

DAYS OF AWE

Text and photographs by Naomi Gryn

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Jerusalem is where I've found the greatest inspiration; it's also where I've known the worst despair. I long for its golden light, its champagne air, the intensity of its daily life and the tranquillity that descends on the city every Friday evening as *shabbat* is ushered in. But now Israel is hornlocked in conflict, trapped by fear and anxiety. Jewish history is riddled with traumatic episodes, and the same is true for the Palestinians. Haunted by such painful memories, Jews and Arabs have become vulnerable and volatile, hearing each other through a veil of emotional scars. But actually they're all shouting at the past.

Last time I went to Israel was two and a half years ago. I wanted to spend the *yomim noraim* – Days of Awe – at Kol HaNeshema, my favourite synagogue in Jerusalem. I've known and loved its rabbi, Levi Weiman-Kelman, and his wife Paula – a fellow filmmaker – since I was a teenager. When I first started frequenting Jerusalem in the mid-1980s, Levi was holding *shabbat* services in the Labour Party headquarters in Baka'a and on Friday afternoons I would help him arrange plastic chairs into a semi-circle. Now his community is flourishing, with its own beautiful synagogue in Emek Refaim. Many of its members are writers or artists, others are rabbis or the grown children of rabbis, their services are exquisite and often I yearn to be in their midst.

Levi and Paula's eldest daughter, Zoë, had finished high school earlier in the summer and was getting ready for army service. She came to London for a visit and we spent an afternoon trawling every shoe shop in Covent Garden for a pair of sensible black lace-ups which might satisfy the IDF's dress code, but what Zoë really longed for was a pair of platformed sandals in red fake fur. Zoë's been a fervent peace activist since she first learnt to speak and, as the significance of this disparity finally hit home, I watched her agitation with concern.

I arrived in Jerusalem on 27 September. The very next day, Ariel Sharon, accompanied by an army of police and bodyguards, made his now infamous visit to the Temple Mount which

inflamed the wave of rioting that erupted into the Al Aqsa *intifada*. On the first night of the Jewish year 5761, *Bridge Over the River Kwai* was being shown on television. The film was interrupted with shocking images from Gaza of the accidental shooting of 12-year-old Muhammed al Duri. I spent the rest of that night tossing and turning, afraid of what lay ahead.

Two days later I was on my way to the movies when my date for the evening heard that Assil, one of the Arab teenagers in his peace group – Seeds of Peace – had been shot in the neck by an Israeli soldier. Immediately he drove north to be with the boy's family. Assil, who'd been dedicated to straddling the divide between Jews and Arabs, died from his injuries on the following day. He'd been good friends with many of the youngsters at Kol HaNeshema, and that Friday evening the synagogue was packed as we gathered to say kaddish, the mourners' prayer, partly for Assil and partly for ourselves, because by then it was clear that the dream of peace which we'd shared was shattering all around us.

On 8 October I woke early because the clocks had gone back for daylight saving and, besides, I hadn't been sleeping well. I turned on the radio and tried to tune in the BBC World Service. Finally I heard an English voice. It was Britain's Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, talking about the Days of Repentance, telling 50 million listeners that Jews are skilled at offering forgiveness because we have such a frightful history of injustices being perpetrated against us. The prerecorded programme made no reference to the current troubles and Rabbi Sacks talked instead about the miracle of Israel, and how Jews from 103 countries, speaking 88 languages, have been gathered together to build a state.

Then came the news bulletin. Joseph's Tomb in Shechem/Nablus had been destroyed by enraged Palestinians, and Madhet Yosef – a young Druze soldier – had been killed trying to defend the shrine. Israeli workers had been injured on their way to the airport in Gaza and there had been shootings in Haifa. Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced that if Yasser Arafat didn't stop the violence in the next 48 hours, he would terminate the peace process.

My holiday suddenly turned into a nightmare. It was like being at a party with thousands of deaf people screaming at each other. Everyone was listening through a veil of their own emotional scars, retreating into the memory of their own worst traumas.

Patyu, a cousin of my father's who'd survived the Nazi death camps, became convinced that this spelled the end of Israel, while his son, Erno, having fled the Soviet Union in the 1970s, wanted my help finding a job as a doctor in Britain. A friend of mine, Debora, recalled the Scud missiles directed on to Israel during the Gulf War of 1991 and dreaded a return to sealed rooms and gas masks. My own mind went back to a hot summer's day in 1997 when I'd wandered into Mahane Yehuda – Jerusalem's glorious food market – just ten minutes after a suicide bomb attack, into the street where watermelons were mixed with body parts, and to an earlier episode which I will never forget.

It was January 1994. I'd been offered a job on a series of documentary films about the Middle East peace process. I was looking for a new adventure and jumped at the chance. Those were heady days. Ever mindful of political correctness, I'd never crossed the Green Line before, but when Yasser Arafat and Itzak Rabin gritted their teeth and shook hands under the loving embrace of Bill Clinton in November 1993, they showed a green light to peace-mongers. It was our turn to rush into territories where previously only the heavily armed had dared to tread.

I landed in Israel with a suitcase full of sun screen and optimism. I rented an apartment and engaged a couple of researchers. The director, Tom, arrived two weeks later and we set off to interview potential characters for the series. In Gaza, we met right-wing Jewish settlers who grow *glatt kosher* insect-free lettuces and tomatoes for the salad bowls of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel proper. This was a year of *shmitta*, observed every seven years, when the fields in Israel are supposed to be left fallow and Jews may not eat produce picked by fellow-Jews – legislation introduced in the days of Ezra, who'd returned from exile in Babylon with great religious zeal. Gaza was not part of the land of Israel at that time, so the laws of *shmitta* shouldn't apply, but Ezra's spiritual descendants like to be extra certain that they're not in contravention of any rabbinic decree, so Netzarim's kibbutzniks – fearing insurrection – kept their machine guns pointed at Arab farmhands hired to pick lettuces grown in soil placed on plastic bags. Complicated stuff to explain to a non-Jewish television director.

In Gaza City we visited the Shiffa hospital where, due to the large number of Palestinian marriages between cousins, they see the highest proportion anywhere in the world of hermaphrodites as well as

children born without an anus. While we were in the hospital, a six-year-old patient who'd undergone many operations to build an anus enjoyed his first autonomous defecation and there was an air of celebration. And we were told how, thanks to *Medicins Sans Frontières*, even at the height of the last *intifada*, hermaphrodites reaching puberty could choose their preferred sexual identity and get their genitals altered at a hospital in Haifa which has consequently achieved world renown for this specialty.

Then we went to Jabaliya, a dreadful refugee camp filled with the descendants of Palestinians who'd fled their villages during Israel's War of Independence. There are no pavements here and no playgrounds. The dirty streets are crammed full of crumbling shacks, with naked light bulbs and plastic chairs for furniture. The camp's open sewers are a breeding ground for disease, while the humiliating living standards foster resentment and discontent.

We'd arranged to meet a group of Fatah Hawks, young men wanted by the Israeli Army. They



Mahane Yehuda, Jerusalem, in the aftermath of a suicide bomb attack, 1997

arrived in a dramatic flurry, dressed in nylon khaki bomber jackets, blowing imaginary smoke from the barrels of their Russian-made Kalashnikovs – souvenirs from the Cold War – which they rested on their knees. They described how everyone in the camp lived in fear of the Israeli undercover Shimshon unit who might, at any time, burst into a meeting such as this and start firing without asking questions.

Our next trip was to Hebron. In the market we sat with Sheikh Al Haj Zuher-Marake, the most respected Palestinian judge in the West Bank. His stall sells beautifully embroidered kaftans and people sit outside for many hours, waiting to present their disputes and ask for his opinion. This is the *sulkha*, which attempts to resolve the conflicts and blood feuds that erupt periodically among the Palestinians. Invariably the judge proposes a financial settlement and, such is the level of respect that the sheikh

enjoys, this not only satisfies both sides of the dispute, avoiding further retaliations, but even the Israeli civil administration upholds the decisions of this ancient system of justice. In Hebron, ten Palestinian clans coexist reasonably peacefully. When Rabbi Moshe Levinger arrived at Hebron's Park Hotel in 1968 he and his followers – the first Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories – must have seemed like an eleventh tribe to their Arab neighbours, but they brought with them their own talmudic texts for legal guidance and disregarded the authority of the *sulkha*.

Outside Hebron's mosque – built on the site of the Machpelah cave bought by Abraham to bury Sarah, and where Ishmail and Isaac, together as brothers, later buried their father – we met Aziz Dwaik, one of the Hamas leaders who'd recently returned from exile in Lebanon. Dwaik suggested that we might like to join him at the wake of a 15-year-old boy gunned down by the IDF. That's how, later that day, I found myself standing with a thousand Hamas supporters at a demonstration of solidarity with the family whose teenage son had been killed. The only woman present – apart from me – was the boy's mother, jubilant because her child had died for the glory of Allah.

The next day I returned to Jerusalem to celebrate Zoë's *bat mitzvah*. It was held in the shell of the purpose-built synagogue that Levi and his growing congregation were lovingly constructing. I was surrounded by cherished friends, but my head was spinning with a confusion of emotions. I wasn't sure if I could stomach a year or more chronicling Jewish oppression of Arabs in the name of the Torah, nor if I would survive the unveiled hatred of Palestinians for their Israeli occupiers.

In the event, the decision was taken out of my hands. On Tuesday, 25 January, I set off for the north of Israel to meet with settlers in the Golan and discuss how they would feel if Israel were to return the Golan Heights to Syria. Tom had become exasperated with my cautious driving and asked Alan, the researcher accompanying us on the trip, to take the wheel instead. I sat in the back of the car and enjoyed the view.

Our route took us through Jericho, one of the oldest cities in the world. There, we were to interview the owner of the Hisham Palace Hotel, who hoped that his hotel might be the future headquarters of the Palestinian Authority. We got a little lost, ending up at the archaeological remains of the original Hisham Palace, destroyed in an earthquake in the fourth century. It was raining lightly. Alan and I – both veterans of the independent film scene in London's Soho – took a walk in the ruins and felt decidedly pleased with this unexpected addition to our day's itinerary. When we eventually found the hotel it was difficult to picture how, before 1967,

this dusty, dingy building had been famed for its glamour and a magnet for Jordanians hoping to test their luck at the roulette table.

Then we set off for Shalom al-Israel, 'Peace on Israel', which, with its sixth-century mosaic floor, has some of the oldest synagogue remains in the world. The rabbis who made it their duty to protect this holy site were worried that it would not be properly respected if the area was returned to the Palestinians. When I heard of its destruction six years later – torched by Arab rioters – I would reflect on how tragically prophetic this had turned out to be.

We returned to the car and continued our journey north. I was contemplating where we should eat lunch and had in mind Vered Hagalil, one of my favourite pit stops in the Galilee, a ranch which offers horse rides, a great view over the Kinneret and grouper fish – known in Israel as *locus* – grilled, with chips. As we approached the only bend on Route 92, a huge semi-trailer was heading towards us. 'That truck's going too fast,' I heard Tom say. 'Watch out!' But that was the last thing I remember.

The next day, in hospital, I was shown a newspaper carrying a full-page colour photograph of the accident. The truck, carrying 30 tons of Jaffa oranges, had turned over. Its trailer had squashed flat the Volvo ahead of us, killing outright two Druze soldiers who were hitchhiking back to their homes in the Galilee and seriously injuring the driver and his son. The cab of the semi-trailer had fallen on to the back of our car, right on top of where I was sitting.

Later Tom would describe how, when he realized that I was trapped, he'd been suffused with superhuman strength. Tearing open the frame of the car, he'd carried my limp body to safety. I have a vague memory of some paramedics cutting open my favourite denim sweater and a pair of Levi jeans that I'd worn to perfection and recall a sense of relief that I'd chosen to wear a new pair of Calvin Klein knickers.

A few weeks later I was brought back to London to lick my wounds, suffering from a head injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. As I struggled to make sense of this near-death experience, any sudden movement or noise was liable to trigger me into dissociating and re-enacting a truck falling on my head. I was on full alert 24 hours a day, perceiving danger in the most harmless situations and incapable of controlling my responses. When I wasn't sobbing with grief, I was shouting at truck drivers. Once, I hit a pregnant woman because I thought she was going to bump into me; another time, a stressed-out purser on a hellish British Airways flight from New York misinterpreted my panic attack as an aggressive outburst and had me arrested for air rage.

My usual disposition is cheerful and happy; instead I became anxious, withdrawn and suicidally depressed. And things only got worse when, two and a half years later, my father, Hugo, died from cancer. Looking back at that time, my dysfunctional behaviour now makes me cringe with shame. I'm not sharing these humiliating reminiscences to illicit sympathy, but to explain what can happen if traumatic memories aren't properly processed. The turning point came in a session with Dr Macdiarmid, the wise and endlessly patient psychiatrist who saw me through these very dark years. I was harping on about some ancient grievance when he interjected: 'Naomi, you're shouting at the past!' That was the moment when I stopped clinging to history, anxiously fearing the future, and began living again.

It took five years before I got back on track. When I finally reemerged, it was as the Middle East correspondent for an American cable station, which allowed me to commute between England and Israel. I was still hungry to know more about Islamic culture. In London I started a dialogue group for Jewish and Muslim women and went on some magical trips to Morocco, Yemen and Andalusia. Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were fraught and complex, but I couldn't believe anyone would prefer violent conflict to the rosy future that was almost within an arm's reach.

I finished *Chasing Shadows*, my father's memoir, which we'd begun together ten years before, about an idyllic childhood in the Carpathian mountains that was abruptly halted when he and his family were deported to Auschwitz in May 1944. The book was published by Viking in February 2000 and no one has ever needed a bestseller as much as me. I cycled around Regent's Park in the spring sunshine; there was an unfamiliar emotion stirring in my heart, and then I realized it was joy. As I filed away all the glowing reviews, I found I could once again face myself in the mirror and put the bad stuff behind me.

13 October 2000. It was the eve of Succot. Over dinner, my cousin's wife declared that the only good Arab was seven metres underground. I was appalled, particularly that she should say this in front of her children. Of Tunisian descent, she protested that she had an insight into the mentality of Muslims and that they all hate Jews on principle. I told her that racism can have the most appalling consequences and, for dramatic effect, pointed to the number tattooed on the forearm of her own mother-in-law. Erno, my cousin, told me that if his family were threatened he would shoot first and think about his affiliation to the medical profession afterwards. He has a clinic in Nazareth and, earlier that week, had watched a crowd of Jews rampaging against some of the town's Arabs like an old-style pogrom, but this

seemed to have made him more afraid for the safety of his children, not less.

Oil prices were rocketing, the NASDAQ list had collapsed and President Mubarak was threatening to cancel the impending Arab summit in Egypt unless Arafat met Barak in Sharm el Sheikh to discuss a ceasefire. So Arafat agreed to go and we all held our breath. Barak appeared on CNN and announced with confidence that Israelis and Palestinians would be living indefinitely side by side, and that this con-



Mahane Yehuda, Jerusalem, a week after the suicide bomb attack, 1997

flict had to be resolved as peacefully as possible.

Meanwhile, everyone was discussing the lynching of two Israeli reserve soldiers in Ramallah. An Italian news crew had filmed the crowd tearing the bodies apart and television stations were showing this over and over again. Their hands had been cut off, eyes gouged and livers ripped out. Gili, a gentle, loving yoga teacher, spent hours staring at a newspaper photograph of this gruesome scene. Did the horror of these latest murders somehow justify killing so many Arabs in the preceding two weeks? Was this a fitting punishment, a big enough sacrifice?

The threat of attack by other Arab countries gradually subsided, but more terrorist attacks were expected and every bus journey, every cinema outing or trip to the shops seemed loaded with danger. Arabs in Beit Jalla were shooting at Gilo, the Jerusalem suburb which lay in front of the apartment in which I was staying. More hatred vented, more lives wasted in senseless acts of revenge. Men, women and children caught in the crossfire of two clashing cultures. Never before had I felt so keenly Succot's message about the fragility of human existence and it was very, very scary.

I joined Levi and Paula on a trip to a spa by the Dead Sea. We had fun plastering ourselves with black mud, but the spa was unusually deserted and,

even though the scenery was as spectacular as ever, tension hovered above us like a darkening cloud. On our way back we drove through the road block that separates the road to Jericho from the outskirts of Jerusalem and collected Zoë, who had just completed her three weeks' basic training. Seeing her dressed as a soldier, with the black lace-up shoes that she'd bought in London, I wondered what Zoë's generation will make of a world where grown-ups tell them it's okay to kill other kids.

Eventually Zoë was stationed in a UN liaison unit on the border with Gaza and nearly went out of her mind. Or, as Zoë puts it, there are two ways for girls to get out of the army: marriage or a psychiatric profile. Zoë figured that marriage was insane, so she went to a military psychologist instead. Now Zoë and her boyfriend, Ariel, are in Berlin for a year. How ironic that Jews should feel safer in Germany than in our own digital ghetto.

In January, Zoë came to stay with me in London. I played her a recording of a programme about Jerusalem that I presented last year for Radio 2 and that included an interview with her father. This is what Levi concluded:

Jerusalem was destroyed twice and just because we're here, just because we're rebuilding it, just because we have a strong army doesn't guarantee anything. Jerusalem was destroyed in the past because of immoral behaviour, because of needless hatred. We have to create a society here that's worthy of Jerusalem otherwise we might lose it again.

In 1994, just a few weeks after my visit to Hebron – in the same mosque where I'd met Aziz Dwaik – Dr Baruch Goldstein, an American-born Jewish settler, massacred 29 innocent Muslims at prayer before being lynched by the terrified crowd. Sometimes I wonder whether Goldstein felt vindicated in his vile deed because, only a few days earlier, he'd been signed up to take part in our television series and was offered an opportunity to share his bigoted ideas with viewers throughout the English-speaking world.

He was, it seems, intoxicated by stories that fill with hate the hearts of modern Jewish zealots. It's a lethal cocktail that includes stories about wicked Haman who wanted to destroy the Jews living under King Ahasuerus; stories of Tevye the Milkman being forced to leave his beloved Anatevka; stories about American cowboys and Indians, and how the Wild West was won. Stories too about Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son, just because God said he should, about Moses who died before he reached the Promised Land and about a Messiah who has still to come.

Above all, perhaps, their heads resonate with stories about the Holocaust, a collective trauma which has become deeply etched into the Jewish psyche.

Paranoia and cynicism govern the lives of so many Israelis. With five wars and two *intifadas* since Israel declared independence, no wonder they feel insecure. Wrapped up in pain, who has the capacity to identify with the suffering of others?

But it's never too late to heal rifts and seek reconciliation. Anger and betrayal can give way to trust. There's only one way to end conflict: let go of pointless grudges and poisonous hatreds. Stop shouting at the past and start again. And if it doesn't work out, start again another time.

Joseph Roth, a distinguished Jewish journalist and novelist working in Vienna and Berlin in the 1920s, moved to Paris when Hitler came to power. In *The Wandering Jews* (London: Granta, 2001), Roth was writing about the oppressed Jews of Europe, but the plight of the dispossessed Palestinians is comparable in so many ways: 'The will of several million people is already enough to form a "nation", even if it has not existed before.' Roth recognized the need for self-determination, but frowned on Jewish nationalism, seeing it as only a partial solution to the difficulties facing the Jews of his day. To Roth's mind, 'the earth belongs to everyone who treats it with respect'. He also offered this penetrating insight: 'Everyone should take notice as one people is freed from the stain of suffering and another from the stain of cruelty. The victim is freed from his torments and the bully from his compulsion.'

On my last day in Jerusalem I noticed an old Arab man walking down my street carrying a white sack. He was unshaven and dressed in tattered clothes. He was looking in garbage cans and, for a moment, I wondered whether he was looking for somewhere to place a bomb. And then I was ashamed of myself as I realized that he was looking for things discarded as junk that still have a value amongst those who have nothing. That afternoon, he passed by again, still carrying the half-empty sack that I had noticed in the morning.

Suddenly I remembered a pile of slightly shabby towels and sheets that I had been thinking of throwing out. I called out from my window and ran down to the street to give them to the man. He beamed a toothless grin and seemed thrilled. 'Od? Od?' he asked. 'Do you have more?'

'No,' I said. 'This is all.'

He thanked me profusely, but when I got back upstairs I remembered that I had a whole suitcase full of unwanted kitchen utensils that would be of much more use to this poor man and his family than to Debora, the friend who usually gets to house my bits and pieces between visits. But sometimes the opportunity for generosity only opens for a moment; when I looked out of the window again, the old Arab was gone. ♦