
Home to Babylon

June 13, 1997

[Letter from Jerusalem]

Dear Friends,

We have been living in Jerusalem for almost a year. As our departure approaches we are frequently asked, "So how has your year been?" Lurking beneath this natural inquiry I always sense another question "Would you consider staying here?" Sometimes this second question doesn't lurk but is frankly asked, and at other times I am surely mistaking a straightforward question about our year here. But I do think I'm right to feel it is often the unspoken background to the question, and usually the possibility of our "Aliyah" to Israel does arise in the ensuing conversation.

In a way it is a puzzling question. Besides being a country of great immigration Israel is a country of great emigration. Those who don't permanently emigrate make great efforts to spend as much time out of the country as possible. Years abroad are commonplace. Foreign vacations are too ubiquitous to be explained solely by Israelis' curiosity about other cultures or landscapes. One needs a break from this country. So it is a little odd that you should have to explain why you are not choosing to stay here.

Courtesy thwarts my impulse to answer "Stay here! Are you nuts!" When I'm being asked by an American who has settled here I try to be especially careful to avoid any implicit disapproval of their choice while explaining why it definitely is not what I will choose. I emphasize my loves in and of America--family, friends, mother tongue, mother culture, the inalienable right to pursue happiness, etc.

The only motive I would have (in present, Judeophile America circumstances) to emigrate to Israel is to be at the center of current Jewish historical action. I favor a quiet *physical* life but am attracted by the hubbub of portentous public debate and newspaper headlines. But being in the Eye of Jewish history isn't temptation enough to suffer a degradation in almost every other dimension of the good life. There are certainly attractive people here for whom I have grown much affection. Israelis and Palestinians I've gotten to know are warm, funny, intelligent and extremely generous. Israelis are more volatile, Palestinians more urbane, but that may appear so to me because I've met a wider range of Israelis. The Palestinians I've had substantial relations with have all been highly educated.

But the private personal virtues of the population is overwhelmed by the harshness of public life--surly, rude, chaotic, selfish, and dirty on the

day to day level. More ominously, marbled with dishonesty, injustice and murder. The Netanyahu and Arafat regimes (but it predates their rule) both fairly described as criminal.

So the interesting question for me is why does any American Jew choose to settle here. Of course, the large majority don't. But even excluding those who fall in love with the (rare) immovable Israeli, or have a unique job opportunity here (e.g. Bibi), there are thousands of American (and other Western) Jews who make Aliyah; they voluntarily go to a country that is poorer, less free and less comfortable than their native soil. Not to mention a rotten school system, all pervading and unending military service and the sad state of civil society I mentioned above. Clearly their motive had something to do with being Jewish. Most immigrants to Israel come from countries where it is even worse to live than Israel or are the descendants of such people. Being Jewish was a factor only insofar as it was shit to be Jewish where they were when they were there. But how does being Jewish move an American Jew here, when we are right up there with the Episcopalians as the ruling class?

The best I can make out is that some come to be Jews and some come to stop being Jews. The former don't want to search for kosher restaurants, miss work on Jewish holidays, or check for Hechshars on food labels in the supermarket. If being a religious Jew is central to your life it is easier and more convenient to do it here than in America (Brooklyn excepted). But you can also stop being Jewish here. Perhaps that is a contentious way to put it. I should rather say you can escape the condition of being a Jew in the diaspora. Since the Jewish identity I cherish is Diaspora Jew, by wishing to escape that, many of these American Jews settled in Israel are to me people who want to stop being Jews. They want to live in a country where their Jewishness is of no significance except for making them part of the dominant majority. In America one may note that your bus driver, your boss, your neighbor or child's playmate is Jewish. You may also wonder if your Jewishness is being noted. None of this is a concern in Israel. Nor must you expend any effort to be Jewish or feel anxious about whether you should make an effort to be Jewish. The state holidays, the school plays, the street names, the pop music--all establish you firmly in Jewish life. In other words, you can come to Israel and forget about being Jewish without feeling you have in the least abandoned the Jews. I believe that some people find the burden of being a Diaspora Jew so great that they are willing to trade it for the burden of being an Israeli. As one who most delights in the diasporarity of his Jewishness (indeed one of the things I would most miss if I left America is American Jews) it's a trade that is hard for me to empathize with.

Before leaving I wanted to visit the heart of the darkness so I went to

Hebron. Its holiness to Muslims and Jews derives mostly from the presence of the Machpela Cave, the traditional burial site of Abraham. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah (Rachel is on the outskirts of Jerusalem.) There is a mosque and synagogue complex over the cave. It used to be that one could move freely between the synagogue and mosque, but ever since the Goldstein massacre of Muslim worshippers in 93 heavy metal partitions divide the mosque and synagogue. Jews are not allowed in the mosque, Muslims forbidden in the synagogue. I snuck into the mosque side with a group of Swedish Christians by remaining opportunistically silent when the group was asked, first by the Israeli soldier, then by the Muslim guide, if there were any Jews in the group. My silence made me feel a little bit like Peter denying Jesus, but then I switched imagery and pretended to be a nineteenth century English gentleman adventurer sneaking into Mecca. I stopped that fantasy when I started to fear beheading. In the event, I may be the only Jew who has seen both the mosque and synagogue at Machpela in the last four years. They do well as symbols of the insanity here. A pretty but not spectacular mosque with holes in the floor to look down at the burial sites of the Patriarchs, mythical characters only slightly more likely to have even existed than they are to be buried together here. These holes in the floor compete with the bullet holes in the walls and ornaments as tourist attractions. Goldstein's official shrine is two miles away in Kiryat Arba, but its here that the tour guides will do most to keep his memory alive. The synagogue side has more worshippers than the mosque side, more I suspect than it did before the Goldstein massacre. These are the sort of Jews who yearn for a return of the Temple sacrifices. It is probably unfair to them, but I wonder if the Goldstein murders and "martyrdom" does not play to their ritualistic sacrificial urges; the murders have sanctified the site for them as much as the putative pre-historic internments.

A few of you had asked about the red heifer, which I hadn't heard of till recently. There is so much of that stuff going around that it is usually ignored by the Israeli press. But because for some reason this particular item was picked up by the foreign media it finally did get some play here. It is part of a general upsurge of religious irrationalism. Wonder working Rabbis have the prestige and following here of Astrologers in India or evangelists in America, and more influence on politics than at least the latter do. It is not surprising. Decades following calamities in Jewish history-- the Sabbateans after Chmelnicki, Lurianic Kaballah after the expulsion—there is a tendency toward messianism and irrationalism. After Adolph it is amazing that there is any worldly sanity among world Jewry at all. But the portion of it remaining in Israel seems to be fighting a losing battle. The result gives the place a kind of a "last days" feel. What I imagine the atmosphere is like in a society on verge of catastrophic dissolution. Genuine "Last Days" can only be labeled in retrospect, but many of the standard symptoms that I associate with Weimar in the 20s, or Rome in the 4th century (Fellinis version), are there.

1) Frantic and corrupt moneymaking: a billion dollar highway, widely acknowledged as useless, ugly and polluting, will be built because there is an irresistible boondoggle. Driving License Examiners regularly take bribes to give unqualified drivers licenses as Israel has the highest per capita road deaths in the West. 2) Militant, hysterical nationalism: the calendar is replete with holidays celebrating the armed glory and might of the state. War dead are memorialized at every opportunity. A view of Israeli and Jewish history both paranoid and triumphalist is propagated at every turn. 3) Religious irrationalisms that are romantic, reactionary and militant. The Temple mount faithful want to destroy the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque and rebuild the Temple to renew sacrifices, Lubavitchers claim the late Rebbe Schneersohn is the Messiah, Nachmanites await the 19th century Bratslaver Rebbe's return. 4) Intolerance and civil strife: Conservative and reform Jews are physically attacked when they pray at the Western wall, police claim they are unable to protect them. Sephardim hold violent demonstrations to protest the singling out of their guy Deri for prosecution in the Bar On Scandal. Haredi burn Israeli flags on Lag B'omer. Scalding tea is thrown at politicians, feces thrown at women Rabbis. Wildcat strikes occur every other day. 5) The government is factious and known to be corrupt. Policies of national importance turn on petty interests and squabbles of coalition actors who have little in common beyond a desire for office. 6) Mostly the "last days" feel comes from the pervasive despair, hopelessness and sense of impending disaster that so many Israelis and Palestinians I meet express. Israelis who say they never lost hope before, now say they have. A prominent conservative Rabbi I know, here for over 30 years speaks of being physically ill when he contemplates Israel future. A sabra kibbutnik friend, finally mustered out of the Army reserves at 48, has trouble sleeping when he thinks of his son, almost 16, heading into the Army. He talks obsessively of leaving the country. His wife fears Syrian missiles. Isaac's Russian Trumpet teacher hates late night phone calls. His son is a Navy diver. Hardly a young Palestinian I've met isn't scheming to find a way to settle abroad. Those who aren't excitedly awaiting Armageddon, agonize about the desperateness of the situation and what they perceive as their powerlessness to do anything about it. Palestinians feel constrained by a liberation struggle's need for unity to resist Arafat's corrupt and lawless leadership. Accusations of disloyalty to the state and the "democratic will" expressed in the last election constrain the potentially saving activities of sane Israelis. There is an overall sense that we are going down with a ship in which we are helpless to prevent our crew mates puncturing holes in the hull. We watch them let in the water and can only cluck our tongues in bewilderment at their foolishness and in impotent resentment that we must drown with them.

I fear I've painted a distorted picture of everyday life here. Most

people of course go about their business in no obvious despair. We have attended joyous weddings and celebrations of babies' births. People go to mindless movies, good restaurants, worry about school exams, and job prospects like everywhere else. Indeed, this past week we had a great time during Shavous at Kibbutz Hatzerim. It was an early Zionist dream come true. A green, lovely, prosperous agricultural settlement, flourishing in the center of the Negev desert. The holiday is celebrated in dance and song, showing off their livestock, wheat and vegetable produce, as well as their advanced agricultural technology manufacture exported to the whole world. This traditional Jewish holiday, primarily thought of by religious Jews as celebrating Gods giving of the Torah to the Jews, is celebrated on the Kibbutz without a whisper of the Torah. Instead the minor and ancient tradition of the harvest festival is elevated to the whole meaning. Shavous becomes a pagan ritual, devoid of the sex and blood, hewn from Jewish sources for the needs of an enlightened, modern people--self sufficient and at home in their own land. Ben Gurion kvelling in his grave. Not a Haredi or Arab in sight.

But not completely out of mind. The secular religious tension, unspoken, hovers on the horizon of even Hatzerim's consciousness. And beneath and behind it all is the great, unresolved scandal of Israeli history, the Palestinians. It is their existence which must be ignored even by people of good will whenever they want to engage in national or communal celebrations. It is this willful ignorance which at bottom is so trying and distressing. Maybe it is just a more acute form of the human condition. We all have to put aside the injustices and cruelties in which we are complicit to get on. At least those of us who are not saints.

Last week we went to a concert at the Mormon Center for Near Eastern Studies (blessed neutral ground). The tiny Campus is beautiful, the buildings' arches growing out of the northern Jerusalem hills. The concert hall, shallow but wide, has a wall of glass running the width of the stage behind the performers. The audience sits looking at a panorama of Jerusalem. You watch the sun set and must give credence to the sobriquet of Golden Lightened Jerusalem. Omar's Mosque, Suliemans Walls, the Great Jerusalem Synagogue, the Steeples of the Orthodox Churches East of the City and the Towers of the Hotels west of it all are there before you. Gray haired, tastefully groomed Yeches, the remaining remnant of refugees from Hitler's 1930s Germany, (however merited their reputation for anality, to my mind among the most civilized and admirable of groups to have ever lived), whisper in German before the program begins. As dark falls the lights in the city come up. I am listening to Bach's Cello Sonatas. I can't conceive of a better setting for an aesthetic experience. And I sit there thinking of the Palestinian Jerusalemites who are having their identity cards confiscated and being

expelled from their native city.

We return home next Tuesday. But it will not be easy to forget Jerusalem. If I could it might be worth having my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, just a bit.

Love,
Mitchell