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Letter from Israel

MARJORIE HOWE



Marjorie Howe is a junior majoring in English with a Writing Concentration. This ethnographic essay is the result of a Summer 2012 journey to Israel, made possible by a BSU Undergraduate Research Abroad grant. Portions of this article have appeared in slightly different form in the context of the blog the study group maintained while travelling, “Shalom! or What We Saw in Haifa.” Marjorie is grateful for this opportunity, and for the continued encouragement and mentorship, before, during, and since the trip, of Dr. Lee Torda.

Theodor Herzl watches over me while I sleep. *The portrait of the Father of Zionism hangs on the wall next to my bed. Herzl is the namesake of the Hotel Theodor, our lodging on Herzl Street in the Hadar section of Haifa, and versions of his portrait hang on every floor of the hotel, in guest rooms, in corridors, in the lobby. In some pictures he appears in silhouetted profile, adapted from a picture taken at the First Zionist Congress in 1897. In others, he looks directly at the turn-of-the-century camera lens, arms folded, daring it to capture his image. In my room he faces forward, but his coal eyes look slightly left of the middle distance. They are heavy-browed, serious eyes. He wears a preposterously thick, dark beard. His even thicker black hair is combed straight back from his serious forehead. His name is everywhere in Israel, on main streets in cities and towns. The city of Herzliya, near Tel Aviv, is named after him, as is Mount Herzl in western Jerusalem, the home of Israel's national cemetery, where Herzl himself lies, his remains having been transferred from Vienna in 1949. Yad Vashem, Israel's massive memorial to the Holocaust, lies on Mount Herzl's western slope, overlooking the Jerusalem Forest.*

Zion: 1. the Jewish people 2. the Jewish homeland that is symbolic of Judaism or of Jewish national aspiration 3. heaven 4. utopia

Herzl was born in Budapest in 1860 to a well-off, mostly secular, Jewish family. They spoke German rather than Yiddish, and imagined themselves assimilated and accepted, as many European Jews of the late nineteenth century imagined. He first encountered anti-Semitism as a law student in Vienna in 1882. Then, in Paris as a journalist covering the Dreyfus Affair, he witnessed a level of vitriol against Jews that had been smoldering just under the surface of French society and which shocked him. He came around to the point of view that anti-Semitism was something of a natural state, that true assimilation was not possible, and that the only way for Jews to live as anything other than as despised interlopers was by gathering together from around the world and creating their own nation in a legally founded and internationally recognized state. He worked tirelessly, and by 1897 had gained enough support to convene the First Zionist Congress, resulting in the World Zionist Organization. Herzl was its first president. Zionism became the political movement that proposed and promoted a modern Jewish state in Ottoman-controlled Palestine. Herzl died in 1904 at the age of forty-four,

forty-four years before David Ben-Gurion declared to the world the existence of an independent State of Israel.

At the end of a long, productive, 94-degree day in Haifa, I pull the smooth white comforter under my chin, my room air conditioner set on “arctic,” and realize Herzl is not exactly watching over me, but rather, looking past me, to the future, to the Jewish state to which he has committed his life. Herzl and his Zionist followers, the young David Ben-Gurion of Poland among them, had envisioned a utopia in Palestine, a pluralistic, secular society where they believed, according to writer Simon Montefiore in *Jerusalem: The Biography*, “a socialist Jewish state would be created without violence and without dominating or displacing the Palestinian Arabs,” where “the Jewish and Arab working classes would cooperate” (401). Three days in Israel, and I’ve only seen a sample of Haifa’s working class Jewish and Arab neighborhoods, but I’ve seen and heard enough to wonder in amazement at the flawed optimism of these otherwise brilliant and charismatic leaders. Ben-Gurion lived to see the reality of it, but how would Herzl now interpret his utopia?

On a Thursday, the third day of our study group’s first week in Israel, we meet with two men who are colleagues at Haifa’s *Beit HaGefen* Arab Jewish Culture Center, located in the Arab neighborhood and a brisk ten-minute walk from our hotel. Asaf, a middle-aged man with close-cropped steel gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses, is the Jewish director of the center. He greets us with a smile and handshakes and he invites us to take a tour of the Arab neighborhood before it gets too hot in the morning sun. We walk along narrow streets and alleys that are crowded with tan stone buildings. We stand on narrow sidewalks as Asaf fills us in on local history. The sight of laundry hanging from a second-story porch reminds me that this is a living, breathing neighborhood, not a tourist attraction. I step off the sidewalk for a moment to let a young boy and his grandmother pass. He is wearing shorts, striped shirt, and sandals. He is holding his grandmother’s hand. I would like to be able to explain, even if only to myself, why the sight of those sandals made me feel like an intruder. I can’t explain why a little boy’s sandals made me feel like an intruder, but they did.

Asaf shows us outdoor sculptures from previous years’ art festivals. All of the sculptures are political and address the Jewish-Palestinian conflict on some level, some more subtly than others. One in particular, a large wrought iron representation of a skeleton key hanging on an outdoor wall next to a false wooden door, speaks to the issue of the Palestinians’ contested right of return to the homes they fled or were driven from in 1948, the time Jewish Israelis call the War of Independence and Arabs call the *Nakba*, the catastrophe. Our conversation with Asaf turns to serious issues: social inequality and Israel’s

Arab minority, protests, suicide bombings, personal tragedies and national tragedies.

We ask Asaf about his own background. He is of Ashkenazi heritage, born in Israel. He has served in the military, as almost all Israeli Jews do. I don’t remember now if unprompted, or if in response to a specific question, but Asaf takes a moment to tell us about the part of his service that involved going door to door and inspecting Palestinian houses. He is aware it must have been disturbing, especially to small children, to see soldiers with rifles in their homes. He explains that they tried to conduct these operations respectfully. It seemed to me that he was trying very hard to put, if not exactly a *good* spin on the processes of occupation, then at least an acceptable spin. I feel certain that if anyone could conduct house-to-house searches with respect for the occupants, it is Asaf. Doing the math, I figured he would have served in the early eighties, and I tried to remember which conflict, of Israel’s tortuous history of conflicts, was going on when Asaf had been a young soldier. I felt terrible that perhaps one of my questions about the Occupied Territories or checkpoints put him on the spot to explain the assignments he was involved with thirty years ago. Asaf’s twenty-year-old daughter is currently serving in the military; his sixteen-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, will serve two years from now. Young people in uniform are everywhere in Israel, sitting in two’s and three’s on park benches, praying at the Western Wall, napping through jarring city bus rides with their rifles across their laps. They are Israel’s newest generation of soldiers who will have to navigate the bumpy terrain between being defenders and being occupiers.

Back in Asaf’s office we are offered delicate cups of the best coffee I have ever had, and he narrows down the mission statement in the Center’s brochure to his two priorities: promoting shared living between Jews and Arabs in Haifa as an example that can spread to other parts of Israel, and increasing the Arab cultural presence in the community. Asaf is an optimistic person who has made an optimistic presentation.

Next, Asaf takes us across the street to meet Yusuf, the Arab director of the Children’s Library. Yusuf greets us with customary hospitality. I dearly wish I had a photo of Yusuf so I could picture him realistically. In my mind’s eye, Yusuf is a towering man. I asked a friend from the trip if she had a picture of him in her iphone, but no, she said there never seemed an opportunity to ask him if we could take a picture. She felt too intimidated to ask him. It seems I wasn’t the only one who found him intimidating.

Yusuf leads us to sit in a small circle around one of the library’s low tables. We are surrounded by shelves filled with

books printed in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Yusuf's poised young son serves us cups of water on a tray. We learn Yusuf was educated in the United States and that his older son now attends school in the U.S. He describes a little bit about the library's unique role in providing children's books in Arabic to the community, and I relax a little, thinking we will learn about the library's mission within the greater context of the Culture Center. But then the talk turns antagonistic.

Yusuf has questions for us, rather than the other way around: "How much do you pay for gas back in the U.S.?" "Are any of you Jewish?" And then, "How many stars are on your flag?" Although he is baiting us, we dutifully answer, "Fifty." "Make it fifty-one," Yusuf replies.

Although Yusuf maintains a relaxed posture and smiles often, I feel uncomfortable with him. At times, when he looks away toward the window or the ceiling, formulating a question, his eyes, in my memory, become brooding and shadowy. His tone of voice is hostile and he expects us to answer for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Since returning home, I have emailed Yusuf several times hoping to initiate a long-distance dialogue, but have received no replies. I have spent a year, before, during, and since our trip, working to educate myself about Israel and Palestine. It is an ongoing process. In the Fall 2012 semester, I chose the course "Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East" with the specific goal of working through the conflicted feelings which began during the meeting with Yusuf. It occurred to me the other day that the right of return key sculpture, while it certainly represents the Palestinians in general, perhaps represents to Yusuf someone in his own family. I don't know, but I would like to know.

If I could talk to Yusuf again, if I had one question to ask, it would be a question about how he and Asaf deal with the conflict in the context of their friendship. Do they simply agree to set aside their conflicting narratives, the narrative of a persecuted people who found their homeland versus a persecuted people who lost their homeland?

Asaf and Yusuf had greeted each other with obvious affection an hour earlier, as if long-lost brothers. But it is as if they are brothers who were raised under the same roof by two entirely different sets of parents. Asaf refers to his Ashkenazi European ancestors and the War of Independence, while Yusuf speaks of the *Nakba* and of Palestinian refugees. Estimates of how many Arabs fled or were driven out to the West Bank and Gaza as well as to Lebanon and Syria in 1948 varies between 500,000 and 750,000. About 160,000 Arabs remained and became Israeli citizens after statehood. Along with their descendants several generations in, at 1.6 million, they make up twenty-percent

of Israel's population. Whether Arabs call themselves Arab Israelis or call themselves Palestinians has to do with whether they accept Israel as their nation and its government as their government. It has to do with whether they even recognize Israel's right to exist.

When I ask Yusuf what he calls himself, he replies, "I am Palestinian."

On Friday afternoon I go back to the Culture Center. Asaf has invited us to the four o'clock opening reception of the art exhibit, "Extraction Point." I am one of the first to arrive and climb the worn marble stairs to the second-floor gallery, a bright, high-ceilinged space with several small rooms surrounding a large center reception area. The place begins to fill quickly with visitors, mostly Arab young adults. The men wear jeans and trendy dress shirts, the women are in colorful sundresses. A young man makes last-minute adjustments to a large wall placard, consulting with Asaf. I wander into a small alcove and look at a group of photographs, a photo memoir by Reem Qassem, a twenty-five year old Arab-Israeli artist born in Nazareth, who now lives and works in Tel Aviv. Photos of bakery goods and fruit stands are alternated with close-up photos of newsprint in which the same three Hebrew letters are circled in red, over and over throughout the articles. I don't read or speak Hebrew, but a woman standing behind me translates, "That's the artist's name." She wanders off and another woman steps next to me and points to the red circles with a puzzled expression.

"The artist's name," I say.

"Ah, yes, yes," she says, nodding. "Your work is here?" she asks, gesturing to the surrounding rooms. She wonders if I am one of the artists.

"No, I am just a visitor," I reply. We introduce ourselves. Claire is a petite, slender woman in her sixties. She is French and a resident of Haifa the past five years. Her accent is something I haven't heard before: English, softly accented by French, and further accented by Hebrew, which she says she uses for most of her daily transactions. We wander the small exhibit together for the next hour, read the wall placards, speak in low voices as the place becomes more crowded. She asks me if I am Jewish. When Yusuf asked this question it felt confrontational, but when Claire asks, it seems she is hoping for an ally in the mostly-Arab crowd. I feel a little ill at ease, too, suddenly part of the minority.

I take the opportunity to ask Claire some of the questions I have come to Israel to ask, questions about levels of religious

observance, about keeping a Kosher home, lighting Shabbat candles, driving on the Sabbath. How Jewish are Israeli Jews? But I find out with Claire, as I will with other people I meet, that to talk to Israeli Jews about being Jewish leads to much more serious topics than candles and Kosher food.

Claire was born in France after World War II to parents who, along with Claire's older sisters, survived the Holocaust. The family's narrative is one of victimhood and survival, but Claire had a childhood free of persecution. She grew up in a moderately observant home. She saw herself as assimilated, French first, Jewish second. But as a teenager, she learned it was the French police, not the Nazis, who took her father away. Her parents had immigrated from Poland; Jews without secure French citizenship were the first to be rounded up. She carried the weight of this disillusionment into adulthood.

Claire went to medical school and became a gynecologist, and married Frederic, a psychiatrist. Once they had a child, she began to dream of coming to Israel. They tried in 1977, taking jobs at a kibbutz as general practitioners at much lower wages than they were accustomed to and studying Hebrew six hours a day. The economic reality of moving to Israel and living on dramatically decreased wages accounts for about a fifty percent first-time failure rate for emigres. Claire and Frederic returned to France, but when their son turned seventeen, he moved to Israel and stayed. His mother's dream had become his dream, and he now lives north of Haifa with his wife and three daughters. Claire and Frederic, their careers completed, came to Haifa five years ago. They live in a community with many neighbors who have also immigrated from France. She sees her granddaughters often. She teaches them French. They sing with her, and she is teaching them to play her piano.

I ask if she believes that she was meant to live here, as one of a chosen people.

"Oh, no," she says, "Not that biblical nonsense. I don't believe in that. This is the place I feel safe from another *Shoah*, another Holocaust," she says.

Is she religious? "No, we are secular. All of our friends here are secular."

Claire and Frederic have taken their small car across town, as the approaching Shabbat settles over Haifa, to the Arab Jewish Culture Center to see what they imagine will be Arab and Jewish art. Claire is dismayed.

"It is so angry," she says, "So political."

She asks me, "Is it what you expected, to see work of only Arab artists, and so political?" I mention to her the point that Asaf stressed the day before, that one of the center's missions is to promote the Arab cultural presence in the community.

Claire poses a question: "Wouldn't cooperation, Arab and Jewish artists working together, bring in more of all kinds of people, so the Arab artists would have more of an audience?" She searches for a word. "A more *diverse* audience."

We both have difficulty with the open-air installation on a patio at the back of the building. "Displacement," by Mahmood Kaiss, is a wood and chicken wire cage large enough for several adults to stand in and which for several months housed pigeons. But, we read on the wall notes, the pigeons in the weeks before the exhibit opened had been "driven away from their nests in a deliberate action taken by the artist, leaving behind bits and pieces that attest to their previous presence." The viewer is challenged by the artist, via the notes, to step inside the cage, to experience the feeling of being sheltered and protected, but also the feeling of being imprisoned, and then challenged again to contemplate the meaning of stepping out of the cage. Were the pigeons cast out to "an unknown fate – or possibly to their freedom"? I feel on some levels I should try to have the experience the artist intended, but I start to feel very self-conscious on the crowded patio. We go back indoors.

Claire loops my arm as I have seen European women do in movies. She looks both angry and hurt, but mostly hurt. Her eyes fill. "Does this artist feel a prisoner here? In this city where he is accepted, where he has freedom to be a creative person, and has the support of the community to live whatever life he wants? My family understands about being thrown out. About being the minority. This is not the same as the cages they were put in."

We continue to talk about minorities, but not only about Palestinians. I ask what she thinks about the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, the *Haredim*. "Oh, the fanatics! Old men yelling at little school girls, spitting at little school girls!" She shakes her head. "But everywhere there are fanatics, yes? And they want us to pay for them to study and to have their demonstrations." I ask her opinion about the West Bank settlers. "Oh, more fanatics," Claire says. "They are ruining a chance for peace. And do you know what they say to our young soldiers who are there to protect them? They call them Nazis. How can a Jew call another Jew a Nazi?"

It has been a number of days since we visited Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. How do I make sense of this experience? How do I begin?

Perhaps with an orientation to time and place. Yad Vashem was started in 1953 with a law passed by the Knesset. It is situated more than 2,600 feet above sea level on Mount Herzl and looks out over the Jerusalem Forest. On completing the walk through the Holocaust History Museum, we stepped into the warm, shaded air of a Jerusalem July afternoon and looked out on a view of the surrounding landscape and city, mountainside and sky. I thought of those who perished under the most unimaginable circumstances, never to see this or to feel warm summer air again. I tried to keep my thoughts with the victims only, tried not to selfishly make the experience about myself, about what their victimhood means to me.

The Yad Vashem complex is vast. The many buildings and memorials that make up the site are surrounded by expansive plazas and connected by winding pathways, all paved in the ubiquitous tan-white Jerusalem stone. Some paths are shaded by the surrounding trees, but the plazas are bright and flat, and I found them disorienting. I felt exposed and empty and lost as I walked across each open plaza.

Entering the Holocaust History Museum, I wondered how they began such a task. How did the curators bring this staggering volume of artifacts together? Thousands of photographs, documents, personal and household items are displayed in a sequence that carries the visitor through the years leading up to and through the Nazi's rise to power, describing the means by which six million European Jews were murdered. Was there a first pair of children's mittens, perhaps the pair in front of me in the display case, the yarn worn down at the palms, left behind on a wooden bunk in the barracks, or dropped from a pocket onto the frozen ground outside a crematorium?

Days later, what of this experience has me awake at two o'clock in the morning?

I am thinking about shoes under plexiglass. In one of the final galleries of the museum, I came to a display of hundreds of broken, blackened shoes, sheltered under sheets of plexiglass flooring in the shape of a rectangle large enough for ten adults to stand on at one time. But of course there is a great reluctance to stand on the glass, to walk over the display of shoes, as if stepping on a grave. It makes you feel like a violator. So at first I stand back. There is a group of girls and boys, fifteen or sixteen years old, in a semi-circle around the far end of the rectangle from where I am standing. They are wearing purple t-shirts with some sort of logo on them. A guide is in the center of the group – a young man whom I feel has been chosen for this particular group because he is close to their age. He steps squarely onto the plexiglass and asks the others to step onto the glass as well. Nobody moves. I try to move, but at first I cannot.

Someone says out loud that they don't feel they should.

"Why not?" the guide asks. No answer. There are self-conscious glances all around. Teenagers afraid to look or sound foolish in front of their friends. And then, a boy giggles. I believe it is explainable, nervous, self-conscious giggling. Ill-at-ease, immature, and explainable. The guide tries to control his temper.

"This reaction you are having, can you explain it to me? I am trying to understand why you think this is funny." The boy tries to stop smiling but cannot. He turns his face partly away. The guide, trying to ignore him and engage the others, kneels down and points to individual shoes, a worker's half-boot, a young lady's open-toed sandal, very much like what some of the girls in the group are wearing. Something turns in me, something tells me I need to step onto the glass, that doing so is the only way to acknowledge the reality of the lives lost, of the people who left these shoes behind. I force myself. One step forward. Two. I stand and weep. The group of boys and girls, the guide, are oblivious to me.

He continues his effort to teach: "You should step onto the glass," he tells them, "And if you cannot, you should think about why you can't. Why do you think there are so many shoes remaining?" Finally, another boy, speaking in a cultured British accent, takes a chance, gets past worrying what the others will think of him, "Because the Nazis had no use for them?"

"Yes," the guide says, "that is it. Nobody would want to wear the worn and broken shoes of dead people, so there was no profit to be made." I make my way out of the gallery.

In November of 2011 I had finally found Hanukkah candles in the third supermarket I checked, having pronounced and spelled and explained "Hanukkah" in all three locations. If I lived in a community with a higher Jewish population, I would probably have had a different experience. I wondered, holding my box of candles marked, "Product of Israel," if I'd have had trouble finding Hanukkah candles in Israel. And here was the start of my idea, the little question that grew into the questions about the Jews in Israel who buy those candles, or who don't, who may or may not have a menorah on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet (as for years I didn't), who may or may not take it down and light the candles for the eight miraculous nights. Is there a single Jew in Israel without a menorah on the top shelf, I wondered? And what about Sabbath observance, or synagogue attendance? What does "Jewish" mean in a country that is 75% Jewish, rather than 2%? What do those Jews call themselves? I went to Israel not knowing what kind of Jew I

am, or what to call myself, imagining I was going to find out about Hanukkah candles.

What I found out is that there are Jews in Israel who have a ready and confident answer when asked about their level of religious observance: “I am secular,” they reply, or “traditional,” or “orthodox.” But there are many others who pause and then explain that, for example, they go to synagogue or keep Kosher, but hesitate to give themselves a name. Whether or not they have a quick answer about what kind of Jew they are *does not matter*. It only matters that they are Jewish and they are Israeli. What I saw and heard and felt was that Jewish and Israeli are part and parcel for them, two inseparable parts of their nationality, secular *and* sacred.

I found out that these Jewish people go about their daily lives with the same question, sometimes on the front pages of their newspapers and sometimes further in, on the editorial pages, but it is always in their minds: what are the chances for a peace agreement in their lifetimes, in their children’s lifetimes? I found that the Israeli Jews I spoke to believe in the two-state solution and want to see a Palestinian state. They express dismay at extremists on all sides in general, but in particular at the West Bank Settlers, and increasingly right-wing government policies, and stalled negotiations. I found out that to be a Jew is to question, and that the question every Jew needs to ask, as representatives of history’s persecuted people is: “But what about the Palestinian people?” I found out I had it in me to finally step onto the plexiglass, but not into the pigeon cage, and that a question I had rarely, if ever, asked myself was, “But what about the Palestinian people?”

I found out that there is a place in this world where I am welcome because I am Jewish, not in spite of it, and that I am more Jewish now, as I was told I would be, although I am not a religious Jew. I am a Zionist, a word I didn’t even understand one year ago. I found out that at 5.9 million, there are still fewer Jews living in Israel than were murdered in the Holocaust. That there are only 13 million Jews in the entire world. I am quietly desperate that Jews have a homeland and a right to exist. *But what about the Palestinian people?*

The writer Joan Didion says, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.” My writing worked for me in this way while I was in Israel. But I quote Ms. Didion now because, as it turns out, I went to Israel entirely to find out why I went to Israel: to find out that my right to exist, as a Jew on Planet Earth, is directly connected to Israel’s right to exist; to find out what it means to be able to walk up to the Western Wall of the Second Temple, in the walled Old City,

the City of David, and what it meant to touch the ancient surface, tentatively at first with my fingertips, then with the full palm of my hand, and finally to touch my forehead to the ancient Jerusalem stone and shed tears for every single soul that has come before me and every single soul I will someday leave behind; to find out that in leaving my dad’s name on a small piece of paper, folded over on itself and secured between the cracks in the stone, I truly believe I have given a part of him a resting place in Israel; to find out that Israel’s hard won access to the wall, and therefore my access to the wall, means that others are excluded. Perhaps this is how it had to be in a certain time and place, but I don’t understand why it still has to be so. It does not. I went entirely to find out what I want and what I fear. I want a Jewish homeland to exist and a Palestinian homeland to exist. I fear that opportunities to achieve this are being discarded daily, hourly, as we speak.

Here is what I am thinking now about Yad Vashem, about the shoes and the angry guide and the immature, smiling boy, about the more mature young man who found it in himself to speak up. All of us on this inexplicable planet in this inexplicable lifetime are potential victims and potential perpetrators, potential rescuers and potentially rescued. Knowledge of the Holocaust, such a place as Yad Vashem, cast into sharp focus who, for a period in human history, was one thing and who was the other. I am someone who, in a different time and place, would have been taken away. The two sons my husband and I have raised, by virtue of having a Jewish mother, might not have escaped, might have been rounded up and taken away, no matter whether they choose to call themselves Jews, or not.

I have no answer to this question: If I acknowledge that I could have been one thing, can I acknowledge that perhaps I could have been the other? If tested, could I be brave? Could I be strong and righteous? Given the life I have been given, free of persecution, can I find it in myself to speak up for others who continue to be persecuted? On this journey I begin to ask this question of myself. I begin to look for an answer.

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