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## Living in the Garden of Perhaps: Ordinary Life as an Obstacle to Political Change in Israel

By Katherine Natanel<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article explores how gender in part shapes the contours of small worlds or 'elsewheres' (Haraway 1992), constructed by Jewish Israelis as they pursue 'ordinary lives' in a context of conflict and sustained political violence. Situating as central the experiences, perceptions and behaviours of the dominant sector in Jewish Israeli society—middle-class Ashkenazi Jews living in Israel's urban centres—the article appraises the work done by the production and maintenance of dual worlds, what lies at stake in their loss and their implications for political change. By building upon the work of feminist and queer theorists who consider the centrality of intimacy to politics, here relational ties binding communities of varying size and composition emerge as more important than the material trappings of newly created worlds. Drawing on the narratives of Jewish Israeli women and men living in West Jerusalem and its suburbs, this article demonstrates how gender intersects with geopolitical location, social class, religion, race and ideology to create intimate spheres whose maintenance ultimately becomes bound up in stasis.

*Keywords:* gender, intimacy, stasis, Israel-Palestine, intersectionality

Fresh flowers of perhaps once grew  
in a landscape dewy and warm,  
and I the best of gardeners knew  
how to foster and keep them from harm.

Night after night, a sentinel  
I kept watch tirelessly  
to protect my buds from the cold wind,  
the wind of certainty.

But finding out my secret, the wind  
coldly outwitting me,  
turned my garden of perhaps  
into a cemetery.

- Ra'hel, *Flowers of Perhaps*

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Standing in Ronit's garden, I looked out over the rolling hillsides of brown, grey and green, that compose the pastoral scenery of Mevasseret-Zion, a suburb outside West Jerusalem. Upon arrival to the day's interview I had been ushered warmly through a locked glass gate into a bright and spacious home, a welcome contrast to the blocky homogeneous stone exteriors which together rose like a fortress above the valley below. Led through the home and into the garden space beyond, I was struck first not by the stunning view but by the massive fence which enclosed the yard completely – standing nine feet tall, the mesh fence was topped by a 'y'-shaped frame from which a fanned extension projected toward the valley. Definitely a security fence of sorts, the first association that sprang to mind was a prison compound, minus the concertina wire and with the addition of an incredible view. "I built this for the cats, to keep them inside," Ronit explained with a laugh as she began our tour of the garden. "I have five cats at home who I want to keep in—and I want to keep the weasels out!". I smiled and we walked toward the flora, as house cats' wary eyes shined from behind a thicket of leaves and stems.

Moving around the garden, Ronit introduced me to trees of cherry, almond, lemon and clementine—300 orange fruits harvested in the previous year!—then on to graceful stems of white calla lilies, cheery pentas whose pink and red flowers attract butterflies, and fading purple and white anemones which mark the arrival of spring. The garden was bursting with flowers and trees, providing an ornate display against the ascetic nudity of the brown hills and their lines of stone. Together we stooped to inspect a small door cut into the fence through which Ronit fed the street cats, along with the occasional weasel. Though banned from the garden sanctuary, Ronit cared for these creatures at a comfortable distance. Gazing across the hills once more I felt compelled to comment on their beauty: "Gosh, the West Bank is just so striking—it's unreal." Ronit smiled and gestured to the valley as she replied, "No, the Green Line is quite far from here. This is Israel." Stepping back into the house past the buds, blooms and branches I was confused, certain that Mevasseret-Zion was located on or near the 1949 Armistice Agreements borders—later I would learn that 'near' and 'far' possessed relative meaning: "The Green Line is not close to here," Ronit reiterated, "But it's not like it is in another country..." Indeed, it bisected the valley below.

In the calm and cool of Ronit's garden, the reality of conflict is held 'far' while the sanctuary of home and the realm of beauty are kept 'near,' though each possesses a window to the other. Here buds grow safely, fostered and kept from harm under the protective watch of a sentinel – a gardener of flowers, a cultivator of security and a protector of a world unto its own. Yet ever visible beyond the fenced perimeter exists a wider world looming on the horizon, seemingly empty yet posing threat and promising danger metaphorically dressed in weasel's clothing. Entwined discursively, materially and emotionally, these worlds cannot decouple as the garden sanctuary – a site of desire and imagination, 'perhaps' what life might be—relies upon precarity, with lush abundance appearing in stark contrast to hills of scrub and rock. Thus, even in the warmth of May the cold wind slips long fingers between the mesh of Ronit's fence, prying at her garden while creating the conditions of its possibility.

This article explores the ways in which gender shapes the contours of diverse gardens, small worlds or 'elsewheres' (Haraway 1992), constructed by Jewish Israelis as they pursue 'ordinary lives' in a context of conflict and sustained political violence. Situating as central the experiences, perceptions and behaviours of the dominant sector in Jewish Israeli society—middle-class Ashkenazi<sup>2</sup> Jews living in Israel's urban centres—the article appraises the work done by the production and maintenance of dual worlds, what lies at stake in their loss and their implications

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<sup>2</sup> Jews of European descent.

for political change. Here, more important than the trappings of these newly created worlds—their flowers and fences, gates and doors—is the intimacy which sustains them, as relational ties bind communities of varying size and composition.

In combination with feminist and queer theories of normativity, this article looks to intersectional analysis in assessing gendered practices of world-making. Understood here as ‘signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76), intersectionality makes visible the multivalence of power shaping subjectivities, societies and material realities. Drawing upon the narratives of Jewish Israeli women and men living in West Jerusalem and its suburbs,<sup>3</sup> this article demonstrates how gender intersects with geopolitical location, social class, religion, race and ideology to create intimate spheres whose maintenance ultimately becomes bound up in stasis.

### **Elsewheres, Here and There**

The mentality is Hobbesian here. Fuck Hobbes! You can’t build a society based on Hobbes unless you want no equality, depression, aggression. Like Buffy the Vampire Slayer said, “I say my power should be *our* power!”—that’s the fandom I come from. In sci-fi and fantasy Henry Jenkins did research and studied the link between involvement in sci-fi or fantasy fandoms and political action. There’s a strong link, like how Donna Haraway writes about the creation of ‘elsewhere.’ The problem is that most people think ‘We have to do this,’ to be ‘x’ is the only solution. Well no, we live it and we can live it differently if we choose. I believe in small steps, very small steps, not symbolic steps which are huge. Of course it’s complicated and huge, but if we don’t start who will?<sup>4</sup>

Meirav, a 25 year-old feminist blogger and political activist, first raised the possibility of ‘elsewhere’ as we sat together in Jerusalem’s Machne Yehuda market, watching evening shoppers from our position at a popular café. The founder of an online initiative aimed at stopping street harassment, Meirav invoked Donna Haraway’s (1992) conceptualisation multiple times during our interview, citing it as a positive space of possibility and meaning. Of debates around the differing plights of Palestinian and Jewish Israeli women in Israel, Meirav claimed, “The argument [of who has it worse] usually gets stuck at a dead end, but there’s always an ‘elsewhere.’ . . . Real change can come from women on each side.” Similarly, in discussing Israel’s ongoing occupation of the Palestinian Territories and annexed East Jerusalem she concluded, “It is what it is, you get angry and frustrated. You break down and then you see the options... if you’re lucky enough to have an ‘elsewhere.’” For Meirav ‘elsewhere’ exists a realm

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<sup>3</sup> The empirical data for this article was collected during twelve months of ethnographic research and sixty interviews conducted with Jewish Israeli women and men in Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem, from October 2010 through September 2011. The names of all participants are anonymised. I am thankful to the individuals who shared with me their perceptions and experiences in Israel-Palestine, generously offering their time and engaging in often intensely personal discussions. I also wish to thank my doctoral supervisors, Professor Naje Al-Ali and Dr. Laleh Khalili for their continued support and guidance. I am grateful to SOAS, University of London, and the University of London Central Research Fund for financial support.

<sup>4</sup> Interview in Jerusalem 5 May 2011.

of political action as suggested by Haraway (1992: 295), a site of imagination ‘there’ which leads to transformation ‘here,’ an ability to access fantasy and in doing so change reality. Contesting claims to biological determinism, ‘naturalisation’ and postmodern “hyper-productionism”<sup>5</sup>. Haraway proposes the existence of “elsewhere,” a space of difference and diffraction, a site of interruption and interference that creates the possibility of change (1992: 299-300). Home to “inappropriate/d others” (Trinh Minh-ha 1986, 1989 cited in Haraway 1992: 299) – those multi-cultural, ethnic, racial, national and sexual subjects excluded from hegemonic (Western) narratives of biology, nature and social construction – the third space of ‘elsewhere’ promises combination, interface, implosion, collapse, hope and action, a place where “my power” may indeed be “our power.” What binds this realm of possibility and engagement with Ronit’s securitised garden, a site of seeming haven and passivity arising in reaction to those very conditions which inspire Meirav to act? In a context of sustained conflict, rather than ushering in novel forms of resistance, ‘elsewheres’ may additionally provide escape or respite, becoming small worlds of normalcy and immediate influence amidst a sea of uncertainty, fear, powerlessness and despair. Sheltered behind mesh fences and carefully adorned with beauty, these worlds may constitute enclaves or ‘free areas’ in which ‘we don’t experience any massive tension or disruption between fantasy and script’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992: 113); so too they may be linked with denial, or ‘the maintenance of social worlds in which an undesirable situation (event, condition, phenomenon) is unrecognized, ignored or made to seem normal’ (Cohen, 2001: 51). As highlighted by Meirav above, while ‘elsewheres’ importantly expand the scope of thought and deed, the “very small steps” taken within these realms may replace large and symbolic actions, binding ‘there’ with ‘here’ in ways which foster not transformation but stasis.

Rather than transcendental politicised realms evolved beyond prevailing conditions or conventions, the small worlds of Jewish Israelis emerge as liminal spaces, “gardens of perhaps” held in tension between the dewy warmth of promised blooms and the cold wind of certainty. In a manner similar to the ways in which processes of othering and exclusion produce ‘elsewheres,’ these small worlds take shape through the surrounding environment, resonating between extremes as they offer both escape and action. As Meirav acts to thwart street harassment, so too she escapes the violence of occupation and conflict; as Ronit escapes the Green Line and the threat of weasels, so too she acts to secure her garden and the lives within. Bound to both ‘here’ and ‘there,’ small worlds necessarily remain rooted in *material reality* as the former depends upon the latter for content and intelligibility – in part what it is *not* and in part what it seeks to be. Yet in a context of political violence, equally significant is the inverse relationship: how existing conditions rely upon the production and maintenance of small worlds, both escapist and oriented toward political hope.

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<sup>5</sup> In her work on transnational technoscience and cultural studies, Haraway (1992: 297) writes, ‘[N]ature for us is *made*, as both fiction and fact. If organisms are natural objects, it is crucial to remember that organisms are not born; they are made in world-changing techno-scientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places’. Through these claims Haraway argues that worlds, realities, identities and even individuals are produced and manufactured – importantly by specific communities whose interests remain informed by particular historical moments and locations. Yet Haraway remains wary of broadly deterministic constructivist theories and posits an alternative to what she deems “hyper-productionism,” or the postmodern narrative that ‘man makes everything, including himself, out of the world that can only be resource and potency to his project and active agency’ (1992: 297).

### Small Worlds, Simple Lives

In assessing the function of co-existent worlds, sociologists Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor (1992: 113) write, '[w]e simultaneously occupy several worlds and move into different activities each of which may be distinguished by the degree of individuality, at-homeness, freedom from constraints which can be experienced'. Yet in the context of Israel-Palestine, these worlds may additionally provide connectivity, familiarity, and away-ness, as experiences of sustained conflict are compounded by social fragmentation and privatisation produced through rapid liberalisation (see Shafir and Peled, 2000, 2002; Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 2004; Yiftachel, 2006; Abdo, 2011). Into this complex tension feminist and queer theorists insert a provocative claim: the normative and aspirational dimensions which constitute the basis of worlds apart may produce an economy in sync with existing relations of power and privilege. Couched in affective terms by Sara Ahmed (2004) and Lauren Berlant (2007, 2011), worlds large and small are built and maintained through attachments – to others, to objects, to scenes, practices and desires. Here, intimate relations and reciprocity yield the experiences of “unconflictedness, belonging, and worth” (Berlant 2007: 282) imagined to underwrite normality and ‘ordinary life’, scenes where existence ceases to be a project and is instead exercised as fact (Berlant 2007: 291). Constructed differentially by Jewish Israeli women and men, these small worlds of intimacy arise through the intersection of gender with hierarchies of class, race, religiosity and geopolitical location, producing approximations of normalcy bound with the preservation of power and privilege.

#### *All in the Family: A Theory of Systemics*

What’s keeping me sane is the micro environment—family and friends. I see families and I think ‘Where is this going? What will we leave to our kids?’ I feel things are getting worse. Neighbourhoods are a micro-cosmos. At [age] 11, I saw that my daughter couldn’t be free. They built a student dormitory— four-story-high buildings that were fancy and new. Many students live there. Then the Arabs in the neighbourhood became aggressive, they started attacking girls. The students built their own security groups and patrolled, they were the ‘*mishmar ezrachi*’ [civilian guard]. The neighbourhood had groups on patrol too. I decided that if I was alone I would stay, I have no energy to make the changes! But because of Maya, not only was she growing up in this crazy country, but her development as an independent child [was at risk], the ability to go to her friend’s safely and come back safely. So we left the neighbourhood because of Maya. And I’m so glad we did! Maya is independent, she goes to school and returns on her own, safely. It’s not only being in an Arab environment, there are many people around who make life impossible. I still have the feeling that I need to protect her—Maya calls me when she gets to school, when she gets home. But I’m not hysterical.<sup>6</sup>

Sipping tea and eating cakes in the cool of Ronit’s apartment, the garden and its formidable fence remained visible through the sliding glass doors as my host outlined the contours of her small world, presented as a “micro environment”. A scientist at a nearby

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<sup>6</sup> Interview in Mevasseret-Zion 20 May 2011.

university, 57 year-old Ronit constructs a multi-layered scene of threat and intimacy: a once-safe neighbourhood “micro-cosmos” whose changing dynamics jeopardised the core of her small world, her young daughter Maya. From neighbours to friends and ultimately family – here a unit of two as Ronit raises her single child alone—the narrowing rings of Ronit’s micro environment indeed reveal sites of both action and stasis, clearly constructed through and bound by intimacy. While Ronit admits to having felt “no energy” to move from her first neighbourhood in Jerusalem’s French Hill area, *de jure* a settlement across the Green Line in the Occupied West Bank, she feels impelled to action when her daughter’s development and security appear at risk. By moving to escape conflict, violence and harm – acting to secure her small world—Ronit preserves a sense of stability: the apparent safety of a new neighbourhood and the ‘normalcy’ of childhood freedom.

Within this, action becomes a vehicle for seeming passivity, ensuring a mode of ‘coasting’ which allows Ronit to invest in her micro environment and avoid feelings of constant struggle, danger and survival. Indeed, as our conversation ended Ronit mused, “If one is happy in one’s micro environment, one will be used to the macro—this is keeping me sane. In science, if the micro takes hold it becomes systemic”. Yet to read Ronit’s words carefully, the happiness, security and stability of her micro environment remains tenuous, in need of continual maintenance and reaffirmation. Despite moving from French Hill to Mevasseret-Zion where Maya can walk through the neighbourhood without fear, Ronit still requires her daughter to phone upon reaching the nearby school. During the course of our interview Maya called to say that she was leaving school, arriving to the house some time later to a warm reception from her mother. Rather than a performance of acute ‘relief,’ an indicator of the extraordinary, Ronit and Maya’s interaction conveyed *routinisation* – this call and response constitute a daily interaction. Instead of creating accord with the wider environment, the ‘systemics’ of Ronit’s small world clearly operate within particular boundaries to produce normalisation: one grows *accustomed* to the macro rather than including it within the scope of action and everyday life.

Then, even as her micro environment promises stasis and offers respite from wider cycles of violence, trauma and conflict, the stability of Ronit’s small world requires constant repetition, a forcible reiteration of particular norms (Butler, 1993: 2). As argued by feminist and queer scholars including Butler (1993, 1997), Berlant (1997, 1998, 2007, 2011), and Ahmed (2000, 2004), normativity is central to world-building and maintenance as ‘matter’ gains “boundary, fixity, and surface” through processes of (re)materialisation (Butler, 1993: 9). Which repeated norms, then, give rise to Ronit’s small world, linking her ‘elsewhere’ to material reality in its provision of “at-homeness” and away-ness? Most clearly, Ronit’s micro environment underlines the primacy of protection, importantly challenging hegemonic gender norms while simultaneously reinforcing sexualised racial norms. Produced through militarised patriarchal nationalism in combination with an ongoing settler colonial project (see Enloe, 1989; McClintock, 1995; Abdo and Yuval-Davis, 1995), the normative relations of Jewish Israeli man-as-protector and woman-as-reproducer are undermined by Ronit’s account of lived experience: as a single mother and sole income earner, Ronit assumes the dual responsibility of security and nourishment/care. Here the (gendered) divisions between ‘homefront’ and ‘battlefield’ (Sharoni, 1994; Herzog, 1998; Jacoby, 2005) collapse even as Ronit seeks to maintain division, physically moving home to a locale beyond—yet near to— the Green Line through a mobility enabled by her membership in Israel’s middle class. Yet in pursuing a sense and site of security on behalf of her young daughter, Ronit reaffirms a racialised and sexualised category of ‘other’ within the settler colonial project: the ‘Arab’ imagined to lurk menacingly at the physical and metaphorical

borders of her micro-cosmos. In a manner strikingly similar to discourses of colonial projects past (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; McClintock, 1995), Ronit's narrative (re)produces an image of the 'other' as an aggressive (brown or black) native-man-turned-invader preying upon innocent (white) daughters, salient symbols of the nation.

Thus as Ronit performs protection and in doing so subverts hegemonic gender roles, the repetition of this racial norm confirms the position of the "object being" (Butler, 1993: 3) whose continued presence materialises the border of her small world, a site simultaneously secure and precarious in its proximity to 'other' bodies and violence. Then systemics transmit not happiness and security, but rather a sense of danger and fear, recreating the impetus for protection. Indeed, after describing the contours of her small world, Ronit related the following:

Katie, you can't imagine how they *hate* Arabs. . . Maya grew up – you can't *imagine* how she hates Arabs. In this house, in this family, you won't hear these words. She has so much hate, fear. I say, "Maya, you can't generalise! We have [friends] Amal and Khalid, we're invited to their house!" She tells me, "They are exceptional! You can't trust [Arabs]."

KN: How old is she?

Ronit: She'll be 13 in October.

### *Spiritual Escapes: Of Self and Circles*

As valuations and hierarchies of race emerged, stabilised by the repetition of norms associated with protection, Ronit's family unit provides a small world in which norms are simultaneously subverted through acts of necessity; although a daughter remains the object of protection, her mother assumes the (masculine) roles of defender and provider along with (feminine) caretaker. Yet family institutions provide no predictable patterns with regard to the construction and maintenance of small worlds and the normative relations therein; rather, specific factors intersect to give rise to diverse realms of escape and action. In Ronit's case, residence as a single mother in the occupied territory of French Hill converged with valuations of (Palestinian) race/nation and opportunities afforded by (middle) class to produce the contours of her 'micro environment,' a site worthy of cultivation and action. For others, the family constitutes a nexus of differential interests, producing small worlds of investment and action which diverge from yet reinforce the overarching norms framing Ronit's narrative.

For 30 years, Yael has lived in the same modest limestone home in West Jerusalem's German Colony, separated from the tense environment of French Hill by the Old City, Hebrew University and what feels like a cultural chasm. Now retired from work as the manager of her husband's surgery and with four children grown and moved away, at 56 years-old, Yael cultivates her interest in dance, pottery, yoga and meditation through courses offered at the Cultural Centre behind her house. Prefacing our exchange with the claim that she is "not a political creature", Yael outlined her position and practices thus:

Let me paint you a picture: every morning the paper is delivered to our door my husband picks it up and goes through it, clucking his tongue in disappointment. Ido is very Left and he can't believe what's going on here. I can't get my head

around it. I have to put my head in the sand like an ostrich to live here, because I don't believe there's a solution.<sup>7</sup>

As an immigrant who arrived from Australia at age 18 seeking “a legitimate way to escape” her immediate family, Yael chose to raise her own family in Israel, exchanging one reality for another which, for her, necessitates conscious disengagement. Defining her family as “modern religious”, for Yael “what’s going on here” extends beyond the divisions of nation and ethnicity described in prevailing narratives. “We are modern religious, so we’re very exposed”, Yael related as we sat in her kitchen. “In Jerusalem as modern religious people we don’t have one group of friends, we have all kinds. My husband has lots of family here from Denmark and Sweden, all of his cousins immigrated. And they’re all religious. We also have a lot of family living in hard-core settlements. For us it’s not ‘them’ and ‘us’”. With family living in occupied territory, Yael’s experiences and valuations of ‘otherness’ emerge along lines of religious practice, belief and affiliation as abject beings appear within her society, ‘others’ not along lines of race but ideology.

This intimate relation to Israel’s illegal settlements informs Yael’s perceptions of the world around her, as family ties and religious belief propel her and her loved ones across territorial boundaries. Indeed, with two of her children wounded during a shooting in the West Bank as they drove along a ‘settler only’ road, Yael views macro and micro scales in distinctly political terms. Here ‘macro’ emerges: “the Arab countries”, settlements and her children’s military service – matters of “security and survival” which preoccupy the country – set against the ‘micro’ of friends and family. “Yes, my kids were shot at in the car, but it wasn’t a personal attack on me”, Yael explained. “And my son had an army accident, but it wasn’t the Arabs. I don’t take this on board – the way I divide life is that the problems, bad, negative is ‘out there’ and what is personal...” Trailing into silence, this disjuncture between “out there” and those matters deemed “personal” creates the boundary of Yael’s small world, a site of escape, connection and action:

I’m a person who connects things! I always say to the kids “*Hakol kashur*” – everything is connected! They don’t see how, but it is. But I disconnect because I look for the spiritual life. I feel how I can bring the spiritual to the ground, into the here and now. I only believe that what I can do in the world is to do what I can, to do good within my small circle. I begin with myself – when I’m depressed it’s not good for anyone. Then I go to my relationship with my husband, build a wonderful family, reach out to friends. I don’t do community work on an organisational level, going to organisations and demonstrations, but on a *personal* level. All I can do is on that level, in my small circle. I see Bibi [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] on the television and it’s embarrassing to see his body language – he’s sitting on a chair and there is a row of gangsters behind him. It’s about money and religion - they hide behind the cloak of religion, religion which is so full of righteousness. What can I do with all of that? Except for run away if it gets too bad...

Disengaging from the macro level despite feeling irrevocably connected, Yael outlines a small world constructed through a particular form of spirituality, importantly different from the

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<sup>7</sup> Interview in Jerusalem 12 May 2011.

righteous religiosity of (male) political leaders. Again demonstrating an ascription to systemics – the ability of change, happiness and stability to transmit from small circles to those larger – Yael positions herself as central to her small world; from here “goodness” radiates outward, yet “all [she] can do” remains within the personal level delimited by the presence of “bad” beyond. Yael’s small world, then, becomes a multi-layered sphere of influence, intimacy and consistency, a space of simultaneous connection and disconnection which allows her to remain living in Israel.

Yet which repeated norms form the basis of this world unique to Yael’s spirituality, social class, race, location and gender? Here the overtly racialised ‘othering’ of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as Jews and Arabs becomes at times displaced by exclusion borne of religious belief and practice, as spirituality expands territorial boundaries – ‘we’ remain within state borders, while ‘they’ live illegally beyond. However, while complicating conventional understandings of ‘otherness’, Yael’s distinction between ‘out there’ and ‘the personal’ again mirrors the normativity of protection, in both racialised and gendered terms. ‘Macro’, ‘bad’, and ‘there’ emerge bound with Arabs, conflict and politics while ‘micro,’ ‘personal’ and ‘here’ become a source of sameness, read in terms of intimacy, calm and the presumed whiteness of Australia, Denmark and Sweden. Thus ‘here’ emerges in need of protection from ‘there,’ repeating the militarised, sexualised and racialised gendered norms in part resisted and reinforced by Ronit’s actions in the interest of her daughter’s safety. Although Yael directly experienced political violence as visited upon the bodies of her children, she avoids politics in a manner reflective of the norms which link knowledge of security to political voice in Israel (Mazali, 2003; Rimalt, 2008). Through avoiding the bad there even as it intrudes on the good here, Yael actively constructs herself as “not a political being”, unqualified to speak about the world around her even as she demonstrates a nuanced understanding of its connections and machinations. Yael’s spiritual small world of action and influence then reproduces ‘the political’ as a realm of men, those “gangsters” whose exercise of power produces in her the desire flee ever deeper into spirituality, a hybrid practice made possible through (middle) class belonging.

### *“Together in Pain, Together in Hope”*

While the narratives above seemingly point to a phenomenon of depoliticised or apolitical small worlds produced by Jewish Israeli *women* as gender norms meet with geopolitical location, social class, race and religion, this is not to say that Jewish Israeli men collectively dwell in the wider world of politics. While small worlds of family and spirituality take shape in forms bound with the feminine/masculine valuations of private/public, homefront/battlefield and domestic/political borne of militarised patriarchal nationalisms, so too do men construct microcosms of belonging, influence, escape and action vis-à-vis wider realities of conflict and violence. Emerging through the confluence of norms and intersecting hierarchies of power and privilege, these small worlds again centralise intimacy and connectivity, as diverse spheres ultimately draw together to form a particular type of collective.

Both a practitioner and instructor of a movement-based meditation practice derived from Buddhism and martial arts, 40 year-old Yair’s small world resonates with the circles built by Yael in part through spiritual practice. Now living near to the Knesset<sup>8</sup> in Neve Sha’an an northwest of Yael’s home in the German Colony, Yair credits his father’s extreme politics with the formation of his current beliefs and practices:

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<sup>8</sup> The Israeli Parliament.

My father was very right-wing politically – he was part of the original settlement movement ‘*Gush Emunim*’<sup>9</sup> and part of the group that supported [Ariel] Sharon when he ran for the first time to the Knesset. He wasn’t religious or anything, but he had a hard-core right-wing orientation. This was also me through high school – I was involved in the ideological right wing until the army. . . . It is the outcome of my father’s education that I support the opposite.”<sup>10</sup>

While military experience catalysed a period of questioning and personal transformation for Yair, a post-service trip to Japan and the eruption of the second *intifada* during a retreat in France radicalised his politics, bringing Yair to participate in “Dharma activism”. “The basic tenet of Dharma is that there is suffering in the world and we should be involved in ending or finishing the suffering,” Yair explained. “[T]he goal is not to solve, but to understand the conflict”. Part of a small community of practitioners in Israel, activism in this vein aims at self-understanding as a foundation for wider processes of change: “What does the conflict do to me?” Yair related as the central question posed by Jewish Israeli Dharma activists. “Not even to us, but to me. We want to create a safe space and gently insist on exposing this pain”. Thus the individual again emerges at the core of a world of meaning, this time based on ‘universal’ suffering which must be “ended or finished” while at the same time violence makes possible the very “safe space” of action.

Within this world of self-reflection, greater understanding and reduced suffering, how does political action become manifest? Yair describes “advanced practice” as a time in which the work of Dharma activists “extends”, importantly mirroring the principle of systemics outlined by Ronit and internalised by Yael as all view security, stability and happiness radiating outward from a core. Yet Yair admits that the “immature practice” in Israel focuses on “inner work”; as such, burgeoning initiatives seek to integrate self-cultivation with the wider context of conflict which many identify as the root of their suffering. From workshops with teenagers nearing military service to consciousness-raising meditation walks and solidarity actions in Palestinian villages, Dharma activist leaders attempt to bridge self and society, ‘me’ and ‘us.’ Yair recounted one long-term initiative thus:

The New Age community is a group that you could say doesn’t have any political awareness, but for the last eight years there has been a ceremony commemorating Memorial Day, Independence Day and Nakba Day together.<sup>11</sup> The reason you don’t know about it is because it is initiated by New Age people. At the start it was a Jewish renewal group that celebrated all the holidays. A friend who

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<sup>9</sup> Precipitated by the October 1973 or Yom Kippur War, *Gush Emunim* (‘Bloc of the Faithful’) was a political religious nationalist movement which encouraged Jewish Israeli settlement of the Gaza Strip, West Bank and Golan Heights; see Shafir and Peled, 2002: 159-183 and Shlaim, 2009: 25-36.

<sup>10</sup> Interview in Jerusalem 15 May 2011.

<sup>11</sup> While Memorial Day and Independence Day are Jewish Israeli holidays respectively marking the deaths of citizens (military and civilian) killed in conflict and the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel, Nakba Day is observed by Palestinians as the day of ‘catastrophe’ on which the Israeli state gained international recognition. Memorial Day and Independence Day follow the Hebrew calendar, while Nakba Day is commemorated annually on 15 May, one day after Ben-Gurion’s proclamation of the ‘Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel’. Memorial Day, Independence Day and Nakba Day commonly fall within the same week, only one week after the Israeli commemoration of the Holocaust.

belonged said, “We’re celebrating everything that happened here, but not Nakba Day – there are people here to whom that is important”. It was a two-day event and the theme was ‘Together in pain, together in hope’. The first day is Memorial Day – it’s about pain: the Holocaust and the Nakba story. The second day is Independence Day – it’s about hope: how do we see a joint state or a joint way of living together? . . . But the New Age group doesn’t understand the political implications of what they’re doing. Very healing things happen: Jews listen to Palestinians tell their story, they sympathise, and then the same thing happens in the opposite direction. . . . The New Age group, their minds don’t go there, they’re happy with their personal moment of deep catharsis. But I support it, of course.

Bringing together divergent national narratives beneath the banner of a single event, Yair and his fellow Dharma activists centralise suffering as a means of fostering connectivity across borders, formulating a sense of shared history and common future. Yet those practitioners who take part fail to move beyond “personal catharsis” even as the event ostensibly impels them to action – here individual happiness supplants transformation on wider scales.

Repeated in this world are the prevailing intersecting norms of race, class and gender, as indeed ‘us’ and ‘them’ remain the racialised categories of ‘Jew’ and ‘Palestinian’, social class facilitates access to a spiritual practice requiring time and mobility, and the “safe space” for reflection and understanding appears feminised vis-à-vis the assumed masculinity of violence and conflict. Yet significantly, the central repetition underwriting this small world is the normative narrative of Zionism. As Idith Zertal (2005: 3) writes, ‘[t]hrough a dialectical process of appropriation and exclusion, remembering and forgetting, Israeli society has defined itself in relation to the Holocaust: it regarded itself as both the heir to the victims and their accuser, atoning for their sins and redeeming their death’. The terms of threat, persecution and transcendence resonate deeply with the suffering, pain and hope centralised by Jewish Israeli Dharma activists, as Nakba Day converges with commemoration of the Holocaust and celebration of Israel’s ‘independence.’<sup>12</sup> Enmeshed with gender, class, race and the geopolitical location of Jerusalem – a nexus of diverse faiths positioned on a fault-line of history and ideology – Yair’s small world repeats the very narrative at the core of Jewish Israeli state and society, linking ‘me’ with ‘us’ in ways which halt at the boundaries of self and nation. Here sympathy engenders not movement beyond the borders of collectivity, but guarantees trauma its position of primacy in worlds small and large.

From this central ideological narrative emerge the norms repeated in differential worlds, spaces of escape and action bound with power and privilege. These safe, feminised realms ostensibly free from the violence of ‘politics’ emerge those same sites where ‘whiteness’ takes shape through the masculinised and sexualised threat of ‘Arab others’, where class and urban environment enable the accumulation of ‘sameness’ in constant need of protection. At stake in the loss of these worlds, then, is less their sense of normalcy knowingly suspended between

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Massad (2006: 19) notes that the official document marking the foundation of Israel is entitled ‘Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel’ and was renamed the ‘Declaration of Independence’ only within popular discourse. Massad pointedly argues that as Zionist settlers achieved statehood with the backing of imperial powers, their declaration of ‘independence’ stands as an attempt to recast the colonial establishment of the Israeli state as an anti-colonial struggle, ostensibly heralding a post-colonial era in Israel-Palestine.

fantasy and reality, but the very selves and intimate relations at their centre, the systemics imagined to bind in both pain and hope.

### **Conclusion: The Liveable Life of Stasis**

Through fostering self and connectivity within differential spheres of meaning, influence and respite, the inhabitants of Jewish Israeli small worlds practice membership within micro imaginings of community while simultaneously ensuring belonging to the larger collective – a public built upon the normative precarity of Zionism. Importantly, this lack of stability creates the possibility of a world's rematerialisation, of each day living out renewal and redemption *as if* a normative 'ordinary life'. Yet herein lies, seeming potential for transformation. While detailing the constitutive and pervasive qualities of normativity Butler (1993: 2) writes, 'that this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialisation is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialisation is impelled'. Raising the possibility that within iteration lay the seeds of resistance or subversion, the incomplete materialisation of worlds and the non-compliance of bodies offer the hopeful interference, diffraction and interruption promised in Donna Haraway's 'elsewheres' (1992). However, when the central normative narrative around which selves and worlds coalesce *relies* on rupture and instability, what are the implications for transformation?

As made visible through the accounts of Ronit, Yael and Yair, small worlds arise through a dynamic relationship between norms, not only those repeated but also those subverted, upending any assumptions about a mono-dimensional role of normativity in projects of world-building and world-maintenance. When Ronit challenges the hegemonic gender roles which link Jewish Israeli men to action/defence and women to passivity/care, her very resistance becomes normative at the level of larger structure. As Israel presents itself a 'modern', 'liberal', 'democratic' state, liberal feminist agendas paradoxically converge with patriarchal gender norms, fashioning particular kinds of Jewish Israeli women into markers of both tradition and modernity. Ashkenazi, middle class, urban, secular and heterosexual, Ronit's agential securitising actions signal resistance while at the same time repeating the claim that Israeli is like 'anywhere else' European or American. So too while Yael expands the scope of 'us' and 'them' to include hierarchies of belonging internal to Jewish Israeli society – challenging the narrative of a single cleavage between Jews and Palestinians—her rejection of politics reaffirms the gendered norms linking men with the political and women with the domestic. As Yair seeks to expand the systemics of his small world beyond self-cultivation and into political action, the work of Dharma activism breaks against the boundaries of self and nation, reproducing the normative narrative of Zionism. Here, actions which subvert and destabilise also reinforce, becoming normative within wider frames of reference.

Unable to completely decouple from political realities, categories and actors, the construction of small worlds then remains bound with the norms and relations which deem particular lives 'liveable' and 'thinkable' (Butler 1993: 8-9; Butler 2004) – the contours of 'I' and 'we,' of 'me' and 'us.' These realms importantly complicate the optimism shown by both Butler (1993) and Haraway (1992) as small worlds demonstrate how instability might stabilise, violence might securitise, and subversion might normalise, all within the frame of the nation. Thus 'ordinary life' emerges a practice bound within particular structural boundaries, as acts of

ostensible freedom—escape and action—articulate within wider material and political realities<sup>13</sup>. Change may indeed be pursued to ensure the sanctity, security and stability of always-insecure and unstable small worlds, their senses of normalcy and the liveable lives of their inhabitants. However, these actions supplant steps to be taken on larger scales, as existing political realities and historical narratives together *produce* the conditions for cherished worlds of constancy.

Then ‘ordinary life’ as it is imagined and performed within these realms—intimate, dependable and fulfilling—becomes an obstacle to political change. Resistance at the level of everyday life does not always challenge power, rather sometimes becomes integral to it. Actions which secure and protect against threat and violence may recreate the very conditions of conflict. And “getting by” the occupation—adapting to its disruption of daily life, violence visited upon bodies and dislocation from homes and histories (see Allen, 2008; Kelly, 2008; and Richter-Devroe, 2011)—might be not resistant, but simply *getting by*. In fostering liveable lives through the intersection of ideology with gender, geopolitical location, social class, religion and race, the small worlds constructed by Jewish Israeli women and men guarantee stasis, the very condition which ultimately threatens and sustains the life therein.

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<sup>13</sup> For a superb discussion of the relationship between practice and structure see Timothy Mitchell’s (1990) critique of James C. Scott’s (1987) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance*; see bibliography.

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