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From Long Island to the Negev Desert



WEST HEMPSTEAD AND ISLAND PARK, LONG ISLAND, 1968. In one of the less reported on scenarios of school busing in the United States, the school boards of these two affluent New York suburbs merge their high schools. The decision has nothing to do with race but rather with demography: Island Park, eight miles south of West Hempstead, with attractive beachfront near the Atlantic, just doesn't have enough kids to warrant building its own high school. Island Park's ongoing entente with Ocean-side is breaking down so the town elders approach their cohorts of West Hempstead. West Hempstead Junior High School disappears and a much larger high school, with students bused in from Island Park, takes its place.

In West Hempstead, we are now faced with two new breed of students: "Italians," like our local ones whom we generally avoid and whose male, strapping, football-playing versions we mildly fear; and Jewish kids, somewhat like us. In their own way, the latter are also exotic in that they hail from a little island-enclave of their own: Harbor Isle. By bridge and by landfill, Harbor Isle is physically connected to the rest of Island Park, but it exudes a more orderly and inviting charm. Harbor Isle kids live within a few minutes walk from their swimming and sailing beach club. In West Hempstead, marine life is limited to feeding the ducks at Hall's Pond.

ALONEI YITZHAK, ISRAEL, 1969. From this camp in northern Israel, thirteen-year-old boys from around the United States, part of a bar mitzvah Pilgrimage program, tour Israel. It is a heady experience for a young

teenager. We visit the Western Wall—captured just two years prior, during the Six Day War—the winery of Zichron Ya'akov, the lazy town of Rehovot, the dusty frontier of Eilat, the whole Holy Land. In the Arab *souk* (market) of the Old City of Jerusalem, amidst the exotic smells and sights, I learn how to bargain. I feast on exotic foods (falafel), learn to play a then-exotic sport (soccer!), and learn some titilating Hebrew curses (*ben zona*). At the dining hall at Alonei Yitzhak, we delight in asking our fifteen-year-old but already *zafnig* server, Rivka, *Ma ba-sba'a* (“What time is it?”). This requires Rivka to grasp and twist the wristwatch she has efficiently tied to her shoulder strap; in the process she lightly touches her ample but still blooming bosom. We immature boys holler in delight as, meal after meal, innocent Rivka reports the time.

On weekend matchups with an Israeli family, I am paired with Roni, whom everyone calls Gingi on account of his red hair and complexion. Roni's effusive mother so readily regards me as one of the family that she has no compunctions about my joining the other children in her bedroom while she's still in underwear. I like this culture. We communicate in Hebrew, and I am both thrilled and proud to become part of something different, deeper, and greater than my pre-Israel self is. The tastes, the smells, the females—all intoxicate.

Still, there are aspects of this experience that disturb me. While I don't mind our daily morning rally around the Israeli flag, I don't enjoy the gloating tone and triumphant cheers at the announcement that “we” just shot down some Syrian MIG fighters. I'm no early adolescent pacifist but I do regard these recurring dog fights—and related fatalities—as a necessary evil, not as an exciting sports contest.

Entries from my diary from that summer alternately embarrass and illuminate:

August 16, 1969. Mea Shearim. This is the religious Chassidic part of Jerusalem and walking through we see signs against autopsies. You can't help noticing the way they look.

Surely, I am referring to the ultra-Orthodox, not to cut up cadavers.

July 31, 1969. A boring whole day trip to Hula Valley. Our destination is found to be off limits because of fighting by the Syrians that morning. It was at the Golan Heights.

Thus, begets my interest in geopolitics.

One entry is relevant in light of my sojourn on Yahel thirty years later:

August 3, 1969. Mahane Shmonim. Army base for new recruits called Nahal where they fight if there's a war and live on and develop kibbutzes during peace."

The proper plural of kibbutz, I didn't know yet, is kibbutzim.

My early adolescent diary is sprinkled with references to Holocaust memorials: at Yad Vashem, on Mount Zion, at the Warsaw Ghetto, and Martyrs' Museum at Kibbutz Mordechai. Through grisly films and nightmarish books, we thirteen-year-olds are already well acquainted with the Holocaust. There is no doubt in our impressionable minds: Israel is necessary on account of the Nazis. Holocaust is subject for conversation, heavy and light. Ever jocular Lazarus tells us about his father: "He's an exterminator. You know, ants, termites, that kind of thing. But when people here ask me what my father does for a living, and I tell them that he exterminates—well, they kind of back away from me."

It is nighttime. A typical Mediterranean evening: hot and sticky. We are in our bunks. Our stay in Israel is soon to end. Too soon. I am arranging camp stuff in front of my cubbyhole. Exceptionally, given the hour, the camp radio is playing. Bulletin: Neil Armstrong has just walked on the moon. On the moon! My God, I think, everything is possible in my lifetime, absolutely everything. It is great to be a Jew, especially when you're in Israel and among friends. It is great to be an American, especially when your country can put a man *on the moon*.

LONG ISLAND, 1970–1971. Unlike my friends at West Hempstead High School, after my bar mitzvah, I continue to go to Hebrew School at the Jewish Community Center of West Hempstead. But I hang out mostly with my new friends from Harbor Isle, my Shangri-La of the South Shore: Marc Wolinsky, the irrepressible showman and envied brain whiz; Michael Feldman, political radical and erstwhile girlfriend thief; and the contemplative, mildly hippie-esque Lloyd Lending. Lloyd's father is a leftist war hero, a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade which fought Franco during the Spanish Civil War. He is also stridently atheistic. Lloyd and I discuss not politics but the transcendental—universes beyond our own, the likelihood of life on other planets, unearthly and counterintuitive laws of space and light and physics. We are not political protesters but metaphysical seekers: our mutual guru is not Abby Hoffman but Isaac Asimov. We meditate on life and girls during endless binges of basement ping pong.

Although two neighboring families, the Hofmans and the Rosenblums, are Orthodox, we as Conservative Jews better typify the religious

profile of Jews then living in the West Hempstead-Franklin Square area. We deride Reform Jews for their watered-down services, minimal level of observance, and scant knowledge of the faith. A typical put-down:

A rich but busy Jewish businessman from Westchester buys a Jaguar and tries to get it blessed. He calls up an Orthodox rabbi in Brooklyn, interrupting his Talmud study, and asks, "Rabbi, can you give me a *bracha* [blessing] for my new Jaguar?" The rabbi is annoyed at the disturbance. "No," he replies curtly, "we don't bless pets, no matter how exotic." He immediately hangs up.

So the businessman man phones a Conservative rabbi on Long Island. "Rabbi," he asks, "can *you* say a bracha over my new Jaguar." The conservative rabbi puts the caller on hold, frantically consults his English edition of the Jewish Code, and then gets back on the line. "I'm very sorry," he responds in an apologetic tone, "but Jewish law makes no stipulation for the blessing of automobiles."

Desperate, the businessman places a long distance call to a Reform rabbi in Los Angeles. "Rabbi, please, I've got this new Jaguar, but I can't get a bracha for it. Can't you do it for me?" The Reform rabbi is both impressed and bewildered. "Gee," he says, "I'd love to help you with your car problem, but what the hell's a bracha?"

However funny we think our Reform rabbi jokes are, living next to Orthodox Jews engenders unease about our own religiosity. What are *they*, true "keepers of the Sabbath," thinking when we get into our cars on Saturday? Don't they look down on our nonchalant Judaism and inattention to *halacha*, Jewish law? Do they make jokes about *our* rabbis? I assume that the Orthodox are smug about living Jewishly while the Reform are confused. We Conservatives, upholding the golden middle—knowledgeable about the details of kashrut, for instance, but not actually keeping kosher—are moderately, reasonably, schizophrenic about just how much of Judaism it makes sense to conserve.

Although we do not discuss it, the "new Jews" from Island Park are Reform. Marc and Michael have scintillating South Shore bar mitzvah parties. Lloyd, I assume, does the same. Only three decades later will I learn that Lloyd does not have a bar mitzvah at all.

REHOVOT, APRIL 1971. Having won first place in the National Bible Contest the year before, I am in the august auditorium of the Weizmann Institute, representing the United States in the international competition. No Orthodox yeshiva student, I am tested on Old Testament arcanae not

in Hebrew but in English. “Name two instances in the Bible,” the quiz master asks me on Israeli television, “when Moses is asked to render a legal decision but, not knowing how to rule, has got to consult God.” I answer correctly (see Numbers 27:1–11) and receive the maximum four points. But my heart is broken during this second trip to Israel, not because I do not win the International Bible Contest (I tie in the middle of the pack) but because my first potential real girlfriend in life—Ethne, the South African contestant whose accent seems to drip with precious exoticism—drops me for Amar, one of the Israeli contestants.

With Sefon from Dublin, I am amused to hear Hebrew spoken with an Irish accent. Amnon, my macho Mexican roommate, scandalizes me with his lewd Zionism, explaining—as he insinuates some racy personal experience—that every Jew should move to Israel “because even the prostitutes here are Jewish.” Reporting that I left a bag in a taxicab I am told “if the driver is Jewish, he’ll return it. If he’s an Arab, forget it.” We receive a security briefing and are warned that terrorist bombs are disguised in the most innocent looking of objects. I shake hands with Golda Meir. I am fifteen-years-old.

An anti-Vietnam War moratorium has been declared for the very day I return to West Hempstead High School after my Bible Contest absence. Friends inform me that I ought to boycott class along with them (so does Mrs. Smith, my English teacher and sole black high school instructor) but I don’t, claiming out-of-the-loop ignorance on account of my recent overseas activity. Henceforth, Southeast Asia competes with the Middle East for my geopolitical attention. Bible Contest exploits are consigned to family folklore.

There is no way for me to know that these two visits, in 1969 and 1971, really belong to an uncharacteristic period, a veritable Golden Age, in young Israel’s history. Two years prior in 1967, having been on the edge of extinction, the Jewish State had emerged as the triumphant David amidst Middle Eastern Goliaths. Two years later in 1973 she will be sobered and shaken by the confidence-puncturing Yom Kippur War. The intoxicating spirit of enthusiasm, self-confidence and solidarity which as a teenager I take to be the eternal essence of the Israeli character is really only an aberration, a ’67–’73 high.

ISRAEL AND BINGHAMTON, NEW YORK, 1973. A summer program for gifted science students brings Lloyd, my high school friend from Harbor Isle, to the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. Part of the program includes a stint on a kibbutz. He is turned on by the spirit, the camaraderie, the

music, by “really cool young people walking around barefoot, looking really confident.” The atmosphere is electrifying. Israel’s collective post-’67 feeling of invincibility rubs off on Lloyd. My high school buddy, who definitely inhaled when he smoked and could care less about Judaism, is now turned on by the Jewish State. Until then, says Lloyd twenty-six years later, “I didn’t know that anything was missing from my life.”

Soon after returning to Binghamton, Lloyd is stunned by Israel’s near defeat in the Yom Kippur War. All those new friends he had just made on—kibbutz—are they to be annihilated? Other students fly to Israel to fill in for young workers sent into the army, but Lloyd is unable to just pack up and go. But neither does he adapt to the college groove at State University of New York-Binghamton. Imbibing the disillusionment of the 1960s protest movement, but without a Vietnam to serve as target for the discontent, Lloyd gravitates to Jewish studies as he asks himself: “Who am I? What am I doing here?”

POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK, 1973–1974. Although a good many of my fellow undergraduates are actually Jewish, we willingly lose ourselves in Vassar’s traditionally WASP ethos and live, for the first time in our lives, in a predominantly (if nominally) Gentile world. Isn’t that, after all, why we chose a Seven Sisters school rather than a local SUNY or a Brandeis? The unrivaled campus hero is the hip southern Baptist chaplain, not the discreet Hillel rabbi. It is not assumed, as it is in high school, that the smartest students are necessarily the Jewish ones. I “pass” (at least I think I do) as just a generic, rather than Jewish, good-grade-getting undergrad. At Vassar, my most relevant minority status is that of male.

In the first month of my freshman year, Israel is nearly defeated in a war that begins on the Day of Repentance. When I am a sophomore, the United Nations resolves that “Zionism is racism.”

Freshman roommate Tim Dennison from Baton Rouge introduces me to Southern culture and I befriend (not without a touch of class envy) Dick Cavette look-alike and sophisticate Richard Van Demark. For sure, I do have Jewish friends, male and female. College assimilationist truth be known, however, the most thrilling encounters are with the non-Jewish women whom I meet, date and, when the Master of the Co-ed Universe is merciful, mate.

KIBBUTZ NAN, ISRAEL, 1974. After a summer reading Zionism’s best sellers—*Exodus*, *The Source*, *O Jerusalem*—Lloyd leaves Binghamton to

spend a year studying Hebrew and working on a kibbutz. He drives a tractor—"a revolutionary thing for a kid from the suburbs"—and is asked to become a kibbutz member. But Nan is too big, a place where a young immigrant can get lost. He attends a seminar of Zionist thinkers and philosophers. "Stay connected," his professor, Stanley Merone tells the seminarians at the end of the course. "Stay connected among yourselves. Stay connected with Israel."

POUGHKEEPSIE, 1975–1977. During my junior year, Israel becomes deeply implicated in the Lebanese civil war. In my senior year, a month before graduation, the leftist Labor government is defeated by the revisionist, right-wing Likud led by Menachim Begin. There is nothing cool about being Jewish on a college campus in the 1970s.

She with whom I fall in love during my last year at Vassar is Catholic and Polish-speaking; inevitably, my mother reminds me that the Poles are the worst anti-Semites of all. "Her mother was raped by the Germans during World War II," I feebly offer in her family's defense, trying to evoke a sense of shared victimhood. But in Mother's eyes, Martha remains the consummate *shiksa* danger.

Intellectually, I silently brood at the Jewishless version of Western philosophy and history to which we are exposed in class. Hegel's unfolding of God throughout history is irredeemably Christian. Never do we learn that the major figures of the Frankfurt School whom I study in my Critical Theory concentration—Adorno, Habermas, Marcuse, Lukacs, Horkheimer—are *Jewish* German emigrés. Jews are not yet part of the multicultural curriculum and Holocaust studies are at least a decade away. Jews are still the understated presence in the post-anti-Semitic elite academy: intrinsic, perhaps indispensable, but rarely invoked. As students, professors, and authors, Jews politely blend in. Noisy pro-Soviet Jewry protesters, yelling and wielding "Never Again!" placards on television, greatly embarrass me.

The counterculture years are over but I still retain some antimaterialistic, anticorporate track propensities. Mercifully, each of the top notch law schools to which I apply in my senior year rejects me and so I am free to pursue my true postcollegiate desire: two years of exotic overseas adventure with the Peace Corps. Although I have taken not a single course dealing with the Third World during my four years of high-priced college, Africa is my ultimate assignment. For two years I shall live in a desolate, landlocked desert country that I never even knew existed prior to be-

ing offered an English teacher's position there: Niger. Our group of sixty, mostly recent college graduates, fly off to train in Niamey, Niger's dusty capital, in early July 1977.

YAHEL, NEGEV DESERT, FEBRUARY 1977. Near the southern border with Jordan, in another desolate, desert setting, a group of fifty-five young Jewish men and women, about half of them from America, move into their small, spartan homes and launch a new community based on progressive Judaism and communal living. Yahel is the first kibbutz of the Reform Zionist Movement, a brainchild of a few radical rabbis and Israel immigration activists. They have worked almost subversively to buck the prevailing trend which views kibbutz life as passé and actual emigration to Israel as a nonrealistic goal. Dr. Michael Langer, Rabbi Alan Levine, and Rabbi Stephen Schaefer have recruited Israeli kids from a Reform school in Haifa and Americans, especially those who had previously spent a college year abroad in Jerusalem. They tap into a wellspring of idealism among these young sabras and English-speaking immigrants (including a smattering of South Africans). Renouncing America, however, is more complicated than moving from Haifa.

Although officially dedicated three months before, as these Jewish spiritual desert rats unpack their bags Yahel still has no electricity or drinkable water. Given the proximity to the Jordanian border, not having a working telephone poses an especial security danger. Yet the young pioneers decide to make the move, reasoning that "surely others had endured more discomfort and lived in greater danger than we would experience." Michael Madson, recently graduated from Dartmouth, records Day 1:

At sunset of our first day we had services. As the first kibbutz associated with the Reform movement, we hope to become a community dedicated both to the traditional values of kibbutz and the search for a meaningful Jewish way of life in the modern world. We prayed and sang: We give thanks to You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this day.

We sat down to a supper of hard green tomatoes, cucumbers, warm sour cream, and a drink of concentrate mixed with water. It was good, but what made it special was looking around the dining room and only seeing people dedicated to Yahel. There were no interesting volunteers from overseas with whom you could cuddle up in the pleasures of the flesh and escape from the discussions and pressures involved in making important decisions. There were no host

kibbutznikim to remind us what to do, to ask us to get up because there were not enough seats, or to tell us to be quiet because we made too much noise. It's hard to convey the pleasure we got out of screaming at each other, as loud as we could, to stop laughing, to stop singing, and to stop having a good time. We sat there singing for a long time and then we stumbled back to our dark rooms and lit candles.

The candles did not give off enough light, it was cold and we wanted to be together. Someone lit a bonfire and called us out to make coffee and burn some sad little potatoes. We sang for a couple of hours . . .

Perhaps it was the brashness of youth and the lingering madness which had led us from the comforts of "normal" existence to this stark and lifeless desert. But we laughed at the challenge and called our laughter idealism.

Another Long Islander, Ron Bernstein, recounts the kibbutz's genesis like this: "It was very naïve then. We were all young and idealistic, and I don't think any of us knew what we were doing really. We had no real direction.

"It was exciting, something very new. We were starting from scratch. Most companies, most firms, most governments would never take a group of twenty-year-olds and say: 'Take this multimillion dollar business and make a community that is supposed to be set up as a kibbutz with Reform Judaism as its center.' The Jewish Agency, the kibbutz federation, and the Reform movement were telling these kids to put this conglomerate together, with most of us not having the experience to do something like that. That's basically what it was."

BINGHAMTON, 1977. Lloyd, back in Binghamton, begins tinkering in mechanics, car repairing, manual enterprises of a type alien to our crowd of Long Island Jews. He takes more Judaic studies courses, still trying to build a Jewish identity "from basically an empty slate, because I had no Jewish upbringing. It was a process of discovering roots." But he does not graduate. College is "cold, academic, nonexperiential." *Studying* about Jews is irrelevant for he needs to *live* Jewishly.

We are hardly in contact during these years, Lloyd and I. When we do reconnect in Island Park, Lloyd retroactively admires my having won the National Bible Contest way back in '69 and praises my knowledge (rusty by now) of Hebrew. Without saying it aloud, we agree that the real test of an authentic Jew is one who has mastered our ancestral tongue and can actually converse in it. Orthodox speed-*davening*—the ability to recite, virtually by

rote, ancient prayers at breakneck speed—may not, after all, be the defining hallmark of the good Jew, especially when such prayer book Judaism is practiced from the comfortable suburban confines of Long Island. But moving to Israel, regardless of religiosity: *this* is Jewish commitment.

NIGER, 1977–1979. So otherworldly is life in the hinterland of Niger that for the only time in my life I am oblivious to the arrival of Rosh Hashana. So far have I traveled from my previous Jewish life that I do not know when falls (and therefore do not fast on) the Day of Atonement. Living in an Islamic society, however, I become well acquainted with Ramadan, Tabaski, and Id-el-Fitr. Why, not only are some of my best friends now Muslim, but they are virtually the only friends around! A history teacher from Benin—a rare Catholic in these parts—invites me to his class as living specimen for the unit on ancient Semitic civilizations. Feeling rather fossil-like, I address a classroom of young black African Muslims with the heavy burden of knowing that I may very well be the only Hebrew they ever meet in their Sahelian lives.

YAHTEL, 1979–1983. A group of prospective immigrants spend a summer at a Reform camp playing kibbutzniks. They pool their money, simulate desert agriculture, wash dishes together. Several of them drop out. But not Lloyd.

In October 1979, Lloyd flies off to Israel and joins the group in the middle of Yahel's third year of existence. He finds "a bunch of twenty to twenty-three-year-olds running things, without any real idea of how to do it, but with a lot of energy and determination, a lot of seriousness, and a lot of shouting and screaming and arguing." It's exciting, intoxicating. A year later he meets a visiting co-ed on winter break from Vassar College. Erica Sussman, originally from Newton, Massachusetts, smites him—and returns to Poughkeepsie. But shortly after Lloyd joins the Israeli army in 1981, Erica, Vassar degree in hand, returns to Yahel. In 1983, after a year and a half of army leave weekend romance, they marry.

MEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS AND MARTINIQUE, FRENCH WEST INDIES, 1980–1984. Taking a year off from post-Peace Corps graduate school, I spend a year teaching English in the Caribbean and picking up a doctoral dissertation topic. A year later I return and pick up an island lady. I am smitten. A tropical romance ensues. But marriage is impossible, I confess to this French Caribbean mademoiselle, for my future wife must be Jewish. On a former slave plantation at Fonds St. Jacques, on the northern tip of

this bewitching island, the petite, café au lait damsel with fine Indian features and slender Chinese fingers, inquires in French, “Cannot I become Jewish?” I am skeptical. She is courageous. She is perhaps the first ever Martinican convert to Judaism.

NIGER, WEST AFRICA 1984. With an Islamic priest and another Muslim friend, I am seated outdoors on a straw mat on the sandy earth in a remote Hausa village in this former French colony in the Sahel. We are chatting about this and that and I am asked, in a similarly by-the-way tone, “Is Isa”—Arabic for Jesus—“going to come back?”

“How am I supposed to know?” I shrug.

“Oh, you know all right,” comes the reply in Hausa. “You just won’t tell.”

They are a bit miffed, particularly since they think I am deliberately holding back as to *when* this shared Christian-Muslim prophet is scheduled to return. The only way out, I conclude, is to reveal that I am not, as had been assumed all along, a Nasara—a follower of the one from Nazareth—but a Bayahuda.

“Oho,” says the Imam, “you don’t follow the Prophet Isa [Jesus]. You follow the Prophet Musa [Moses].” To the now confused friend, the priest explains the difference among white folk between the followers of Isa and the Yahudawa, “they who follow the *atora* (Torah).” Then he turns to me to confirm something. “You were under the Faruna, weren’t you?”

Faruna, faruna. What is he talking about?

“You don’t know the Faruna? Harsh masters, they made your people work hard, so finally you left them.” Aha! Faruna is their way of saying Pharaoh. When I confirm, the Imam turns back to his friend, points at me as illustration, and recounts how my brothers fled Masar (Egypt), were pursued by the Faruna, and had the Red Split for us. The friend sits up like a bolt.

“That was you?!” he exclaims in utter amazement and admiration. “You are the ones who did all that?”

I shyly admit that it was indeed “us.”

With clenched fist, he raises his arm and shakes it, in the traditional Hausa salute extended to kings and rulers. He utters the words of praise reserved for such occasions (*Ranke ya dadi*—May you live long!) and exuberantly continues to recite the story of the Exodus, complete with miracles, with an immediacy, enthusiasm, and faithfulness beyond that I’ve experienced in the more than twenty Passover seders I can recall. Moses’ rod seems to be his favorite feature. “Your brothers did all that? *Ranke ya dadi!*”

“Well,” I explain with false modesty, “we had to. After all, we were living under a harsh regime.” I use the local term for the colonial period under the French. “We also”—as was the case in Hausaland—“experienced slavery.”

“Do you have the atora here with you?” the Imam asks me, expectantly.

“No,” interrupts the friend. “He has it at home. How could he bring it here? One needs a camel to carry the Torah.” I don’t bother to correct him. But in every subsequent Simchat Torah back in America, in my mind’s eye I see a Torah-laden dromedary parading around the synagogue sanctuary.

YAHTEL, 1987–1988. After years of nationwide inflation, governmental withdrawal of subsidies, and spendthrift policies on the kibbutz, *mashber*—crisis—hits Yahel hard. Financial crisis spurs ideological crisis. Either the kibbutz radically restructures its economic operation, or it threatens to go under. Economic restructuring means privatization and capitalism, hired labor and rent-paying residents, bottom line thinking and preoccupation with profit. Some kibbutzniks are convinced that Yahel cannot survive. Others fear that if the proposed changes are adopted, the kibbutz will surrender its core communal principles and lose its soul in the process.

Matt Sperber of Long Island, John Cohen from England, and sabra Amnon Shimoni go house-to-house trying to convince people to weather the storm and stay the course of the changes. They succeed—partially. One-third of the members throw in the towel and abandon the kibbutz. But Yahel survives.

Lloyd takes the crisis and restructuring in stride. Never the ideologue (“the entire world works on hired labor. What’s so criminal about it? What’s so immoral?”), he is content to hone new skills and contribute to the community wherever he can. He will become a licensed tour guide, a master electrician, even *mazkir* (general-manager) of the entire kibbutz. Some of the innovations bother him on account of the toll they take on social cohesion but more important is the overall viability of his community. Raising his children takes precedence over struggling for ideological purity.

JERUSALEM, 1994. After ten years as a college professor in Boston, including extended research jaunts to the French-speaking enclave of Pondicherry, India, and to the South Pacific archipelago of Vanuatu, I am entitled to a university sabbatical. Where else to go but the Promised Land, where the very notion of sabbatical year first arose? Affiliated with the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, we rent an upper story apartment on French Hill in Jerusalem, overlooking a Bedouin encampment

below and the Judean desert beyond. I am ecstatic about returning to Israel as a professor and being part of what I imagine to be an intellectual kibbutz in the Holy City. So as to regain my Hebrew, I enroll in an *ulpan*, a language crash course, at the university. An informal, long-term vehicle rental arrangement with my landlady allows us to roam the diminutive country at will. Wheels, pad, freedom, think tank hangout—it's the perfect setup for an American Zionist's university sabbatical.

It is the most disillusioning period of my life.

What was I expecting? The Israel of my youth, perhaps, when American bar mitzvah pilgrims and Bible Contest contestants were the toast of the land. The same Oriental-Mediterranean frontier, perhaps, with the explored exoticism of an Africa, India, or Oceania but in a Jewish key. Instead, I find a rude, often uncouth, fast-moving, stressed-out culture whose Jewish members exhibit little interest in American visitors, marginal patience with Hebrew stumblers, and naked condescension for Arab residents. The cleavage between religious and secular Jews is jarring. Conservative and Reform movements are not only peripheral but positively despised by the Orthodox establishment. There is little theological legitimacy for those of us Ashkenazim who are somewhat observant but do not follow the full panoply of Sabbath strictures. Soon enough I learn to keep silent about my Bible Contest background. For secularists (including virtually all colleagues at the university), it is a suspect sign, the mark, perhaps, of latent religious fanaticism. For the religious, given my apparent secular demeanor of today, it conjures shameful abandonment of previous religious commitment.

In six months in the so-called City of Peace, I witness enough aggressive, argumentative exchanges (usually between Jews) to last any religion's vision of purgatory. Gratuitous nastiness by armed Israeli soldiers towards Arab shopkeepers and taxi passengers sours me on the presumption of Israelis' generic love of peace. I do not find that men wearing yarmulkes are any more genteel, be it in political debate or driving habits, than those who do not. Secularists' stereotypical prejudices against "black hats"—the ultra-Orthodox—begin to make perfect sense. But I am not comfortable among secularists either, for they reject virtually everything that I have grown up to associate with being Jewish. Only after deciding that leaving America to settle in Israel is insane do I realize that, beneath all scholarly pretense, I had also come with a hidden agenda to explore a permanent return to "the Homeland."

On the morning of Purim, when Jews commemorate their deliverance from Persian genocide thousands of years ago, I receive a call from

my university office mate Uri, an Israeli graduate student with Hawaiian connections, with whom I'd casually discussed plans for a family outing that would take us through part of the West Bank. "I don't know if you've heard the news," Uri says in a friendly but restrained voice, "but some crazy guy in Hebron has gone on a rampage and killed a lot of Arabs there. I don't really think it's the best day to go for a drive on any West Bank roads."

The "crazy guy" is Baruch Goldstein, an Orthodox Jew, a Brooklynite by birth and upbringing, a medical doctor, and now that he has fatally shot twenty-nine Muslim worshippers, a mass murderer. He is emphatically religious but not certified as insane. On television a fellow traveller, when asked to comment on the killings, will only invoke the Talmudic rule about conserving the spirit of a holiday even in the face of personal tragedy; with a malicious grin, he recites the commandment, "You shall be happy and rejoice." Goldstein's shooting down of Palestinians praying in Abraham's tomb sets off waves of violence. Immediately killed by survivors of his massacre, Goldstein's own tomb soon becomes a shrine for other Jewish fanatics.

Respite from the rejection, dejection, and depression that I experience throughout this half year comes from befriending the elderly, Hausa-speaking chief of the Black African quarter in Old Jerusalem and from the few short trips we make to Yahel. Only here, within the safe, enclosed, self-sustaining community gates, where everyone knows everyone else and all dine together in the summer camp-like cafeteria, do I rediscover glimpses of the Israel of my youth. My old friend Lloyd—now going by the Hebraicized name Elad—is a jubilant, extroverted, thirty-eight-year-old head-shaven version of his younger self. Elad shows off his kibbutz with the same pride he displays for his eleven-year-old daughter Chava and his eight-year-old son Gadi. He is an enthusiastic desert tour guide, joyfully chatting with the same American teenagers whose adolescent ilk I am happy to escape while on university leave. (To my long lasting regret, I miss Tisha B'Av in Jerusalem—the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple—to meet up in Be'er Sheva with a Yahel-bound tour group of Reform American adolescents.) Elad waxes rhapsodic about the kibbutz's decision—a hallmark of ingenuous Reform Jewish reasoning—regarding the appropriate use of technology in the dairy during the Sabbath. He is a hands-on electrician and Israeli army reservist, a cow-milking kibbutznik in the Negev Desert, the Hebrew-speaking father of sabra children. The religious school dropout who never had a bar mitzvah trumps me, the Hebrew high school graduate and Bible Contest winner, on every index of

Zionist and Jewish commitment. Which is fine. Only I can't figure out how it happened—from a "Reform" friend, no less.

BOSTON, 1998. Only in America . . . Only in America could the reasoning and actions of well-intentioned Gentile friends, colleagues, and a dean result in a specialist on former French colonies receiving a professorship in Jewish studies. My appointment is made one year before Gadi Lending is scheduled to celebrate his bar mitzvah and two years before the bat mitzvah of my own daughter. Yahel—in spite of Israel—beckons. Although my sabbatical has painfully convinced me that I do not wish to live in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, or in any other city or town in the Jewish State, I still do not fathom what keeps Elad and his fellow kibbutzniks on this communal Jewish farm in the desert. I still need to know: had I, when I was twenty-one, gone to Yahel rather than the Sahel, would I have stayed? Would living in this obscure but egalitarian community in the Arava have satisfied both my expatriate urges and my commitment to Judaism?

Under the guise of academic scholarship, I make plans for the family to arrive well in time for the summer *simcha* of '99, that is, for Gadi Lending's joyous rite of passage at the age of thirteen. Deep down, I am also hoping to scratch my last, stubborn, Zionist itch.

EILAT, JULY 1999. We arrive in the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, in the Negev. To stock the pantry of our kibbutz cottage, we take a kibbutz car to the supermarket in Eilat. Elad ambivalently steers us away from purchasing an otherwise flavorful and well-priced line of wines. "It's produced on a right-wing kibbutz," he explains somewhat sheepishly, not quite sure yet to include us within his circle of fellow boycotters. Perhaps it's a matter of shunning products from a Jewish settlement in the contested Palestinian territories.

In this southern Israeli Supersol liquor aisle, I watch as my old high school buddy from Long Island scans the wine labels in Hebrew lest he inadvertently purchase a politically objectionable bottle from an ideologically rival kibbutz.

Had I been a better Jew and joined him years before, might I be doing the same?