

## Chickens Coming Home to Roost March 17, 2023

I am recently back in Boston following a week of the typical tourist pleasures that Portugal richly provides, and three weeks in Israel/Palestine, a rather different kettle of fish.

This email, only about the I/P part of the trip, is too long, too short, and very far from my ideal of objectivity. Too long as an email, too short to contain all that I think worth relating, and too impressionistic—impressions derived from a wildly unrepresentative sampling of Israeli and Palestinian opinions and lives, to be anything other than a blind man's report about an elephant he touched for a few moments. I may attempt a coherent political blog post in a few weeks,\* but for now a description of a random selection of my experiences that had political overtones.

1. The Museum of Islamic Art in West Jerusalem is under Israeli control but appears to be staffed by Palestinian Israelis. It currently has an exhibition of Iranian women's resistance to the Ayatollahs' theocratic repression, mostly videos and other images gleaned from social media. It is very moving, and also striking in implicit allusion to Palestinian resistance to Israeli rule. The colors of the Iranian flag (Green, White and Red) that the women protest under, evoke the Palestinian (Green White, Red and Black) flag, the Iranian soldiers they confront look not that different than the Israeli soldiers Palestinians face, the power imbalance is similar, the liberation rhetoric employed nearly interchangeable. One wonders if this exhibition is the product of Palestinian curators who, like the politically suppressed often do, use metaphors to avoid censors, or simply Israeli authorities' obliviousness to the obvious parallels. The irony of the whole thing is heightened by the museum's address—No. 2 HaPalmach Street, the Palmach being the elite Hagana unit instrumental in the establishment of Israel.

2. In Jerusalem I attend a Megillah reading Erev (Shushan) Purim, at one of the very few Reform (hence relatively liberal) synagogues in Israel. The atmosphere is very much like it would be at family friendly liberal synagogue in Massachusetts. The young Rabbi begins the service acknowledging that it will be a challenge to be appropriately joyous given the political crisis, and that while the holiday celebrates a potential genocide avoided, the actual genocide approved of in the Book of Esther—the Jewish people's killing of 70,000 of its enemies—is asserted to be a troubling warning. The service ends with a peace song—“Lo Yisa Goy” –“Nation shall not lift their sword against nation, and they will study war no more.” However, despite the liberal synagogue's prayers, Purim for Palestinians under Israeli rule, is *somewhat* like what Easter was for Jews under medieval European and Czarist rule—a dangerous holiday, a holiday when drunkenness is a duty and the killing of enemies before they kill you is fondly remembered. Baruch Goldstein massacred Muslims at prayer on Purim. Part of the “protective presence” work I was modestly involved with, was about avoiding violence on Purim. I spent some of Purim in a neighborhood in East Jerusalem, having been told that the presence of “internationals,” lessens the chance of anti-Arab violence. I guess it worked. I saw no violence, or even any other Jews where I was. Or maybe the very bad press for the Huwara pogrom (I am happy to defend that label) inhibited potential holiday thuggery. (Peter Beinart has a powerful video post on this theme that I highly recommend [https://peterbeinart.substack.com/p/the-amalek-in-us?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email#play](https://peterbeinart.substack.com/p/the-amalek-in-us?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email#play).)

3. I have no idea of the extent, but some Israelis are experiencing familial “milchama achim” (literally “brothers war,” the Hebrew term for civil war). A leftist family, good friends of ours, has the sister furious with her brother because he was serving, rather than refusing to serve, on the West Bank while doing reserve call-up. The brother is hardly a fan of the occupation, but wouldn’t abandon his unit, whom he has been with through thick and thin for twenty years. The sister will not live in Israel as long as the occupation exists. A young Jewish Israeli man I spent a day with in the South Hebron Hills (escorting a Palestinian shepherd) has had a serious breach with his family because of his work defending Palestinians from settler violence. Another Jewish Israeli protector of Palestinians, doing such work for almost fifteen years now, said he felt alienated not only from family, but all of Israeli society.

4. Listening to Israelis and Palestinians describe their shared reality vividly brings home the capacity of alternative descriptions, each factually accurate, to leave very different impressions. The bombing of Pizza restaurants, Seders, buses, --rockets from Lebanon or Gaza—Palestinian rejection of various partition plans—all come up frequently when discussing Israeli/Palestinian politics with even quite liberal (albeit not with truly radical) Israeli Jews. “Security” in Israeli politics plays like crime does in American, only raised exponentially. It is a trump card, and no Israeli politician has any realistic shot at power if they are perceived as weak on national security. Security for Jews is at the heart of Israel’s story of the “conflict” with Palestinians, along with the end of a long painful exile. Any Palestinian who kills a Jew is a “terrorist.”

*Anu*, a well done museum of Jewish culture and history, never uses the term “Historic Palestine,” always “the Land of Israel.” *Hatzerim*, one of the few remaining genuinely socialist Kibbutzim, tells its founding story in an inspiring making-the-desert-bloom version in its small in-house museum. The kibbutz is proud of its fidelity to egalitarian values. But the Bedouin population that was native to the Negev when in 1946 a group including holocaust survivors built a prosperous socialist community on harsh terrain, are barely mentioned.

At the *Walled Off* (pun certainly intended) *Hotel* in Bethlehem (a weird, but gorgeous high-end boutique hotel, decorated like an English aristocratic men’s club circa 1917) immediately adjacent to the “apartheid wall” (“separation barrier,” in mainstream Israeli parlance) there is a compact museum that does an impressive job of encapsulating modern Palestinian history in the face of Zionism/Israel. Its summary of political sovereignty in Palestine throughout the ages—Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Arab Caliphates, Ottomans, and Brits—entirely omits the centuries of Israelite sovereignty--which one might have thought relevant to the tale. No Land of Israel here, it is Historic Palestine, or simply Palestine. The *Anu* museum had video excerpts of Jewish comic creations—Marx brothers and Seinfeld clips—the *Walled Off* museum displayed Israeli-Jewish anti-personnel creations deployed against Palestinians—horrible stink bombs, injurious and sometimes lethal rubber bullets, killer robots. Israeli harassment of every aspect of Palestinian life, and especially Israel’s ever-expanding appropriation of Palestinian land, along with their 75 years of exile, is the center of the Palestinian account of the “colonization” of their homeland by Jews. Killers of Jews are “armed resisters,” “martyrs,” or “political prisoners.”

Israelis are outraged the P.A. compensates the families of Palestinians who are killed while attacking Israelis, Palestinians outraged that these families' homes are demolished in revenge (the pretext of deterrence is absurd). Israelis note Palestinian celebrations of the murder of innocent Jews, Palestinians note that celebrators of the murder of innocent Palestinians now head government ministries with power over Palestinian lives.

Nothing at either museum, or indeed anything I heard in conversation with Israelis or Palestinians I thought materially false. But, man oh man, the competing narratives made *Rashomon* seem like it was a film made by Joe Friday.

5. Israeli Jews, doing “protective presence” work on the West Bank display admirable courage, both physical and moral, and a remarkable dedication to the work, which on occasion is helping Palestinians harvest olives or rebuild demolished homes, but is mostly serving as an intermittently and quasi-effective shield from settler, and sometimes soldier violence. For some of these activists this is full-time work, and a number live in the hills for weeks or months.

The shepherd that I and three Israeli Jews accompanied one Saturday had requested our presence: the very rocky fields on a hillside his 31 sheep graze (as did his father and grandfather's flocks), about a dozen football fields in size, rise from his electricity and plumbing-free concrete two room house, up to a (theoretically illegal by Israeli law) Jewish settlement at the hilltop. The shepherd says he has been harassed by settlers from that settlement and feels safer with us there (my companions learned Arabic from doing this work and translate for me). We have a quiet six hours with the sheep, no settler appears, and I feel most threatened by the stony slopes, which the shepherd, who looks about my age but turns out to be 15 years younger, strolls about as nimbly as the sheep do, whereas every step I take is as mindful as a tightrope walker's, with a knee or ankle injury only miraculously avoided. When the sheep are brought in, we have a leisurely tea (very sweet, very hot) sitting on stools in the shade cast by the shepherd's home, where he tells us his family history and reports every harm done him and his neighbors by Israel going back as far as he can remember.

I thought the quietness of my day might be attributable to it being Shabbat, which the religious settlers might be disinclined to desecrate with hostile activity. But I had to abandon that theory when others who had come down in the van with me to these hills just east of Yatta, accompanying another shepherd less than a mile from where I was, had a man from a different nearby settlement drive an all-terrain vehicle right at the sheep (the “protectors” called the Israeli police—the only police with jurisdiction-- but by then the settler had left, and although the police said they would deal with him, there was skepticism that they ever really would).

A third group of activists with us that day (altogether 12 of us came down in a van and a car, eight Israelis and four internationals), were going with a man named Sayed as he attempted to access his land. The Israeli activists told me that Ottoman law reassigned the right to land if the land is left unworked for an extended period. Hence, if you can keep someone from his land, it reverts to the state, which can reassign it. The settlers who covet Sayed's land hope to prevent him from working it, and with the cooperation of the state, give a legal, administrative coloring to what in reality is violent theft. That day, it was the army, not the settlers, that stopped Sayed

from getting on his land. The commander present didn't question Sayed's right to access the land, but claimed he only wanted to prevent a violent confrontation with the nearby settlers that Sayed's going to his own land would provoke. In effect "keeping the peace" was a pretext for the army to accomplish the settlers' goal. Our group argued with, and even tried to shove past the soldiers. Sayed's young kids did manage to run onto their family's land, and perform a few symbolic chores, before being chased off. We will see what the children's foray affords in court when the case to decide the fate of the Sayed's land is determined by Israeli judges.

6. The beauty people can create not only in but also because of oppression is remarkable. Like American Blacks, Iranian women, and European Jews, Palestinian's have made their oppression an occasion for notable creativity, nowhere more strikingly than in murals, especially on the eastern side of the wall. I spent a day with Palestinians who showed me and interpreted long stretches of these murals. A report of them needs pictures, which I don't take (lazy AND incompetent), but there are good books depicting them. Still, their power is substantially lost if not seen live, full sized, but most of all in context of the social conditions wherein they were made and abide: the ones I saw were near the impoverished, claustrophobia inducing Aida refugee camp that I visited, or looming right over a family compound, or separating a shopkeeper from his traditional clientele, or, not on the wall but on the side of a underfunded community service provider's building, were aesthetically pleasing apart from their social/political meaning, but deeply moving with it.

7. The three weeks we were there, Israel was as, as you may have read, highly politicized and polarized. My trip often felt like a tour of Israeli protest demonstrations.

With about 150 people, a group composed from the tiny portion of Israeli Jewish radicals, and a few Palestinian activists, I joined a demonstration against the eviction of Palestinians from homes in East Jerusalem. I am told this one was specifically about the impending eviction from Sheik Jarrah of the Salem family, who have been living there since they fled their West Jerusalem home (or were expelled) in 1948. A Jewish family fled (or were expelled) from that very Sheikh Jarrah home in the opposite direction that same year. Now the right-wing has gotten title from the pre 1948 Jewish owners and wants to reclaim the house, and so far, the courts have agreed. The courts are not hearing cases for the Salem family to reclaim their West Jerusalem home. This demo, at a park where the Wadi al Joz and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhoods meet, is unabashedly pro-Palestinians. A handful of right-wingers across the street use a bullhorn to call our group leftist traitors, anti-Semites, and terrorist supporters. Bored looking police keep the groups apart. At the demos end, a march to an Israeli police station deeper into East Jerusalem results in a confrontation with police and some injuries to the demonstrators. I, true to my promise to family, not to mention my own interests, cut out right before the violence goes down.

That sort of demonstration has been going on for years, but the dramatic development of course has been the mobilization of Israelis who care at all about continuing their lives in (for Jews) a liberal democracy in mass protests and large-scale civil disobedience called "disruption days." I attended, sometimes with Israeli friends, sometimes with Ora, sometimes alone, such demos in Beersheba, Emek Yizreel, Tel Aviv, and in Jerusalem. They are high energy events, with clever messaging, rousing speeches, imaginative costuming (mostly women dressed in *A Handmaid's Tale's* red cloaks and white hoods), vigorous chanting, celebrity performances, and affinity

groups from various sectors of Jewish Israeli society—health care providers, lawyers, academics, LGBTQ groups, and highly trained reserve pilots (the group most worrisome to the government). The focus is almost entirely about the judicial “reform,” aimed to entrench the theocratic, illiberal Right in power. The ubiquity of Israeli flags at the demos (a politically smart tactic I think) gives the demos a patriotic air but is offensive to Palestinians who have experienced Israel as either a very partial democracy, or as an outright military dictatorship. To them, preserving Israeli democracy appears a delusional bad joke, callously unconcerned with Palestinians.

Still, at every demonstration I attended there were some (in addition to me) demonstrators with anti-occupation, democracy for all placards. At the big March 11th Tel Aviv demo there were around 500 in the anti-occupation block, identified by huge signage, waving Palestinian flags, chanting radical slogans, and most interestingly, engaging the mainstream protestors to convince them that “Ayn democracia Eem Kibush” –democracy and occupation are incompatible, and that only a democracy with equality for all is true democracy. If there is any hope for peace and justice in I/P, it is that this idea will become clear to Jewish Israelis who fear living under a theocratic dictatorship. At a pop-up demonstration in West Jerusalem last Monday, a consequence of word getting out that Netanyahu was meeting with an Aipac delegation, some of the few dozen anti-occupationists got a fair number of the 150 more mainstream liberals to join in chanting in English “1, 2, 3, 4 [a short phrase I forget that rhymes with 4], 5, 6, 7, 8, we don’t want an apartheid state.”

There are adages I hold dear and assert, but which I sometimes wonder whether my belief in them is grounded more in my desire for their truth than the evidence of their truth, e.g., *Honesty is the best policy*. One such belief is exemplified by the oft quoted Niemoller statement, “*First they came for the socialists and I did not speak out... .. then they came for the Jews.....*” teaching that oppressive power ultimately encompasses all, and so enlightened self-interest requires broad human solidarity. But it increasingly appears true, not a pious hope, in the I/P case. The undemocratic oppression of Palestinians really has corrupted Israel’s democracy for Jews. The chickens are coming home to roost, and perhaps the Jews of Israel who value their own freedom will come to see, before it is too late, that it can only be sustained in the long run by granting a full, equal measure of liberty and human rights to Palestinians. A slim hope, but not impossible.

Since 1970-71, when a war between India and Pakistan accidentally landed me in Israel (it’s another story), I’ve had an ambivalence-soaked love affair with Israel. It’s like being married to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I delight in Jekyll’s virtues, its vibrancy, diversity, warmth, artistic creativity, humor, informality, and connection to the sweep of Jewish history, but have always been aghast with the knowledge that Hyde was always at work in the background. In my 28 or so months there, spread out over seven visits these last fifty-plus years, Hyde comes ever more nakedly in the foreground. I am personally affronted to see the many tall buildings on Har Homa, a Jewish settlement on Palestinian land whose construction a ten-year-old Isaac, a six-year-old Hadass, Ora, and I protested in the 1990s by camping out near the site with Palestinian protestors. [Described in a 1997 essay for *Jewish Currents*: [2e9e6f\\_134cf7b26b5442df835dfd25e81d6c28.pdf \(mitchellsilver.com\)](https://www.mitchellsilver.com/2017/07/13/2017-07-13-har-homa-israel/)] Har Homa is the face of Israeli Hyde that most stares at me. And while Jekyll is hardly gone (we had

warm, fun, meaningful visits with many Israeli friends), Hyde is more nakedly out front, taking the reins, determined to kill off Jekyll for good.

Portugal, after having performed greed motivated atrocities for centuries in Asia, Africa, and South America, atrocities thankfully not yet achieved in Israel's differently motivated oppression of Palestinians, is now, at least to a tourist's eyes, a splendid, diverse, tolerant country, comfortable having acknowledged its past and moved on to a humane present, where Fado and Port wine, not the slave trade and spice extraction from forced labor, best characterize the small, beautiful country. One hopes for a day when Netanyahu is only a Salazar-like bad memory, the occupation as distant as the colonial wars in Mozambique, and Israel and Palestine, or whatever mixture emerges, are also unambiguously the small, beautiful country(ies) they so clearly could be.

- A political analysis now posted: [Mitchell H Silver | Blog](#)