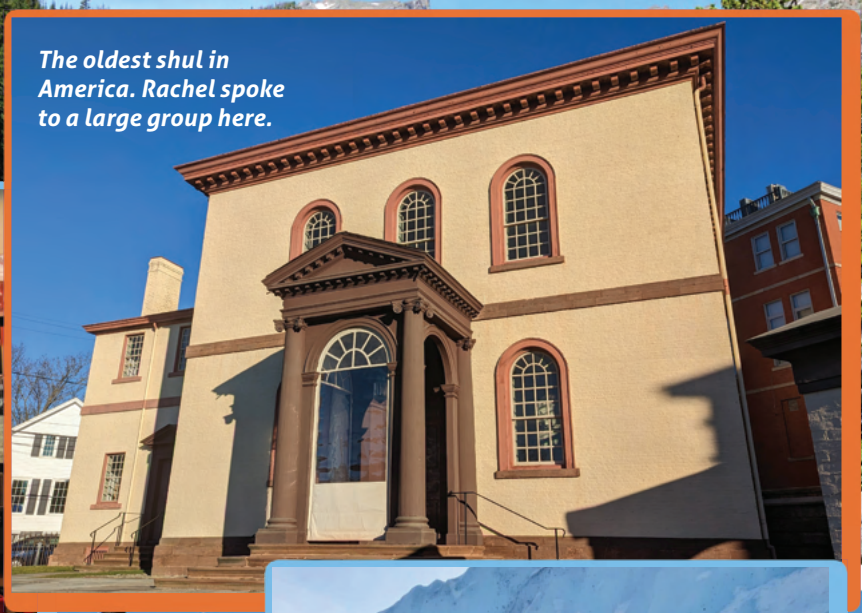
RACHEL: Leah and I are our only siblings. We live in Monsey, New York. We used to go to Ohr Chodosh, a Montessori school, but then there was a fire there and we started homeschooling. Homeschooling is about learning things by experiencing them, and seeing them is a big part of learning. So, our family trips fit right into that!

HOW DOES YOUR FAMILY USUALLY PLAN TRIPS?

RACHEL: Our parents do a lot of research to decide where to stay and which places to visit. My father also came up with three goals for each state: to visit a *shul* there, to visit the capital, and to sleep there for at least one night. We usually also visit the famous sites in every state, like national parks.

LEAH: We're very experienced at packing for our trips! Rachel and I love staying up late to help our parents get ready, especially when it's way past the time we should be in bed! For food, we take along things like tuna fish and noodle soups if it's going to be a shorter stay; if it's for longer, we take frozen stuff and pots and then kasher the Airbnb we're staying in. Packing clothes is interesting because sometimes the weather is different. When we went to Alaska and Hawaii for Sukkos, we needed to pack both winter and summer clothes! Our parents don't get too worried about it, though, because there's always Walmart.





The oldest shul in America. Rachel spoke to a large group here.

Old-time machines at the Coca-Cola museum.

World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta—a fun museum about Coca-Cola with tons of activities.

TELL US ABOUT SOME OF THE PLACES THAT YOU VISITED.

RACHEL: We saw so many places, it's hard to single out a few. But my favorite four states are New York, Hawaii, Alaska, and Texas. New York, because it's home—and also because we met the governor in the governor's mansion in Albany! Hawaii because it's gorgeous. My father and I went swimming in the ocean there, and we watched the sunset; it was amazing. It's a beautiful, tropical place.

Then there was Alaska. We went for Sukkos, and there was no snowfall. We even went dog mushing, a type of ride with dogs that usually pull a sled—but because there wasn't enough snow on the ground, we rode in carriages instead. We also went hiking on a glacier (an ice mountain) with special shoes and guides.

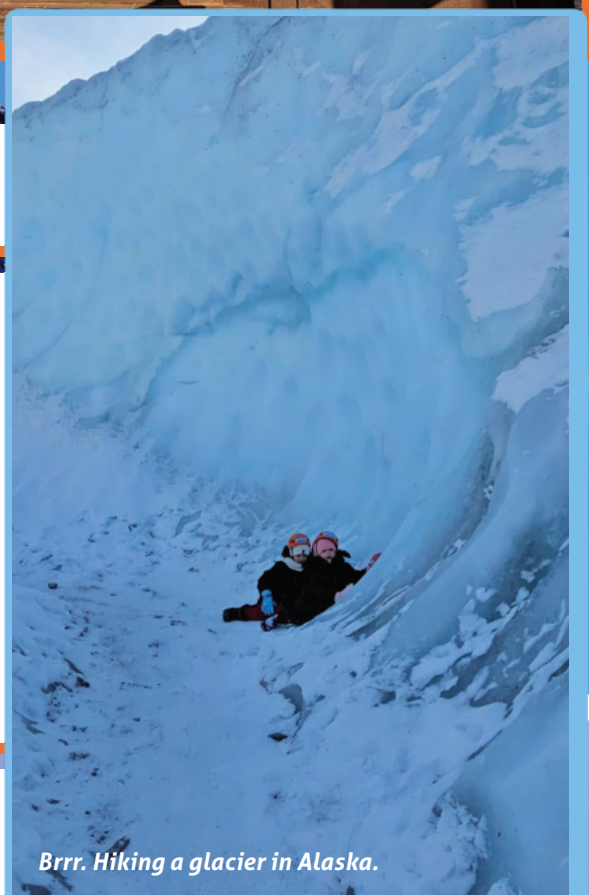
As for Texas, the state is famous for cowboys, and my father and I rode a Longhorn bull there like real cowboys!

LEAH: My favorite places are similar. New York 'cause it's home and we love our home. Hawaii and Alaska because that was such a stunning trip. And Arizona because we went on that trip with friends, which is always so much fun. But one of my favorite places wasn't in those states: it was the

DO YOU OFTEN TRAVEL WITH OTHER PEOPLE?

RACHEL: Some of the time, but not always. Our family usually arranges the trips, and we ask family and friends if they want to come along for the bigger trips. If they can, then they do, which is fun.

LEAH: I really enjoyed the trips we went on with family and friends. Those are the trips that are my favorites.



Brrr. Hiking a glacier in Alaska.

TELL US ABOUT A MEMORABLE SHUL YOU SAW.

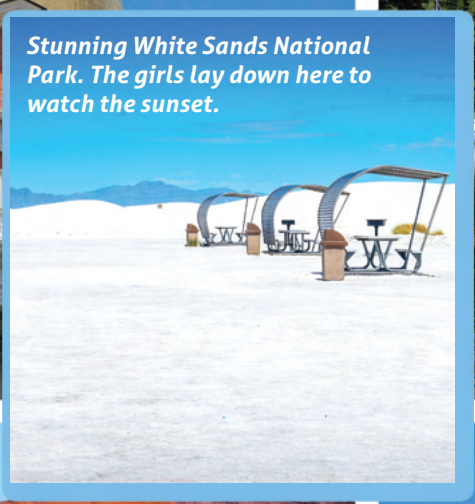
RACHEL: The oldest shul in America, the Touro Synagogue, was built in 1763 in Rhode Island. A tour guide was meant to speak to us there, but his voice was hoarse, so he gave out papers and asked who wanted to read them. I volunteered. We were in Rhode Island with family and friends, a group of about 30 people. I spoke in front of them all!

IMPRESSIVE! WHAT WERE YOUR FAVORITE NATIONAL PARKS?

RACHEL: In New Mexico we visited White Sands National Park, a park with tons of pure white sand that we lay down on to watch the sunset. It was magical. And in Arkansas there was Crater of Diamonds State Park, where we went scavenging for diamonds. In most of the parks, we joined the junior ranger programs. They run scavenger hunts and give out booklets to



The magical Grand Prismatic Spring at Yellowstone National Park.



Stunning White Sands National Park. The girls lay down here to watch the sunset.

fill in. You hand them in to receive an official Junior Park Ranger badge and get sworn in by a real Park Ranger. We have about 20 of those badges.

LEAH: I really liked Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park. There are rainbow-colored hot springs there and geysers too—smoking, hot water that comes out of the earth. I also saw a bison (a buffalo-like animal) there.

WHAT WAS THE LONGEST TRIP THAT YOU EVER WENT ON?

RACHEL: Our trip to Utah and Arizona. It took almost a month. My father found out that in the early 1900s, there was a town in Utah called Clarion with lots of Jews. There was even a Jewish governor in Utah, in 1917, Simon Bamberger. We visited his house. We also knew that there were two Jewish graves in Utah, but we couldn't find them, so we asked the locals if they knew about them. We searched for hours until we finally found an older lady who told us about a farm where the graves were located. She also showed us the ruins of the Jewish school and *shul* from the old community. It was really special.

Utah also has five national parks, called "the Mighty Five," and we visited them all!

LEAH: We also visited Arizona on that trip, which is much hotter than Utah because it's in the south. We visited the Grand Canyon and Saguaro National Park, where we saw so many big cactuses. We also went to the city of Sedona, in Arizona, which has stunning, big red stone formations.



The girls saw many big cactuses at Saguaro National Park.

AND IN BETWEEN ALL THIS YOU'RE HOMESCHOOLED....

RACHEL: Yes. Our basement at home is full of school things for learning. We also have a whiteboard in our kitchen so we know the schedule of the day. My mother teaches us, but a lot we learn in a very hands-on way. Like, we learn math through figuring out how to double recipes and we learn writing by actually writing. I sometimes miss my friends from Ohr Chodosh, my old school, and I try to keep in touch, but these days I also go twice a week to Tifferet, a school with programs for homeschoolers. There I have regular "moros" and get to meet other kids and learn with them, so it's like having the best of both worlds.

LEAH: The longest we've ever been at home without a trip is around three or four months. I really like being homeschooled and having my mother as my teacher and being able to spend so much time together as a family.



The New York State Executive Mansion, where the governor lives. The girls met Governor Kathy Hochul there!

ANY FINAL WORD FOR READERS?

RACHEL: There's so much beauty in America. Hashem made such a gorgeous world for us to enjoy! On our trips we really got to see that.

LEAH: It was lots of fun to see tons of new places and experience new things, but the most amazing thing was the time that we had—time with family, time with friends. That's what made our trips so special.