

Disneyfication and the Conflict, October 6th 1996

[Letter to friends]

We left Jerusalem Friday Sept 27, after the worst violence in most towns, but before the shit really hit the fan in Jerusalem. We went north and toured the Golan and the Galilee for the week. Some history/culture and lots of kiddie stuff. Parts of the Golan we visited are the places Israeli PR people take visiting bigwigs to impress them with Israel's vulnerability should it give up the Golan. It is impressive. You wouldn't want noisy or inconsiderate neighbors there, let alone long-standing militant enemies. [So staying is not without some security rationale]. Still visiting the Golan one becomes convinced that the primary reluctance to giving it up is that it is such beautiful real estate with considerable recreational and economic assets. One Israeli friend is convinced that most people who have moved to the Golan do so with the expectation that a hoped for withdrawal will lead to a very generous compensation for its settlers. I'm not quite that cynical, and think most of its settlers are genuinely attached to the place I am making that subtle judgement on the basis of bumper stickers.

Our visit to the water parks on the Sea of Galilee (the establishments around the Sea of Galilee make it a cross between Orlando and the Vatican--"Jesus recruited Peter here," next to "the dancing alligator show," with some combining attempts--use your imagination) helped me develop an idea I may have mentioned to some of you that will go a long way to solving the political situation here: Disney should take over sovereignty of Jerusalem. The city would get cleaned up, merchants and the tourist industry would reap the benefits of synergistic marketing, and could you imagine the potential of "character breakfasts" with King David, Jesus, Omar and Geoffrey of Bouillon! A conveyor belt on the Via Dolorosa ends up at the Holy Sepulcher with a holographic reenactment of the crucifixion, with Jesus using the same wise voice Disney gives Lincoln and Mary doing a new Ashman/Mencken song (yeah, I know one of them is dead but this is Jerusalem after all). The beauty of the idea is that it will free up the Israeli Army for where it is really needed--*keeping order in the water parks*. I don't know if the Israeli Army is tough enough or has the firepower for the job but it certainly is needed. An American tort lawyer would think that he'd died and gone to heaven. We had lots of fun and got out uninjured, but it was by far the most dangerous thing we did this past week. If you were worrying about our safety, that is what to worry about.

In some ways you have more access to better information about what's going on here than I do. The daily English paper is to the right of Netanyahu, the Israeli English TV news seems to be quasi government organ, and the English Jordanian TV the most personal organ that King Hussein has. My Hebrew is just barely good enough to entice me to watch the Israeli TV's Hebrew coverage and analysis, but not good enough to actually understand anything beyond that there is some hot name calling and accusations going on. But here are some opinions and observations I picked up from my limited circle of locals: Netanyahu didn't expect to win so he is completely at sea, since he had no plan upon coming into office. In addition, he is torn between his loyalty to his father, an old Betar ideologue without whose advice he doesn't make a move, and the security apparatus which is telling him he must go forward with Oslo. It seems to me that the overall logic of the

situation--especially economic but also the logic of internal Israeli politics- would pull toward continuing Oslo. But internal *Likud* politics and Bibi's whole past has a different logic. And then there is the probability that logic has nothin to do with it.

Most of my Israeli friends, outside the peace activists, are disgusted with Netanyahu, curse him deeply, but still end up with a sort of patriotic defensiveness when I express dismay at Israeli behavior, especially over Army violence. Of course, the men are all in or recently were in the Army and feel a deep solidarity and pride in it. Peace activists' anger is more widely aimed at the Israeli body politic which elected Bibi, who appears to be beneath their contempt. "How could we have elected him?" They are also concerned with the corruption among the Palestinians and the split between the PLO outsiders who returned with Arafat and whom he trusts, and the people who have been here for the last 40 years and constitute the real local leadership. Still everyone in Israel from the far left to the part of Likud that now, at least publicly, seems to include Bibi, accept that Arafat is the indispensable one.

Whether it is unreadiness, inexperience (no one in this government had ever met with any PA official in his or her life) or ideologically inspired foot-dragging, or intentional undermining, there is agreement that the Government has managed to harm the Peace process as much as all of the left could have feared. The far Right is displeased because he has explicitly abandoned peace, the near right think he has been inept in his maneuvers, so so far he is getting pretty poor reviews all around. I'm actually less despondent here than I think I would be in the States. Firstly, the chance for on the ground activism is an outlet for frustration and seeing that half the Israelis are on the side of sanity and most others are at least sympathetic, gives one hope. Also living in this Apartheidoid city, already as divided as a city can get without fences, makes me think that an accommodation on Jerusalem, the most contentious issue, requires, materially speaking little more than a recognition of reality.

Of course, most of the *meshugass* is over symbols, and my Marxist background and Freudian ignorance leaves me unable to fathom that. Here's where I think we need Disney's expertise again. Let me know if you don't want your E-mail cluttered with future rambling thoughts.

Mitchell