

Encounter in Jerusalem

Albert Vorspan

It is almost a year since we returned to the States from Israel. A number of things have changed since then and some of our memories have dimmed. And not only for us. The Tel Aviv airport massacre, which occurred while we were in Jerusalem, is probably dimmer in most people's memory than the horrifying killings at the Munich Olympics or the Libyan plane disaster in Sinai. Still, we believe we learned some things that endure, that will not readily fade from mind.

We lived in Jerusalem for four months and we travelled the country like nomads, trying to catch the peculiar essence of Israel. But it's silly; born Israelis can't even catch it. It's as elusive as Jerusalem's fugitive sunbeams. And we got perhaps the truest pictures of life in Israel in our *ulpan*, our class for learning Hebrew.

In our *ulpan* (typical, I understand, of practically all the others) we didn't really become expert at Hebrew. At best we mustered a small, rather pidgin-Hebrew arsenal of words which was fine for firing off in our little "conversations" in class, going to the store or the post office or mounting the "auto-bus," but next to useless with real Israelis on the street. But meeting our fellow *talmudim* (classmates) three times a week for four months revealed in its own way the character of life in Israel—its joys, tensions, frustrations and quiet satisfactions.

The class met in a pleasant building in the fashionable neighborhood of Talbieh. The Moadon Oleh is a gracious kind of club for new immigrants, and virtually every national grouping (American and Canadian, South African, British, Australian, etc.) has an office there to give counseling, cultural programs and

tiyulim (trips) to ease the shock of transition for *olim* (immigrants). The Russians don't yet have an association, but they should. Several *ulpan* classes go on in the building at one time and it's rather a hit-or-miss affair as to which level (Aleph, Beth, Gimel or whatever) you enter, depending largely on prior background. My wife and I started in Aleph, thought it was too slow, and simply graduated ourselves into Aleph Plus, which was about our speed.

Jewish informality was the tone. The teacher didn't keep attendance, and the class started at 8:45 A.M.—if not 9:00 A.M. The coffee break came at about 10:00 A.M. or 10:15 and took anywhere from ten to forty-five minutes, depending on how the *morah* (teacher) was feeling. Our *morah*, Edna, was a trim, pretty, vivacious young university student, whose English was adequate. The day after she broke up with her boyfriend we had a long coffee break. Nobody used last names in class. In fact you virtually cast off your past identity and were called solely by your Hebrew name. I became Avraham and my wife, Shirley, became Sarah—Abraham and Sarah, a formidable ancient couple in this land!

The turnover in the *ulpan* was impressive. It was like a ladder; each day somebody climbed up and decided to move out to the next higher group or, contrariwise, slipped down to a slower level or, more likely, dropped out altogether. Reinforcements were always arriving, however—now a black Christian from Africa; the next day a gay Irish woman from Dublin who was converting to Judaism; then again a buxom Dutch girl who appeared suddenly in distracting décolletage, recited once and was never seen again.

What a variegated crew, and how characteristic of the wondrous heterogeneity of Israel. In the buffet at the coffee break the cacophony of a dozen languages buzzed like a modern Tower of Babel. In our class, among the more or less permanent *talmudim*, were the following: Rosie, a grandmother from Johannes-

ALBERT VORSPAN is Director of the Commission on Social Action of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the author of several works, including *Jewish Values and Social Crisis* and—in another vein—*My Rabbi Doesn't Make House Calls*.

burg who comes to see her family; Meir, a retired businessman from Toronto; Abraham (the second!) and Dinah, a young Orthodox couple from Memphis; Joyce, a spinster from London; Bathsheba, the wife of a Reform rabbi from New York who had come to Jerusalem to work with Israeli youth; Katie, a fundamentalist Christian from Iowa; Kojo, an eager, smiling Japanese studying at the Hebrew University; Jeanette, an attractive young shiksa from America who was married to a Jewish boy who loves Israel; Bessie, an elderly Jewish woman from Atlantic City who was here under severe duress because her husband was determined to live in Israel; and us two, right out of the Bible but *déclassé*—only temporary residents. . . .

For most of us the ulpan meant returning to school (with its books, homework, lessons, etc.) for the first time in twenty, thirty or even forty years. And with our halting recitations (*Ani Avraham—Ani gar b'Artzot habrit*. . . . I am Abraham—I live in the United States) we reverted to the second or third grade of a long-forgotten incarnation. And it showed! Here we were, a bunch of mostly middle-aged, middle-class folk, waving our hands urgently for the right to recite (“I go to the post office; I say . . .”), then studying the face of our twenty-five-year-old teacher for a smile of encouragement or even a glory to God—a word of praise (*b'seder*—okay) or even a commendation (*tov*—good) or the ultimate yichus (*yofi*—fine). Faces beaming with satisfaction or depressed (if Edna scowls “*lo nachone*”—not correct), covertly competitive as all get-out, we daily broke our teeth on a new and exasperating language.

Meir, pushing sixty, was the eager beaver in the class. If Edna assigned two lessons for homework, he did three. While the rest of us wrote three or four simple sentences in our assigned *nichtav* (letter), Meir ran off a two-page epistle, bristling with biblical phrases and figures of speech pulled out of a Hebrew-English dictionary. Whenever Meir finished one of his *sippurim* (stories), Bathsheba softly suggested (in English) that he ought to move up to a higher class, he was destroying our amateur status.

Meir was strongly motivated. He was there to stay, and he felt that conquering the language was vital to his making it. Already, because of his lack of Hebrew, he had failed to land a job for which he was otherwise qualified. Meir studied for hours every day, and he was the only member of the class who made the herculean effort to try to read the Hebrew newspaper (the rest of us were content with the English-language *Jerusalem Post* and/or the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*). Back in Toronto Meir had been active in the Labor Zionist movement and, when his son and his daughter-in-law had settled in Israel and loved it, he and his wife decided to make the plunge.

One day Meir came in troubled. He and his wife were hunting an apartment in the Beit HaKarem neighborhood in Jerusalem, and he was astonished by the prices—160,000 pounds (\$40,000) or more for a three-room apartment. After he showed interest in the apartment the owner switched the price upward to 175,000 pounds. “You have to run away from Canada,” the owner said, “so you’ll pay a little more here for your security.” Reluctantly, Meir closed the deal and went to the bank to work out a mortgage (16 to 18 per cent is par for the course). The bank manager listened to his story, glaring at him balefully. “Why should I help you rich Americans?” he demanded. “You come here with your money, you drive the price of housing out of sight, and because of you my son and his wife can’t get an apartment!”

Another day Meir was driving his new car (a Volvo) to Tel Aviv. He stopped—as he always did—to pick up a hitchhiking soldier. “I have been waiting here for twenty minutes,” the soldier declared accusingly. Meir, irritated, produced something sarcastic about being sorry he had kept him waiting. “How much did you pay for this car?” the soldier demanded. Meir said he didn’t remember exactly.

“I saw the white border on the license [indicating the car was bought by an immigrant and was, therefore, exempt from the crushing customs and taxes which native Israelis must pay for a car; Meir’s Volvo would cost a non-*oleh* Israeli about \$12,000] and I know you didn’t have to pay the damned *meches* [taxes] we pay.”

“So,” said Meir, “I’m a new immigrant. I gave up a good living to come to Israel, to contribute to the state.”

“Thanks, who needs you? And who needs the Russians either?” the soldier continued. “People like you really burn me up!”

Meir asked him if he was so burned up wouldn’t he prefer to get out of his despised car. That angry he wasn’t.

“Meir,” I asked, “why did you stay? The bureaucracy is bugging you and you’ve had such rough experiences.”

Meir looked surprised by my question. “This is my country. I should have come years ago. This is the only place for a Jew. I had it good in Canada, but can a Jew be happy anywhere else but here. . . .?”

Katie was the object of daily speculation and gossip in the buffet. She was a Christian fundamentalist, and she and her husband came to Israel, as she told us over coffee one day, because God had called them to do so. “We’re not missionaries,” she said, “and we don’t impose our views on anybody, but of course we feel free to explain our views to anyone who is interested.” She told me that she and her husband had applied for citizenship in Israel, but that she felt they were getting a runaround by the bureaucracy. (Who doesn’t?) She wondered aloud if that was because they were not Jews or because the authorities feared

they were missionaries. In any event, she and her husband (who had already learned Hebrew) obviously felt hurt by the guarded reception.

The class crisis broke unexpectedly on Katie's head. It happened the day Katie's husband, a nice looking and smiling chap, came to visit the class. He sat beside Katie, smiling pleasantly and occasionally helping somebody with his conjugation. Immediately after the coffee break the explosion erupted. It seems that Katie's husband had expressed the opinion to Meir that Arab workers in Israel were subjected to discrimination in wage scales relative to Jewish workers. Meir disagreed rather mildly, contending that Arab workers in Israel were receiving higher wages than they had ever known in their lives and that they had never received such rights and benefits in Arab countries. By now the reassembled class was getting drawn into the discussion. And then everything hit the fan.

Bessie was the first to blow. "After all we have suffered," she shouted, "we don't have to come here to Israel and listen to this damn prejudice. We suffered enough at the hands of you Christians. You go around criticizing this and that. Why don't you remember that your damned Jesus was a Jew?" Before Edna or anyone else could dampen that fuse, Bessie was on her feet, her voice shrill and hysterical: "Who needs you here, with your damned missionary work? After all we have suffered, how dare you chase us here in Israel, of all places, with your anti-Jewish poison!"

The class was in shock and so was Edna. Katie's face was white, and her husband was trying to pull some clippings out of his pocket about the situation of the Arabs. "We Jews can't do anything right, can we, class?" It was Bathsheba, her face contorted with fury. "The U.N. always condemns us, never the Arab terrorists. The Red Cross is neutral on the side of the Arabs. And you come around here with your anti-Jewish propaganda and your constant criticisms. Do you think anybody has ever given the Arabs the standard of living they now have in Israel? They live better than their people in any Arab country. And you pick, pick, criticize. I'm sick of it! *Listen, if you don't like it here, go back to where you came from!*" "Yes," I put in weakly, "love it or leave it. Right, Bathsheba?" knowing that in America Bathsheba and her husband had been (like me) bitter critics of the Vietnam war.

Through it all Katie's husband smiled wanly. What was he thinking? Probably that God's calling required suffering, as his Jesus had found in full mea-

sure. Forgive them, O Lord, they know not what they do.

The calm came as suddenly as the storm. We were all spent, troubled, mildly guilty at our collective overkill but vaguely aware that a deeper agenda of emotions boiling below the surface of the discussion had overwhelmed us all. Was it the vulnerability of our Jewish history? Our acute sense of Israel's isolation? Deep wells of anger at the world's ambivalence to our right to live? A dangerous self-righteousness? Fanaticism? We learned little Hebrew that day, but we asked a lot of silent questions about "them" and "us" and ourselves.

Katie quit the next day. She told Edna the class was too fast for her. . . .

Kojo was not in class the day after the Tel Aviv airport massacre. A dark cloud hung over the class that day. The Lydda tragedy seemed so incredible—Israel had never been so tranquil and peaceful. Unescorted women could stroll the streets at any hour of the evening . . . could they do that in Detroit? But innocents were slaughtered in the airport and Arab leaders were hailing the massacre as an heroic triumph! It was spring in Jerusalem, flowers of every conceivable hue bloomed everywhere, filling the air with intoxicating perfume. The sublime Jerusalem sky was as blue as a painting, and the sun outside the window of the Moadon glowed pink on the Jerusalem rock. Jerusalem—the magnificent, richly human City of Peace. The Tel Aviv disaster seemed to crash into our tranquillity, evoking pain and horror within the dreamlike sweetness of our Jerusalem life. Which was real . . . this or that? Or both?

The door opened and Kojo came in, eyes on the floor, and made his way to his seat. He put his face in his hands and sobbed softly and brokenly. We tried to comfort him, but he didn't speak or even look at us all morning. Why did he come? It was his way of telling us he was shattered by what happened—and he shared our pain. We shared his too, a Japanese unlucky enough to be in Israel on that fateful day.

The ulpan was a hothouse sanctuary where we learned a special language (ulpanese) in a special world, but it couldn't lock out the tensions and agonies of the real world outside those hills. Israel that spring was the incredible Judean hills, the silent wastes of the Negev, the Phantoms breaking the sound barrier overhead, the busy *kibbutzim* green and vigorous in the distance. And Israel was there too, in a small room in the Moadon where we came to study Hebrew, learned a little, and struggled with some other things harder to comprehend.