

Chapter One

It's almost eleven o'clock on a weekday morning in November 1994. Back in New York, I would already be shivering in the bone-chill of late autumn, winter already breathing frostily down my neck. But on this day in Jerusalem, where I now live, the weather is still summer-like. A beam of yellow sunlight slants like a leaning tower through the tall windows of my kitchen, bouncing off motes of dust dancing in the air. I am grateful for the cool cocoon created by the two-foot-thick stone walls of the house we are renting in Jerusalem's Greek Colony.

I love this time of day. Chaim's at work, the boys are at school. The atmosphere around me is tranquil, the frantic eddies of the early morning rush having subsided. I'm relatively rested and focused. I have deliberately not scheduled any patients today, a luxury born of the flexibility of running my own private psychotherapy practice. Today, I have a date with my mother, due to knock at my door any moment.

She and my father are back for another visit to their beloved, traitorous daughter who left the Upper West Side of Manhattan—and them—three years earlier to pursue a lifelong dream of living in Israel. The move wasn't unexpected. That didn't make breaking the news any easier.

"*What?* You're doing *what?*"

"Moving to Israel. This summer."

"*This* is how you tell me? Don't you think you should have sat down and discussed it with me, with Daddy, before you made a decision like this?"

"Discussed it? Are you kidding? We've been talking about this forever. You knew we've wanted to do this for years. Ever since Chaim and I met. That's almost—what—eighteen years ago! This isn't a surprise."

"That's true, you've been talking about it for years. That's why I thought you weren't going to do it. But now, with the kids, and the situation? Do you realize how dangerous it is there?"

"No, I hadn't thought about that at all."

"Don't take that tone with me. That's not fair."

"Sorry. I know this is hard—"

"Of course it is. I know you've always talked about moving there. But I thought—I hoped you'd given up the idea. And anyway, when you talked about it, it was years ago. We were younger then. Maybe if you'd moved when we were younger, Daddy and I. But we're not that young anymore."

"Oh, c'mon, Mom. Stop that. You're young. You have more energy than almost anyone I know. You've got more energy than I do, sometimes. What does that have to do with it, anyway?"

"It would have been easier for us to get used to it. We would have had more time to get used to it. But now . . ."

"Well, you can always move too. Why don't you? That way you can be with the kids, watch them grow."

"You should have thought of that before you decided to move. *We're* not moving."

"Well, then you'll have to come visit."

And so in August 1991, Chaim and I, with our three sons—Yonatan, age seven, David, four, and Yehoshua, two—boarded an El Al plane en route to making Jerusalem our home.

Chaim and I *had* planned this for years. In our very first conversation, we had been delighted to discover that we each planned to live in Israel someday. Okay, so it took us a while: eighteen years. But now we were finally doing it.

My parents love and cherish Israel. It is the glowing counterweight to the darkness of the Holocaust, the pillar of fire to

the Shoah's pillar of smoke and ash. Israel is the realization of a redemptive, protective dream: had the Jewish state existed during The War, the Holocaust would not have happened, and all the grandparents, all the aunts, all the uncles, all of the six million, would still be alive. My parents believe wholeheartedly in the importance of building the Jewish state, of being part of the miracle, and they had educated me toward this ideal all my life. But losing one's daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren—three grandsons, no less—to that far-off country, still at war, still at risk? *That* was another story altogether. My mother dripped pain whenever she talked to me about it.

This was not new to me. Growing up, I had certainly felt the bonds holding me to my family. I knew that for survivors, separation from family members, even for events as casual as vacations, is never easy. In fact, it verges on the traumatic. For many, the last time they'd been separated from their loved ones, it had been final: they never saw them again. I also knew about the deep sense of responsibility many children of survivors feel toward their parents, the compelling need to take care of them, becoming, in effect, their parents' parents.

In graduate school, training to become a clinical psychologist, I read the relevant literature that gravely discussed "survivor syndrome" and "survivor guilt" and reflected on survivors' particular form of separation and death anxiety. To me, this was no abstraction. I carried it within me, deep in my cells.

Sometimes these syndromes had an upside, one my mother-in-law counted on quite explicitly. When I married her younger son, she confidently declared that at least she didn't have to worry about *this* son moving far away, and to Israel, no less, as her older son had done several years earlier. My in-laws lived only a few blocks away from my parents and she was sure I would never leave my mother.

But now, against all odds, I *was* leaving my mother and my father and moving to Israel. I knew all about the connection between separation and death. I knew all about being responsible for parents. I had watched my mother devotedly taking care of her aging father and mother until their respective deaths in 1973 and 1980. I admired and loved that about her. But I was adamant:

I would live my own life. I was sticking to my plan. Besides, I argued—with her, and with myself—she was nowhere near as old, as infirm, as my grandparents had been. On the contrary, she and my father are two of the healthiest, most energetic people I know. I should have their stamina, their zest for life when I'm their age. Hell, when I'm *my* age.

So I ordered the obligatory 220-volt appliances, the dependable Maytag washer and the twenty-two-cubic foot Amana refrigerator, packed all our stuff, marshaled all my arguments, and steeled myself against the final good-byes. Anyway, I told myself, these were not final good-byes. It's only a ten-hour flight from JFK to Ben Gurion Airport. We're a long way since the days when covered wagons bore relatives away from each other forever. We have faxes and international dialing. Sure, the separation would hurt. I convinced myself that my mother would handle it.

What I didn't take into account was whether *I* could.

Israel. Chaim eventually found work, getting happily involved in a start-up software company brimming with hope and energy. I began to develop my private practice as a clinical psychologist. We enrolled the kids in their respective schools and preschool programs. Two were happy, one was not. But over the next few months, they, and we, began to adjust to our new environment. On a macrolevel, the transition was going smoothly.

On a microlevel, the transition was exhausting. I was hell-bent on making this Zionist Experiment work. I was flushed with Zionist fervor. Everyone I met—on the street, at the grocery, at the filling station—was a long-lost Brother or Sister, every experience a Zionist Miracle. No wonder I was wiped at the end of every day's hunt for Meaningful Moments and Portentous Signs.

Much of the time, I felt as though I'd entered a house of mirrors: everything was recognizable, but just distorted enough so that when I reached out to touch the image, it wasn't quite where I expected it to be. This applied to so many things: the supermarket, lined with cans and jars and containers of products I recognized—almost. The school system, which didn't provide us with a regular schedule of dismissal times and vacations because "everyone just knows it." The plus signs in my kids' math workbooks, which were

written like an upside-down T, missing the lower “leg” of the little cross I was used to. I took the disappearance of that “lower leg” personally. The first few times my kids drew this new, amputated symbol, I corrected them. They corrected me right back. “*This* is right, Mommy,” they told me patiently, then not so patiently, until I gave up. And I remembered my mother helping me in math back in elementary school. Her division sign was strange to me: a colon, with no horizontal line separating the two dots. I corrected her too, back then. She, too, was amused at first—then irritated. What had been good enough for the hen was no longer good enough for the chick. Now I knew how she felt.

Living in a new language posed endless challenges. A whole new life needed to be deciphered, decoded. Banking statements—in Hebrew. Recipes—in Hebrew, and in grams and kilos. Converting the weather report—or a child’s temperature—from Celsius to Fahrenheit or back.

Our kids slid into fluent Hebrew—its cadences, nuances, and accent—within several months. Their growing proficiency soon outpaced our knowledge of the language. They started making a point of identifying their English-speaking friends as such, to save us the trouble (and themselves the embarrassment) of our butchering the grammar or the accent. They served as my grammar- and spell-checkers every time I had to send off a note to school. It made me appreciate what my parents had gone through, learning to function in English after they came to America. They speak with relatively light accents, but there are words my mother will never quite get her tongue around. She still pronounces *colonel* just as it’s spelled, in three syllables, “co-lo-nel,” despite years of coaching her to think: kernel. She cannot hear the difference between *color* and *collar*. And *drawer*: I learned the hard way—the snickering of my second-grade classmates ringing in my ears—that it’s not two-syllabled, as my mother says it, but that you draaaaaw it out in one long “draaaaawr.” Now it was my turn to be the greenhorn. My kids laughed at how Hebrew gutturals got stuck in my throat. In stores, cashiers often switched into English when handing me my change—broken English at that—and who asked them, anyway?

All these small, daily adjustments scraped against my skin like fine-grained sandpaper: the clumsiness of mangling a foreign

language, the inability to escape my accent, the feeling of marginality, even among an immigrant population that turned out to have its own insidious pecking order. No mortal wounds, these, but enough to hurt, to chafe, to keep me tottering and unsteady.

My insides fluttered in a brittle dance of exhilaration and angst. Had I been in a laughing mood (and sometimes, in my better moments, I was), the irony (poetic justice?) of this might have been funny: in my private practice, I specialize in anxiety and stress reduction. I daresay none of my clients needed my skills as much as I did. All my training, all my techniques got a power workout. And when being breathless with excitement turned into simply being unable to breathe at the thought of the day's looming challenges, there was one particular godsend: the massive jasmine bush outside the kitchen window. I am eternally grateful to that bush for its hands-on lesson in stress reduction: sucking in its perfumed exhale forced me to breathe deeply, to calm down whenever the strain of adjustment became overwhelming.

I began to appreciate what my parents had gone through, arriving on strange American shores after the war. But *I* had made the choice to immigrate freely. They hadn't. They had been ripped from their moorings, flung from their land and culture, weighed down—in a world where such concepts were still unknown—by the long-term effects of trauma. How *bad* they coped?

And one more Something lurked, just below the surface, just below the daily struggle to adjust. Some faint shadow-feeling prowled and skulked, refusing to be identified, remaining mad-deningly elusive.

I felt off-balance. Irritated. Damn it, I'm a psychologist, I'm supposed to be able to figure this out. Well, at least I knew enough to accept that I'd just have to wait for the cloud of swirling mess inside to settle—like coffee grounds settling in a cup—for the outlines to become clear.

In the meantime, my intrepid parents visited us, flying back and forth between New York and Israel, their suitcases loaded with treats: the latest best-selling books for adults and children, culled from the *New York Times Book Review* and plucked from the shelves at the majestic Barnes and Noble at 82nd Street and

Broadway. Decaffeinated English Breakfast Tea from Zabar's. From the discount dry goods stores on the Lower East Side, Eckstein's and Kreinen's, came thick fluffy sweatsuits for us all, and Superman and Batman pajamas for the boys. All those touches of "home," those "essential," more grown-up incarnations of the teddy bears and "blankies" intended to ease the transition from one developmental stage to another.

Their visits were like their suitcases: cram-packed full of goodies, multilayered as an archeological dig. And very, very heavy. Sure, it was wonderful seeing them radiate with joy at being with their grandchildren and watching the kids bask in that love. All the while, however, I had to steel myself against the undercurrent of sadness, the knowledge that, all too soon, once again, this would end. In the space of weeks, we tried to compensate for the separation of months. The joyous lightness of reunion balanced precariously with the dead weight of good-byes already looming. We stoked for the coming period of starvation by gorging on shared experiences: attending the children's class parties, cheering them on at judo exhibitions, sharing Shabbat and holiday dinners. Moving through the visit, I'd feel nourished, then sated, and finally stuffed and cranky. The partings were difficult. The kids wailed and sobbed every time my parents left us. I didn't handle it much better; I was just quieter about it. During the last days before their departure, I'd slide into a funk that didn't dissipate until several days after they'd gone and I'd settled back into my routine. Relief was always accompanied by the hollow pain of loss.

Sometime in the early autumn of 1994, I found myself at a writing class in Talpiot, a nearby Jerusalem neighborhood. I put it that way because going there was a spur-of-the-moment thing.

Not that writing was a foreign idea. As a child, I dreamed of becoming a writer, like Betsy of the Betsy-Tacy series, Jo March, and Anne Frank. I scribbled reams of stories and poems.

In my first semester at Barnard College, a Freshman English instructor callously skewered my writing—and my confidence. After that, I confined myself to term papers, long letters to friends, and lots of journals. Instead of a writer, I became a psychologist,

sublimating the desire to analyze subtle literary themes into helping flesh-and-blood creations explore their motivations and find the poetry hidden in their lives. I thought I had laid to rest the urge to write. But here I was.

The assignment was straightforward: “Go back in time and write about an incident that happened to someone you know. Get inside their skin. Tell their story from your perspective.”

Five women, strangers to one another, perched their notebooks on their knees and scratched away in the dark light of the living room. The story of my mother’s stomach-wrenching journey to America by storm-tossed Liberty Ship in 1949 flowed onto a page of yellow lined paper.

Diane Greenberg, the teacher, asked us to read out what we’d written.

My turn: I began to read, feeling nervous about being scrutinized, about giving my silent thoughts voice. Halfway through, a huge sob heaved itself out of me. Past my astonished Censor. Out into the open. In full view of five perfect strangers.

They sat silently, watching, while tears poured down my face. I was mortified. Aghast at the loss of control; I hadn’t seen it coming. A few ragged breaths later, I could push enough of it back down to resume reading, my voice shaking and tight. I finished and stared at the page.

“Is it a true story?” Diane asked, quietly. “Whose voice is it?”

“Yes, it’s true,” I answered. “It’s my mother.” Barely meeting her eyes, I explained that my mother was a Holocaust survivor. I had heard this particular story many times, growing up. But I had no idea why it had produced such a strong reaction now.

As I talked, taking refuge in intellectual explanations, the waves of turbulence within me began to subside. I could pretend to ignore, for a moment, the upheaval and my horrified disbelief at how I had let down my guard, or rather, how something much more powerful than I ever imagined had cracked through the walls of my defenses.

In her gentle, elegantly British tones, Diane suggested that perhaps something was begging for expression. Perhaps I should even consider writing about it—and not just about my mother’s experiences, but about my own reactions to them as well.

“That’s a story, too,” she said.

The other women—when I dared to glance at them—were nodding vigorously.

Maybe. At the moment, I was focused on getting my guts to stop quaking, and on convincing myself that I would survive even if the women present still secretly thought I was a fruitcake.

There was no denying, however, that something *was* trying to get through to me.

I gradually began to understand what it was.

This “Separation = Death” thing was working all right, but in reverse. What if this was the last time I saw my parents? It was unthinkable, yet I was thinking it: How did one survive the loss of one’s parents? How did you make your way from one day to the next to the next, knowing you’d never see them again, never be able to talk to them again? Never be able to call them up and hear that explosion of sunlight as they recognize your voice on the phone. “Come *quick*,” my father always yells to my mother when he’s the one to answer first, “your daughter is on the phone!”

But it was more than that. If “Something Happened to Them”—that’s as close as I could bring myself to give voice to the fear—would I have known them? *Really* known them, as people, not simply as my parents. Who they were, before me, aside from me. The details of their lives.

My father had recently spent over one hundred hours being interviewed about his life and wartime experiences by Professor Michael Wyschogrod, a close family friend. I had the transcripts of those conversations. Although they didn’t contain all that I wanted to know, at least there was some record of his life.

There was no such record of my mother’s. If “Something Happened,” how would I ever get to know her?

That thought was becoming unbearable. But my growing desperation was met with resistance that was just as desperate: I did not want to get into “Holocaust stuff.” I had been very, very grateful when it didn’t have to be me interviewing my father, when Michael had stepped into the breach. But there was no one else to do this with my mother.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so hard. As my mother herself said on those rare occasions when she discussed this at all: hers weren’t hor-

ror stories like my father's. She had never made a big deal about her experiences, so maybe there was nothing to worry about. Besides, I would only be chronicling her childhood, slaking my thirst for anecdotes that could be passed on to my kids, about zany aunts, maybe, or daredevil uncles, or mischievous childhood pranks, the kind of scrapes my childhood heroes—the March sisters in *Little Women*, the Bobbsey Twins, the Hardy boys—always got into.

So, later that fall, when my parents arrived on yet another visit to the Holy Land, I had a Plan for this oral history project that I hoped would help me avoid the pitfalls.

I knew just how to do it.

Back in 1984, just after our first son, Yonatan, was born, I had been browsing in a local stationary store on Upper Broadway when I spied it: a grandmother's memory book. Similar to a baby book, it was designed to help a grandmother create an heirloom of her life for her grandchildren. It laid out everything simply, coherently, and chronologically, and walked you through your life with questions to be answered, a family tree to be completed, and blank squares to be filled with photographs. I thought: Great! This is pretty straightforward, almost easy, even for someone who doesn't like to write. Perfect for my mother. What a great gift for both the new grandmother and the new baby.

I presented it to my mother. She thanked me, rewrapped it, and put it carefully in a drawer. And left it there. From time to time, as the years passed, and two more sons were born, I'd ask her about the memory book. She hadn't done a thing with it. Someday, she said, she would sit down with me and we'd fill it in together. We never got around to it.

Once, during one of those parental visits to Israel, my mother reached inside her suitcase, pulled out the memory book, still carefully wrapped, and handed it to me.

"You keep it," she said.

I did.

"We'll get to it," she said.

We didn't.

Somehow, it was never the right time.

Now it was time.