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The Other's Other

Reflections and Opacities in an Arab College in Israel

EXTRACT

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CHAPTER ONE

The Beginning

The Second Lebanon War started on July 12, 2006 with the kidnapping by the Hezbollah of two Israeli soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, and the shelling of the army outpost on the Golan. Within a few days, events spun out of control.

I was visiting from Israel with my daughter in Berkeley when I first heard the news of the kidnapping on CNN. I must confess I didn't pay it much mind. It wasn't that I didn't care about what was going on. I worried about the soldiers, and wondered how Israel would respond. But years of unrest and tragedy had turned the awful, the previously unthinkable, into our way of life.

My oldest daughter had been born about 8 months before the 1982 First Lebanon War. By the Gulf War in1990, she had been joined by her two siblings. They were all still young enough to think it was fun to run into the sealed room when the air raid siren sounded, and slip on their gas masks. My son was too small to manage his, and his older sister had to help him while I put my baby daughter into her protective tent. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 was my daughter's third war in 24 years, not counting the two Intifadas. When it broke out, my son was already an air force reservist and my youngest had just finished high school. Enough time had passed for them to have developed a hard patina, a careless, off-handed attitude to the sirens and the booms of the missiles falling around them in the Jezreel Valley[1] where we live. They are Israelis and I admire their courage, but there is a price that has had to be paid. They have been churned from sweet milk into heavy butter, some denser substance I don't entirely recognize as mine.

But that's how it is here. Through all the turmoil, people weave the garment of their lives. Cafés, restaurants, malls, beaches—filled to overflowing with people needing to be together, bent on having a normal life. This is the antidote to an existence based on tension and anxiety, arbitrariness and meaninglessness: We

live it up, knowing that life may be short if not precious, spending money and not giving a damn. It works. It's not forced or even conscious. And despite the sensibilities I possessed as a North American when I immigrated here several years after the Six Day War at the age of 22, I too, like most Israelis, like my children, had apparently become inured to disaster.

Until I picked up a copy of *Newsweek* to read its cover story about the situation in the Middle East[2]. I opened to a picture of terrible, paralyzing grief at the military funeral of an Israeli soldier killed in a skirmish inside Lebanon. The soldier's mother and sister sit by his grave surrounded by a throbbing wall of his fellow combatants, friends and family. The mother is resting her head on the stomach of a man standing behind her, her eyes closed. She is holding the boy's sister on her lap, a girl of about 8, whose sobs are palpable through the silent photograph as is her bereft mother's sorrow.

The caption says this is Yonatan Hadassi's funeral. Yonatan was my son's friend. He was 21.

August 4, 2006. Headline: 12 Israelis die.

Caption: A mother and her 2 children in Acre walk over a bloody floor.

Hezbollah had launched more than 100 rockets on northern Israel in less than an hour, killing 8 civilians and 4 soldiers. Three of the 8 were young Arab Israeli men from the Arab town of Tarshiha. The other 5, killed in Acre, included a man and his daughter, who must have been the rest of the family in this photograph, and died on this floor.

This picture of a life in ruins was on the front page of the paper, stacked neatly at the local market near my daughter's home. The owner commiserated with me about the situation from behind the homemade apple pies and chocolate chip cookies at the counter. I appreciated her concern, but when I walked out, the clap of the screen door as it shut behind me sharply separated us: she, safe and placid in her peaceful, lazy village store; I thrown into the reality of our life in Israel where I was soon to return.

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I wrote an email to Hakim, the head of our English department at the Arab teachers' college in an Arab town in the north of Israel where I'd been teaching for 2 years prior to this war. I wrote him to let him know I was thinking about him and to preserve our collegiality during those difficult, dividing times. I

struggled with every word, not sure how he'd understand me, what he might read between the lines as an Arab, or what might evoke his understandably negative feelings towards me as a Jew—hurt, anger, mistrust. In the end I wrote something tentative yet bland and received something equally bland in response.

This reticence was repeated back in Israel at the college after I'd returned. I spoke with Nasira, one of the secretaries, who was in the outer office, and looked in on the Academic Dean to say hello. I so wanted to ask them, "Do you still like me? Are you angry with me? Will I be welcome at the school as before?" but instead I asked how they'd weathered the difficult days. They answered insipidly, "We were at work the whole time. Let's hope it's all over," when I was sure they were silently muttering, "How can I possibly talk to you about how I feel—about my brothers and sisters being killed by your army, about your constant abuse of our people, about you?"

Thank goodness, I thought, grateful for their non-committal answer, which let us both off the hook and avoided overt unpleasantness, if also a certain intimacy. But their tacit invitation to stay within the bounds of the college, which was perhaps our only commonality under the circumstances, also felt like a gentle shove, as if they were indeed saying, *You really don't want to get into that with us because, you see, it's none of your business how we are. Except that it is all your doing. Except that you are to blame for all our troubles.* And though that faint shove hurt me, I knew what I assumed they were thinking was true. The Israeli Arabs had done nothing during the war to earn our mistrust, they were not our foes, but they suffered during the war for their brethren across the borders, and constantly suffer reminders that they are a distrusted minority within our country.

Still, despite my understanding of their unspoken blame, and the acceptance of my undeclared guilt, something was beginning to change for me, as it was changing for many of those Israelis after the Second Lebanon War who may not already have shifted more to the right after the second Intifada and the wave of terrorist activity. I would now have to recognize that not too far below my customary concurrence with the notion of my complicity as a Jewish Israeli in the plight of the Arab Israeli, something else was sizzling. Because in fact, what I was also thinking that day I walked back into the college was, *You may be sitting here in Israel and you may have come to work every day, but your people—the people you really identify with—are my sworn enemies. I cannot like them while they're trying to kill or maim us and our children. What does that make me feel about you?*

The war was over by the time classes started, and the discomfort of that first encounter at school in which incidental opponents pretended that they were not passed with the few innocuous words we'd actually voiced. Though our two kidnapped soldiers were still POWs—to be returned two years later in pine boxes—we all settled back into the college routine, and what had been mostly pretense at that moment reverted to our more naturally easy manner with one another. Yet any ambivalence I might ever have felt about working in an Arab, predominantly Muslim college as a Jewish woman in Israel had been highlighted by the war. I began to see things at the college in a slightly different light, aided by the gradual, sobering revelations that unfold in any new environment over time. More significantly, I had been forced to face the reality that at any given moment in my interactions with my Arab colleagues, students and acquaintances there would now be a complex dynamics at play between conviction and skepticism, credence and mistrust, affinity and alienation—on both sides.

The sense of challenge and mission with which I'd come to the college, my belief in the project of coexistence, and the good feelings I'd had whenever I came to work for the two years prior to the war was being undermined by these concerns. From the moment I no longer simply wondered about how they responded to me as a Jewish alien in their midst, but began also to question how I responded to them, my view of these dynamics at the college, and their manifestation in the broader realm of the country, became increasingly more problematic to me.

Trying to make sense of it all became the impetus for writing about it. The writing, I hoped, would in turn serve as a kind of shield, protecting me against my own sensitivities and reactions, and offer a way to examine these ambivalences. I had already discovered enough during the years at the college up to the Second Lebanon War to alter much of what I began with. Several more years at the college and events in the country would change a great deal more.

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When people outside Israel think of American Jews making *aliyah*—moving to the Holy Land—they see them as either romantic idealists or perpetrators of oppression. Either they're acting out a dream or they're engaging in some form of imperialism or colonialism. Of course, it could be both. American Jews typically make *aliyah* out of choice and a certain degree of idealism. Most

American Jews who have come to Israel are more or less ardently Zionist. And though most immigrants who've made *aliyah* in the last 30 years or so have come with a rather right-wing settlement agenda, it was quite different when I arrived.

My coming to Israel after the Six Day War had its romantic element, to be sure. It was easy to feast the imagination on the hundreds of contemporary magazine photographs and travel posters of young, tanned, smiling Sabras in rolled-up shorts and work shirts picking glimmering oranges off trees in sunny groves, and the always exotically beautiful, shapely girl soldiers and handsome, swarthy, young men posing in khaki with their Uzi rifles. I was also motivated, though, like others of my generation, by a desire to relinquish any identification with the values of domination, materialism and militarism that had taken over in America during the period of the Vietnam War. I didn't plan to bring these values with me, and it didn't dawn on me in those heady, patriotic days awash in those colorful images that I was actually about to join the dominant segment of a militaristic society. I never even thought of the Arabs living inside the country.

It is admittedly strange for someone brought up on socialist, humanist, pluralist precepts as I was to have so easily been able to disregard a population that saw in our Independence Day their *Yawm an-Nakba* (Day of the Catastrophe). But as a new immigrant, it took all my energy to figure out how I fit into this place.[3] And then, the more integrated into the country I became, the more I grew to see Arabs in a typically Israeli light—as people I'd never personally have to deal with, whether I'd choose to support their grievances or, like the majority, ignore them.

Although there are hierarchies among Jews in this country delineated primarily along ethnic and class lines, Jewish Israelis are never more unified or more strongly identified as Jews than when they shore themselves up as one sector against a perceived enemy, and this includes the minority Arab population in Israel. This happens especially when our security is being actively threatened, but not only then. For most Israelis, their underlying mistrust of Arab Israelis' intentions informs their very notion of themselves as Israelis.

My own sense of being Israeli grew in stages, through the initial dreamy visions, the subsequent culture shock, the initiation by fire of war after war, the establishment of friendships, a family and new roots, the long path to a degree and a career and the feeling of belonging to a community. But I am also an *olah*,[4] and as such, carry the immigrant burden of a shifted and hyphenated identity.

I was once asked to answer the question, "Who am I?" quickly, without thinking about it. My mind immediately started racing, leafing as quickly as it could through mental pages that had suddenly gone completely illegible. I stared at the person who had asked me the question, hoping I could read some hints to a response in his eyes. All I saw there, however, was an understanding of my inability to define myself. There were so many facets to be aware of, from my years in Canada where I was born to postwar immigrants, in America where I moved as a child, and now in Israel, that any definitive answer to the question of who I was eluded me.

Certainly an important factor in my identity was being part of a privileged immigrant group in Israel who, for the most part, has always seen itself as coming from a more civilized, Westernized, modern and enlightened society whose Jewish population is characterized by its ambition and hard work, its appreciation of intelligence and emphasis on education, its civic and political savvy, its top-heavy contribution to mainstream America, its representation in virtually all walks of life. Though Israelis also regard Americans as a superior race in many ways—if only because of America's overwhelming wealth, influence and power,—they see Jewish-American immigrants as just one more foreign element with its particular peculiarities within the ever more fragmented society—a country that is multicultural without finally being comprehensive.

Nevertheless, I eventually felt I was Israeli, even if I'd never be a *Sabra*.[5] No matter how well or poorly I'd learned the landscape, the songs, the accent, or the lingo, I was an Israeli. Whether or not I'd been in the army, played *matkot*[6] on the beach, set up a *mangal*[7] for almost every holiday, or been in the statistically required car accident, I was an Israeli. Even if I didn't always agree with its politics or feel the need to fly its flag, I was an Israeli. But I would always be different because 'Israeli' was added to an already patchwork identity.

And what about everything I was not? Had this not also shaped me? Just as my not being a native Israeli was part of my identity, so was my not being Arab. The extent to which that was so became apparent to me only once I began teaching at the college. I was asked to join the English Department when it was a new college, about 3 years old, and was recruiting teachers from the universities. Almost all of these new recruits were Jewish, and though each one might have had his or her own reasons for complying, no one would agree to work in an Arab college in an Arab town unless they were ideologically oriented to do so. I was wary of throwing in my lot with Arabs and leaving the comfort zone of working in a Jewish institution, and a bit afraid, but I decided

to take it on. I was surprised to learn that all my earlier ideas about my identity were going to be tested, and were likely to be transformed.

Basically, the standard definition(s) of identity always made me uncomfortable and defensive, resistant and all the more insistent that I was no less anything because I was not entirely, monochromatically, classifiably *it* according to its own insular notion of itself. In fact, I have always believed it would solve many conflicts and do away with a lot of hostilities if we could loosen the stranglehold identity has on us. But this is a romantic notion, and the romantic has little foothold in a country where identities within and without are continually at loggerheads and omnipresent—in the separate languages, separate school systems, radically different cultures, separate towns and villages, and separate dreams. And since I am no longer a new, naïve American immigrant, this belief has been relegated to the best of all possible worlds. The reality of this one is harsh, and dictates a coarsely unsentimental world view. Because here, since its inception and defined by it, Israel has always been 'we' and 'they'.

For their part, Arabs in Israel struggle with their identity too, probably a lot harder and more problematically, and with fundamentally more untenable choices of how to stitch it together. They are, after all, Israelis, not immigrants, yet possess a hyphenated identity that stamps them with the mark of the despised alien wherever they turn. They have to contend with the animosity of the Jewish majority inside the country and that of the larger Arab community outside it. As Arab Israelis, they trigger mistrust among Jewish Israelis for being Arab. Partly in reaction, a sizeable and increasing number today identify themselves as Palestinian Israelis, increasing the sense that their loyalties lie elsewhere, though they don't necessarily mean that. Most mean that they insist on maintaining their separate culture, traditions and religion even as they try to make it here. Then again, they elicit suspicion and disdain in the Arab world for being Israeli, which is to say implicitly collaborative, though their intent is not to distance themselves from their Arab heritage. But they want to maintain that heritage in a country that offers them a better life than any Arab country they see outside it.

Once at the college, I was able to see just how much the identity of one is bound up in the identity of the other in the relationship between Arabs and Jews and how compounded the dissonance in the mélange of identities that constitutes the unrelenting friction between them. I was able to see how our very divergent cultures are also interwoven; how our mistrust of one another, though not completely unfounded, is also neurotic; how our strong

desire to ignore one another can be countered by the more valuable attempt at understanding, and our desperate wish to be rid of one another can be offset by an effort at embracing; how we both may want to live in peace and plenty but don't always have the same idea of what that would be.

And still, though the romantic idealist in me would love to win the day, I cannot leave a partial picture, even if heartfelt. If nothing else emerged from the days back at the college following the Second Lebanon War, and has gained momentum ever since, it was the gradual certainty that though our lives are interwoven, we are in significant ways separate entities. That even when we embrace one another, the gesture is not binding. That though we are often unreasonably suspicious of one another, there's much that remains undisclosed so that we may never finally understand one another, or know how rational or irrational that mistrust, hard as we might try. That the attempt itself may not be reciprocal. And that one people's peace could very well be predicated on the other's eventual disappearance.

During my time at the college, I have felt oddly identified with the Arabs. I credit my experiences both as an immigrant here and a first generation Jew in North America for this, someone always somewhat different from the hegemonic surroundings, always identified with the minority. Yet quite unexpectedly, my being at the college among Arabs has heightened my sense of being Israeli since I have delved into the belly of the beast, as most Israelis would see it. I feel I know more than many people about the country by mingling with that suppressed 'Other' in our society. But in fact, this was not all that has made me feel more Israeli. In the end, despite my revelation of the commonality between Arabs and Jews, despite the satisfaction and gratification in the affable meeting of disparate cultures, and despite their warm welcome, I still feel like an alien in their midst and on their turf. My own identity came much more sharply into focus, perhaps actually solidified, not only by being among them but also by not being one of them.

No matter how long I will have been at the college with them, I will not feel more Arab. Nor, in fact, do I want to. Despite any original ambivalence about my identity, and any amount of sympathizing with their situation, I am a distinctly Jewish Israeli in an Arab environment.

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I walk in the fields of my kibbutz almost daily for an hour before sunset. Most of the year, the ground is dusty and course—raw, dry loam churned to a mealy

gravel by huge tractor wheels that patrol and work the crops. The earth gives way congenially, with a distinct crunch, under my shoes. The cooler, moister weather of late autumn brings the end of the long Israeli heat and aridity. The skin begins to feel smoother, the sinuses become unclogged of the ubiquitous dust. Autumn is an exasperating and short season in Israel, where there is little sense of gradual transformation, of a slow cooling down of the weather, of the spicy smells of aging foliage. Here it is *hamsin*[8] one day and winter the next. But there are also small, quiet differences. The sun is now often milky yellow as it settles into the hazy clouds above the hilltop to the west. On clear days the sky is now frequently dabbed with pristine, silky clouds in various shades of white, piled atop one another as if reaching for more air or for something that can no longer be found down here. The birds, too, seem to have been flapping southward for weeks. The crops have suddenly all gone as well, except the meaty, blue-green cabbage which sits rather forlorn, as if hastily left behind by the farmers' rush to clear the terrain of its harvest. Its lone plot is dwarfed by the enormous stretch of brown land all around, salted by soiled tufts of cotton missed and fallen at the hurried activity before the rains come.

With the rains, the trees are washed of the grey dirt that the autumn winds covered them with. The burned, brown grasses turn lush and green. But after the first heavy rain, the earth in the fields turn to a mud that sticks to the soles of shoes and bogs a walker down within just a few steps. The sun bakes this mud to a hard, cracked clay after a day or two of no rain. Neither the muddy nor the glassy surfaces of the ground allow for pleasurable walking. It is never an unalloyed pleasure, without any complaint, at any time.

Nonetheless, walking in the fields at sunset is more like a journey than just exercise—mountains in the horizon; the colors and the warm, clean smells of earth and vegetation at my nose; the changing, incandescent hues in the sky as the sun spreads its last rays in a show of splendor that never fails to thrill me; and a sense of freedom which greets me the moment I step out into the open space through the gap in the southern hedge of cedars that acts both as a fence and a windbreaker for the citrus groves. The exhilaration accompanies me till I walk back in through the rusty southeastern gate of the kibbutz an hour later.

Since the fields are open areas, outside the border of the physical kibbutz, the sense of freedom, though safeguarded, is compromised by the gear I take with me. What that is depends on the situation in the country. A few years back, when there was almost daily terrorist activity, I added to my ipod a small canister of pepper spray and a cell phone in case I would be accosted, knifed, kidnapped or raped—victim of a "nationalist" crime. When I walk, I turn every

so often to see if anyone is in back of me. Since I listen to my ipod, I am occasionally startled by joggers and walkers who suddenly come up behind me, as if out of nowhere, or appear in front of me when I'm being unvigilant. Though all my encounters have been innocuous, I still feel vulnerable in the fields outside the kibbutz, even with all my preparations. But I keep going because I love walking in the fields, and because I am not about to be cowed into giving it up.

This is an attitude most Israelis share. Generally, we are unmoved by threats, whether aimed directly at us by our Arab neighbors, felt in the occasional rumblings of the Israeli Arab community, or insinuated in the growing and almost constant criticism from abroad. In fact, it could be said that we thrive on threat. What else could explain the way we drive, the extreme sports that have become so popular here, the disregard we exhibit towards travel warnings to hostile areas, towards sitting in bomb shelters during wars, towards rules and laws? Our bravado is shaken only when the threat is actualized.

It was on a spring day on my way towards the fields that I saw a figure in the mallow that grows wild throughout the unfarmed land in the valley. Our kids learn how to make fried mallow patties on field trips where a favorite activity is to gather large bunches of mallow leaves, mince them and add them to a pot of boiling water. After a few minutes, they strain out the mallow and mix it with minced onion, spices to taste, salt and pepper, and just enough flour or bread crumbs and egg to form patties that hold together. They fry these patties in oil till they're golden brown.

As I got closer, I saw that the figure in the mallow was an old Arab woman. She was walking through the growth, stooping to pick the broad-leafed plant and gathering it in a bundle on her arm. We have lots of uninvited guests on the kibbutz, 'poachers' I guess would be the word for it, who drive onto the kibbutz lands or park on the perimeters and come in to pick our fruits and crops. We look at it as stealing yet turn a blind eye to it. For one thing, in a large community like ours, it's hard to know who's been given permission to be there. Sometimes an unfamiliar face is connected to us in a way that is not immediately apparent. It might be a friend of a worker, a parent of one of the boys on the soccer teams that rent our soccer field for practice, or someone who has simply decided to help themselves to some of our property. And short of wrestling the intruder to the ground, detaining him by force and calling the police, there's not much to be done on the spot. Besides, we have to pick our battles. How serious a crime do we really want to make of picking a bagful of grapefruits? For another, neighboring Arabs are often allowed, even