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## Ulpan Akiva

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By Efrem Sigel

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# Ulpan Akiva

## Efrem Sigel

I can't imagine why I packed my swimming trunks; that's what I'm thinking the night I arrive at Ha Hof Ha Yerok, the Green Beach, in Netanya, a coastal city 20 miles north of Tel Aviv. The tarmac at Ben Gurion Airport is soaked when El Al flight 18 lands, at the tag end of a gloomy January afternoon. Outside the terminal I wait in a long line for a cab, as rain and a chill mist blow sideways into my face. Seventy-five minutes later, after crawling through miles of rush hour traffic, the cabby finally locates the dead-end road that leads to our destination. Buffeted by wind and water, we pound along Zalman Shazar Street, past the unfinished high rise apartment buildings of Ramat Poleg: nothing but weeds and dirt to our left, nothing but ocean to our right. The road makes its final wide swing and as we head down to the low-slung buildings of the Green Hotel, I can see the distant spit of sand that marks the last outpost of land against the now raging Mediterranean.

I have come to Ulpan Akiva for a three-and-a-half-week intensive course in Hebrew. For the next month whenever I tell Israelis where I'm studying I get an instant nod of appreciation, oh, Ulpan Akiva, yes, famous place, fine program; many know of UA's charismatic founder, Shulamith Katznelson, who ran the place for 47 years until her death in 1998.

My last week there, Ulpan Akiva throws a big party to celebrate its jubilee, 50 years, and what a crazy array of alumni and guests shows up: singer Shuli Nathan; a member of the Knesset; the first Israeli Arab ambassador to Finland; an athlete from Togo who studied at the ulpan in '67 (Shulamith even named him head of civil defense, when all the young men went to war) and who speaks a wonderful, sonorous Hebrew; half a dozen Japanese from Makuya, the Bible research group--they bring everyone to their feet with a rousing version of "Zion, Zion." For the party, workmen decorate the Green Hotel with bunting and signs, scrub its worn linoleum, paint the wall in its fading lobby, spread a lavish buffet across its dingy dining room. But the night I arrive there are no dignitaries, no buffet, no fresh paint, no bunting. The cabby drops me and

my bags on the front step as the rain slashes at my jacket and pants.

In the dim lobby a man in a sweater of knobby wool looks up from behind the counter. "You're not due until tomorrow," he says in Hebrew.

"I wrote that I was arriving tonight and they told me that was fine."

He shrugs. "Ein baya," no problem, your room is ready. He points the way toward a two-story cement structure gleaming a dirty yellow through the storm. The only way to get to it is onto a slick veranda and then down a muddy hill, toting my four bags as the rain and mud slosh over my shoes.

To compare the building to a late 1940s motel would be unfair to that postwar period of hope and boom. Yes, I expected the accommodations to be modest; what I find is grim. I doubt if the three light bulbs total 50 watts between them. The plaster has crumbled away at the bottom of the bedroom walls. The faucet in the bathroom sink ends two feet above the basin; when you turn it on water splatters your face, your arms and your feet. When you don't turn it on, it leaks. What Israelis call the *masgan*, a wall-mounted space heater, is encrusted with dust and grit, and placed in such a way that it directs its fitful gusts of lukewarm air high into the room, depriving the bed and the floor of any benefit of warmth.

That first night I sleep in my sweat pants, polypro top and socks. All night a howling wind tears at the second story railing of the building and in morning, I find a scattering of wet pine needles on the floor, where they've blown in under the gap between the door and the jamb. A gray and dismal dawn greets me on my first full day in Netanya. When the rain stops, briefly, at 6:30, I dash back up the muddy hill and onto the road for my morning jog. No sooner have I turned the corner to run along the ocean than the sky darkens. Rain falls in vast sweeps, as if drawn up from the depths of the Mediterranean. A wind strong enough to double me over blows in from the west; hailstones as big as mothballs pelt me about the ears and mouth.

In the dining room, hordes of Israeli teens, some wearing *kipot*, crowd around the serving tables, grabbing French toast, salad, bread and milk. The tables where they alight soon look like the wasteland of a departing army, littered with egg shells, bread crumbs and the slop of juice and coffee.

It has been years since I've been surrounded by this many teenagers, with their loud voices, their unlaced sneakers, the urgency of their need to be nonchalant. Next to me is a girl who has put mousse on her hair, making her dark curls glisten.

"Who are all of you? What are you doing here?" I ask.

"We're here to learn Arabic," she says, a five-day program concentrating on the spoken language to supplement what Israeli kids learn in school.

In vain I scan the dining room for adults like me who have come to study Hebrew. Finally I find two: Michael from Philadelphia, Holli from Kentucky. Michael, talky, round-faced, is fuming over the accommodations. Holli, her black hair in a net, has no complaints, as if, whatever inconveniences come her way, she will stuff into her backpack of hardships and soldier on.

In the *chadar ha tarbut*, the culture hall, where we gather for orientation, I see the rest of my 100+ fellow students, soon to be divided into seven classes. Except for we three Americans, all of them are living in Israel. Some have been here as little as a month. From every corner I hear Russian. Under Israel's law of return you can immigrate if even one grandparent was Jewish. Why should I be surprised at all these Russian faces (some of them are flat, blond, with pert noses--where, I wonder, are the long Jewish faces, where are the mournful Jewish eyes of my imagination?). The orientation lecture is delivered in Hebrew, English and Russian. Brighton Beach, I think; I've fetched up in the Israeli Brighton Beach.

A 10-minute placement interview lands me in Gimmel Plus, the second most advanced class. Our alternate teacher, Gila, who is to work with us one or two days a week, has flouncing scarlet curls. How they love red hair, these Israeli teachers. Gila welcomes us with a toothy smile and begins telling us in Hebrew of the grammatical orgies that lie ahead: nifal, pual, hufal, all the passive *binyanim* (conjugations). Everyone else seems to know what

she is talking about. I wonder, is it too late to change my mind?

The next day, after a second damp and chilly night, Michael and I flee the Green Hotel and check into the Carmel, 15 minutes away by bus but with heat that works, 24-hour hot water, a fridge to hold my humus, olives, pita and tangerines. Even the price is right: \$21 a night for a month, payable in advance.

By now classes have started in earnest, and I am quickly buried in *shiurei bayt*, homework, hours of it every night. I feel lost and out of my depth. Only the reassurance of our regular teacher, Dvorah, red-haired, but less outrageously so than Gila, keeps me going. Dvorah speaks so clearly, inspires such confidence, that I always imagine I understand what she is saying, even when I don't know half the words.

During the breaks I try to dope out my classmates. It is thrilling to talk to these Russians, French, even Americans, and to learn about their past lives. Hebrew becomes a sort of electronic passkey, one of those oblong plastic strips you carry up to your room on the twentieth floor: slip it into the slot in the door, a green light flashes and you are home.

In truth, I am a bit in awe of these young Russian women all around me: how cool and distant they are, how quick on the grammatical uptake. There is Ilana with her bright blue eyes, her blond hair in a braid, her apple-cheeked enthusiasm. Oksana, tucked in the corner of the room, rarely volunteering, always with the right answer. Paulina, a physician; her thick Belarus accent cannot disguise her quickness of mind, or her quirky sense of humor. Paulina's weary smile and her tousled hair always make her look as if she's come straight from the emergency room to our little cement-floor classroom. Irina, with her brushed copper hair, tapered pants, black heels. The second day, when Dvorah goes around the room asking us to name something in Hebrew that we like, something that starts with the same first letter as our name, Irina offers, "Shmi Irina v'ani ohevet ofna." My name is Irina and I like *style*.

The Russian presence is transforming Ulpan Akiva. Once, most of the students stayed on the grounds of the ulpan, participating in evening singing, in folk dancing, in weekly bus trips to archaeological sites, like the Roman ruins at

Caesaria, the caves in Haifa. Two hundred to 250 students came for the summer session, as many as 60% from abroad. Not only has attendance fallen sharply, but almost everyone is an *oleh chadash*, a new immigrant. The Russians treat Ulpan Akiva like a commuter school--they come for their five hours a day, six days a week, and hurry back to boyfriends or husbands, children, jobs or the search for work. Unlike the Russians who flocked to Israel in the 1970s or early 1980s to escape political or religious persecution or to affirm their Jewishness, the current tide of immigrants are here for economic gain. These mature students with their careful study habits, their well-organized *machberot* (notebooks) and their eye on getting ahead, are a phenomenon. Israel has known waves of newcomers before, but the presence of 1 million immigrants from the former Soviet Union is recalibrating all the political and economic force fields.

Valentin, black-haired, with a smile that flits between playful and smirking, breezes in and out of class. When he wears his black trousers and sharply tailored jacket, we know he has a job interview. What he wants from Ulpan Akiva is not Hebrew songs or the hora, but something quick and marketable. One time Dvorah shuts off the lights. Relax, she says to us, close your eyes, forget the classroom, imagine a favorite time and place; a few minutes later we must describe our daydreams in Hebrew. Some of us go off into flights of fancy, describing childhood picnics, flowing rivers, summer days in the country.

"What about you, Valentin, where were you?" Dvorah asks.

Valentin snorts at the rest of us. "I don't dream about things," Valentin says. "I was right here in Ulpan Akiva, having a nap."

Larissa, a 40-year old woman from Ukraine, sits next to me; one of our exercises is to exchange biographies, which we must then retell in Hebrew for the rest of the class. Larissa describes her husband, working long hours as an electrician, their 11-year old son struggling to learn three languages (Russian, Hebrew, English). Her mother, who is not Jewish, came with her; her father, who is, stayed in Ukraine rather than emigrate to Israel. Larissa herself never had an iota of Jewish education. She left Ukraine because there is no work and no future there. If we could have gone to Canada or Australia we would have, Larissa tells

me. But then, Canada or Australia don't give immigrants what Israel gives them: a year's housing allowance, money in the pocket, a long list of subsidies--and five months of free language instruction at Ulpan Akiva.

Everyday we gather in classroom 19: Valentin, Simeon, Larissa, Paulina and five others from Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia and Russia; three Americans; a French woman; an Iranian woman and I. The day starts at 8, and if it has been raining it is dank inside; the Russians huddle together on one side of the room in their jackets, complaining about how long it takes for the masgan to warm up the room. My young classmates learn new verbs and expressions effortlessly, whereas I, who used to soak up languages in my 20s and 30s, find myself writing the same words over and over in my notebook, wondering if they will ever stick.

It's 33 years since I first came to Israel, to spend three months at kibbutz Kfar Masaryk, only a couple of kilometers from Akko, the walled Crusader city. What Hebrew I learned then came to me on the job, picking apples, tomatoes and pecans, or over coffee and cake with kibbutzniks in their apartments.

Now, I can talk about things that matter here--the income tax rate, the total number of unemployed (250,000 at the end of 2001, second highest rate in the western world), the Deri scandal (the leader of the orthodox Sephardic party, Shas, jailed for bribery), the serious injury to a Maccabee team soccer player.

And the attacks. Dvorah helps us make sense of the rapid delivery of the Israeli radio news readers; she tapes the highlights and plays them over and over for us. She hands out newspapers and works with us to decipher the headlines. Before class or during the recesses at 10:30 or noon, word circulates about the latest news: the Hadera Bat Mitzvah attack, in which a gunman massacres six guests; the Tel Aviv bus station bombing; yet another Jerusalem atrocity. In class Dvorah instructs us how to use those passive conjugations, nifal and pual, to convey the deadly arithmetic of terrorism: "Yoter m'mea v'chamishim niftz'u, shtayim nehergu, echad ne'etzar." More than 150 wounded, two killed, one arrested.

When class is over I'm either studying in my room or strolling the streets of Netanya, a mile away from my hotel. The Russian presence in

Netanya is huge--as much as a quarter of the city's 180,000 population. The streets are full of cafes and bars where mournful-looking men puff their cigarettes, lingering late at night over beer and vodka and small plates of pickles and smoked fish. In the mild January evenings older Russian women fill the benches along the brick-lined pedestrian walkway, bundled up in their coats and scarves, sitting quietly, occasionally gossiping about the good old days at home.

The Russians crowd into the glass *cabinot* of a private telecom business, a narrow storefront with bright yellow doors; behind the counter a pair of young women collect two shekels a minute from customers calling Kiev or Moscow. The same storefront has two computers connected to the Internet; three times a week I fork over nine shekels (\$2) there to send e-mail home. All this long-distance telephony seems to rouse the emotions. From outside the glass I hear the echo of a mother and daughter, together in the *cabina*, shouting to someone a few thousand miles away. I look up from the computer screen to see a looming hulk of a man arguing furiously with the female cashiers, no doubt insisting they cheated him when they sold him a disposable cell phone with 100 shekels worth of calls.

After a week in Netanya I am no longer surprised by the Russian-speaking young men gathered on the sidewalks in the dark of 6 a.m., as I reach the turnaround point of my run from the Carmel into town. They are sipping coffee, gesturing and arguing among themselves, waiting for something--a truck that needs unloading, a van that will take them to a warehouse job. I grow accustomed to the Russian-accented Hebrew of the supermarket checkout clerk or the waiter in the Cafe London bringing me lasagna and an Israeli salad for supper.

Ulpan Akiva quickly becomes an agreeable routine. Our teacher Dvorah, slim, tall, square-faced, perpetually smiling, is everything a language teacher should be: attentive, enthusiastic, organized, clear, committed to her students' progress. Every morning she allows an hour to an hour and a half for free discussion, then propels us forward in a curriculum crammed with grammar, text, vocabulary and expressions. Besides the regular hours of instruction all sorts of supplementary lessons are there for the asking: a one-on-one conversation hour, a weekly

Tanach (Bible) class taught entirely in Hebrew, a grammar review with Sarah, who lays out the Hebrew conjugations relentlessly, one after another, drawing diagrams, offering examples, then asking over and over, "atem muvinim?" do you get it?

The director of Ulpan Akiva, Esther Perron, talks bravely to me about her goals: more Arabic, not only for Israeli youth but for government officials (programs are underway in several cities outside of Netanya); efforts to bring Jews and Arabs together (just a few years ago, Arabs from Gaza regularly came to the ulpan to improve their Hebrew); two-week courses for American teachers of Hebrew or Jewish studies.

Given *ha matzav*, the situation, is this the time for new programs? I ask.

Esther gives me a professional school teacher's smile. She came to Ulpan Akiva in November 2000, a few months into the intifada, after running the school system in Bat-Yam. She is loathe to forego her big plans: when times are hard, she says, we must think boldly. But for the foreseeable future the reality at Ulpan Akiva is going to be more of the same: fewer visitors from abroad, and classrooms crowded with Larissa and Ilana, Paulina and Valentin.

All over the country, business is suffering, tourism is down 50% or more, visitors are staying away—and yet the Israelis are not resentful; they understand. Again and again I am asked, Were you afraid to come? Are you afraid to be here? Aren't your wife and family afraid for you?

My Israeli cousin, Shraga, and his wife Leah, who take me in tow on weekends, pose these questions as I sit in their living room in B'nai Atarot, a moshav near Ben Gurion airport. One Saturday morning Shraga and I stroll around the moshav as he points out the old homes, the new homes, the fields of grapes and pecans, the not so distant ridge of Arab villages just beyond the Green Line.

Late that afternoon, over shish kebab and wine in a suburban restaurant, Motti, the boyfriend of my cousin Aliza, turns to me and says, in Hebrew, "You see, we can enjoy ourselves in a restaurant just the way you do in America, it's not all terrorist attacks here."

Terrorism is the elephant in the corner; no one wants to talk about it, no one can stop thinking about it. Like everyone else here my cousins crave

normalcy: they are determined to enjoy life, to eat, drink and gossip about the price of apartments and cars; to make endless jokes about another cousin, Aharon, a ruffled fellow who haunts the Internet looking for bargains. As far as I can tell, he's found one: a gigantic large-screen TV for \$250.

Shraga answers my questions about *ha matzav*; he is an ex-army officer and he gets to the heart of the matter quickly. There's no one to make peace with now and so we have to go it alone, he says, we hope that will change but until it does we will just have to protect ourselves the best we can. What we need above all is leaders who will tell us the truth. Morale, he insists, is high. We've been through worse times, Shraga says; we'll get through this.

This is the majority view; it is not the only view. One day en route to class I find myself on the *monit* sitting next to one of the teachers at Ulpan Akiva; she and her family recently came back to Israel after years in the States. Their teenage son, with his American passport and American friends, is desperately unhappy here and anxious to return to the States. No way does he want to serve in the Israeli army. There are plenty of others who don't want to go, my companion whispers to me.

My first and third weekends I spend with the cousins; in between I am in Netanya. It's important to plan ahead for Shabbat in Israel, lest you find yourself marooned in your room, without transportation and unable to order a meal. I've already asked Lenore, the American grandmother in my class, about going to Saturday morning services at her synagogue, and she kindly invites me to lunch afterward. Lenore walks to shul; her husband and I drive. Such an easy going fellow, Morrie, with his round glasses and his go along, get along manner; it takes many minutes of conversation to learn that this retired scientist, who worked for the Army and then for the EPA, is actually one of the world's experts on the effects of anthrax.

Their synagogue reminds me of the place where my Uncle Leo used to davin in Boca Raton. And why not? I see lots of fleshy, well-tanned men with New York and Boston accents, smiling and joking the way men do when they are collecting pensions and have time on their hands. The rabbi is from Argentina, the announcements are in English; the only tipoff that we are in Israel is the brief *d'var Torah* in Hebrew--that, and the presence of 15

Ethiopian kids from the synagogue youth group, who gather on the bima at 11:30 to sing Adon Olam.

After kiddush, Morrie takes the car as Lenore and I walk back to their place, following the brick-lined *tyelet*, or promenade, that winds in and out above the cliffs. Below us the sand has been combed smooth by the tide, and with the rain showers gone and the sun warming our faces, it is possible to look down at the few (young) bathers and imagine bringing swimming trunks to Netanya in January.

Why have Lenore and Morrie retired here, to their third-story apartment facing west to the glorious sunsets? Easy, Lenore explains; they've got married children and grandchildren who've made aliyah; one family lives in Bet Shemesh, the other in Modi'in, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. These days it takes either strong religious conviction or this sort of family dynamic to uproot Americans and bring them to Israel.

Another American in our class, Steven, met his Israeli wife on the Internet. After e-mailing each other for a couple of months they decided it was time to check out one another in person. Steven booked a flight on El Al and that's when the fun started. Every Israel-bound passenger goes through *bitachon*, a security line where unsmiling agents ask you why you're going to Israel, what you're taking, how long you'll stay, whom you know there, have you visited before, whether you packed your own bags, whether anyone gave you anything to bring on board. When they heard Steven's story--you're going to see a woman you met on the *Internet*?--they pulled him into a special room and grilled him for hours, went through every item in his luggage, squeezed his toothpaste tube, unscrewed his razor, patted him down, inspected his shoes and socks. Eventually he married the woman, but it took two or three trips before the strip searches stopped.

The last week comes: our final exam, the Jubilee party and now, with class ending, I head to Jerusalem. Few of my ulpan classmates can understand why. My family in the States can't understand either. Even my Israeli cousins and the teachers at Ulpan Akiva are wary. "Shmor aleicha," they urge, watch yourself. Stay away from the obvious targets: the bus station, the

market, the shopping streets of Jaffa Rd. and Ben Yehuda.

For me Jerusalem has the magnetic, elemental appeal of the ocean. Something draws me back again and again, something in the interplay of sky, hills, buildings in dun-colored Jerusalem stone, the spires of the churches, the domes of the mosques, the synagogues tucked away in storefronts in every lane, in every part of town.

It has been six years since my last visit, 32 years since we first set foot here. In the fall of 1969 we'd holed up in the long-vanished Hotel Zion, with its shower in the corner of the room (no curtain, the water splashed onto the floor and ran under the bed), the toilet down the hall, the collection of scruffy wheelers and dealers cloistered in the lobby, whispering past midnight about who knows what shady transaction.

But this time is different. This time is like going to a war zone. Michael and I leave from Netanya in a rental car, starting at 6 a.m. and heading east from the Ben Gurion interchange as the sun is peeping over the Jerusalem hills. We drive straight to Talpiot for a visit to Pardes, an Orthodox--but open and non-judgmental--yeshiva. Michael is thinking about studying at Pardes; I tag along, and the two of us audit Rabbi Grodner's Mishna class.

We spend an hour in the Bet Midrash, reading and discussing a passage and listening to the agreeable hum of voices as partners pore over their texts in the time-honored chevruta style of study. The hubbub, the rustle of pages, the fingers moving up and down along the Hebrew texts--it all produces a sense of completeness. *Shalem* is the Hebrew word for complete; no accident that it is so close to *shalom*.

Michael stays on to sample more classes and I set out on foot for the center of town. I locate Emek Refayim, a main thoroughfare that loops through the industrial area and into the German Colony before it joins Ha Melech David and Keren Hayesod. My stroll is soon interrupted by the sight of an agreeable cafe, with large glass windows that draw in the sun. What better place for a cup of tea and a snooze than here, surrounded by young people amidst the clutter of newspapers and the odor of apple cake, poppy seeds and chocolate croissants.

In the afternoon I make my way down Emile Botta street, just to the left of the King David Hotel, as it winds around to the Khufsot Yetsirot, a lane lined with the studios and shops of some of Jerusalem's best-known artists and craftsmen, like Dani Alsberg with his stunning bracelets of gold, silver and diamonds; Motke Baum with his cityscapes of Jerusalem; Sari Srulovitch with her finely wrought silver kiddush cups or havdalah sets.

Dani is packing his rings, bracelets and pendants as we speak, preparing to fly off to a Judaica crafts fair sponsored by a synagogue in Deerfield, IL. The customers are not coming here, he says, so I have to go where they are.

Motke, from whom I buy a mixed media painting, has the same rail-thin build, the same croaky voice and sweet smile, the same twinkle in his eye, as Manny, my cousin Annabelle's husband. Motke looks up in surprise when I enter his studio; it has been days since anyone visited, let alone bought something.

At Sari's I look at mezzuzahs, candlestick holders, other artifacts of Jewish observance. We get to talking about the differences between religious and secular Israelis.

Every Friday night Shraga, his brother Aharon and sister Aliza gather to eat humus and salad and smoked fish; they drink vodka and kid each other nonstop. It's a warm family scene, a Shabbat scene, even though there is no ceremony that marks the Sabbath--nor does anyone see any reason for one. Aharon's wife, Tzippi, speaks for all my cousins. "*Ani chilonit*," Tzippi proclaims in her raspy voice. "I'm secular." It's the great divide in Israel, not Jew vs. Arab but Jew vs. Jew. We all have to choose, she is saying--*they're* religious and observant; I'm not.

I tell the story to Sari. "That's Tel Aviv," she says. "Tel Aviv is different." I'm not religious, Sari explains, but every Friday night we light candles, we make kiddush, that's just what we do.

The next day I walk to the Jaffa Gate and through the walls built by Suleiman in the 16th century into the Old City. It is so quiet here, as if Friday and Saturday and Sunday have all coalesced into the same day, driving all the believers into their respective services; as if 100-degree summer heat has sent even the Buddhists and atheists indoors. But it is Thursday, nobody's sabbath, and it is a 60-degrees, blue-sky, perfect-for-walking day.

At the tourist information office just inside the gate I am the only visitor. As I stroll through the Armenian area before circling around to the Jewish Quarter, I see only a couple of black-hatted, long-coated young men stepping along the cobblestones on their way to study or prayer.

I can remember walking to the *kotel*, the Western Wall, in 1969, when the crowds along the shopkeepers' stalls were five and six deep, tourists from Hong Kong and Holland, France, Brazil and Singapore, sweeping along the narrow lanes, the girls in their shorts and halter tops, the guys in their sandals and wispy beards, as the young Arab men called out their invitations, the best jewelry, the best guidebooks, the best crucifixes or Stars of David, the best pita or twisted bread or nuts and fruit and spices, all waiting for you, please Miss or Mister, won't you step into my shop, I have special prices for you.

And on this day, almost no tourists--except for one group of a dozen Israeli girls in the Jewish Quarter, on a class trip. No shorts and T shirts, no sandals, no young Arab men calling out. Religion may be the heart of the Old City--the *kotel*, the stations of the cross, Al Aksa, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre--but without commerce the pulse is faint.

The pulse is faint, indeed. A well-spoken, slim Arab guide in his 50s offers to take me on a tour and when I decline, asks for money to feed his family. Jewish men hang around the entrance to the *kotel*, scrounging for tips and contributions: do you need a minyan, how about putting on tefillin, want to see the *sifrei Torah*, the Torah scrolls, follow me, and by the way, what will you give for *terumah* (donation)?

At the *kotel* there are several minyanim and at least one Bar Mitzvah in progress but the crowds are small, tame; the soldiers who keep guard from up above have an easy time scanning the area.

I walk up to the Wall, as I've done each time I've been in Jerusalem. Once I carried a piece of paper given me by the Catholic wife of the caretaker at our synagogue. When she heard I was going to Jerusalem she'd asked two favors: tuck this note (she quickly scribbled it onto a sheet of paper, as if she'd been carrying it in her head for years) into the Wall, and bring me back something from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I chose a

crucifix, a cheap plastic thing that she received with a reverence that shamed me for how little I'd spent.

This time I have no note but in my heart I have a prayer for peace--not for Jerusalem nor for Israel, these are prayers beyond my longing; only grant me *shalom ba bayt*, peace in my household, peace for my new friends, my teachers and my extended family, peace for Shraga and Leah and Aliza and Aharon and Tzippi and their children and grandchildren.

On the way back to the hotel I strike out for the heart of the West Jerusalem. I walk the length of Ben Yehuda, from the armored truck and handful of soldiers at the bottom, near Zion Square, to the smaller squad of soldiers at the top, near King George St. There are more pedestrians than soldiers or police, but not so many more that it isn't a contest.

I've come to Jerusalem because it is and should be the capital of Israel, and after all, what point is there in having a capital if we are afraid to set foot in it? But after a day and a half it is time to leave, time to return to Netanya, to pack my clothes and find my airplane ticket, to gather together my papers and clothes and gifts, to call Steven to come and collect my unopened bottle of Chivas, my electric kettle and my tea biscuits.

I get off the sherut in Poleg in Darom Netanya, and walk south along that desolate stretch of beach for a last look at Ha Hof Ha Yerok and Ulpan Akiva.

Ha Hof Ha Yerok curves out to a spit of sand, the spit I saw on the stormy night I arrived. Now in the clarity of the late afternoon, I can see the low building where the local surfing club hangs out. The sun, looking squashed and used-up, is about to plop into the ocean the way a soft-boiled egg slips into a bowl. One minute there is an egg, and the next there are only chunks of yellow and white. One minute the orange globe of sun, all spikey and indistinct around the edges; the next, only the gray furrows of ocean, backlit by a pink glow so fine that I don't know if it is nature or imagination that causes light to striate in this way.

In town you get used to security checks everywhere: at the mall, the supermarket, the movie theater, the restaurant, the parking lot. But here at the beach there are no armored cars, no men in T shirts checking backpacks. In the cool light of after sunset on my last full day in Israel, I hear a sound



that resonates, male voices talking and joshing in a certain carefree way that reminds me of the boardwalk at Pacific Beach in San Diego, a mellow spot if ever there was one. I pass them, listening to their voices, and then step into the street and leave them behind: half a dozen young Israelis, their backs and chests bare, with surf boards slung over their shoulders and sand between their toes.

Ulpan Akiva is quiet but not deserted. There are no ulpan students today, this being the four-day break between sessions, but another group of teenagers is gathered around a guitar-playing counselor, singing and rough-housing.

In three more years, if nothing changes, these kids will be standing guard on Ben Yehuda or patrolling the border with Gaza, but today they are tormenting a classmate by throwing his backpack into the limb of the skinny margosa tree near the stone steps that lead up to the lobby of the Green Hotel.

I snap a final picture of the campus, and now I am out the gate and walking back up the road as it makes the wide turn onto Zalman Shazar, where I will catch the bus. On my left is the beach and beyond the beach the ripples of the Mediterranean. I've always thought of the Mediterranean as nothing but a nice-sized lake but today it seems limitless, and I can't begin to gauge the distance west to New York.

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In this case, distance turns out to be an all-too-efficient conductor of sorrow. Seven weeks later, as our house in New York fills up with family for Passover, the radio crackles with news from

Netanya and specifically from the Park Hotel, a seaside resort that I used to jog past at least a couple of times a week. As hundreds of Israelis and foreign visitors gather there for the Seder, a 23-year old Palestinian slips inside--and blows himself up.

The force of the explosion, in a closed space, turns the Park into a slaughterhouse: 19 are killed almost at once, more than 130 are wounded, the hotel itself is all but demolished. Within a week, nine more victims have died. The next day, when I fire off frantic e-mails to friends in the stricken city, a response comes quickly--too quickly--from Steven. "Efrem, bad news," he begins. His wife's aunt and uncle have perished in the massacre, leaving two cousins, 16 and 20, as orphans. The cousins' grandfather is killed instantly, and both grandmothers are rushed to the hospital, where one later dies later of her wounds.

I don't know all this the night of the Seder, but I know enough to be stunned, enraged, heartsick. It takes all of my concentration to welcome our assembled guests, and within minutes, to invite the youngest, a three and a half-year old Israeli cousin named Gilad, to chant *Ma Nishtanah*, the four questions. All together we sing the answer, a song rich in irony, eternal in promise: *Avadim hayinu*, We were slaves to Pharaoh but now we are free.

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