

MASH DOWN BABYLON

# London, Utopia

Joel Schalit

It was the first day of sixth grade. Looking outside the window, I could see the rain pouring down hard on the sidewalk below. Tired and frustrated because I hadn't secured the homeroom desk that I'd wanted, I sat there waiting for our teacher to take roll and force us to make our customary introductions to each other. The only things I could think of were how fast the day would pass and whether or not I'd be able to get a pass to eat lunch off campus.

"Okay now," Miss Kennedy finally said, "I want you all to be quiet and begin introducing yourselves, starting with the front row." A short, fat boy wearing a beige cashmere sweater, with head of thick, black, comb-backed hair began. "My name is Ahmed," he said in nearly flawless English, smiling. "I just moved here from Saudi Arabia." Next up was the dark, pretty girl to his right. "My name is Farnaz," she said. "And where are you from?" Miss Kennedy asked. "Iran," Farnaz replied. "I just moved here too."

And so, based on my survey of how many Middle Eastern-looking kids were in the room, it was clear that Miss Kennedy—a young, blonde and blue-eyed teacher married to an American serviceman stationed in London—wanted us all to confess our countries of origin. Following Farnaz was a boy from Syria, followed by an Iraqi, another Iranian, a kid from Lebanon, a girl from Libya and finally, me. "Joel," Miss Kennedy asked, staring at my nametag, "do you want to introduce yourself?"

An enormous silence fell over the room. I was terrified. I just could not issue a reply. Miss Kennedy stared at me



with a concerned look on her face. "What's the matter Joel," she asked. "Has the cat got your tongue?" My classmates began to giggle. Finally, seeing fifteen curious faces staring intently at me, waiting for me to say something, I finally blustered "Hi, my name is Joel. I'm from Israel. Can I go to the bathroom, please?"

In retrospect, there was absolutely no reason to be nervous. None of us was older than eleven, and besides, no matter what kind of ideology you inculcate children with, as I discovered that year in London, it appeared as though all vestiges of the Middle East conflict seem to disappear through the classroom collaborations and the friendships we inevitably fell into. At least once a week, Ahmed, the nephew of a Saudi government official, would treat me to a free lunch at the cheeseburger joint around the corner, where we both would very unselfconsciously violate every dietary restriction of our respective traditions. And we loved it.

Even at that age, I knew this was

something different. Though I had never been raised to actively hate anyone—indeed, my father would always chide me when I'd talk about how bad Arab infantry were supposed to be, reminding me of how brutally Egyptian forces surprised us at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War—I could not muster an ounce of bad feeling towards any of my

Islamic classmates. I was just scared of them because I'd never spent any time with Muslims before.

If there was any defining characteristic of our relationships that year, it was how warm they were—full of gestures of physical affection and warmth, absent of the teasing and bullying I was accustomed to from my American and Israeli friends. It was as though we were all relieved to meet other people from basically the same place, without any reference to the countries we originally hailed from. We were just kids seeking friendship in a cold and dark place that we all tacitly agreed felt like the end of the world.

I've been replaying my last year of school in the United Kingdom for days now, as I attempt to make sense of what led four British Muslims to stage Europe's first homegrown suicide bombings. And I am angered by it. Not because I'm in denial of the fact that U.K. foreign policy in Iraq and the deficiencies of British multiculturalism contributed to what transpired. What upsets me is how these events negate the memory of a utopian experience I will always identify with London. □

AP PHOTO/JOHN GAPS III

Joel Schalit is managing editor of *TIKKUN*. His memoir, *Jerusalem Calling*, is available from Akashic Books.