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# Snapshots from Jerusalem

*Ellen Weiss*

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My two sons, eight-year-old Daniel and five-year-old Ari, stride through the Jaffa Gate into the walled Old City of Jerusalem and head down into the souk, the Arab market. They love to run through the narrow cobblestone alleyways. They move with confidence, as though they own the place. Their destination today, Farez's tea shop. I first met Farez nineteen years ago, when I spent my junior year in college at the Hebrew University. The boy who used to serve me tea is now a man. The hole-in-the-wall tea shop is now the Holy Rock Café. Farez took the family's prime real estate on the Via Dolorosa and expanded, adding indoor seating. We still prefer to sit on the small straw stools that line the street. The orange juice is freshly squeezed; the tea is served with mint and just a little sugar. A multitude of tourists pass by as they trace the route Jesus walked, carrying his cross from the place of his condemnation to the site of his crucifixion and burial. But few stop for a drink. Most tours allow for little shopping in the Muslim quarter. Business is down. Many of the storefronts are shuttered and closed, not because of a strike or an intifada but because the owners can no longer afford the city taxes.

Farez has lived all his life in Khalandia, a refugee camp near the small Jerusalem airport. He owns two horses and likes to show my boys pictures of them. Farez and his brother Khalid keep the shop sparkling clean. They rarely let us pay.

Daniel and Ari see few of their friends from school here. Many Israelis we know won't go into the Old City: they tell us it's a dangerous place. Maybe Ari and Daniel haven't been here long enough to be afraid.

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I'm sitting in Ariel Sharon's living room right above one of the busiest thoroughfares in the Muslim quarter of the Old City. It's easy to spot the foreign minister's home — a huge Israeli flag hangs down the length of the house, on the part that actually arches over the road. On the roof there's a huge menorah. There are also a half dozen Israeli soldiers stationed outside the house. Arabic music pours out of the shops below the building.

I'm here as a guest of Ateret Cohanim, a group of religious Jews that works to restore and rebuild Jewish life in the Muslim quarter of the Old City. There were Jewish residents here years ago, they explain, before British restrictions and before Jordanian rule forced them out of the Old City altogether. Since 1967, when Israel recaptured East Jerusalem, Jews in the Old City have lived primarily in the Jewish quarter. For the past decade, Ateret Cohanim has been acquiring property in this part of the city, much to the dismay of its Arab neighbors. My guide, Miriam, wearing the long sleeves, long dress,

*Ellen Weiss, the executive producer of National Public Radio's All Things Considered, spent seven months of 1998 on sabbatical in Jerusalem with her husband and two young sons.*

and hat of an orthodox woman, says that as a Jew there is no place she would rather be. Her home is just a short walk from the Western Wall. She says she was drawn here because it's the closest place to God.

So how did Ariel Sharon get here? According to Miriam, in the 1980s, when Ateret Cohanim started buying homes in the Muslim quarter, the group wanted some protection — soldiers to keep them safe from the Arab residents. When their requests went unanswered by the government, one-time defense minister Ariel Sharon stepped in to help. By law, former defense ministers are entitled to military protection for the rest of their lives. So when Sharon declared the Muslim quarter his primary residence, the soldiers became a permanent fixture. His living room is large and spacious, but he is nowhere to be seen.

Sharon actually lives in southern Israel, and seven Jewish families now live in his apartment complex.

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Sounds. Sometimes, Jerusalem can be a tough place to sleep. It's five o'clock in the morning and I am walking around my neighborhood. The first to pray today are the Muslims — their muezzins are calling the faithful to the first of five daily prayers.

We live on a hilltop above several Arab neighborhoods, and the sounds of the mosques rise up and fill the air. As I walk along my street, the Arabic prayers mix with those of a group of men. I hear chanting in the synagogue. It's a few weeks before the Jewish High Holidays and these men are reciting Selichot, special prayers of repentance said every morning for the month leading up to the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. From a distance I watch the group swaying and singing. It's early, but the sun is already in the sky. That's because Israel returned from daylight saving time two months before the rest of the world. The religious political bloc holds enough power over the government that it was able to "change time," ensuring that its constituents would have adequate daylight for this early prayer service. In some synagogues it's customary to blow the shofar, a ram's horn, as part of these prayers, but not at the synagogue in my neighborhood. I'm back home by 5:30, just in time to hear the church bells ringing. They are coming from the Catholic Church of the Dormition, where Christians believe Mary fell into eternal rest. I can see the church from my backyard, and I can hear the bells from my bedroom.

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The president of our synagogue begins his weekly announcements. It's the Friday night before Yom Kippur. Evening holiday services, he says, will begin at 5:15; morning services start at 9:15. If you have borrowed prayer books over the last year, he asks that you bring them back — and, on Yom Kippur this year, please, no bicycle riding in the synagogue. No one bats an eyelash. Over the next few days bike shops are open late, people working overtime, getting ready for the most sacred holiday on the Jewish calendar.

Three nights later, as the crowd pours out of the synagogue following the Kol Nidre service, Jerusalem is a changed city. The children of Israel have reclaimed the streets. Not a single car is moving. For the next twenty-four hours, bicycles, tricycles, roller

blades, and strollers own the streets. Major traffic routes have been transformed into pedestrian malls crowded with people walking leisurely. Israel is notorious for its high number of traffic accidents, but on Yom Kippur, the greatest road hazard is an out-of-control two-wheeler or skater.

The next morning, I lie in bed listening to the silence. The early morning horns and engines I am accustomed to hearing have been replaced by bird songs. The uniqueness of the day is expressed in various ways — prayer, fasting, the quiet that blankets the city — and the fact that Yom Kippur is also bicycle day in Israel.

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Salim Shawamreh, his wife, and six kids needed a place to live. The plot of land they purchased didn't look very hospitable — barren, rocky, and on a slope, not a great place to build a home. Still, Salim applied for a building permit in 1994, when peace was in the air. He was optimistic and even started to build. In 1997, the political scene had changed, and Salim's application was denied. The Israeli civil administration said that the land, the hilly, barren, rocky land, was zoned exclusively for agriculture, a designation that was made in 1942 under the British mandate. Accompanying the application was an order to demolish the unfinished home, a step routinely taken by the Israeli government to discourage illegal building. The family waited for the bulldozers to arrive. A little more than a year later they came, and in less than an hour the house was destroyed.

It's a warm, sunny afternoon, and a group of Israelis and Palestinians are gathered around the rubble of the Shawamreh home. They have come to rebuild the house. These are peace activists engaged in civil disobedience — it is illegal to rebuild a demolished home. Rabbi Arik Asherman, a leader of Rabbis for Human Rights, tells me that according to the Jewish calendar, it's two days before the ninth of Av, the day many Jews mourn the destruction of the first and second temples. He says that for this family, and other families who have had their homes demolished, the sense of loss and mourning is at least as great as what Jews feel for the temple. Too many people are trying to tear down peace; these Jews and Arabs want to build it up.

The remains of the old house are hauled out by the volunteers. A hand brigade passes bucket after bucket of rubble. The Shawamreh family serves everyone soft drinks in plastic cups. The scene is friendly and warm; conversation flows in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. Across the way, on the opposite hilltop, another group is gathering. This one arrives in jeeps and armed vehicles. The army and the civil administration have come to watch the building. In three days, after the Shawamreh house is rebuilt, they will come and knock it down again.

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It's Thursday night and Ramallah is hopping. As we turn off the dark, bumpy road that leads into town, the streets are suddenly filled with people, the traffic is bumper to bumper, and the neon lights make this place look more like Vegas than the West Bank. This is the only Palestinian-controlled city with a real night life.

There's already a crowd at Flamingos. At one table, students from Bir Zeit University; at another some staff from the UN and other international organizations; around

the bar there's a group of Israelis from Jerusalem. Tonight they are all here for jazz. The dress is casual, jeans and T-shirts for men and women. There's a pool table, everyone is smoking, and Flamingos may also be the only place in Ramallah where you can get nachos. Bassam Nasir is a jazz DJ, the only one in town. He's got two shows a week on one of the Ramallah radio stations. Like many Palestinians who lived abroad, he moved back here after this city and others were put under Palestinian control. He's hoping to do a live broadcast tonight.

The band has arrived — the journey from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem took a little longer than expected. Arnie Laurence, the sax player, heads up the five-piece ensemble made up of Israelis, Jews from abroad, and a Palestinian. A couple of young musicians studying at the conservatory in Ramallah join in. The music is great — jazz classics and some improvisation. The crowd moves with the rhythm — everyone's having a good time. Amy Mardrosian, the manager, had the dream to bring jazz to Ramallah. "With all that's going on in this country, it's nice to know that once a week you can come to some place and relax." In many places around the world, Flamingos would be just an ordinary restaurant. But here, it is the ordinary that is so extraordinary.

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Living in Jerusalem, I often make a daily calculation. Are the need and convenience greater than or less than the risk? Many factors can affect this calculation. Am I taking my kids? Has Hamas just issued a blanket threat against Israeli civilians? Has the Israeli army recently succeeded in destroying a bomb-making factory and arrested any terrorists? This helps me decide where to shop, whether or not to take the bus, and just in which direction I should drive when I leave the city.

Sometimes the equation is done on the spot. One morning I am looking for cayenne. The spice stall in Mahane Yehuda, the big open-air market in predominantly Jewish Jerusalem, is filled with wonderful aromas and brightly colored powders. Another shopper helps me — I don't know how to say cayenne in Hebrew. Suddenly her attention is drawn out of the stall into the alleyway lined with fruit and vegetable stands. She is staring at the dogs — big German shepherds walking slowly through the market. The dogs are in uniform, special forces. She explains that they are bomb sniffers. The market is filled with shoppers carrying their overstuffed bags. They are civilians, but conditioned to look out for abandoned bags, for suspicious people, for a car in the wrong place. They are always on guard because in this city, the shopper can just as easily become the bombing victim. I do the math, settle for paprika, and walk out of the market.

This morning, Israeli radio announces that gas mask distribution centers will be open to the public today. This is followed by the weather forecast. I wonder, Where do temporary visitors get gas masks? I know our apartment building has a bomb shelter — it's standard, just like a mailbox. We and the other residents use it for storage. The shelter at my son's kindergarten has been turned into a classroom. Children's artwork adorns the thick concrete walls, and there are lots of toys scattered on the floor.

The only calculation I'm making now is the distance between Israel and Iraq. ❁