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RETURN TO THE HOLY LAND

My heart was beginning to race.

I had arrived at Detroit Airport in preparation for the first leg of my trip home to see my family in Israel. The boarding area was overflowing. In front of me stood several young traditionally garbed Palestinian women wearing chadors around their heads. Their small children, dressed in blue jeans and Nirvana T-shirts milled about nervously as easily recognizable young Israeli security agents talked into their collars, slim wires snaking up their cleanly shaven necks from underneath pressed Oxford shirts into huge, fish-belly white ears. Their eyes scanned the Palestinians in the waiting area looking for potential problems. I caught one of them staring at me and said "Shalom Habibi." Caught off guard by my Hebrew, he quickly looked away.

This would be the first time I had traveled home to Tel Aviv in the company of Arabs. I wondered what it would be like to sit next to a Palestinian, what kind of questions they'd ask, where they'd tell me they came from. A month before I'd ridden in a cab in Seattle. I could tell by the driver's accent that he was Palestinian. When I asked him where he originally came from he answered, "Yahud." That was the name of the old Arab town I lived next to as a child, just outside Tel Aviv.

"I used to live in Savyon," I replied.

"Then you are my brother," he answered warmly, looking back at me through the rear view mirror of the taxi with a huge, round beaming smile—much like the one he inspired in me.

I remembered that moment as I waited in line. "God," I thought to myself. "What a nice change." When I was a child, only Jews, American businessmen and military advisors crowded planes bound for Israel. The only place I ever saw Arabs was working on construction projects in Tel Aviv as migrant day laborers or on weekend trips to East Jerusalem where my father and I would go to buy Turkish coffee and Persian rugs at discount prices from flea market merchants in the dank smelling old city. To travel with Palestinians felt like a sign of the progress that was made in the peace negotiations between Israel and the PLO. But as I stared out at the mixed Arab-Israeli crowd, I wondered if I was looking at the only sign of progress left over from the Rabin era.

As much as I wished this scene was a sign of real progress, as the plane took off, the television newscaster on the video screen in front of me announced that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had been sealed off again. Freedom of movement between the two territories through Israel had once again been frozen because a van driven by a Palestinian exploded in midday traffic in downtown Jerusalem. Someone had rear-ended it by accident, setting alight a cache of gasoline, nails and explosives that the minivan had been carrying in preparation for a truck bombing. The driver was badly burned but he survived. Predictably, Israel blamed the PLO for not taking tight enough security measures against Muslim militant organi-

zations. Prime Minister Netanyahu told reporters that the thwarted terrorist demonstrated that Arafat still can't be trusted to control his own people. Peace talks had again been suspended. It was back to business as usual.

Once I'd eaten dinner, I turned on my Powerbook and starting reading hundreds of pages worth of articles downloaded from Israeli and Arab newspapers on the Internet. I was determined to re-acquaint myself with what was going on in the region. It all felt like a missing part of me I had to get to know again. It was the first time I'd voluntarily immersed myself in Middle Eastern media since I was a child. I left Israel permanently in 1980. A trip to attend my niece's Bat Mitzvah, this was only my third trip home in 18 years.

I came of draft age while living in Portland in 1985 and I decided not to return home because I did not want to serve in the Israeli Army. We'd already invaded Lebanon by then and killed thousands of civilians in order to quash a nascent Palestinian army. The war made me sick to my stomach. Watching tanks roll over houses in Sidon, Tyre, the Bekaa Valley and Beirut every night on CNN convinced me that there were no more just wars to be fought on behalf of the Jewish state. Better to be an American despite all the stupid and immoral contradictions, I thought. Better to study the country from afar through the eyes of *The Oregonian* and *The New York Times* than by being a not-so-nice Jewish boy in uniform.

Comfortable in my plane seat, I eventually fell asleep. When I woke up, the plane was landing in Amsterdam. I hurriedly packed my carry on bags and rushed into the terminal ahead of all the other connecting passengers. The only thing I could think of was drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. Low and behold, as soon as I disembarked, there was an espresso stand straight ahead. I ordered a double cappuccino, a croissant and an orange juice. Within minutes I'd consumed them all. As I fumbled through my backpack looking for my smokes, I looked up and saw the Palestinian women I boarded the plane with doing exactly the same thing. After I lit my first cigarette in 12 hours, I looked over at them, and they looked back at me. We all acknowledged we were performing the same ritual and laughed. Looking up at the clock, we stubbed our butts out and hurried to catch our next flight.

As I entered immigration to board the aircraft I had to run through a phalanx of Dutch soldiers armed with machine guns and hand held computers. The first soldier whom I dealt with looked up at me after he ran my American passport information through his miniature PC and said, "Aren't you an Israeli citizen?"

"No," I told him, "Not any more."

He smiled and asked why.

"Because I stayed in America to go to university," I replied.

"Well according to my records you are still an Israeli, Mister Schlitz."

Please check in with immigration when you get to Tel Aviv. You might have some problems with them." Just what I needed.

Nothing inspires greater fear in me than passing through passport control in Tel Aviv because I never formally renounced my Israeli citizenship. Every time I've gone through immigration at Ben Gurion airport, my identity check goes awry and I am always asked why I don't travel on my Israeli passport. I always tell them that it's not important. They look at me kind of funny and start barking in Hebrew. My policy is to always reply in English. Why not just save the pain and just get an Israeli passport? Because if I came home using Israeli ID, I'd be read the riot act about draft dodging and end up in the military.

As I lay half asleep on the final leg of my flight, I dreamed of finally being arrested. The words of a retired military friend of my father's kept creeping into my head. "Yoel, we sure could use you in weapons procurement in New York. Think of how nice it would be. You wouldn't have to leave America, but you'd still get to serve the state." I shuddered and broke out into a cold sweat.

At that point my seat mate finally turned to me and introduced herself. Her name was Erika and was travelling from Rotterdam to work on a Kibbutz. "They're one of the last socialist communities left in the world," she explained. "I thought I'd get my chance before they disappeared altogether."

"That's probably a good idea," I muttered rather cynically, expecting her to be shocked at all the high tech industrial work being done on Kibbutzim these days. Not eager to carry on the conversation with this starry eyed, hippie-looking young leftist seeking salvation in agrarian socialism, I fell asleep again. I awoke as I felt the wheels of my plane touching the ground.

Bleary-eyed from my 18 hour journey, I looked out at the airport tarmac and saw several rows of camouflage Israeli C-130 Hercules transport planes parked in the distance. I slowly stumbled out, laptop in hand, thinking that I needed to check my email and get another cup of coffee. We boarded a bus, and drove to the waiting area, where all of the Palestinian women I'd been traveling with cut in front of me. Determined to be a nice liberal guy, I let them, only to find myself stuck in the slowest line at immigration. No one gets treated worse than a Palestinian in an Israeli airport.

An hour and a half later, it was my turn. As usual, the immigration officers giggled when they asked where my Israeli passport was and I told them I had none. They insisted on speaking to me in Hebrew. I finally gave in and replied. It felt good. Inhabiting that tongue—as broken as mine is—was weirdly reassuring, despite the fact that my Hebrew has gotten horrible. The officers smiled, handed me my papers and said in the most sweet and endearing voices, "Litraod Yoel."

As I carried my bags into the waiting area, I expected to hear my father Elie whistling after me from within the huge crowd of eastern-European looking, pale Jewish people whose heavy Slavic accents suggested they were recent immigrants. But my dad wasn't there. I started to get nervous, thinking he had forgotten to pick me up. I put my bags down. Finally, someone yelled out "Shalom Yoel." It was dad's friend, Israel, sent to pick me up.

The drive to Caesaria was long. We passed Bar-Ilan University, the most important breeding ground in Israel for the training of religious nationalist Jews like Yigal Amir, the assassin of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. I'd received an e-mail from an American Biblical scholar who taught there just before Rabin's assassination. He'd written to me about an article I'd published in the online zine *Bad Subjects* called "Free To Be Jew and Me." It was about how Jews tend to fetishize their own victim status and how that gets played out in Arab-Jewish relations. He

didn't like it.

Its really weird coming home. The country always looks busier. Everything is always new. The cars are all shiny, the soldiers all have fancier looking guns. The highways are lined with American stores. Actually, Israel looks a lot like Los Angeles to me.

"Who can complain?" Israel asked on the drive as he pointed to an Office Depot/Toys Are Us/Ace Hardware shopping complex to our left. "Under socialism, all we had were the necessary items and even then they were always in short supply. Now everything is easier, even though Netanyahu looks like he'll ruin it for us again."

"Y'all elected him," I answered. "Israel should have known better."

We stopped for gas at a small petrol station on the coastal highway between Ramat Ha Sharon and Netanya. A young Sephardi attendant in blue coveralls, pierced ears, '60s GI issue black plastic frame indie-rock-dork glasses and a thick black ponytail hanging down his back immediately filled the tank up. We got back on the highway without paying the attendant. "Why didn't you give him money for gas?" I asked.

Israel smiled. "It's a new system we have here where your bank is immediately debited your petrol purchases through gas stations taking down your license number," he responded. "It's a modern country now Yoel. Things have changed a lot since you lived here. Its no longer in between the first and the third worlds."

We finally departed the highway and started the approach to my father's house. Huge brick walls surround the house he designed and built himself, having finally achieved affluence in his old age. Telephones are ringing, faxes are coming in, beepers are going off. Spanish, Hebrew, English and German can be heard in the distance. My tall, formerly blond-haired and blue-eyed 78-year-old father emerges from his office and gives me his characteristically he-man like hug. My frame shudders with intense pain. My father's face is beaming. "Welcome home, child."

I drank some espresso and sat down and scanned the English edition of *Ha'aretz*. Five soldiers were critically wounded in Southern Lebanon when they walked into an ambush laid for them by Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas. A remote controlled bomb blew them up while they were on a routine patrol within Israel's self-declared 30-kilometer security zone in southern Lebanon. The newspaper listed their names, ranks, hometowns and ages. No one was over 22. The soldiers all had Eastern European sounding last names—most likely they were recent immigrants.

Next to that story was a piece on how the Israeli economy had deteriorated since Netanyahu took power two years ago. Unemployment was hovering at nearly 13 percent. Welfare services were being cut. The salaries of civil servants were being frozen, despite a large increase in the cost of living. In order to slash the deficit, government-owned businesses were being sold off to foreign investors. "Its just like America," remarked one commentator.

Underneath was an article on the forthcoming first Gay Pride Day ever to be held in Israel. The religious authorities were, of course, condemning it. Israel's transsexual disco superstar, Dana International, was scheduled to sing her hit "Diva" on a parade float as the day's highlight. I stared at a picture of Dana in all her transgressive, dangerously erotic glory, "What a big middle finger to the establishment," I thought to myself. "It's so punk rock. God, its good to be back home."

Feeling a little overwhelmed by it all, I went out on the porch and stared out at the early night sky. Several Cobra and Apache attack

helicopters were flying south in formation over a golf course, probably headed home from a retaliatory raid. I turned around and walked back inside. I was tired.

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"Time to eat, junior," bellowed my dad in his 1950s *Leave it to Beaver* English. "We're going to a place where they serve your favorite food." Nothing makes me happier than eating Arab food. Some of my best memories from my childhood were driving to the Palestinian town of Ramallah and eating at my father's favorite restaurants. However, it was now impossible to drive there because Ramallah resides within the newly autonomous cantons governed by the Palestinian Authority, or PA as it is called. We'd go to an Israeli restaurant that served the same dishes instead.

We drove down a narrow, badly paved road through a field. My father's truck bumped and heaved. Small, dilapidated old houses with red tiled roofs lined the side of the street. This was the old Israel I knew. Dusty, old, semi-rural. I was in for a shock. All of the sudden we entered an American-style shopping plaza. In front of us stood a McDonalds. To our right lay another Ace Hardware with overweight Hasidic men with Brooklyn accents streaming out of the front door. On our left was our destination, the 206 Restaurant, named after the area code of Seattle.

As we parked the car, several Arab women wearing chadors and carrying McDonalds bags walked by. "Where are we?" I asked.

"A Kibbutz," my father replied.

Stunned, I screamed, "You must be joking!"

"No Yoel," my father replied. "Israel's catching up to Europe. Even the old Kibbutznik Reds are embracing market socialism. Everything here is collectively owned, even the American fast food restaurant."

I thought back to Elika, the Dutch woman I met on the airplane. I wondered if her pursuit of "one of the last socialist communities" had her working at a collectively owned McDonalds. It was too much. I wanted to throw up.

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The next day flew by in an absolutely chaotic frenzy. After visiting a new shopping mall with my stepmother Ana in the neighboring town of Ofakim, where Babushka-wearing Russian women strolled through the supermarket carrying shopping carts full of Wonder Bread, beets, and imported Birds Eye frozen peas, I finally felt like the foreigner Israelis perceived me to be. So much had changed. There was so much affluence, so much culture, so many things American, and yet so little peace of mind. I took leave of Ana for a moment and wandered the aisles in a jet-lagged daze thinking about diva Dana International and the helicopter gunships flying over golf courses, recalling the daily casualty reports in the newspaper. As I picked up a quarter-pound bag of Lavazza espresso imported from Italy, I realized that I had to get a grip on myself. I may have come home to attend a Bat Mitzvah and acquaint myself with the sentimental pleasantries of a Labor Zionist childhood, but I felt like I was getting shock treatment in the brutal lessons of post-war global capitalism instead.

When we got home, my father—never one to truly leave his military background behind—handed me my itinerary. I was to go pick my brother David and his family up at the airport. Then I was supposed to drive them to Jerusalem, where we were to meet at a Moroccan restaurant just off of Jaffa Street, Jerusalem's main drag.

I immediately hopped into Elie's Korean-made truck and made the two-hour journey in rush hour traffic. As I merged onto the highway, I turned on Israeli Army Radio. The disc jockey was playing a song from the latest Tortoise album, *TNT*, followed by Combustible Edison, Wyclef Jean

and Nusrat Ali Khan. I laughed. Tortoise an Israeli Army favorite? Who woulda thunk? The amusement was enough to keep me going all the way to the airport. Now that's what I call World Beat.

By the time I got to Ben Gurion airport, my brother David was already emerging from immigration. He looked very tired, but happy to see me. "Gimme a cigarette," he barked.

We smoked together in silence, scanning all the newly arrived visitors. Excited Christian tourists looking for their television minister tour guides; Jewish American teenagers on Zionist Youth Summer vacations; fat Greek Orthodox Patriarchs just off the plane from Athens; blonde German Jesus freaks who looked like hippies carrying huge internal frame packs on their backs bound for cheap Arab youth hostels. "So this is what the great Zionist founders envisioned for the Holy Land," David remarked bitterly. "They built a country so that pilgrims could go sight-seeing in freedom. What a joke."

As we drove up the new highway to Jerusalem, David surveyed the roadside landscape. "Look at all that goddamned sprawl. It's all so thoughtless," David said. "Israelis seem to put up buildings anywhere they want, without reference to the landscape, without lip service to any kind of aesthetics or artistry that would incorporate the architecture into the scenery tastefully. They don't have any concept of zoning laws. It's gross. This all used to be beautiful farmland and now look at it. Cheaply constructed industrial parks with neon billboards. It looks just like southern California"

"I know, David," I said, laughing. "In their haste to create a country, they indiscriminately and thoughtlessly build on top of anything—anywhere there is an iota of construction space to be found. The irony is that these are the fields where the army fought the Jordanians to keep the road to Jerusalem open during the War of Independence." We drove for a while in silence.

Fifty years ago, the new Jewish Army, full of untrained conscripts and death camp survivors recently off the boat from Europe, fought Jordan's mighty Arab Legion here in order to maintain access to Jerusalem. As we enter the forested Judean foothills to begin our ascent to Jerusalem, the rusted wreckage of armored supply trucks destroyed by Jordanian forces still litter the side of the highway. They constitute the final remains of convoys which our father organized and put together in order to supply the Jewish half of Jerusalem in 1948.

Every time we drove to Jerusalem when we were kids, Elie never failed to remind us of this fact. It turned what was supposed to be a joyous, fun trip to an exotic, ancient city into a tour of a roadside mausoleum. We hated Elie for it, because the stories ceased to have any significance in their repetition. They became more like ideological nostalgia for the good old days, when armed struggle was the only priority. At a certain point, I felt that his nostalgia was an excuse rather than a reminder, but I didn't know what the excuse was intended for because I was too young to figure it out.

We were snapped back into the present as we entered the outskirts of Jerusalem, in awe all of the new high rises and housing complexes made of orange Jerusalem stone that rose into the twilight sky to the north. These were Jerusalem's new suburbs, full of American immigrants, some orthodox, most ultra-orthodox—*Hasids* as Americans call them, *Haredim* or "Holy Ones," as they are tagged by Israelis. At a time when Israel is governed by a democratically elected right-wing demagogue who espouses the merciless anti-welfare state ideology of Reagan, Thatcher, Gingrich, Clinton and Blair, the only recipients of increasing welfare handouts and free public housing subsidies are these American fundamentalist Jews inhabiting the hills surrounding Jerusalem.

The Haredim are the final beneficiaries of the old Jewish labor Zionist vision of the early twentieth century, but with a self-serving ideo-

logical twist. They receive public subsidies for partisan political purposes, not out of a genuine desire to give shelter for a minority without a country and without wealth, suffering from centuries of racist discrimination.

Let's face it: The Haredim come from a country where Jews are more equal than any other cultural minority, where a third of the president's cabinet is Jewish and *Seinfeld* is the most popular situation comedy. Nonetheless, the Haredim take advantage of an old egalitarian ideology formulated in the shadow of the Holocaust. They position themselves as self-righteous, scheming pawns in a Machiavellian game constructed by the Jewish New Right in order to establish an eternal presence on the ground that cannot be negotiated in land exchange transactions with the Palestinians.

The sick thing about this is that the Haredim know this only too well, yet they play the game anyway, fighting like hell for every greedy scrap of money, housing and real estate that they can get their collective Rabbinical hands on. They make no apologies for it because, as defenders of the faith, they indignantly insist that it is something that the Jewish world owes to them.

As my father said later that evening, "What these American fundamentalists really want is to turn Israel into a modern day Jewish Iran." I couldn't agree with him more.

After an uneventful dinner, we check into our hotel. My room is on the sixth floor, overlooking the entire city. I light a cigarette, stroll onto the balcony in the pitch-black darkness and look out at the old city. I'm so tired I can barely think, but I find the soft wind on my sweaty body soothing. "A Jewish Iran," I said to myself. "That'd be the ultimate fulfillment of the fundamentalist American dream."

I began to realize that perhaps my fear of surrendering myself to a sadomasochistic religious destiny is exactly that; that what I really fear is what I culturally have in common with a huge percentage of American Jews who want just that, and I feel the unconscious pull towards it because of my Zionist upbringing. My heart began to race as this realization settled in. I took one last look at the sleeping, holy city and turned off the lights. I knew now why I'd come here.

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It seemed like the phone had been ringing forever. When I finally lifted the receiver, I could hear my father's voice telling me to "get down here immediately child, we have a Bar Mitzvah to go to." Frustrated because I didn't get a chance to drink any coffee, I got dressed and made a mad dash for the elevator.

"So you finally got your ass out of bed, chief," said my oldest brother David as I step into the lobby. "Lets get out of here."

David knows Jerusalem well, and gets us to the entrance of the Old City in minutes. We park, and begin walking in the already hot early morning sunlight to the Damascus gate. Border troops with their trademark bright green berets and folding-but M16s look around, chattering incessantly on walkie-talkies, fingers resting uneasily on their triggers. We march down dusty stone steps towards a lush, green garden hidden underneath the Tower of David.

After a few moments, the ceremony begins. A conservative Rabbi from the Hebrew University begins speaking in a thick Brooklyn accent. He looks like a typical baby boomer who rediscovered his Jewish roots and decided to immigrate here. The Rabbi begins talking about maturity, and how god views it. Then he introduces my niece Odile—the reason I'm here in the first place—and they start reading the Torah together. Odile's voice is a little shaky. She reads in English.

The Rabbi obliges in Hebrew in call and response pattern, much like a rap song, breaking into prayer every now and then in a lilting New-York-

cum-Eastern-European brogue that raises the hair on the back of my neck. Fifteen minutes later, the Rabbi issues authoritative platitudes about assuming the responsibilities of an adult according to Jewish law. I begin to nod out. Suddenly, the ceremony is over. I'm overwhelmed with relief. But everyone remains silent. My father has taken over.

"It gives me such great pleasure to see my family here today. Nothing makes me happier then to have my children here in Israel in order to celebrate my oldest grandchild's birthday. Especially during such a crucial time in Jewish history as this, when the nation is again dividing itself up into two halves, the pure and the stateists, much like it was in the Old Testament, when the children of Israel divided itself up into two nations: The nation of Israel and the nation of Judah.

"I want to remind you all that this is a repetition of something that happened long ago, and that we must view it in such perspective if we are going to overcome the unjust divisions which my generation was never able to foresee happening again. If we do this, we'll have the resources and the knowledge to know that one day we'll be far beyond this cruel repeat of history, which can only be read as a symptom of the suffering of a long persecuted people unequipped to deal with having become a nation for the first time in 2000 years of tragic history."

As my father left the podium, we all sat there in silence. The only sounds came from the static of soldiers turning their walkie-talkies on and off—white noise bouncing like bursts of automatic gunfire off of the walls of the ancient city which surrounded us. The historical memories which these archaic slabs of stone radiate mingled with the echo of my father's stern words, carried aloft by the sounds of shuffling footsteps of clueless Christian tourists being herded up the steps of the Tower of David by Palestinian tour guides. I caught one of them staring down at me out of the corner of my eye and wondered what they were thinking. Embarrassed, they turned away.

Finally, the Rabbi had us stand and say a closing prayer. *Baruch Ata-Adonai*, everyone sang, *Eluenu Melech Ha Olam*. Tears had started to well up in my eyes. Feeling self-conscious, I wiped them on my sleeve so that nobody would see them. I thought to myself that the significance of this trip wasn't so much just about recognizing my niece Odile's coming of age as much as it was recognizing my entire family's entrance into something resembling political maturity. Not only as a distinct group of people who are biologically related to each other, but as a little microcosm of a new nation that my father had unfortunately raised us to be.

For the first time since I was a child, I was filled with a kind of naive hope again—the kind that's inspired by watching people learn from their mistakes, knowing that they'll be able to move beyond them. Enough history and enough tragedy had transpired to force everyone in my family to cut through the bullshit ideologies that always disguise a family—or a country—from itself when it's in denial of its own inherent moral contradictions. "All this shit will surely pass," I mumbled under my breath as we left the Old City. "Netanyahu, the killing, the history, the segregation, the religion. Everything." ©