

## **Eretz Israel**

On the plane, I sit next to a woman in her 30s. She has gorgeous olive skin, dark eyes and while she greets me in perfect English, she has a thick accent, so I know she's a native, a *sabra*. We chat about America and Israel, politics in the Middle East and Judaism. When she asks if I've ever been to Israel, I say no and she tells me that it doesn't matter. It's mine, anyway. Israel is home for the Jews, even if they've never been. That's why it was built—it is a haven for all of us.

Funny how in America it seems like Israel is the last place a Jew would want to be. Politics are tumultuous, neighboring countries are hostile and danger is imminent. But to most Israelis, the safest place for Judaism is Israel. It will always be the safe port for any member of the tribe.

“But you have to walk it,” she tells me. That's a custom that's evolved to something like legend. To truly possess the land, you have to know it. You have to have your own relationship with the land—anyone can buy a property deed, it's different to truly own something.”

I liked that and I resolved to spend an afternoon or two simply walking through the streets, making them my own.

“I read an article,” I told her and I wanted her opinion, “and this guy, he's Arab, said that he didn't think Israel could exist much longer. He didn't sound like he had anything against the country, but he said when you're a small country in a large region and your enemies are dedicated to wiping you out, then you're fighting a losing battle. What do you think about that?”

She stared out the window, looked like she was searching for something, although only the clouds were visible, we still had hours to go. But I knew she could see Israel. She could just *see* it. She wasn't just telling me some corny custom—she was telling me about the ritual that she had performed many times in her life. I could just imagine her as a girl, going on hikes with her family or classmates or lovers. Walking through forests and cities while she did her duty in the army and, even then, possessing Israel more with each step.

When she looked back at me she looked tired, worn out and I thought that it must be exhausting to be determined for survival every day, even if all you did to ensure that survival was walk through the streets. “The odds are against us. But that is nothing new. We Jews have made a name for ourselves by fighting impossible battles. What are so many holidays about? Battles, wars, survival, whether we won or lost, we still have people drinking in memory, so that is an accomplishment on it's own. Israel will survive.” She spoke softly, so she repeated herself, louder, her voice steadier, but it sounded forced, and “Israel will survive. It has to.”

## Conversation With An American

Shalima, another American student, and I drank Middle Eastern coffee and talked about rites of passage and pilgrimages. We laughed about the joy of Jewish boys and girls upon turning 18, which is usually the time their parents relinquish the money that was collected at their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It's a heady thing to suddenly have a small fortune and a high school diploma.

Shalima told me about her first (of several) trips to Israel, financed by the reward for years of Hebrew school and torah study. "Most American students go to Europe," she told me, as she sipped the strong, dark coffee and ground her teeth to clear away the small flakes of coffee beans. "Europe is so fashionable," she laughed.

"I heard that a lot of Israeli kids go to Africa with their money," I said. "Europe doesn't hold the same appeal as it does to Americans. We see something that's 500 years old and we're blown away. Israeli kids are like 'are you kidding? A rock from my backyard is mentioned in the bible.' They're harder to impress."

"Yea, that's why they're so great to talk to. They have more of a sense of history, of time. Americans—we're so young as a country, we don't possess that understanding of . . . I don't know, how long history is, how full. It's a different thing, talking to kids who pass ruins of King David's temple on the way to elementary school. I always love the random students that I meet."

"Yea, I've been looking forward to that."

"It's different once you've met people, though, it's harder to hear about the Middle Eastern conflicts. Like, I met this group of students once from Hebrew University. A couple guys that were bio majors, like me, so we start chatting and they invite me to go to

get coffee and one of the college haunts. I don't remember their names or the other girls I was introduced to. But a couple months ago, I saw the coffee shop on the news. A suicide bomber had blown the place up. There were 10 injuries and 3 casualties. I don't know if the students I met were there that day or if they were hurt. It didn't matter, it could have been, you know? And it wasn't just numbers, it was real people that I had hung out with and laughed with. I love coming here, but it gets hard sometimes."

I nodded, I didn't really know what to say. I thought about telling her about my trip to Ground Zero and the man who sat by the rubble playing *Amazing Grace* on a flute. Or the poet I heard who was a survivor of Hurricane Katrina and was seen on *When The Levees Broke*. I even wanted to tell her that my cousin was in the Navy and talk about the tragedy of Iraq. But nothing seemed to compare.

"You hear Israelis get a lot of flack for 'having a chip on their shoulder' or having an attitude about the Arabs. It's tough to deal with, but if you're here enough, you start to get it. It's painful, you know?"

"Yea. But, at the same time, it's so . . . overwhelmingly beautiful."

## **The Hope Of Israel**

They call it *Aliyah*, the Hebrew word for “Ascension.” You don’t simply immigrate, you don’t move or even gain citizenship. No, not to Israel. You ascend to Israel. So I thought it would be like coming home, home where the streets are paved with stones from King David’s time. Fear and loneliness would be the Goliath slain as easily as throwing a stone.

Truthfully, nothing is ever that easy. I tell myself that when I fantasize about moving here and trading in my designer outfits for long skirts and modest tops and working at a Kibbutz. I think about cooking kugel and brisket, surrounded by other women, gossiping in Hebrew (which I would be proficient in) and stepping over all the children of the Kibbutz that we would be watching. I think about meeting a nice Jewish boy, preferably a *sabra*, but tall, dark and handsome would be enough. And he would know that the fastest way to my heart would be to read me Song of Solomon, because we would both know that no other love ballad can ever really compare.

I tell myself nothing is ever easy, when I believe that Israel holds a light that can never be extinguished and G-d is as diligent as keeping our nation’s flame burning as He was the Maccabee’s menorah.

But part of me believes that something like perfection is hidden in the streets of Jerusalem, especially when the women that work in the hostel tell me about their pain with one breath and in the next ask me if I would ever consider an *Aliyah*. Because that’s what they call it when you become an Israeli. You don’t simply immigrate or move or gain citizenship. Not to Israel. You *ascend* to Israel.

## Hyssop

“This is the paintbrush of our people,” the guide informed us. Bending to pick up the tiny fern that grew at the bank of the Jordan river. I would have mistaken it for tropical clovers, perhaps even weeds. The plant was entirely unspectacular. “In the Torah, the final plague that G-d brought upon the Egyptians was the death of the firstborn. The Hebrews were instructed to make a sacrifice, take the blood and paint it across their doors with this plant to alert the Angel of Death that they were not to be harmed. This is a biblical plant—and a famous one.”

If you watch the History channel or the Discovery Channel, you’ll hear many explanations for the so-called miracles of the bible. Moses didn’t split the sea it was low tide, it was the season for locusts and frogs, the “blood” in the Nile was a natural phenomena . . . the list goes on and on. Max Diamand, author of “G-d, Jews and History” even theorized that Moses wasn’t even Jewish. You can’t follow the Torah blindly, and I know that.

But as I look at the Jordan and hold the “paintbrush of my people” I can see them perfectly. My ancestors. Standing here thousands of years ago, just as I do. Perhaps they stumbled upon the same plant and recognized it for what it was to our people, to generations past. I can see my ancestors and I know that there’s something godly in this little plant growing in the soft earth at the riverbank.

I pick my own hyssop leaf and idly twirl it in my fingers. It did so much, once upon a time. I wish I could offer a sacrifice now and paint the walls of the city to protect us all from death, from hatred, from ignorance, from oppression, from war. I wish I could dip my plant into the Jordan and mark the walls of the 4 quarters of the city, making the

Christians, the Jews, the Arabs and the Armenians all defer to the same G-d and give the Angel of Death no power here.

If this little plant is truly magical and godly, it seems like that should be easily accomplished. It seems like it would be so simple. Like G-d is just waiting for the right prophet for this to occur to, the messenger who will write the next chapter, one that will never be canonized but will hold more hope than all the other 5 books combined.

For one second, I think that maybe, just maybe, I am the prophet G-d is looking for. That I am the one who sees something no one else can and I really should grab handfuls of weeds from the soil, baptize them and run through the streets, dripping water onto the cobblestones.

Then I come to my senses, determine I'm going to wait for a burning bush before I start trying to start a revolution. But I still pocket and paintbrush and hope to hear a voice booming through the heavens telling me that I have a mission.

## **The Wailing Wall**

The Wailing Wall is not the oldest thing in Jerusalem, nor is it the most holy. Only the most famous. Years back, Palestines (who then had control of the Kotel where the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock, the famous mosque, both sit) didn't allow anyone to visit the Wailing Wall. Soliders had to parachute in to regain control of the area. That moment has been memorialized in every way imaginable. Especially on posters visible from shop windows, posters that manage to speak volumes about patriotism and intolerance. I wonder what it's like to have that poster on your wall—what do families think looking at it? Students? Soliders?

Now that it has been reclaimed, hordes of people travel to visit the sacred stones. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs are celebrated against the partition that separates the men from the women, people wait patiently in line to pray in front of the stone, to lean their heads against it and read from their prayer books, to reverently place prayers written on scraps of paper into the cracks of the rock.

I am without the proper patience and fight a little for a good place in the front of the wall. To my right is an observant Jewess, complete with prayer shawl and a scarf over her head, rocking slightly, lost in prayer, tears rolling down her cheeks. To my left is an elderly woman, wrinkled and bent with age, she rests her head and both her hands against the smooth stone and speaks passionately in Hebrew. I wish I could understand her.

I find my place and I dip my head, whisper "Baruch ata Adonai" and press both my palms flush against the stone. It isn't the first time I've touched the Wailing Wall or my most powerful experience with the holy spot, but I feel my breath rush out of me when I first make contact.

It isn't religious or spiritual, it's simply human. Human, because I am almost deafened by the echoes of prayer. Centuries of prayer, concentrated on this one spot, and each stone holds so much hurt and hope and faith and desire, I feel my mind spin from it all. I can't catch my breath and I feel tears spill from my eyes. Not my own tears, but the tears of my people. Tears of men and women that lost family and friends to suicide bombers, tears of Holocaust survivors who came home, tears of the first children born to Israel, tears of King David's subjects, tears of Jacob's descendents . . . tears flow from the rock, falling out of my eyes and I struggle for breathe, for clarity, for silence.

I can't find stillness through it all, so I pray. I pray for myself, for my family, for my friends, for peace and I sway to the beat of the cries of two millenniums. I rock to the tune of kaddish as I recite the only words I know in Hebrew: the prayers.

You aren't supposed to turn your back to the wall, so I step backwards, slowly, careful not to bump into the women who are talking their lives out with G-d and my body hurts as I move away from the wall. My heart aches to be close to it again, but other women need their turn. We have less room than the men, we have to share.

I sit down almost immediately once I am out of sight of the wall. My legs feel weak. I resolve to visit again, but I know the next visit will be less intense and I long for the feeling of overwhelming faith, where you're too full of G-d for doubt. So I close my eyes again and, out of sight of the Wall, on a bench in the middle of the crowded street, I pray.

## **My Nation Cries**

One night it rains. It rains so I stay inside and I study the Holocaust from my computer. I Google memoirs and stories and discussion boards. I read until I feel like I may fall apart from sorrow. So, to make myself feel better, I read poetry to the rain until the sun comes out and I choose to believe that it stopped because of me.

Part of me wants to cry from it all—from the enormity of the pain and the hope. The combination of the two rips my heart so many ways that I want to cry. I console myself that my Nation cries with me.

Because the bullet holes on the walls of Jewish quarter, where mercenaries shot at the IDF soldiers who stood at the wall to protect the families, must look like they're crying after a rain storm. The phenomena could easily be explained by charting gutters and how raindrops slide around ridges in stone. But in my mind, they are eyes who cry because their arms have been stained with blood of fallen soldiers.

My Nation cries with me because rain makes the Jordan rise and flood the small hollows of stone that lie in pockets along the banks. Leaving the dark rock tear-stained and mournful

My Nation cries with me because mourners praying at the Wailing Wall will know the taste of salty tears mixed with fresh rainwater and what it feels like when both drops fall in your mouth.

My Nation cries because raindrops will slide down the faces of the statues that were built in honor of Israel's founding fathers and it will look like they are weeping for us all.

But mostly, above everything else, my Nation cries because rain will fall in Jerusalem, replenishing the Earth, washing away the prayers tucked in the Wailing Wall, and feeding

the hyssop so they will flourish. And the streets will be clean once more. Clean of blood, of hatred, of ignorance, of misunderstanding. And perhaps Brotherhood and Forgiveness and Compassion will bloom, cracking through the concrete of intolerance. And my Nation cries for one moment, because perhaps it will be the last moment worthy of tears before Peace, so my Nation cries with me, because it can not say “shalom.”