

# NOTES FROM JERUSALEM

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**I**ne morning I wake up thinking—I don't need to be doing this anymore. It's too much. I go swimming in the afternoon, which is wonderful. That night I meet two American friends; we eat grilled vegetables and drink whiskey. Tippy in the taxi home, I find that Jerusalem is again a magical city. I pass the Old City walls. I pass where Abraham almost sacrificed his son, where the Temple used to stand, where Jesus was crucified, where Mohammed went up to heaven. Then I go home, brush my teeth and go to sleep.

**II**

## *Eighteen months before*

The toothless Israeli taxi driver and I sing together all the way from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, late on a Friday afternoon, with the windows open and the sun going down.

The wiry and wrinkled driver grew up in Morocco, and he sings of his intense love for Jerusalem with a nasal soulful Arabic wail. When he hears that I have not been to Jerusalem in over ten years, that I just arrived from America, that I am moving to Jerusalem, he cannot contain his joy.

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Almost shabbat. On the way to Jerusalem. With the windows open and the sun going down. This is what the rabbis and mystics and peddlers of Poland dreamt about for generations. This was a Jewish prayer for 2,000 years.

### III

A few days later, I walk in the Old City of Jerusalem with friends and friends of friends. In the room where, according to tradition, Jesus and the Apostles gathered for The Last Supper, an Orthodox Jewish teacher, bearded, head covered, explains what we are seeing. My friend, a Palestinian university professor in his fifties, corrects him on several points.

The Jewish teacher turns to my friend. “You seem to know a lot about this room.”

“My family lived here for 500 years,” explains my friend.

His ancestor was a Moroccan Sheik who, one night, in the fifteenth century, had a dream: he dreamt he, as a good Muslim, should become the caretaker of King David’s Tomb. He moved with his family, his followers, his servants, his wealth, to Jerusalem. Once there, they took care of the tomb of King David—which is just under the room where, they say, the Last Supper took place (according to *The New Testament*, Jesus was a direct descendant of King David; according to Jewish and Christian traditions, The Messiah must be directly descended from this Royal Line).

Later that day, my friend shows me a photograph from the early 1940s of his extended family in the garden of the complex where King David’s tomb is said to be, where the Last Supper is said to have taken place. The ancestral sheik is buried in a neglected mausoleum in “Independence Park,” on the Israeli side, in West Jerusalem, near other half-forgotten Arab tombs, a Blockbuster’s video store and a good inexpensive Italian restaurant.

### IV

The Holy Land is composed of walls, sacred space, separate worlds. I jump them. Lunch in Hebron; dinner in Tel Aviv. Actual distance has nothing to do with the physical realm. Emotional and spiritual geography have their own reality.

On Ben Yehuda Street, the kids with pierced eyebrows and noses and chins skateboard past the black-coated “haredi” Jews who, in their own way, with the long “payess” (side-curls), look just as funky. The sidewalks are crowded with tired Russian immigrants, with rambunctious American yeshiva students, with tourists, with Ethiopian Jews standing guard to check bags at coffee shops. Young soldiers get on the bus with guns strapped across their shoulders. The soldiers are all colors; all sizes; the green uniforms wrap them up like the candies in a box of mystery chocolates. Their parents and grandparents come from the deserts of Yemen; from the shops of Baghdad and Warsaw; from the rolling countryside outside of Cluj. Where else can one see beautiful young women with machine guns hanging casually between their breasts?

Take a right on Jaffa Road (from Ben Yehuda) and head toward Damascus Gate. In ten minutes, by foot, you are in another world. The covered Muslim women sit on the steps. The mustached man stands pouring black coffee into small plastic cups. There is a German school across from the Gate; several blocks away, past the American consulate, there is a little restaurant (part of the Jerusalem Hotel) with a transparent roof, where you can smoke nargeela with friends and relax.

The owner of the pharmacy on Salahidin Street spent years in Kentucky but came back to continue a family pattern. Decades before, his grandfather left Jerusalem to live in America. After many years he took a ship back to the Holy Land. When the grandfather was dying, he told his grandson: “I should have jumped off that ship.” The pharmacist’s father, who also spent years in America and returned (by plane), insisted that the son should take over the business: the son left Kentucky to stand behind the counter in East Jerusalem.

Leave Jerusalem for the West Bank. Pass Bethlehem. As you make your way to Hebron, through the stony countryside, past the olive trees and the vineyards, you will find people on the side of the road riding donkeys.

## V

It rained hard in Hebron. The roads are bad and it is dark and we get a flat tire. A Palestinian friend gives me a hat to wear. It is an old-fashioned tweed hat made in Turkey. I like to wear it sideways. People really notice the hat. They say I look particularly good in it.

After the rain, we smoke nargeela (double-apple). I play on the floor with the kids. They practice their English on me and teach me Arabic names for different foods. I wake up the next morning to one of the children, five-year-old Mustafa, in my face. “I am Mustafa,” he says. “I am Mustafa.”<sup>1</sup> He jumps up and down. He jumps on me. I throw him up into the air. He does somersaults. I flip him around and around until I am awake enough for coffee.

This is Friday morning. In the evening of the same day, I make it for shabbat with observant Jewish friends in West Jerusalem. Again, children play on the floor. Once seated around the table, my friend, the hostess, tells the guests that I work with Seeds of Peace. We hold up a tent for dialogue, I explain. As part of our work, we bring Israeli and Palestinian educators together, to work across borders for the sake of dialogue, for cross-cultural understanding and tolerance, for the cultivation of leadership skills and civic engagement, for the peaceful transformation of conflict. In response to questions, I tell them of how I spend a good deal of time in the West Bank, meeting with, working with, Palestinians.

One of the guests, Rifka, a devout Jewish woman in her late twenties who works at a shelter for abused children, shakes her head sadly: “*They hate us so much,*” she says.

## VI

According to Jewish sources, the world was created from the spot on Mount Moriah under where the Al Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem, now stands. The three monotheistic faiths agree: Abraham (Ibrahim) went up Mount Moriah, before Jerusalem was Jerusalem, to sacrifice his son. According to Jewish and Christian sources, the son was Isaac; according to Muslim sources, it was Ishmael; in either case, a father took his son up a mountain, along with a sharp knife, ready to kill for the sake of his God.

Isaac wrestled with the angel on Mount Moriah. This is where he was renamed “Israel.” King David’s son Solomon built The Temple on Mount Moriah. The Prophets and the Priests walked the streets of Jerusalem; Priests, well fed, in the best fashion of the time; Prophets, unkempt, eccentric, filled with a thirst for justice. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple. Returning exiles rebuilt it. Jesus taught under the

olive trees of Jerusalem. The Romans razed Jerusalem to the ground. The first Muslims turned to Jerusalem to pray (not to Mecca). The Crusades were, of course, about who would control the Holy Places of Jerusalem. The Turks and the European powers, the French, the British, the Germans, the Russians, were all greedy for Jerusalem. The American Pilgrims, with their obscure Old Testament names, braved the North American wilderness to build what they believed would be the New Jerusalem.

Gospel choirs in Detroit sing of Jerusalem. Mexicans, surrounded by tortured saints, cry out for Jerusalem. The blue-breasted politicians of Moscow and Washington; those who speak in tongues in Capetown, in Kentucky, in Peru; the bearded Old Believers of the Caucasus; the wild and the calm Sufis of Istanbul and Dehli; the Mormons of Salt Lake City and Sofia; the cool pale Lutherans; the Shiites of Tehran, Beirut and Los Angeles; the Indonesians and the Egyptians, the Kazakhs, the Kuwaitis and the Kenyans, not to mention the bearded Hasids of Brooklyn and Paris, or the liberal Jews of Buenos Aires and Takoma Park, all of them, to the extent that they are linked to their traditions—all of them have Jerusalem inside.

In the days of redemption—and here, again, traditions converge—the people of the world will turn to Jerusalem. On one level, the unwillingness of an Israeli taxi driver to take a passenger from Jaffa Road in West Jerusalem to the Kalandia checkpoint outside of Ramallah, twenty minutes away, is no different from a taxi driver in New York who, until that city's 1990s resurgence, would not go to many Black neighborhoods. But what is local in Jerusalem takes on cosmic significance.

## VII

Outside of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, I am told, on a ledge there is a ladder (I have not confirmed the existence of this ladder). Decades ago they were doing renovations. Representatives of the various Christian denominations could not agree. Construction stopped. The ladder lingers.

There are peddlers in the Jewish Quarter who sell pictures of Jerusalem where the Al Aqsa Mosque has been erased. A small reddish man, originally from Cleveland, shows me a model of the Third Temple.

“But there is a mosque there,” I say. “What about the mosque?”

“HaShem will take care of everything,” he replies.

While getting my hair cut, the Palestinian barber tells me with a smile (and sharp scissors in his hand) that, in 50 or 100 years, there will be no Jews left in Jerusalem. “They will be like the Crusaders,” he explains.

## VIII

When I taught as a Lecturer on Social Studies at Harvard, we started the year with Kant’s essay, “What is Enlightenment?”<sup>2</sup> We spent the course tracing how Enlightenment hopes got caught up by the facts on the ground, by human beings who, it turned out, were better at mastering nature and accumulating power than at living together with peace and justice in a sustainable way. We ended with the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. Habermas’s mentors, German Jewish intellectuals, escaped the Nazis and a Europe in ashes. They were justifiably pessimistic. As a teenager, Habermas was a member of the Hitler Youth Group. Born with a cleft-palate, it is difficult for him to speak in a comprehensible way. Yet he has made it his life mission to prove his mentors wrong—to salvage the Enlightenment hopes, to encourage, to guide human beings to reason, to engage in dialogue, to achieve consensus, to act on issues of common concern. For Habermas, we, as a species, are in a race with ourselves. As Freud put it, we have become “prosthetic gods.” Wielding power once reserved for mythic tales and comic strips, wisdom, even common sense and common decency, have not kept pace. Man is still wolf to man. If we do not figure out better ways of living together, Habermas argues (though he doesn’t put it this way), we are collectively screwed.

## IX

I go to Bethlehem before Christmas, to buy presents for a devoutly Christian friend. When I walk into the shop, the owner greets me with a strong handshake and a cup of Arabic coffee.

I buy a creche, carved out of local olive wood. The shopkeeper, a dapper host, calls the wood carver and asks him to come down to the shop to meet me. The wood carver has rough hands and a sad face. “We have no customers,” he tells me: “no business at all.”

I mention to the owner of the shop that his family name sounds Italian. Yes, he says, nodding his big head, fingering his moustache. “My ancestors were Crusaders. They came from Sicily to fight in the Crusades. And we never left.” Much of his family, though, like most of the Palestinian Christians, now live abroad, in Detroit, in Chile and Argentina, in California.

## X

Along with the emotional and spiritual geography of the Holy Land comes a patchwork of time zones determining the texture of experience, the routines of everyday life. On Friday, most of the shops on Jerusalem’s Palestinian side shut down. Across the West Bank, things stop for the Friday prayer. On Friday morning the Jewish shops are crowded. By the afternoon there is a frantic feeling, the anticipation of shabbat, the last-minute shopping. At the market off Jaffa Road, the fruit and vegetable sellers shout out the special deals. In the Palestinian schools of the West Bank and East Jerusalem schools where there is a Christian presence, no matter how faint, the “weekend” is Friday and Sunday. One day off; school on Saturday; another day off. In most public schools of the West Bank, the days off are Friday and Saturday instead. During Ramadan, Palestinians leave work early. The traffic piles up. To get to Jerusalem with reasonable speed during Ramadan it’s best to leave Ramallah by three o’clock. Here “in the region” the new year that comes between the end of December and the start of January keeps its Christian flavor. People remember: it marks the turning of what was once obviously the Christian year. The Jewish year, which, in the diaspora is uprooted from the earth, has been replanted. In the markets of the ultra-Orthodox communities, you will not find any fruit or vegetables grown by Jews this year: it is the “shimta” year, the sabbatical. The land, according to the Laws of Moses, must remain fallow. In “the Land,” the holiday cycle fits with the cycle of the seasons. Metaphors from the Bible come alive.

## XI

If Habermas is right, if citizens really can engage with one another, if they are developing a “cosmopolitan solidarity,” if they have the power to change the course of governments, to determine their own

fates—there must be opportunities to meet, to learn directly about one another, to take the narrative and the needs of “the other” into account. Individuals need to get away from the relentless media, away from the prejudices of their family, friends and neighbors. They need a chance to examine their assumptions, to transform their ideas, their own visions of what is possible.

Such possibilities to stretch the imagination exist at the Seeds of Peace camp in Otisfield, Maine. Each summer session, the Seeds of Peace Camp staff, colored with face-paint, equipped with drums, welcome busloads of “Seeds” (campers) and “Delegation Leaders” who have traveled from conflict regions to Maine, “the way life should be” (as the highway signs state).

To get to this, camp physical obstacles must be overcome. Checkpoints must be crossed. And there is the emotional and spiritual geography of the Holy Land.

Parents do not send their children to this camp, by the shores of Pleasant Lake, in a place called “Maine,” without sending responsible adults from their own communities. These are the “Delegation Leaders.” They are teachers, school principals, Ministry of Education officials, academics, sometimes the manager of an NGO, a businessman, an artist or an actor who also works with youth. At the camp, the Delegation Leaders represent the parents and the home communities. They work with the camp staff to make the Seeds’ experience as rich as possible. At the same time, they engage in their own intense program of dialogue, cross-cultural understanding, conflict transformation. And they work together as educators. They visit schools in Maine; they meet local teachers. What kind of education is necessary to engage in the work of Seeds of Peace? What kind of educational environment encourages the values and skills embodied by Seeds of Peace to succeed? *The Delegation Leaders*, I always say, *cultivate the environment for Seeds to flourish.*

## XII

A Palestinian Delegation Leader who runs a community center in Hebron decides to go into the tomato business. He plants tomatoes in greenhouses in Jericho.

How’s business? I ask.

“Shmita is very good for us,” he says, smiling. His bank account tells him what he needs to know about the Jewish sabbatical year. “The price of tomatoes keeps going up.”

### XIII

I spend a spring weekend in Kfar Kana, an “Arab-Israeli” (or “Israeli-Palestinian”) village outside of Nazareth where, according to tradition, Jesus turned water into wine. I meet with a friend; he is an “Arab-Israeli,” a “Palestinian Israeli,” a “Palestinian citizen of Israel,” depending on one’s political point of view. He went to the Seeds of Peace camp in Maine with a delegation of Israeli citizens—both Arab and Jewish citizens of the state. There, in Kfar Kana, on the roof of his house, he introduces me to one of his students, the first in the village to go to the Seeds of Peace camp.

By the accident of history, this fifteen-year-old girl, shining black eyes, filled with energy and hope, is an Arab citizen of Israel; she speaks Arabic as her native tongue; she speaks Hebrew fluently. A different decision by somebody in 1948 and she would be living in Jenin, or in Lebanon, or someplace else, with a different identity: she would not be an “Arab-Israeli” or a “Palestinian citizen of Israel.”

It is a short drive from Jenin to Kfar Kana—at least it would be if peace existed. Instead, though, there is a “green line.” People from Jenin need special permission to cross into Israel; Israeli citizens, Arab and Jewish, are not permitted to travel to the West Bank or Gaza.

I ask this girl in Kfar Kana if she has ever met a Palestinian from the West Bank or Gaza. “No,” she says: “never.” She is going to Otisfield, Maine to meet a Palestinian from Jenin for the very first time.

At a community center in Jenin, the following week, I meet three “Seeds” (Seeds of Peace campers), two planning to be campers at the same time as the girl from Kfar Kana. From the window of this center, we see Nazareth in the distance.

### XIV

Even as we try to bring people together, the facts on the ground push them apart. During the first session at camp this past summer, we took the Delegation Leaders to an island off the coast of Portland for some

good old American “team-building.” We stayed the night in an old Navy fortress from the First World War that has been converted into a school for environmental education and outdoor survival skills. At night we cooked marshmallows on sticks over the fire. During the day we went kayaking.

Some participants could not swim at all. One of them, Reem, a Palestinian woman from Ramallah, a kindergarten teacher, flipped over, into the cold Atlantic.

Before the guides could stop him, an Israeli Delegation Leader—Menachem, trained as a Navy Seal—jumped into the water, scooped Reem up, put her back into the kayak and led the kayak safely to the shore.

Weeks later, toward the end of the session, Reem asked Menachem to please visit her and her family in Ramallah. He smiled. This invitation meant something. “Yes,” he said, “I would like to go.”

Yet it is illegal for Israeli citizens, Jewish or Arab, to cross into the Palestinian territories of the West Bank or Gaza. Reem wants Menachem to visit her family in Ramallah. But this would be illegal.

Her family would find it extremely difficult to visit him: Palestinians with West Bank IDs cannot cross into the borders of pre-1967 Israel without getting permission. Permissions are not easy to get. I get calls from Palestinian friends who live a twenty-five-minute drive from my apartment in French Hill, a neighborhood in Jerusalem. They call from the other side of the Wall. If they have West Bank IDs, visiting me would require a major procedure with the authorities. We wait for special events, planned weeks in advance; we work through official channels, to get them permissions; or I cross to the “other side.”

Those with international passports have the theoretical capacity to jump worlds. Most fear the emotional geography. The pilgrims and tourists visit Bethlehem, for obvious reasons. They usually do not want to cross the checkpoint to drive around Ramallah, let alone Jenin. Palestinian residents of Jerusalem jump worlds. These are people who lived under Jordanian control until 1967. Since that time, they have lived under Israeli control. They are not Israeli citizens. They can vote in Jerusalem municipality elections—not in national Israeli elections. They can drive anywhere in Israel. And they can cross into the West Bank. The

Israeli government built a Wall: these Palestinians are living on the side of the wall where the vast bulk of the Israeli population resides. Take a taxi in Jerusalem and chances are your driver will be a Palestinian with a Jerusalem ID.

## XV

I know a Palestinian woman whose father makes the concrete for “the Wall,” or “Security Fence,” that snakes across the West Bank. The father was born of a Palestinian father and a Jewish mother, a refugee from Syria. For his first years, he was brought up in Israel as Jewish. Then the family move to Saudi Arabia and he was raised as a Palestinian. He married a Palestinian woman. Now he lives with his family in Jerusalem and works in the cement factory. He has first cousins who are Israeli Jews. They keep loosely in touch.

## XVI

A Palestinian taxi driver with a Jerusalem ID drives me to Jericho. With the support of USAID, the Palestinian Seeds of Peace Delegation Leaders have organized a winter camp at a youth center in Jericho for children (between 10 and 13) from across the West Bank. They ask “Seeds” (graduates of the camp in Maine) to be counselors. At the Jericho camp, I meet Zeina, an eighteen-year-old “Seed,” a high school senior from Bethany, where Jesus, they say, raised Lazarus from the dead. She is a “covered” Muslim girl from a traditional family. She does not shake hands with men who are not closely related. At the camp I see her leading the little kids back to bed when they run into the halls.

A month later, I meet Zeina again, this time on a trip to Hebron with Palestinian “Seeds” from across Jerusalem and Bethlehem. We stop at an environmental “field school” and nursery where they grow trees and teach about the environment of the West Bank. Two Palestinian representatives of an environmental NGO funded by the Lutheran Church speak about the land, the animals, the water. They ask the “Seeds” to plant some trees.

Many do not want to plant trees. It is not considered cool. Later Zeina and I sit on the bus together. She talks to me about an idea of hers. She wants to organize a blood drive. There is a disease, common among

Palestinians, that requires continual infusions of new blood. Several students in Zeina's school have this disease, and she has observed their suffering. When she asked her principal for help to organize a blood drive, the principal told her that she was showing off.

Zeina explains how she is happy about Seeds of Peace because it gives her a chance to do something for her people.

When she decided to go to the camp in Maine, her principal forbid her. Zeina decided to go anyway. The principal suspended her from school for three days and put a permanent mark in her file. According to her file, she is a disciplinary problem. Her father did not want her to go to the camp. When she returned, her uncle refused to shake her hand.

Zeina explains: she needs to struggle against her family. She needs to think for herself. She wants to learn. She thinks her father and mother do not understand. She wants to learn. She wants to do what *she* thinks is right. Listening to her, I think of philosophers, from Kant to Habermas, and their calls for "autonomy," for "enlightenment."

## XVII

I visit Dor, an Israeli friend, a Delegation Leader, at a moshav (cooperative farm) in the north of Israel, by the Lebanese border. The stench of chickens everywhere. People who live in this part of the country, I am told, get tax exemptions: the State considers it a danger zone. This moshav was settled in the fifties by Kurdish Jews from what is now Iraq. It is a short walk from my friend's bungalow—where he, his wife, and five children, live—to the border fences. Literally three minutes. Hold your breath a few times and you are there. The lush green hills are beautiful. He points to where Hizbullah rockets blew up a bungalow in the moshav. He points down to where Israeli soldiers were kidnapped.

Not long after, while in Jerusalem for shabbat, Dor suffers a stroke. A vibrant man, a devout man, filled with purpose. I visit him in the hospital. His speech is slurred; one arm does not work. He needs to learn again how to walk.

I ask him how he is doing.

"God has brought me low," Dor says, "so I can go higher."

## XVIII

Back in 1948, in the Old City of Jerusalem, a young Palestinian man of twenty-one—another Mustafa, by coincidence—lived with his family. He experienced firsthand what Israelis call the War of Independence, what Palestinians call the Catastrophe (the Nakba). He walked through those narrow ancient streets as the big events swirled around him; he went to bed each night. During such a violent time, when people on both sides were killed for no reason, two young Jews, not much older than Mustafa, escaped with their lives—because Mustafa saved them. There were Palestinians who wanted to kill the young Jews. Mustafa took the two into his home. He said: if anybody wanted to harm or kill—they would have to get through him first; they would have to harm or kill him first. In the years after the war ended, the three young men from across the lines of conflict stayed in touch. From 1948 until 1967, Mustafa, married, with a growing family, lived under Jordanian authority. When East Jerusalem came under Israeli control, his family, then living outside the Old City, in a newer neighborhood of Jerusalem, adapted to the new situation. They were at peace with their neighbors. The story of Mustafa was an inspiring one for a divided city, newly “unified,” trying hard to live up to its claim as the City of Peace. The story of Mustafa’s deed made it into an Israeli newspaper. The headline for the story: “Mustafa and His Two Jewish Brothers.” Mustafa died of cancer during the Second Intifada. His wife and six children, and their children, continued to live in the house he built, on Wadi El Khalif Street, in Shufat, behind the Joulani Furniture Store. And here is where a problem emerges. Like most Palestinians, this family wanted to live together as an extended family, so, as the family grew, they needed additional space. Mustafa built two new floors on top of the one-story family house. He built without a permit. He did what the Palestinians of East Jerusalem so often do, because it is extremely difficult for them to obtain permission to build. During the summer of 2007, approximately ten years after the additional floors were built, and after Mustafa himself had died—the family found a sign tacked to their door notifying the occupants of the house that it was an illegal house and would thus be demolished within twenty days: the entire house, including the first floor. The family would be billed for the demolition. During this same summer, Mustafa’s daughter, now a teacher, decided to participate in an intense program of dialogue and

conflict resolution at the Seeds of Peace Camp in Otisfield, Maine. In her role as a “Delegation Leader,” she was responsible for approximately forty Palestinian teenagers. She accompanied them to camp. She encouraged them to work for peace. As a Delegation Leader, she met with educators from “the other side.” She cooked and she kayaked with “the enemy.” She tried to understand the Israeli Jewish narrative, the Israeli Jewish experience. She worked hard to imagine and to create a world where there is more tolerance, more understanding, more respect and more dignity, more peace. Meanwhile, the municipality of Jerusalem twice postponed the hearings to decide whether to follow through with the demolition of the family home. In September, they gave a one-year extension to the family to navigate through the bureaucracy, to obtain a retroactive permit. The court can decide to blow up the house and destroy whatever things remain inside. My friend is an educator dedicated to living in peace. She speaks Hebrew fluently. She enjoys shopping at the Malcha Mall, on the Jewish side. I work with her on peace building projects; we worked together on the Jericho camp. When I think of her story—the forces of peace-building, dialogue and peace education, suddenly seem so weak.

## XIX

I walk with a hundred Israeli high school students through tunnels under the “Kotel,” the ancient Wall of the Temple. This tour is part of preparations for a trip to Poland to learn about the Holocaust. Thousands of Israeli high school students each year go on trips—organized and funded by the Israeli Ministry of Education—to learn about what happened to the Jews of Europe.

The Holocaust hangs like dark dust over Israel. As the older generation, the generation of survivors, the generation that founded the state, dies off, there is a rush to record stories of atrocities, stories of survival. Leaders of the older generation are also interviewed regularly—expressing fears for the future.

At a “Seeds Café,” a monthly cultural gathering organized by Seeds of Peace, held in Jerusalem, a *New York Times* reporter asks the Israeli novelist Amoz Oz to explain the one most important thing that “the other side” should know about his “side.”

Oz responds: they need to know that, though we appear strong, and are strong, we feel vulnerable, threatened, and weak.

## XX

The news of the Armenian-Turkish writer Hrant Dink's assassination by an extreme Turkish nationalist comes to me from a television set in the fanciest hotel in Amman, Jordan. I am there for a conference of Arabs and Israelis dedicated to people to people peace-building.

Two days before, I smashed my head against a metal bar in a hotel in the Old City of Jerusalem. Blood pouring down my face, the Palestinian hotel proprietor rushed me to a clinic run by the Greek Orthodox Church; the doctor stitched me up and covered my head with a white bandage the size of a diaper. I stopped by the pharmacy to buy ointment, extra bandages and gauze.

The hotel where I smashed my head is just down the road from the Armenian Quarter. The walls there are covered with posters about the Armenian Genocide.

The day after I watched the news of Dink's death, a Palestinian friend asks me over breakfast what I think of what happened. He knows that I lived in Armenia for several years. Later in the same day, an Israeli friend asks the same question. The same images come at them, and at each of us, from the television screen.

Holding up this Seeds of Peace tent of dialogue, this safe space, in "the region," in unfriendly terrain—is not easy. The tent is tugged hard in various directions. Seeds of Peace is an educational organization, and it succeeds by being beyond politics, by holding up a wide tent. The organization welcomes the mainstream from both sides, the skeptical, the unconvinced. People who are not willing to be advocates for specific policies—want the chance to engage with people from "the other side." Sometimes Seeds or Delegation Leaders or staff want to become more "political." They do this outside of Seeds of Peace. Seeds of Peace is a school of dialogue, a school for the non-violent transformation of conflict: what people do after going through this school depends on them. At the camp in Otisfield, Maine, the two flags, Israeli and Palestinian, fly side by side. Setting up the tent for dialogue is a political act, an affirmation that the two peoples, Palestinian and Israeli, have equal dignity,

that the differences and hot issues must be resolved through peaceful means. Seeds of Peace helps to create a common global “public sphere.” To the extent that we—citizens of different countries, citizens of a growing global public sphere—can have visceral, vital, honest, open, painful, difficult, cathartic discussions, to the extent that we can learn to understand and respect one another, we will have a freer, more just, more peaceful, more humane future. From what I understand, Hrant Dink was working for this.

## XXI

At the Arub Refugee Camp, on the way to Hebron, there are Palestinians who have not furnished their homes with anything permanent. If you ask them where they are from, they tell you the name of the village where their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents lived until 1948, in what is today across the “Green Line,” in what the international community recognizes as Israel.

A few years after 1967, the father of a Delegation Leader went back to his family’s village across the “Green Line.” He knocked on the door of his old house. The woman of the house, an Israeli, originally from Poland, told him to get off her land.

I eat dinner with friends in the Arub refugee camp. One of the daughters of the house, a “Seed” (graduate of the Seeds of Peace camp), went back to the old family home. Her friend, an Israeli “Seed” took her to visit. She found the trees her grandmother planted as a girl.

## XXII

A party off Hebron Road in Jerusalem. The people around me are in Jerusalem to study Jewish texts, to become rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators. One woman—a rabbinical student—belts out acoustic Madonna: it is beautiful. This scraggly guy gets up, nervously, and sings a song about how he might be the messiah. The guy who does “Bible Rap” (“am I my brother’s keeper” and “I’m not white—I’m Jewish”) is followed by a woman playing Bach on her violin. A band plays American roots music; the yalmuke of the washboard player keeps falling off. A woman next to me whom I know looks sad. I ask what’s wrong. She talks of how she

just spent a day in Hebron on an “Encounter Tour.” The organization takes rabbinical students, Jewish educators, and others, on “listening tours” of the West Bank, to hear and to try to understand the perspective of Palestinians.

This woman looks as if she were about to cry.

“It is so surreal,” she says. “I was in Hebron today. And now I’m here. I could cry.”

She spills red wine on my pants. I leave the party early because, early the next morning, I need to go to Hebron with fifty Palestinian teenagers—fourteen to eighteen or so. After the nature center, we walk the Old City of Hebron, where the checkpoints are, where there is hatred and mistrust everywhere, and the young soldiers, leaning casually, checking their text messages. We are not allowed to take the regular road. The roads are closed for “security reasons.” We get off the bus and walk. We go to Abraham’s Mosque. One of the soldiers makes nasty comments. One of my friends confronts the soldier. The soldiers take away my friend’s ID. Our group waits. The next thing you know, I’m standing opposite three soldiers. “We are a peace group,” I say. “Don’t do this.” One soldier—an Ethiopian Jewish girl with heavy bags under her eyes—looks uncomfortable. We wait while local kids, dirty-faced, try to sell us postcards or just beg for handouts.

### XXIII

Palestinian militants are firing missiles from Gaza to the south of Israel on a regular basis. I meet Israeli teachers from the north who take their students south, to show their support. One explains: “you have to be ready at any point for the bomb shelters.”

My neighbor, Jeremiah, the old dignified man, invites me to drink tea. “For me, it doesn’t matter,” he says. “But I fear for the future.”

### XXIV

At a special interfaith shabbat in Jerualem I meet a Palestinian acquaintance from Hebron. The Israeli hosts worked hard through a local interfaith peace organization to get him a permission. In this crowded Jerusalem apartment there are imams and priests and ministers and rabbis. A Sufi stands to speak about the many paths to a loving God.

A rabbi speaks of how the children of Abraham need to learn to get along. The young man from Hebron gets up and speaks about his own suffering:

“What can I do? Where can I go. I am from Hebron. I want to live but everything is closed to me. It was so hard even just to visit you here in Jerusalem.” This young man keeps talking, trying to tell his story. Eventually Naomi, an Israeli woman sitting on the floor, interrupts him:

“Nabil,” she says, “please. Let us sing you a song.”

She starts singing. Others join. Next thing you knew, there is a circle in the room, with Nabil at the center. He stands, looking around at the faces. On his own face, there is such a smile. Toward the end of the night Nabil turns to me. “I like shabbat,” he says.

## XXV

After a Seeds Café, I go out with some friends, Palestinian, Israeli, international, to smoke nargeela at the Jerusalem Hotel, a few blocks from the Damascus Gate, in the heart of East Jerusalem. Ruth, an Israeli teacher, says to me, “you know, I would never have come here before I became a part of Seeds of Peace. I would not have felt comfortable. For me, this was a dangerous place.”

“And now?” I ask.

“It feels fine.”

## XXVI

In the village of Bili'in, outside of Ramallah, every Friday afternoon, they hold a non-violent protest against the Wall. There are Palestinians. There are Israelis. There are internationals. The soldiers, at the bottom of the hill, face the crowd, on the hill above. I am invited to visit the protesters, and, after many weeks of invitations, I go. Just when I arrive, the soldiers are shooting tear gas.

## XXVII

My father's cousin, Shmuel, sits across from me in his modest clean house in suburban Tel Aviv, with his wife, his daughter, and his two teenaged grandchildren, who are dressed up to hit the clubs later. He is a compact man, past eighty, with thick Ronald Reagan hair, gone white.

For forty years, Shmuel drove a truck. Although this is our first meeting, I've seen him before, in two separate videos.

The first is a video made by the Steven Spielberg initiative to interview Holocaust survivors. Shmuel is on screen, talking about his childhood in the countryside of Transylvania, in what is now Romania, not far from a city called Cluj. He talks about how the extended family from surrounding villages would visit his immediate family; the only Jewish family in their village, they owned a small market and inn. At the family gatherings, the uncles and aunts and cousins would sit together. They would eat big meals and tell stories. The children would play together. Then these many cousins would go to sleep together, on the floor, in the one big room. "I think to myself," says Shmuel, "how did we all fit. But we all fit." After moments of silence, he adds: "those are my favorite memories."

In the video, as I remember it, Shmuel cries. He is the only one from that side of the family to survive. My father and my father's brothers were born in America. Shmuel is the link to a vanished world.

My uncle made the second video. Shmuel took my uncle, my aunt, their grown children (my cousins) and the spouses, back to the countryside of Transylvania, where the family comes from. My uncle videotaped the visit. In one scene, they stop for directions in Shmuel's village. Old men stand by the road. In Romanian, Shmuel asks for directions—and the old men on the road recognize him. They ask if he is the brother of so and so. This is Shmuel's brother. Shmuel nods, yes. He is the brother. The old men start to talk nervously, excitedly. At this point, Shmuel says to my uncle, "let's go."

My uncle, who is holding the camera, wants to engage the old men in conversation. But Shmuel repeats: "let's go."

My uncle asks, "what are they saying. Don't you want to talk to them? You know them from so long ago. They knew the family."

"Let's go now," says Shmuel. "Now. I want to go."

They find the house where Shmuel grew up. They knock on the door. The woman remembers Shmuel from his last visit, many years before. She gives him a kiss. She lets him show the family around the grounds. I don't remember if they go inside.

My father has met Shmuel three times. The first was in the middle 1950s, the year my father stayed on kibbutz. It was cold and my father

had the flu. He visited Shmuel and Shmuel's sweet wife. Because there was no heat in the house and no other way to keep warm and nowhere else to sleep, my father slept in the bed with Shmuel and his wife. The second time was in 1969, for my grandfather's funeral. The third time: this year (2008). Yet my father often speaks of his only first cousin.

After the war Shmuel stayed in a DP camp. In June of 1948 he arrived on the shores of the new State of Israel, on a ship called the *Altalena*. This is a famous ship. It was carrying weapons for the Irgun, the revisionist, right-wing, Zionists. The new government of Israel did not want independent armed groups. After various negotiations and miscommunications, the Palmach fired shells, hit and sunk the ship, thus creating decades of hostility between the followers of the first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, and the followers of Menachem Begin, the leader of the Irgun (who later became Prime Minister). As far as we know, Shmuel had nothing to do with any of this. He was not political. A country boy from Transylvania, trained as a dental technician, he was an orphaned refugee trying to find a home. Shmuel made it to shore. The ship went down. He started a new life in the Holy Land. He married a sweet girl from Romania, now the elderly woman who sits next to him, across from me. For years Shmuel drove trucks for the military.

### XXVIII

The Israeli army attacks Gaza with overwhelming force just as the almond trees in Jerusalem flower. I take a drive to where Sampson grew up. I sit on a hill overlooking where David and Goliath fought. I drive through Jericho, past the greenhouses with tomatoes, to the place where we organize the camps for Palestinian children; along the road hundreds of people are walking, teenagers and teachers, covered girls, heavily armed Palestinian policemen, locals with Palestinian flags hanging from their cars.

I call Ahmed, a Palestinian friend who lives in Gaza.

"It is a terrible situation," he says. He lives a short walk from the center of the fighting. Helicopters fly above him. The sounds of rockets and guns and bombs. He does not leave the house for three days. "This is not how people are supposed to live."

He tells me how, in the eighties, before the Oslo peace process, he used to drive to Tel Aviv regularly to visit Israeli friends. He used to join them for peace demonstrations. He used to stay overnight. “Where are the Israelis who want peace,” he asks me on the phone. “The young people in Gaza today don’t know Israelis except for the soldiers who kill their family and their friends, who make their life miserable.”

### XXIX

My brother calls from New York with visions of impending disaster. He thinks about global warming. A melting world. Floods. Hurricanes. Major disruptions in how the comfortable among us live. He studies and works at the intersection of pastoral care and disaster: how will the priests, ministers, rabbis, imams and other religious leaders cope with future disasters and the trauma they cause. They are making preparations. And this raises a question. What is the more likely cause of future suffering: violence inflicted directly by people on other people or the disruptions caused indirectly through the unintended devastation of the world?

### XXX

What a strange dream. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, in colorful face paint and a green Seeds of Peace t-shirt. He is banging on a drum, singing, with a clear strong voice, by the shores of Pleasant Lake, at the Seeds of Peace camp, in Otisfield, Maine. There, just behind Habermas, is a Palestinian Delegation Leader who, when she first came to camp, could not eat a meal at a table with Israelis. On the other side of Habermas is an Israeli woman who walked out in the middle of dialogue because she could not listen to Palestinian descriptions of daily life in the West Bank. The two of them are doing backup vocals for Habermas. Doo wap. Doo Wap. And the drum somehow vanishes from Habermas’s hands, replaced by an electric bass. The group around him, Seeds, counselors, Delegation Leaders, the office staff, follow his deep bass line, as they sing, drum, and dance. It is a welcome celebration, like the kind we have at camp when the buses roll in with the different delegations on the first day of each session.

I have no grand summary to offer. The Seeds of Peace camp in Maine is wonderful. People do learn. People, young and old, do change. I cannot quantify what grows from the camp experience. These days, due to pressure from large bureaucratic donors, NGOs must list “objectives” and measure “deliverables.” I do this, too. We evaluate and monitor the impact of each program, in detail. The actual impact of the work will be seen only in the day-to-day world, over time. I wish I could somehow bring my friends, the friends of friends, people I don’t know, to see the things I have seen, to meet the people I meet, at camp and “in the region.” I would like to invite Jurgen Habermas to visit the Seeds of Peace Camp. I want to invite him to the region, to jump worlds. I wish more people would realize the power we collectively have. I wish more people would engage actively in the global public sphere. I wish they would reach out to others, from across lines of conflict and misunderstanding, through their schools, through their religious organizations, through their communities.

I go dancing in Hebron with Palestinian friends. It is a celebration for a successful Masters defense. We wait until most people leave. Then, in the back room, doors closed, we dance together, men and women (all “covered” with hijab), children, teenagers. Everybody except me is a family member (and I am the only non-Palestinian). It feels good to move around. Soon after, I go to a Purim party in Tel Aviv, with Daniel, an American friend, and his Israeli friends. I take a sherut (a min-van) back and forth from Jerusalem. If you drive during rush hour, it can take over two hours, easy, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. But at two in the morning, after dancing, I make it from the party in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in forty-five minutes. With the windows rolled up and songs in my head. As a way of ending these notes from Jerusalem, notes that cannot be ended, really, with any neat flourish, let me say: that moment, at night, on the way to Jerusalem, is the closest, at one level, that I have come, so far, to redemption. It is *not* close. There are more stories to tell. I am still just forming impressions and ideas. The conflict in the Holy Land is a challenge, a test, one that God could not have planned any better.

### Notes

1. Most of the names have been changed. The people are real.

2. “Enlightenment,” Kant argued, “is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.”