

Making Friends with Israel, Part 2

More Scenes from Our Editor's First Visit

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1. THE CALL TO PRAYER

The *Adhan*, or Moslem call to prayer, crackled from the Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount as we stood under a noontime sun in the City of David, the most ancient Jewish corner of old Jerusalem, gazing down on the rooftops and balconies of Arab East Jerusalem. Moments later, another mosque, out there in the hills, echoed its call. “*Allahu Akbar* [God is great] . . . *Ash-hadu alla ilaha illallah* [I bear witness that there is no god but the One God] . . .”

Two nights later, as we strolled on the *tayelet*, the pedestrian promenade overlooking the Old City, we heard it again, blaring this time from loudspeakers on five different minarets and overwhelming all street noise until it seemed to be the voice of the city itself. “*Ash-hadu anna Muhammadar Rasulallah* [I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God] . . .”

Wherever we heard it, our conversation and our meanderings would suspend. My wife Susan felt stirred by the evocative chant and wanted to give it extra attention as a rich part of her tourism experience. Somewhere in my body I shared her response, but it was frozen by dread: The sound of the *Adhan* always made the Jewish State seem fragile and temporary to me, like a diorama. For all of its broad boulevards and big buildings, its shopping malls and army bases, and for all of the stubbornness and patriotism of its citizens, I could hardly imagine Israel bearing up for another half century against this Big Brother voice of Islam unless there is a genuine peace — precisely what the warriors of Hamas and Fatah have been thinking all along.



Hayya alal-Falah [Hasten to real success] . . . *La ilaha illallah* [There is no god but the One God].

2. THE FLAT ROOFS OF ARAB HOUSES

Our experiences with Israeli Arabs, however, were anything but dreadful. Again and again, it seemed to me that this population is probably Israel's most important bridge-builder to normalization and a viable future.

We had been taught to recognize Arab towns by the flat roofs of the houses, Jewish towns by their graded roofs, often made of orange tiles. We got to understand the “why” behind this rule when Susan Susser and her husband Bernard (Susan is our magazine's correspondent in Israel, where she has lived since 1969)

brought us to the home of their close friend, Jalaal Abu-Tuomeh, the former mayor of the Arab town of Baqa El-Gharbiya.

A gracious and courtly man, Jalaal took us first to see the separation barrier, which is substantial in Baqa — 12-foot high concrete slabs — but separates just four families, out of the entire town, from their lands. Jalaal was nevertheless adamantly opposed to it, seeing the barrier as an insult, a power play and a land grab more than as defense against suicide bombers. The Sussers did not entirely share his opinion, and I knew why: The night before, as Susan Susser had shown me their century-old town of Kfar Sava, she had pointed down the block and said, “If you walk ten minutes in that direction, you're in

minutes in that direction, you're in occupied land."

Jalaal took us next to the house of his newly-married daughter, Hanifa, which her husband, Sa'id, a dentist, had spent four years constructing before even asking for her hand! The house was spanking new and downright palatial, with extensive tile work, stained glass, a marble fireplace mantle and very expensive fixtures — a house you might expect of a corporate CEO, not of a 36-year-old dentist.

Arabs do not often buy and sell houses, we were told; rather, a man will build a place over the course of years, plunging a large portion of his earnings into its construction, so that it becomes as substantial a family encampment as he can afford, a projection of his presence and influence in the community. Hopefully, his children will build their own home atop the flat roof, and their grandchildren on top of that, and relatives on parcels nearby. In short, the flat roofs of Arab houses are an invitation to future generations to stay, to build.

Hanifa, 23, is a science technician by profession. She seemed completely "modern" — barefoot and bareheaded, wearing jeans and a V-neck sweater. Back at Jalaal's house, we met one of her sisters, who was dressed traditionally, as was her mother, Ha'ifa. As we sat down to a feast — with Jalaal playing the role of "Jewish mother," springing up to ladle more and more food every time a blank space appeared on our plates — I was struck by the hybrid nature of their family and the essential liberality implied by it.

3. TEACHING TEACHERS

Outside its shopping malls, Israel

is a segregated land. While we knew the sad reasons for this and accepted the "What do you expect?" shrugs of our Israeli friends as sufficient explanation, I found myself wondering, many times, if Israel wouldn't be better served by sacrificing some aspects of its Jewish identity — the Star of David flag, for example — in order to make its Arab citizens feel more welcome by society.

I wondered this especially in our encounters with the segregated

Susan weaves her magic with them, so we were very uncertain about how her techniques would be received by Arab teachers who, we assumed, would hail from more traditional, and traditionally modest, culture.

I missed the first class, spending the day, instead, huffing and puffing through the hilly Mediterranean city of Haifa with my daughter, Zoë. I did, however, witness and photograph the Beit Berl class, and was spectacularly charmed by some twenty



Kinesthetic learning in Beit Berl

educational system, with which we had intimate, if very limited, contact when my wife taught two classes to Arab teachers of English — the first at a teachers' conference in Haifa, the second at Beit Berl, the college in Kfar Sava (a suburb of Tel Aviv) where Susan Susser serves on the faculty. My Susan specializes in training teachers to use kinesthetic activity in the classroom to teach elementary curriculum — that is, to use creative movement to help kids grasp concepts of math, science, language arts, literature, and more. The very idea of kinesthetic teaching sounds intimidating and outlandish to most American teachers before

young Israeli Arab women, all education majors, who followed Susan's instruction with verve and humor and all-out participation. Half were "traditional," in head scarves and stylish long skirts, the other half "modern," in jeans and sweaters — but all of them were willing to jump and gesture and skip and dance.

Prior to the class, Susan, Zoë and I had also enjoyed an encounter with a group of students at the Arab Orthodox College in Haifa, where we had come to rendezvous with Lubna, a teacher who was to drive us to Beit Berl. As we sat at the gates of the school waiting for her, these young

men and women came streaming out, fresh from their English oral exams, and stood at the curb making fun of the test and the tester in a rapid-fire blend of English and Arabic. What we could make out of their conversation was hilarious, and when they saw our smiles, they zeroed in for conversation.

Their school, we later learned, is a high school for gifted Arab students, both Moslem and Christian. This group consisted mostly of science majors, several of them interested in genetics, bioengineering and the like. They told us, however, that they were unlikely to find work in their fields unless they emigrated to Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Europe, because in Israel, preference is given in the higher education and job markets to people who have served in the army — and Arabs, with only a few exceptions, are not permitted to serve.

Nor would they want to: “I would not shoot Arabs,” said one of the young men, with the others murmuring their assent.

What if there were a non-military national service corps for Arab high school graduates, we asked, which would permit them to serve, like their Jewish peers, and to gain the same benefits of service? All but the most “militant” boy in the group liked the idea.

On our drive to Beit Berl, Lubna deepened our sense of the contradictions faced by Israeli Arabs. Israeli-born, she identifies deeply with the land, the culture, the democratic values, the independence for women; she would have no interest in living in a Palestinian state or anywhere other than Israel, she said, yet she knows that she and the kids she teaches are doomed to second-class citizenship.

Despite the many complications

that would accompany efforts to develop an integrated, binational Israeli educational system (see, for example, Susan Susser’s portrait of The Bridge Over the Wadi School in our March-April issue), it seemed to me that the “melting pot” benefits would be invaluable for the future

the prime minister’s last monstrous meal — three or four meat courses, two slices of rich chocolate cake — I had the distinct feeling that the peace process, or whatever one called Sharon’s policy of unilateral disengagement, was in real peril.

Two weeks later, the prime minis-

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well-being of Israeli society — and that Israel certainly provides enough of a Jewish context for the feeding of Jewish identity that it can “risk” such an approach. Perhaps the February 27th ruling by the High Court of Justice (Supreme Court) that the government cannot favor Jews over Arabs in funding education will force some changes in this realm.

Or perhaps I’m simply a naive American Jew with visions of *Brown v. Board of Education* dancing in my head. It’s easy to propose melting-pot solutions to problems of entrenched nationalism when you can hardly tell an Israeli Jew from an Israeli Arab or figure out whether the songs you’re listening to on the radio are in Hebrew or Arabic.

4. THUNDER OVER THE CANYON

We never did locate an English-language radio station, only rarely sat in front of a television, and were generally too busy reading maps and taking in the sights to spend time reading the *International Herald Tribune*. One of the few occasions when our news drought ended was the morning after Ariel Sharon’s first stroke. When the reporter described

ter lay in a coma. Susan and I were driving in the Negev, the southern desert region where Sharon has his 1,000-acre ranch. This time we had an English-language newspaper in the car. The Palestinians, we read, were celebrating and wishing him dead. Olmert was pledging to be faithful to the policy of unilateral disengagement — and non-engagement with the Palestinians. Netanyahu and Peretz were respectfully holding their peace. All the newspaper columnists sounded stoical and reassuring — and I kept on thinking of the classic Road Runner cartoons, set in desert spaces like this, in which Wile E. Coyote, tricked into running off the edge of a cliff, shrugs at the camera before plummeting down.

We entered Makhtesh Ramon, some fifty miles south of Beer-Sheva, Israel’s largest desert city. Ramon is the world’s largest crater of its kind (a “karst” crater), twenty-five miles long and six miles wide, with rocks as old as 200 million years at the floor. It is described as “the Grand Canyon of Israel,” though it more resembles the Wyoming Badlands than the Colorado River’s great sculpted canyon. Moreover, while one needs reservations, made four months in



advance, to begin a descent into the Grand Canyon, Ramon seemed to belong exclusively to Susan and me — and the Israel Defense Force.

On either side of the highway that wound through Ramon were warning signs: “FIRING ZONE ON BOTH SIDES.” As we left the car to admire the sights at one of the tourist-approved safe spots, the desert sky split open with rolling thunder like I’d never heard before. It was bone-shakingly loud and sustained — ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty seconds! Yet the sky overhead was blue, with fluffy white clouds.

Warplanes. It took three rounds of thunder before I finally spotted them, tiny silver bars in the sky, six of them, in tight formation. I could only begin to imagine the terrifying noise they would make if they swooped down close, even without firing their missiles. If all the loudspeakers on all the mosques in all of Israel broadcast the *Adhan* simultaneously, I thought, they would not begin to match the decibel output of these planes.

5. A JEWISH PRINCE?

We soon beat a retreat back towards the Galilee, where Israel feels more like a normal land than a garrison state. En route, we stopped in Dimona, the desert town best known as the center of Israel’s not-so-secret nuclear weapons research. Dimona

has a second claim to fame as the home of the African Hebrew Israelites, a community of some two thousand black people, mostly African Americans from Chicago and Oklahoma, who settled in Israel in late 1969 and have been campaigning for citizenship ever since.

Parts of Dimona resemble a “gated community” of fancy new desert homes on dead-end streets. We made U-turns up and down these blocks until we found the “Village of Peace,” which looked like an encampment of old stucco bungalows. As soon as we parked our car near the gates and passed beyond the English and Hebrew “Welcome to the Village of Peace” sign, a posse of children, eight to ten years old, came streaming towards us in a parade of braided hair, kinte cloths, amulets and various brown complexions. “She’s got silver hair!” one of them shouted in English at the sight of my all-natural wife.

It was an African Land of Oz. All the people were dressed and coiffed like royalty, in majestic robes, fine leather sandals, and headgear ranging from tiaras and diadems to skullcaps and turbans. Two women attached themselves to us very quickly, and the older of them brought us to a small eatery and fetched us glasses of a delicious fruit drink. After a few more minutes, a man from across the room switched seats to our table and introduced himself as Prince Immanuel Ben-Yehuda — “National Spokesman,” according to his business card, “Congressional Liaison and Holy Council Member.”

He was a tall, handsome fellow, a former journalist and college

basketball player from Oklahoma. The African Hebrew Israelites, he told us, consider themselves to be descended from the ten lost tribes of ancient Israel. Their worship, ritual and lifestyle practices are shaped by the Torah but not the Talmud or any of the other standard texts of rabbinic Judaism. They are a vegan community involved in the manufacture of clothing and soy foods. They have additional settlements in Arad and Mitzpeh Ramon, as well as in Uganda, Benin and South Africa. They recently were granted “permanent resident” status by the Israeli government, after years of non-recognition. This means that their children, many of whom were “stateless” after being born in Israel, are now permitted to serve in the army and can thereby gain citizenship.

I learned later that the group originated through the religious visions of Ben Ammi Ben Israel (né Ben Carter), a Chicago foundry worker who first brought several hundred of his followers to Liberia before settling in Israel. Their culture is polygamous (our “prince,” according to newspaper reports, has two wives), and is certainly hierarchical, patriarchal and cautious about outsiders — but no more so than any ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.

Are they Jews? Susan and I discussed this with some heat as we drove north through the Arava desert along the Jordanian border. She had been entirely impressed by the beauty, dignity, and hospitality of the African Hebrew Israelites and felt critical of the Israeli government for keeping them at arm’s distance for so many years, while I felt very skeptical of the community’s claim to being Jewish and empathized with the government’s commitment to

keeping the Law of Return meaningful by setting some broad standards for Jewish identity. She argued that anyone who is crazy enough to *want* to identify with the Jewish people should be embraced; I argued that identifying with biblical Judaism while deliberately ignoring all developments in the religion during the past two thousand years hardly amounts to identification with the Jewish people.

After reading more about them, I still don't give much credence to Ben Ammi Ben Israel's "revelation" that a sector of African-American slaves were descended from the people of ancient Israel (and that all "white" Jews are descended from the Khazars and other Caucasian converts to Judaism) — and I still feel proud of Israel for slowly but systematically integrating the African Hebrew Israelites into society without recognizing their claims. Yet I also realize that the pan-Africanist beliefs of the Dimona community are only marginally less credible than many mainstream Jewish beliefs based upon biblical "history." I know of no hard archaeological evidence, for example, that the patriarchs and matriarchs, or the tribes of their descendants, even existed, nor is there evidence of Hebrew enslavement in Egypt or of a Hebrew invasion of Canaan. Recent DNA research has made the matter of "Who is a Jew?" even more complicated, with groups in South Africa, India and Latin America showing "genetic markers" as well as cultural and linguistic traits that could be linked to Jewish sources. Who, at this point, can say with accuracy what makes people from all the corners of the globe into Jews, "members of the tribe," qualified for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return? We have only ours

and our parents' passionate self-definition — and Adolf Hitler's Luger at the back of our heads.

6. WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE TO ME?

Throughout Israel, in restaurants and marketplaces, movie theaters

I do feel a certain loyalty to Israel, bred of my understanding that anti-Jewishness remains an active force in our irrational world and that the security I take for granted is vaporous.

and museums, I would try to conjure the classic Zionist thought — *We're all Jews here!* — to see how it felt. Often, it was not really true: In the Galilee, especially, where there is a church erected at every spot Jesus is said to have stood, there seemed to be a busload of Christian tourists at our elbows half the time. But even at moments of "Jewish solidarity," I usually experienced less *heimish* rapture than existential uncertainty. Are Israeli Jews truly less "foreign" to me, by virtue of being Jewish — even that great, secular Israeli majority for whom "Jewish" seems almost an irrelevancy — than the French in Paris, the Italians in Venice, or the Kenyans in Kenya among whom I have passed? Are the hasidim of Sfat, the Galilean city of Jewish mysticism, more "family" to me than the African-American "Hebrews" of Chicago/Dimona?

After my month's sojourn in Israel, there are certainly Israelis whom I now love, and even more whom I admire. I have great respect for the country's scrappiness, courage and resourcefulness; I have great admiration for its commitment to helping Jews around the world escape their oppression and find equal footing among their Jewish peers in Israel.

I enjoyed experiencing a culture in which the Jewish calendar is integrated into everyday life. I was keenly interested in Israel's experimentation with socialism, especially on the *kibbutzim*, and in hearing people's assessments of it as an economic system, a social system, a belief

system. I also felt a certain stake in Israel, bred of my understanding that anti-Jewishness remains active in our irrational world and that the security I take for granted in my life is vaporous; Israel might, someday, serve as refuge for me and my family.

My experience of "making friends with Israel," however, did not bring me significantly closer to Zionist ideology. Rather, it confirmed for me that my Jewish identity is most alive not in the "normalized" circumstances of a Jewish State, but in America, where I experience, to use Mordecai Kaplan's phrase, "living in two civilizations." Here, my Jewishness is countercultural, an identity of dissidence, subversive humor, self-examination, and humanistic passion. Here, it is the biblical meaning of the name "Israel," "God wrestler," which counts, more than an identification with Jewish nationalism or an attachment to the Land of Israel.

Israel, in short, did not fill me with feelings of "homecoming." I do not need that, however, to appreciate the Israeli people's right to their land, their nation, and a secure future of self-determination. I find sufficient imperative for that in the Holocaust, and I feel sufficient anxiety about their destiny to give the country my solidarity and my special concern. ■