

Peaceful Hilltop

April 16 1997

[Letter from Jerusalem]

Dear Friends,

"Everybody (at least all Israelis) wants peace." This passes as a truism among Israelis. The Right and Center say the debate is over which tactics will best secure peace. The Left says the question is what compromises you are willing to make, what price you are willing to pay, to obtain peace. The Left argues that the Right's desire to have peace is meaningless because they are unwilling to pay any reasonable price for it. I think the truism is untrue. I think there is a politically potent minority of Israelis (and perhaps some diaspora supporters) who don't want peace no matter how cheaply and painlessly it could be had. These are Jews for whom an essential part of Jewish identity is having mortal enemies. It combines with those settlers who fancy themselves the contemporary equivalents of the Halutzim, the Zionist pioneers of the early 20th century. Their story is made heroic by settling the land in the face of standard pioneering hardships (untamed wilderness, poverty, Indians, etc.) Today's would be Zionist heroes get lovely suburban homes and bypass roads built for them, government subsidized mortgage deals, good schools, etc. They are not about to give up the hostility of the Indians. When we toss in the religious constituency for a Messianic war and their fundamentalist Christian supporters in the US hoping for Armageddon, we see that not everyone wants peace, not even a peace that was a victory.

Of course, most people around here really do want peace, or at least to be left alone and not have to think about the Palestinians, neither their suffering nor their potential threat. Although statistically less threatening than the traffic fatality carnage, a suicide bombing makes an intrusive psychological point for weeks afterwards. Ora, the most Daredevil of Baby boomer Americans who don't earn their living as Soldiers of Fortune, confessed to thinking about suicide bombers when she is on a bus. A standard game of mine (and probably half the people in Israel) while on a bus is to assess the other passengers as candidates to blow themselves up on the fast track to Paradise (and don't exclude ethnic "unlikelies" –recall those blond and Asian sympathizers from Red Armies and Factions). Even Isaac told me that while we were all reveling at a fancy crowded restaurant in the Galilee, he had an image of the place exploding in the middle a rousing song. The other week in the mall I couldn't shake myself from perceiving the scene as the opening scene of some political film (The Battle of Algiers? In the Name of the Father?) in which the crowd noises, bustle, laughter, domestic and commercial byplay--is all

ripped apart by an explosion leaving the camera (me, playing Isherwood) to linger on the torn doll's head in the pool of blood.

This bombing paranoia has its comic elements as well. My car pool to Hebrew classes stopped downtown last week while one of us ran into a building to do a chore. While the rest of us sat in the car waiting, one of us noticed that a passerby had just placed a large package on the street a few yards from us and walked away. This observation immediately caused one of the carpoolers to bolt from the car and run down the block. The others looked at each other and then also hightailed it out of there. I remained. No testament to my courage, but it was cold out, I was comfortable, and I quickly calculated that no bomber would intentionally pick as his target a fairly sparse corner where the only likely victims would be foreigners sitting in a car with an obviously inadequate grasp of Hebrew. But then it occurred to me that if I was wrong, and this was a bomb that would kill me, the opening line of my eulogy would inevitably be "the moron just kept sitting there in the car." So more out of concern for my posthumous reputation for prudence than for concern for my life, I moseyed out of the car. (It turned out not to be a bomb).

As I've implied in previous letters, although ambition and reality may turn Bibi into an effective peacemaker, I think his character and education make him dangerously close to the camp that doesn't want peace no matter how good the deal. The Har Homa construction, while largely explained as a sop to the Right and a stratagem to foreclose the emergence of a genuine Palestinian state, must also be viewed as an intentional act aimed at ending the peace process. It certainly looks that way through Palestinian eyes. The Palestinians I have gotten to know are mostly from Bet Sahur, a village adjacent to Bethlehem and close to Har Homa (the Arab name is Abu Gneem). They have been working through the courts to get this construction stopped for years. Although AM Rosenthal, Charles Krauthammer, and the Israeli propagandists portray Har Homa as just another Jerusalem neighborhood where the question is whether Jews will be allowed to live there or be excluded by anti-Semites, the overwhelmingly obvious reality is that the construction is a development that will exclude Arabs, stuck into the heart of Arab territory, surrounded on three sides by Palestinian villages, that will cut off Arab towns from each other, from Arab Jerusalem, villages from their grazing lands and the north of the west bank from the south (when the intended roads from Har Homa to Maale Adumin are built). A hill right next to Har Homa, Jabu-Al-Dik, is under Israeli control but owned by Palestinians and is as of yet unconfiscated. Some tents have been set up there and Palestinians are now living there as a protest vigil against the Har Homa construction. Some Israelis go there occasionally to stay in a show of solidarity. The other night Ora, I and the kids became the first non-Palestinian family to camp out at the site. Before my parents left from the Israel visit a few days ago, I promised them not to do anything dangerous or stupid, and

then two days later I take the kids for an overnight on Har Homa. But of course, it is probably one of the safest places to camp overnight on earth. For Palestinians it is a showcase of peaceful protest. No bombers or even rock throwers here. The Israelis have it surrounded by soldiers vigilant 24 hours a day. I had no safety concerns. It was an interesting, moving and disheartening experience. Getting to talk with the Palestinians, especially one muckity-muck from Fatah, was fascinating. This fellow had been in Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and Israeli jails as a Fatah activist. He is now an elected member of the Palestinian legislature. From an old patrician Palestinian family, he is married to an ex-wife of King Hussein. We gossiped about Abu Nidal, Aboud Jabril, Saftawi, Arafat, all of whom he knows or knew rather well. He described the evolution of Palestinian strategy--from hijackings (which he claimed never to have supported) to Oslo. Of course, I suspect I was being bullshitted a fair amount by this smooth, charismatic politico. But a late-night campfire on a cold, windswept barren hill, sharing potato chips and tea (he turned down the fake Smores my kids were having) might elicit more candor than other settings. While it was still light, and then again in the morning, Isaac and Dassy played with the Palestinian children who hung out during daylight hours. Palestinians also helped us pitch our tent and brought wood to a little fire we made by our tent. Ora brought a guitar and after we listened to Palestinian songs accompanied by drums and flutes, she played some Israeli peace and Dylan songs. It was a weird but oddly fitting place for *The Times are A'Changin*. The evening itself was beautiful. The night sky was dramatic. Fast moving wind-driven clouds were the backdrop to all the surrounding Palestinian villages: Bethlehem, Bet Sahour, Sur Bahir, Um Tuba, Beit Jala. In some of the surrounding empty hilltops and valleys you could see shepherds or goatherds with their flocks, or a kid driving a donkey. A hundred yards away, at the edge of Har Homa, an isolated house is used by the Israeli Army as a guard house. They are the only Israeli soldiers actually visible from where we were. There is always a soldier on the porch of this house watching the tent vigil site. I am told that when there are only Palestinians at the site they occasionally come over and engage in petty harassment. But the night I was there, the single soldier, no doubt a 19 year-old draftee, standing out on the cold, windy porch all night, added poignancy for me. It was as if the soldier was part of the vigil. In the morning we woke to the sound of steam-shovels and bulldozers working at Har Homa. Your heart sinks at the sound. You can already see dirt roads crisscrossing the mountain. It was the only tree covered mountain in the area. The others are barren, rocky hills. Watching the trees disappear in itself is depressing. Thinking of 6500 apartments, with skyline breaking Israeli style buildings replacing them deepens the depression. Add more traffic coming into Jerusalem from the south, already terrible, and further blighting the lives of Israelis in Talpiyot, Gilo, Baka, etc., the massive disruption and upheaval to local Palestinian society, and the clear threat to hopes for peace, and it is

hard to not conclude that no stupidity can account for the plan; there must be some malignancy in this project.

My hopes lie in conversations I've had with Israelis and Palestinians about the possibility of joint Israeli Palestinian non-violent, Ghandi/King style resistance. Suicide hunger-strikers instead of suicide bombers would, I believe, move Israeli society and grab as many CNN viewers and a lot more American sympathy than throwing stones. As one who doesn't like to skip between meal snacks I'm not well positioned to tell others to starve themselves to death, so I'm holding back on that peace of advice. But even sit-down protesters who were hauled off by Israeli police and soldiers without violently resisting would do a lot. This hope of mine is probably forlorn. I think it was Tip who said that all politics is local, and certainly local Palestinian politics seems unripe for a non-violent resistance movement. It may be too late in the struggle--there is a lot more nihilism about than the idealism needed to sustain that kind of struggle. And local Israeli politics, in which Bibi's right wing coalition partners caused the initiation of Har Homa construction in the first place, might tolerate the violent and brutal suppression of even non-violent protest--leading to a quick escalation of violence all around. I fear that other "local politics" contributes to the general bleakness. You tell me: does Clinton's weakness caused by his scandal ridden administration make him unlikely to read Netanyahu the riot act. I can hardly describe my angry exasperation when I read accounts of ignorant rich American Jews of AIPAC cheering on Netanyahu to pursue suicidal Israeli policies, with cynical, pandering American politicians in tow, assuring Netanyahu that no matter how foolish his policies, from an American or Israeli perspective, as long as the local American politics suggest "pro-Israel" politics is the winning approach, Al Gore Newt Gingrich half of the US Congress and all the rest of the crew known to love Jews and Justice, will back to the hilt Israel ability to engage in ultimately unsustainable policies leading to disaster. But perhaps I've written too long. I'm ranting now. No patience to proofread, hopes this makes a modicum of sense. Next week we hope to go to Istanbul for a short Passover vacation. I need a break in an ideologically secular country. Happy Passover. Mitchell.