

Israeli Arabesques



Although Israel has absorbed Jews from all over the world, it is a country founded with a concrete identity, Jewishness, at a specific time in history, after the Holocaust.

Israelis are edgy at intersections. In traffic an instant before red changes to green, drivers, insistent they be free of synapses, press on their car horns. No one gives an inch: a driver uncertain of direction or timid to enter the fray will sit until sundown Friday, or longer if the traffic jam is in secular Tel Aviv. The labyrinthine intersections are not only vehicular ones, motorized traps; they work as a metaphor, too. Palestinian and Jew, orthodox and secular, past and present do not mesh easily in Israel.

Before traffic jam testiness, before I arrived in Israel even, I experienced a

borderline battle. It took place in Vienna at the El Al office and afterwards at the airport. Scheduled to fly from Austria to Israel on El Al, my companion, Julie, and I ambled over to El Al's office with nothing in mind but a perfunctory confirmation of our flight plans. Up a flight of stairs stand a door and a plate glass window. The door is locked and a man behind the window stares at us at length before we are permitted in. Immediately after the first door is a second locked one. Wedged between them we are again scrutinized before being admitted to the El Al

office. Used to laconic, stylish women at other airline offices, we realize that the men here are not ornamental. We're now aware in a minuscule personal way of the way Israel lives in the rest of the world (especially Vienna where some travellers to Israel were once massacred). After checking on our flights and casually, again, heading for the door, we are startled by the man manning the door who abruptly leaves his post and dashes over to our place at the counter loudly demanding whether we had left a bag behind. All three of us return to the place where no bag is found. Either everyone appearing at El Al's office is subjected to such a rigorous examination or our appearance alarms the agent. We are a guy with spiked platinum hair and a woman with gentile clearly written into her physique and colouring.

We seem, also, to perplex the man who interviews us at the airport prior to our departure. Passengers on El Al flights are directed to a remote area of the airport where singly or in couples or families we are isolated even further. A polite but restrained man asks my friend and me why we are going to Israel and for how long. "A visit" and "duration unknown" do not please or placate him and he asks us repeatedly for more details. Given the names and addresses of two Israeli acquaintances of mine, he disappears again for some time, then resumes asking what our motives for the visit are. Neither flippancy nor belligerence deters him from his careful, circuitous questioning. He repeats his puzzlement over the lack of a return ticket. The sweat stains under the armpits of my t-shirt have expanded enormously and my curiosity at the intensity of a procedure designed to combat terrorism has turned to anxiety. Finally, flippancy resurfaces with "to see the tree planted in honour of my Bar Mitzvah" in response to the question yet again asked as to the purpose of my

visit. With my Jewishness suddenly peeping out as dramatically as the roots of my dyed hair, the tone of the interview shifts. "Is this your first visit to Israel?" "Yes." "What took you so long?" A thorough but now convivial inspection of our belongings follows and we are raggedly and unevenly through our first Israeli intersection. On the plane, incidentally, we are shepherded by the same man who first buzzed us into the El Al office and who looks even less like a desk-bound airline employee than he did then.

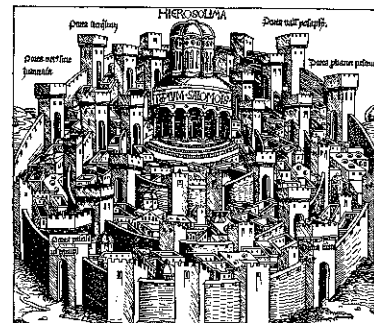
Unfamiliarity with Jerusalem's roads led quickly to another snafu. I had booked a room at the Hotel Reich in Jerusalem on our arrival in Israel. It was an odd name I thought for a hotel whose kitchens were strictly kosher, but the advertisement in *The Jerusalem Post* promised a reasonably priced hotel

without North America stamped obtrusively on its architecture and staff. I had a slight feeling on arrival of bonding with a homeland I hadn't inhabited, as the beaches of Tel Aviv came into view as we flew overhead. That gave way to touchiness as smokers and starers — my head seemingly as much a provocation as I thought keffiyees would be — interrupted my scripted reverie. The "homecoming" gave way more dramatically as we erred egregiously by losing our way and arriving at the Reich after the sabbath had commenced on Friday evening. Brusquely the Reich hotelier directed us to our rooms and insisted we quickly get to the dining room or we would not eat that evening.

We rode up the elevator with its self-activated Sabbath buttons that stopped us at each floor allowing orthodox Jews to avoid operating it, deposited our bags in our room and, not bothering to change from the soiled t-shirts first ruined in our encounter with the Israeli agent in Vienna, we returned to the main floor one floor at a time to stride hurriedly into the dining room. All of my mother's carping over the years

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room full of orthodox Jews, having just embarked on the eating and praying that constitute the sabbath meal, stopped and stared at our arrival. Aliens in their gefilte fish we seemed to be.



about my bizarre hair styles and colours should have prepared me for this. None of my experiences as a middle class North American Jew had prepared me for this. A room full of orthodox Jews, having just embarked on the eating and praying that constitute the sabbath meal, stopped and stared at our arrival. Aliens in their gefilte fish we seemed to be. Seated in a corner of the room we promptly got up and joined the queue around the buffet only to have our server rush over and guide us back to our seats and to the only familiarity that I was to encounter there: the soup, over-cooked meat and mushy vegetables that I remembered from the days my bubby and zaida stood guard over me while I ate, gobbling my overly large portions out of fear that even a momentary break in the utensil to mouth activity would signal to them that they should begin to worry about my appetite, my career and my social life. Julie, whose jaundiced view of all religions was ecumenical, was saved from loathing not by the force feeding of her past but by the cultural forced feeding of her present which included, most notably, the wigged orthodox women whose own hair is exposed only to their husbands.

It would have been easier, I am sure, travelling with a Jewish woman. Maybe instead of a lesson about foreskins the lively old lady would have with even more kindness helped me through an intersection. My heritage would have looked stronger in my partner's refracted company. I had tried. As a commitment to

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something greater than the personal, as an appeasement to my parents, I had from time to time hastily and intellectually decided historical and religious forces were ones I should be recruited by. Those whom I wooed ardently as a result of my zeal, with whom I sought an intangible — though some were wealthy — Israeli bond, accepted my track record and idiosyncratic portfolio because of the blue chip nature of two items: my Jewishness and my profession, professor. I also had no kids cluttering (scattering and probably losing) the dossier, though I'd had a brief marriage once to a student whose bicycle I one day had helped to fix. My once in a lifetime mechanical bent occurred when I was 30 and ready, I thought, to be scared into the prospect of something mature and future orientated. Where it occurred was Newfoundland,

Canada's remotest province, where I'm sure no Jew ever wedded before, nor in all likelihood has since. My then teenage non-Jewish bride was and remains non-Jewish. Thus, it has been in the many intervening years, when promiscuity has momentarily been suppressed by a less self-indulgent focus, that I have thought to wed myself not only to a Jewish woman, but to an expansive cultural and tribal milieu already disposed to have me. That milieu would even include my own family. After hearing of my precipitous marriage in Newfoundland my father banished me from all family practices until four months after the wedding when I was startled and pleased to receive a "come home" to me and my bride. The latter, alas, had gone home one month before.

The only glimpse of a war I witnessed was a demographic one. Babies were everywhere and always the focal point of attention. The statistics for children per Israeli Arab household appear to regulate Israeli Jewish life. Bars are non-existent. Family life dominates. The only idling, strolling Jewish youths one sees are off-duty soldiers, guns strapped to their backs. One soldier we gave a ride to propped his gun casually by the gear-shift; had it gone off my punk hairdo would have been in fearful as opposed to stylish disarray. Our own idling in Jerusalem's old city drew hordes of "professional" guides who competed with each other to offer the litany of the tour guide book and to drag us around a city we didn't want turned into a monument. As a consequence, our glimpse of the Wailing Wall had us secularly wailing (and almost whaling away) at a particularly bothersome reciter of history who despite our disgruntlement managed to finish his spiel and offer us a bill for his enlightenment. The only charm from and

insight about the old city came from a book, *Jerusalem: City of Mirrors*, in which is recounted the story of George Adam Smith who gave a lecture in Jerusalem's old city on its topography, then had to get help finding his way home. Having lived there for 40 years he had not mastered the old city's intersections.

Although Jerusalem's claustrophobic alleys can threaten danger, other intersections have their own need for traffic cops. In Har Nof, a suburb of Jerusalem, trouble developed while I was nearby over the issue of driving through the district on the Sabbath. Har Nof is largely populated by ultra-orthodox Jews who throw rocks at cars whose drivers don't share the ultra-orthodox prohibition against driving on the Sabbath. Seeking to bring perspective to the issue, Joel Rebbibo, a member of the

playing, slippery language that bulwarks no political program. Another interesting experiment in miscegenation, literary this time, is that of Anton Shammas whose 1986 novel *Arabesques* contains more intersections than Manhattan. Arab and Israeli, the most dangerous and estranging Middle Eastern mixture of all, Shammas has been published in both Arabic and Hebrew though *Arabesques*, his first novel, is written in the latter language.

"Novel" is itself a site of conflict and an unsteady definition, for Shammas chooses as his epigraph a quotation from *Unreliable Memoirs* by Clive James: "Most first novels are disguised autobiographies, this autobiography is a disguised novel." The narrator and leading character is blatantly called Anton Shammas, who tells a two-tiered story of his family's history and his

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editorial staff of *The Jerusalem Post*, wrote in that paper, "I don't believe in coercion, but when 98 percent impose their will on two percent, that isn't coercion it's democracy." Wrong, Joel, it's totalitarianism. Although Israel has absorbed Jews from all over the world, the ashkenazi from Europe, the sephardim from North Africa, the falashas from Ethiopia, it is a country founded with a concrete identity, Jewishness, at a specific time in history, after the holocaust. Thus, it is resistant to miscegenation which literally means the mixing of races, but can be expanded to include the dilution of any firm, fixed identity. Political and social voices and styles in Israel may seem raucous and cacophonous to North Americans; however, they yield to greater entities which are ultimately subsumed in the largest unit of all, the Jewish state of Israel.

Even in the so-called major industrial countries, confusion and anger are occurring where visible minorities appear to alter a country's perception of itself. In Israel, smaller, denser and more acutely aware of its *raison d'être*, cultural intersections are more crowded and more combustible. Israelis cannot think of their country as able to countenance decadence, a decay of its strongly rooted image of itself. A purist in no sense of the word I find it difficult to be absorbed in such a broad, such an absolute state.

The literary critic, George Steiner, sensed the incompatibility of rich, ironic meanings produced by Jewish scholars and inflexible meanings required by a nation or state. An essay of his, entitled "Our Homeland, The Text," and published in the journal *Salmagundi*, extols a punning,

odyssey as an adult and a writer. On the Sea of Galilee, actually in the sea in a half-submerged *chaïse longue*, at the kibbutz resort Nof Ginosar, I loll with this book *Arabesques* reading of a family that moved in the early part of the 19th century from a village in Syria to "the remote village of Fassuta in Galilee." The lyricism of olive trees and youthful memories abuts on political realities. British soldiers and Israeli ones come and go and come again rewriting history, changing the names of places and the people in them. Shammas is careful not to allow the poetry of his prose to overwhelm the reality of displacement, the danger being that to make his memories beautiful and give them unrestricted vent would be to accommodate himself to a purely literary transformation of Galilee's political landscape. That landscape is one which has seen the life of his family and those of the other inhabitants of Fassuta dominated by occupying forces. This *realpolitik* affects their relationships, their jobs, all aspects of their existence. *Arabesques* would be a book about wandering and procreating, a slowly unfolding account of generations, if it were not for those looming forces that are armed and that hold power to decide who moves through which intersection and on to where. ♦

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