

Journal of a Wishy-Washy Liberal:  
travelling through Israel and Palestine

Call me a wishy-washy liberal if you like, but there are ways and ways of visiting Palestine. Before I set off I knew about the frustrating and humiliating queuing at the checkpoints, the demolitions, the trigger-happy settlers, road blocks, intimidations, the villages divided from their olive groves, or from their water supply – and over all of this, the illegal settlements and the relentless acquisition by the Israelis of more and more of the land that under the Oslo agreement is Palestinian.

And we in the West know about them too, don't we? But how representative are they? Is it only the extremes we see and hear about? Last spring I went to find out. A few days after leaving Palestine for Israel, I was lunching with my friend A. in Tel Aviv when a couple from Hendon stopped. 'Over here on holiday, too?' the woman beamed. 'Isn't it a ... LOVELY country? All those things you read, about the apartheid and that, I don't know where they get those stories. Ted and I come over every year. We've never seen a bit of trouble. They've got affluence and that's what people want. Israelis and Arabs both. And they want peace.'

There are times to pick one's arguments. A.'s few facts and figures and my observations about what I'd seen on the West Bank persuaded the couple we did not share their opinion, and they left. 'We see what we want to see,' I observed. 'They want to find Israel safe and basically fair, so that's what they find.' 'There are no excuses to be blinkered,' retorted A.

Blinkered: that's a resonant word. Between school and university, in 1960, I'd worked for three months on the kibbutz of Beit Ha'Emek in Galilee. Three years later I returned with a student production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Fifty years have passed. And recently - like so many other Jews worldwide, and an active minority within Israel - I've become increasingly anguished by - and felt implicated in - Israeli politics towards the Palestinians. How can we, as Jews, inflict on others what we underwent 70 years ago, humiliating another race, treating them as sub-people, lesser beings? How have we forgotten the Holocaust's lessons?

I felt an urgent desire no longer to merely mutter with fellow liberals how could they...? but to discover for myself. In three short weeks I must see Palestine, go through those check points, use my eyes, walk

into the villages as a person wishing peace. I must use my ears. Then I must go to Israel, to listen and hear. Above all, I must stay open...

The end of March, and the day we reach Jerusalem coincides with an annual protest march to the city of Palestinians wanting their land back. The two women at the reception desk of our guest house voice the fear that underscores the next few weeks. The fear tonight is that the marchers will reach Jerusalem and cause trouble. Better not to venture beyond the heavily fortified Jaffe Gate and its obvious army presence. If we leave we may not be able to get back in... words that will become a leitmotif of the trip.

Next day we explore old Jerusalem, a week before Passover in holiday mood. We meander along with the rest, squeezing into this church, that mosque. Bells hurry worshippers to the midday services. Muslims dart down toward the Dome of the Rock. But Israeli soldiers stop the crowd at intervals, creating impromptu checkpoints. Every now and then an anxious hurrying Arab is singled out. Sometimes a whole group, after domineering, aggressive questioning, is turned back, or not. The rest of us pass by unimpeded. It is past noon, many have reached the mosque, some have failed. The soldiers' task is apparently over, the checkpoints disbanded. I walk up to three of them, guns casually on their hips, smoking against a sunlit wall. 'What were you looking for – in particular?' I ask. 'Why could some go through, not others?' 'Just keeping a presence,' I was told. 'To let them know, to remind them.'

Later we were in a particularly narrow lane, flights of gentle incline alternating with level sections. Half-way up one of these inclines was a small mosque, its courtyard so packed with the faithful that some spilled out across the busy thoroughfare, leaving no room. Those coming down the street, including a steady flow of orthodox Jews with prams and babies and groceries, pushed on past the praying bodies almost as if they weren't there, intent only on their own business.

April 1st. Day I of tour.

I am joining a group, organized by a non-profit interfaith organization promoting cultural tourism in Palestine. Leaving everything I don't need in the Guesthouse, I find all four of them: a German teacher, Aden, whose daughter is working in Ramallah, Melissa from California, Jaz, a handsome young turbaned sheik from High Wycombe and his friend Alys, both BBC colleagues. I calculate our average age, then refuse to dwell on it.

We drive to Bethlehem, the driver anxious as we approach the checkpoint but his documents proving his 'guide' status see us through smoothly. In barely an hour we are on the outskirts of Nablus.

We go to the Balata refugee camp, built in 1948 and still home to 65,000 people. It stretches endlessly, unending concrete with lanes narrower even than in the souk: barred windows, no sunlight, mere shafts of sky, dank smelly alleys, not a patch of grass. What a place to live, for children to grow up in.

Sobered, on we move. Majdi, our guide, takes us into the old city, reminding us that this is Palestinian territory, and our welcome AS INDIVIDUALS is a cautious one. At every junction are plaques and graffiti commemorating those who died at Israeli and British hands, many as recently as the 90s, during the second Intifada. This is the first time I hear that word Nakba: the catastrophe of 1948. On several walls is written in red: 'Never forgive, never forget.' Our guide is an urbane, muscular man with a sense of humour. I'm grateful for that.

Three boys are fighting a solitary opponent. "They've seen so much shooting now, we have a problem, how to stop them inflicting the same on their peers", Majdi says. "This generation have had a bad time of it." He seems a man of resilient humanity, describing the reality, the hospital that the Israelis closed, the sewage, the water, the infrastructure problems of Nablus, but with this buoyant optimism and humour – it will come right in the end.

After lunch we talk politics, the history of British involvement from the Palestinian perspective. Will I admit to being Jewish as well as English? We talk too about Majdi's hopes and fears, whether a two-state solution is possible, what he would like to see.

After this, off to Awarta, our first village, about five miles away. Enter a simple house in a relatively poor-looking village. On one nearby hill, dwarfing the village, making it feel smaller than it is, are what will become familiar, the round rooftops of the illegal Israeli settlements. Meet the widowed owner of the house, a feisty, beautiful woman whose husband died at Israeli hands and who has brought up three children single-handed. This woman is, her son claims that evening, 'as strong as a man, or stronger'. We drink tea in the living room a little stiffly and awkwardly. Her English is limited. I ask if we can see around the village. She suggests we go to her roof terrace, where she

and her son point out the sights - the hills; the settlements; where the village well was, now capped, metered, the water sold back to them at prices hard to afford.

The son is at Nablus University in his first year, studying mechanical engineering. His two older sisters are also there, one studying to be an accountant and the eldest already an engineer.

Time stretches out. I ask the son: "Can't we go for even a short stroll before dinner?" He says his mother doesn't want us to. His face is closed. "Tomorrow when your guides come and the villagers see them and know who you are, then you will walk." Perhaps he doesn't think I understand. Perhaps he wonders – I wouldn't blame him if he did - how much to trust or open up to these strangers.

Afternoon turns to evening. There is tension now as well as hospitality, and I can't read it. Then the young man starts speaking. His mother has gone, probably to prepare dinner: he feels able to speak more freely. Had I read about Awarta last year, how a settler had killed a man from the village for a real or imaginary misdemeanour, like coming too close with his sheep? And how afterwards the dead man's nephew went to the settlement and killed a family of five? Then he himself was taken by the Israeli police, with one male from each family in Awarta, and held in solitary confinement for twenty days, and in prison for eight months. Horrible things had been done to him, his mother had been beside herself. Then they let us go. By then they had found the culprit. Now they have all our DNAs – for life. He says this with a profound bitterness. And still you got into university this year? Yes. The scars are palpable. My impressions of an hour back, of this upwardly mobile, hopeful family, collide with their present void of power and hope.

Now our host, dinner eaten, is cheerful, skittish almost. She wants to know about us all, she laughs, tells stories, and says there are seven things everyone should know: your birthdate; birthdate of your husband, wife, loved ones; where you live; your blood group; what your passport/identity number is; the names of your family members for four generations back - and one I can't remember. She is mock-appalled that few of us know our blood group (and of course its centrality is its own statement on the reality of their lives) and none of us knows our family members from four generations back.

We are tired. She asks if we are ready for bed. We agree and follow her downstairs into the cool basement. Then she returns upstairs and comes back down carrying a large metal padlock. It bothers me. What flashes into my mind is an image of Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war being locked into a church, which burns, and how the guard told a court at the Nuremberg trials that she locked them in because she needed to account for them. She leaves and we hear her padlocking the basement door. There is an uncomfortable silence.

“Oh well...” eventually says one of our group. The implication: we chose the Abraham Path, we were flexible people, and resilient, wanting to genuinely see, didn't we, what it was like for the Palestinians? Mine was not the only heart pounding. Being locked in was just one of the things we would have to negotiate. But why were we locked in? Was it us she was frightened would wander out? So for our own safety, in case we were mistaken for people from the settlement, and the villagers jumpy from last year might do something? Or frightened they might attack, or Israeli soldiers make one of their sporadic appearances? Or was it herself and her family she was protecting, from the consequences of being our hosts, should any trouble occur?

April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Day 2 and we're on our way to Dumas, 19 kilometers away. Our guides, Nidal and Habib, arrive early, and we set off alarmingly fast. Villagers leave their houses; many of the children ask, what is your name? Or call out theirs. Or try out English phrases they have learnt.

We pass the capped wells, places where a village has been obstructed or refused the use of part of its land, as being too near a new settlement, and Nidal is beginning to unfold his story, and that of the refugee camp he still lives in (from political choice – if we leave, who will be left to tell our history and get us back our villages?). His story of how his family were tricked into leaving their village will permeate the two days, and leave a deep impression. We have time to go deep while walking, and it is told in bits, layers under layers unfolding. What makes him a good companion is that he imparts many things, tells many painful stories, but again and again returns from the dark to draw from a well of philosophical optimism.

We've stopped in Aqabra for a meal. English is sparse: I mind my lack of their language. Afterwards we walk again, and the afternoon stretches out.

At last the sun is sinking and Dumas in sight. We enter a well-furnished spacious house that apparently belongs to Habib, and where us women will stay. Habib asks us if we would like to sit by a fire circle outside. He leads us around the back of the house towards the edge of the village and a square of seats. The sun has gone now, there is the chill of early evening. I return to the house for a jacket. Immediately a young woman with two children, one about four, one in her arms, says she will accompany me. She asks me if I know that Habib has three wives: she would never, never let her husband have another wife. She wouldn't stand for it, would kill him rather! We talk about her children, her circumstances, and how she would love to walk with us, but can't while she has young children. But in a few more years.... She has all sorts of plans. When I re-emerge with my jacket, there she is.

As we walk back she says, ask him why he has a third wife, make him tell you. Her eyes are flashing. Seated again, I feel her trying to goad me, but resist. The visitor wants to ask you about having three wives, she says. Well, why do you? I finally ask Habib, and does it work between them? He looks embarrassed. Nidal says for him that his friend really wanted a son and so went on having wives to have a boy. And now with his third wife he has a little son. Luckily the conversation moves on to babies and broken nights, and we all congratulate him, and the moment passes. But I found it interesting, this modern young woman butting against the old ways so clearly but not confronting her neighbour herself, using the visitor to do that.

Back at the house the bedding is new, all sorts of signs of a greater affluence here, more shop-bought stuff. We are called to eat. Habib serves us and sits with us. He is a reticent man and it is a relatively quiet meal.

Soon we begin preparing for bed. Then Habib's disappointed voice, are you going to sleep now? Well, we'd sort of thought of, but why? we say. My wives and daughters would like to meet you. If you are not too tired? Of COURSE we're not. And in come two wives, two teenage girls, one more fluent in English and outgoing, the younger, painfully shy and sitting close to her father for courage – or approval. And shortly after, Habib's mother, a small, feisty, elderly woman. The next couple of hours are pure treat. The girls are shy, there are many halts and misunderstandings and much laughter. They tell us what they have been learning at school. The grandmother who has little English has -

at 87 - gone back to school to learn to read and write. But the first and oldest of the three wives, who lives not in the house but with her mother-in-law, does not seem to be getting the effects of this emancipation. With no English, she speaks through the younger generation. So here are the old skills, the old way of life as represented by the old lady - who walks miles into the hills, Habib tells us proudly, to collect wild artichokes, the hearts of which she bottles. And the younger generation with their hopes through education and their ambitions. And others, perhaps, trapped between the two... Habib goes into the hills to collect wild honey. Would we like to see a video of him and a friend doing this dangerous work? We would. The conversation shifts to medicinal herbs used here which we also use.

You get the impression these women have spoken to few foreigners, it is as if they had come out from the recesses of the house, and it is a valued moment, this exchange of goodwill and common interests over the cultures. We sleep well.

April 3<sup>rd</sup>, day 3.

Today we have only 14k to do, but we are tired from yesterday, not so fresh. Nidal says the last time we will be anywhere near a road is just after lunch. He could arrange a taxi from there, but then there's no turning back. A taxi seems almost too easy this morning.

The illegal settlements are getting me down. They are so PRESENT, always on hilltops, always higher than the villages, making them feel insubstantial to the people in them: that is the point. Being a walker in the landscape is different from seeing them from a car. You are there to be taken a pot-shot at, too.

To get to the settlement we are skirting around, a new tarmac road has been put in. Building it was an excuse to filch even more land, limiting Palestinian access to a swathe on either side. Further on we see a small cluster of provisional buildings on a hilltop. This is how they do it, says Nidal. Start small. Take another bit of our land, prevent us from going near, restrict our farming, you can just do this, you can just do that, you can go on grazing your animals but not sowing your fields, and then all of a sudden it gets changed and you can't even graze your animals. He sighs deeply. Every time you see a few structures like this, you know it will expand into a full settlement before long. The latest person he knows to have been shot – injured though not killed - was

grazing his animals in an area where this hadn't yet been stopped, ' but maybe he got too near, or maybe they just felt like it, you never know...'

Later we glimpse the distant Jordan River leading to the Dead Sea. This prompts conversation about water usage and storage and the shrinking of the Dead Sea and the amount of water siphoned into settlements and the amount proportioned for Israel, and the much lesser amount for Palestine... Water is a theme of these three weeks.

We are eight now because in Dumas Peter showed up - a tall, good-humoured Englishman wearing an Arab cotton headscarf, equipped as if he'd made a last-minute decision to go on a day trip. (He is married to a Palestinian and they are over here holidaying with her family in Nablus.)

Aden says if I opt for a taxi, she'll come with me. It would make sense...yet, damn it, the urge to see it through with the others, if I can, is strong. Sorry Aden. So she takes a taxi with Habib and I remain with the others.

In the early evening, after navigating a mountain pass, and many strenuous hours of walking, a hilltop village comes into sight, another couple of kilometers away, but how sheer the last bit! My legs are about to give way. I ALMOST got there: that's going to have to be sufficient. I ask Nidal if a car from the village could take me the last little way, so he waves down the next car and in I get. That's how I happen to be in a car by myself with someone I don't know, going I don't know where.

A young man is driving, his English limited. We nod and smile at one another. He shifts gears with effort as we transverse the near vertical rise into Kufer Malek, stopping by a public phone box, keeping the engine running. We wait. We wait some more. A crowd starts gathering. My driver isn't from the village, I learn later, and he doesn't know these people. The gesticulating crowd increases in size. My driver's anxiety is obvious in his voice when he speaks to them. He indicates for me to get out. Can you take me to the house I'm going to, I ask? Not understanding, he hands me his mobile. But I find Nidal's number is in my case, not my rucksack, and I have no idea of our host's name or address. I had assumed Nidal had given it to him.



Walk with a guide and everyone knows what to expect, but this unaccounted for incident sparks off the fear that is permanently hovering that you/we/they are not safe. Five minutes pass, in which the sweat trickles copiously from my driver's face, as he taps his fingers on the dashboard, uncertain, while the crowd outside becomes more jumpy, more noisy. I remain in the car because I have become equally anxious, after our first night's experience, about alighting into the tense crowd with no more than a few words of Arabic, and without the name of our hosts in the village.

Then, just when the young man makes it clear that that I have no option, for he is intent on leaving, a car comes down the hill, and a vigorous, small woman, strides over, breathing benign capability, and calming everyone. Within moments we are at her house.

She works for the Ministry of Sport and Education, her husband in the tobacco industry. This is the wealthiest of the three villages, the house particularly lavish.

The spacious living-room cools as the warmth leaves the day. My bed in the children's room with the daughters. After dinner the men go off to their lodgings to smoke, watch football and drink beer, a bit of non-verbal male bonding.

We are all so tired it's hard to dredge up any conversation. I had thought meeting the villagers would be the easy part, but now I can hardly think of one sensible question... Then heaven, it is time for sleep and I collapse on the mattress and no-one else is in there. In the morning both the girls are there and getting dressed. After breakfast Nidal and the men arrive, and off we go.

April 4<sup>th</sup> Day 4.

We set off fast. One interesting point: when I talk about composting and Nidal doesn't know the word, it turns out their soil is so rich the whole concept of composting hasn't, as it were, taken root.

It is a short walk: before long Taybeh comes into view. Almost too short: that it is the end of the walk already has caught as all out. There's consternation – a sense of having got into another way of being, another – ether, almost – and we don't want it to end, to not be putting one foot down after another, smelling the olive trees and the baked ground.

Taybeh (Eng sp.) itself, its old shady corner and stone walls. We visit the lovely Byzantine Greek Orthodox church, and the cool shaded peace of the two outside courtyards, with big stone urns and an ancient well. Then on to Palestine's only brewery, producing very good Taybeh Beer. An assured Palestinian young woman takes us around. She and her family moved from Taybeh to America, where she grew up, then returned to Palestine and started the brewery. It's a success story, despite what she considers the Israelis' every effort to hinder them. The customs requirements change constantly, every excuse is sought to delay the beer. But it is selling in several European countries. She is clearly proud.

Over lunch out come the feedback forms, and it really is over. We plan to exchange addresses, hug and think of ways of staying in contact, the usual things... And all too soon the car arrives to whisk us to Bethlehem. Melissa and I explore Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity, before returning by taxi to Jerusalem. Dinner in a local café with A. A restless night.

April 5<sup>th</sup>

This morning I ask for a quieter room. Then we join a day trip to Hebron. Our guide never stops talking. He is well-informed, but filled with such relentless energy to educate that it has a negative effect on you. No-one likes being force-fed what to think. Later he'll confide that - if you tell a tale of pain and injustice too many times - it can begin to eat into you -

We reach the hell-hole and ugliness of Hebron, with the Wall, the barred roads, only one entrance, and the coach manoeuvring in streets far too narrow for it. And then we disgorge into a square and desperate Arab children pester us to buy poor little trinkets and the guide tells them to scam and back they come, again and again, trying for just one sale. It's hot and you feel sick and try to sound firm but you end up shouting 'no' in self-preservation. And then you regret it.

In the souk we see the netting over the streets to prevent the Israelis from the settlement throwing rubbish and rocks on the people in the street below. The guide calls us into countless doorways to tell us more terrible stories of abuse. I'm mourning the end of the walk, mourning Hebron, exhausted and jumpy. The guide says he's not allowed to go further with us and directs us to the Haram Al-Khalil mosque, back to back with the Synagogue.

Now we're in the waiting pens. The queue is slow, there are enclosed parts of the checking grids where we are herded forward, sheep-like. The Israeli soldiers are laconic, arrogant or dismissive or don't meet your eye, or all four. They seem out to make you feel small. You eventually pass through, if you are lucky. Then the great mosque, and you are given an archaic gown and hood covering in blue. We all end up looking like Trolls.

We're back now with our guide. He will take us only a little way further, he says, for it is dangerous for him here. The road, the main thoroughfare, has a narrow strip cordoned off, perhaps no more than one eighth of the width. This is the bit the Palestinians must walk. All the rest is free for the rest of us. We can even go in their strip if we like. But they, if they step out of their cordon, are in trouble. Apartheid?

The army is much in evidence. Across the way it has occupied a house, which a Jewish family claims to have bought from a Palestinian. In the front yard of the house next door a young Orthodox Jew with an orange beard sits surrounded by scraggly-looking children and a scraggly-looking young wife with an abstracted dreamy look. One of our group, James, walks over and talks to him. I join them. The soldiers are alert to my movements, hands on their guns. A. follows me, standing a little back. I like James' non-confrontational interviewer tone, like he is neutral, just interested, without opinion of rights or wrongs. I say this because A. is already steamed up. It's illegal for the settlers to buy anything here, she hisses. I try to find James' neutral stance.

The orange-bearded one, asked simply what is he doing here, says he is sitting it out with his family. He has bought the house, paid good money and now they will wait to get into it. He didn't look like someone with good money to me. And was the house just for him? No, he relents, for him and others. How many? Reminding myself to keep my voice flat. Five families. They didn't pay for it, I'm thinking, the logistics for one thing would be too complicated. So – it wasn't your money then, perhaps someone bought it for you? He didn't seem pleased, but eventually answered yes, they had. Who? He said it was a Jewish organization, but didn't say which. But I knew then what I needed, that some right-wing organization was buying up houses illegally to extend the area in this Palestinian town where Israelis have a purchase, extending their frontiers and putting these young

impoverished families in the houses of an up-till-now wholly Arab area.

We move away and James offers to take us up to the settlement. A., he and I go. It is eerily quiet. I feel nervous, but I want to see it. It's unguarded and we walk straight in. It's far more affluent than anything else we've seen in Hebron. Like a reasonably upmarket housing estate with a synagogue and a child's play area and lots of toys around, and some women with young children in long skirts and the boys in long trousers and of course encircling barbed wire. It's spooky and solemn, we're greeted courteously enough but with suspicion. There is no sound of kids' laughter or happy play. But then what effect can it have on these young lives to live barricaded, to hate those outside your compound? We climb up on the parapets and look down on what they look down on - what they so hate, the Arab streets below...

Afterwards, back in the coach and more of our guide's voice, and a stop at a glass factory. Then a refugee camp, kinder, smaller than the one in Nablus. Some houses with more space, fewer stories - and gardens. But still 80% unemployment, says our guide.

And outside the camp, on its doorstep, rises the wall. You walk smack into it, the horror of it, its sense of claustrophobia. There it is, wedging them in. Some of the graffiti tries to soften its effect with jokes. The most telling being the life-size staircase drawn onto it, like you are only at a tube station, you can just go up those steps and get out... Our guide argues that the wall doesn't keep anyone out of Israel who really wants to get in because it only runs in stretches; there are enough places to get through if you want to. He says the Israelis' claim that since the wall there have been less suicide bombers and terrorist attacks is in reality nothing to do with the wall but results from a different approach by Hamas. It is an atrocity to see it like this and sense what it would be to be living right up against it, angry, despairing, un-agented...

God, it's hot. In Manger Square the guide is waiting. He sticks by me but doesn't rant now. He says recounting his people's story day after day is destroying his underpinnings, he is beginning to crack up. You'll need a rest from this job soon, I say.

We're on our way back to Jerusalem now. The guide waves us goodbye. The coach is quiet afterwards, stifling. To left and right, all the ways from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, they are busy building more settlements and adding to those already there. Whole corridor towns

are springing up, solid and irrefutable, never to be disbanded. And we pass the occasional small, ever more precariously positioned Palestinian village, wedged in on either side by these huge battleship monstrosities of towns. Soon the entire strip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem will be filled in like this. You feel sick, sick at heart.

Back in the Gloria, and the same man is on the desk. Have you had a good day? We've been to Hebron. He asks angrily, why go there? To see. But you go there in your coaches and you see this and that and you come back - and what good does it do us? I don't know, I say. Maybe we can tell people. What can you know of our suffering in a day? Not much. You know, I tell him, when I asked you for a quieter room this morning it was because I've just returned from walking in Palestine. At least four days, I say with a bit of a smile, is that a bit better? Silence. Where have you been walking? I name the villages, *Awarta, Dumas, Kufer Malek*...say I've been staying with villagers. Why? Because I wanted to know. The anger has gone out of his face, or perhaps the despair. A slight movement, a slight softening of his features. What you find? Oh...a lot of things. When you go home, tell them, he says.

April 6<sup>th</sup>

For the next few days my thoughts and emotions dovetail with A's. I feel angry and disturbed as we travel on Egged Line buses down through the desert. Hard not to view Israel as the country inflicting the conditions I have witnessed - and worse - on the people I have been amongst, and in doing so, riding roughshod through the Oslo agreement, with the world watching.

Passover starts tonight. Everyone is travelling somewhere, Jerusalem is emptying. Our first stop is Ein Gheddi on the Dead Sea. The Guest House is barrack-like, unadorned, a lot of concrete, and behind, the ubiquitous barbed wire security fences. At the front, huge gates which can be bolted and locked. Who are they worried about keeping out here? There is only desert, and another holiday community, a nature reserve, and a kibbutz up in the hills taming the desert and creating an impressive green haven. A. shrugs. They can green every bit of the desert they like, she says, it makes no difference.

Time to test the waters of the Dead Sea. We walk to the bathing place. Afterwards I return to the women's dressing-room, opening the door to the shower-room to face two belligerent-looking women in their forties, a bevy of teenage girls behind them in the showers.

You can't come in here.

Why? Why not?

The showers are closed to the public now. We have paid for them to be opened.

The salt from the Dead Sea is stinging my eyes and legs.

Please, I'll only be a moment.

We paid to have it opened, they repeat.

Then I'll pay for my shower, I'm happy to.

No, it's only open for us. Special for us. The women stare at me. Do you hear – special for us!

And later that evening over the Sabbath meal, where to sit? We approach the first table for ten, where three people are seated. No, you can't come here, it is for us and our family. The empty neighbouring table? No, also for our family. A third empty table. But, again - It's *ours*. Later, in our bedroom, after, finally, a seat, and what turned out to be a very good meal, A. and I were in dark accord. Do you need to travel further? This is what they think: special for us.

We travel south, into Jordan and back again, and the border crossings and the questions and the relentless grilling at the airport. Fear. Where have you been, who have you spoken to, have you given anyone your email address, have you told anyone your movements? Why three days in Petra? Where have you walked? The same questions all over again and again, until you are hot, exhausted and very confused.

The café in Departures is bedlam - babies screeching, people shouting at the top of their voices, the decibels resounding off the walls, everyone pushing and shoving, hollering. And then the plane descends into Tel Aviv. A taxi driver drives us off barely before A.'s foot has left the pavement, speaking loudly the whole way into the city, without ever making eye contact: hard not to make the comparison with the unfailing courtesy we've experienced from the Jordanians and the Palestinians to an older generation.

Here we are at the hotel. The guy on the desk laconically watches us haul our cases up the steps without coming to help, with similar lack of concern. I hate this place, says A. Tired, we eat a late meal, buoyed up, if nothing else, by the camaraderie of decrying what we have witnessed.

The following day we walk around the bay to Jaffe, cobbled streets of artists' studios, a charming tourist spot with its views over the harbour, its yuppified restaurants. Only the Palestinians who lived here, many of them, like Nidal's family, who come from this area, have been living in refugee centres, like Balata, since 1948...

I walk back to Tel Aviv along the sea front, in somber spirits, troubled. Wait a moment. Wasn't my intention before I left England to remain open, to be even-handed on this journey, to see both sides, I remind myself? These are my people, too. Though as yet everything I've felt has been alien, not akin. I'd supposed that there might be some advantage in making the trip at this time of my life. While I might encounter some physical challenges walking in Palestine, the redeeming feature would be a greater breadth of spirit, a *wiser* mind. So, what has happened?

You go to the West Bank, you witness injustice, you see the incontestable signs of the inhumanity that one peoples can mete out to another, the one with the greater power, the more weaponry: the one that won. And you feel angry with the oppressors – wretched for the oppressed. A week ago you were staying in their houses. A few days ago the clerk at the hotel desk urged, tell it as it is.

We must oppose injustice by whatever means we can. Yet, to make another people into a them is too easy, surely. It stems from the same root as the Israelis' treatment of the Palestinians on the West Bank, and what has so searingly been done to us Jews through most of our history. Call me a wishy-washy liberal if you like, but after ten days here, aren't I falling into the same trap, if I'm viewing the Israelis as 'the enemy'? I need to stand back, to hear, also, what it feels like to be living in Israel. To hear it from them. To stay open. To use my ears and eyes.

But A., who is not Jewish, and hasn't the same impetus, also - temperamentally, ideologically - to find common ground, doesn't need to see more. She's made up her mind. I thought we agreed! I don't know where I am with you any more! And sometimes I found I barely knew myself.

I meet - separately - three Israelis, all friends, all art therapists, B, C and D. B, in her 50s, has been in the same apartment block for over thirty years, since arriving from Australia. She works in a hospital with a residential unit for seriously disturbed adolescent girls. The

programme embraces all: fully-covered Muslims, conservatively attired orthodox Jews, and shorts-wearing modern Israelis, with rings in their belly-buttons, eat and sleep together. The staff are multi-cultural. Sometimes I think it is hard being a liberal, she says, always giving in to the more radical, louder group. On our last staff holiday the orthodox Jews wanted kosher food but there was no kosher restaurant, so we had to go miles out of our way to please them. Politics? I haven't got the time to be active. But – I do what I can through my work...

When she drives me back a cluster of Orthodox Jews are walking ahead of her in leisurely manner and failing to let her through. Obstinacy, or a failure to notice her? That's what I mean, she sighs. It's the Sabbath and they don't drive, so they don't acknowledge that anyone else does.

C's family emigrated from Poland, as mine had done: her uncle just before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War; the rest of the family afterwards. Her parents were ardent adherents of the back-to-the-land movement, believing that only by leaving the towns and working on the land would you become rooted, free, able to prevent history ever repeating itself. They began farming. The only trouble was they were hopeless intellectuals with no idea how to do it.

She brings to mind my own mother with her goats and her hens in wartime Sussex. She too was a hopelessly intellectual, idealistic back-to-the-lander with probably the same dreams. When I share the memory we look at each other, moved a little, laughing, that laughter that is near tears.

And Israeli policies? To the Palestinians? Look, it's so wrong. Her face has lost its vibrancy of a few minutes ago. There is despair there and a grief I can feel pressing out to touch me from behind her eyes.

And it is that very conflict, of being so out of kilter with your country's direction, that I touch with her in a place below words. It is – almost unbearable, and there aren't words, I can feel that, I can feel that from her. There's just a very, very dark pain. And this woman, I didn't know her an hour ago. Tears in my eyes now.

Then she shrugs it off, pulls herself back. As we part she says, with a touch of apology, but to someone/something that is not me - and a sort of defiant lightness that has unreadable layers underneath it - that she has come to the point where she thinks that small personal acts of



kindness - like finding a lawyer for a Palestinian boy in trouble – is what she can most valuably do now.

A few days later I go to dinner with D and her husband. Tonight is Holocaust Remembrance Day, marked in Israel by a loud siren at 8pm, the broadcast ceremony lasting a few minutes. D hates it, it reminds her of wars, and she's unsettled. But the TV says the sirens will sound tomorrow morning instead. A relief? No, she says. Something's wrong. There must have been some sort of a – muddle. We can't afford that. It's worrying. Fear, again. You can butt against the system but you damn well need it – is that the implication?

They came from Switzerland in '67, settled on a kibbutz then moved to the town and started their careers. But they began to feel deeply disillusioned by Israel's policies towards the Palestinians in the West Bank. So they returned to Switzerland, "but discovered we weren't Swiss any more. So eventually we came back."

Like B & C, D is proud of her work. And perhaps for her that mitigates 'the other', is a counter-balance, the uncomfortable pact a sensitive person would have to accommodate, wittingly or unwittingly, by living here?

Move further from the West Bank and the issues do seem less obviously contentious day by day. In Haifa, for example, the large Christian Palestinian group have a history of peaceful relations with their fellow townsmen. Or should I put that the other way?

I also revisit Beit Ha'Emek, the former kibbutz (now a loosely run co-operative that embraces private ownership) I worked on in 1960. I have set up meetings with two elders and one of them, W, a retired agronomist in his late seventies, is taking me to lunch in the community's restaurant.

I can't get my bearings yet. The ride from the station has involved a series of dual carriage-ways, with a large gas station marking the entrance to what in 1960 had been a rural community living in prefab huts.

Close to the dining-hall had stood the laundry, where newcomers were put to work. Before the Sabbath kibbutz members queued up to receive their fresh supplies. Along with everything else we needed, stamps, toothpaste, the boys would openly get another supply of condoms.

I graduated to the vineyards a few miles away, and later to the backbreaking challenge of laying a lawn in front of the dining-hall, the first green grass the kibbutz had. When I went back three years later with my theatre troupe, all of Beit Ha'emek was as green as an English golf course.

It had been at first less successful than some of the other kibbutzim, partly because the water supply was constantly being damaged by the neighbouring Arab villages. Every night a teenaged orphan, Shleppe, a boy of my age, was responsible for making the rounds of the kibbutz land on horseback, with the sole gun it possessed, to check the well and other installations. Soon I was riding the horse with Shleppe, holding the gun when he dismounted to check.

There was something confusingly amateurish about the relationship between the two villages and the kibbutz, which makes today's hardened hatreds all the grimmer. I'd been at Beit Ha'Emek for about six weeks, for example, when the same Arabs who played weekly havoc with the water supply invited Shleppe and me to be guests at a wedding celebration. Water gave Israel life, but can water ever be 'special for us'?

Over lunch W asks what I have been doing. I mention walking in Palestine. And some unquantifiable shift of attention takes place, some alertness in his relaxed body. There is a minute pause. He says: "An Arab friend of ours, a young man I trust very well, said that he recently went for a holiday to Ramallah and he stayed in a very good modern hotel, and it was like anywhere else, a very nice place. No troubles at all. We're becoming more affluent and they're getting more affluent and that's what it's all about, in the end. That's how peace will come."

No, I say to W, I'm sorry, but no -. Listen, in Hebron –  
Oh Hebron, that's different.

Well, what about the illegal settlements –

Those meshugana [crazy/extreme] settlers, he says, the government is losing patience, is finding ways of curtailing them.

Let me tell you, I say –

Of course I don't believe in apartheid, he says, but I don't believe –  
come, let me take you round.

I jump up at this suggestion: I don't want to be arguing with this man.

The average number of children per family here is four. Both W and S – who I speak with later – have married children back living at Beth Ha’Emek. Many have returned since the changes. And the community have made peace with their Christian Arab neighbours (W implies that the Christian part is important.) Some send their children to the kindergarten of the kibbutz school, the petrol station at the entrance is a joint venture, they are building a seniors complex that will house both members of the kibbutz and people from the nearby Arab villages. And will you live there, if it comes to it? Well, he laughs, I’d rather die in my own home!

He was once as left wing as anyone. No-one wants of course to live in a system where there is injustice – BUT, he says, BUT - and he is getting very worked up, I’ve seen what happens. We left Lebanon and got the Hizballah – we got the Jewish settlers out of the Gaza strip and what happened - they voted the Hamas into power and they are still shooting rockets into Israel – all this makes turning the West Bank into a Palestinian state very complicated.

W, I urge, don’t let’s argue. But he will, and on we go and on we go, Lebanon, and the Arab Spring, and how we would have accepted the agreement made with the United Nations but they would not. They’d still...have us in the sea if they could, and that’s why -

W, let’s walk on shall we. Please – But he cannot let it go and all the while we walk, still he is talking politics, and I think, he could have a heart attack. He must explain it to me, all of it comes tumbling out.

We get to his home; his wife is upstairs dozing. He is badly out of breath but insists on making tea and cutting me a piece of the coffee cake she has left out.

You tell me this, he says, all over the world there are wars, people win and people lose, and if they lose maybe they have to leave their land, their homes, and set up somewhere else. Take India and Pakistan; take Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. It happens and it’s tough, but people get on with it, they make their homes somewhere else. But why not the Palestinians, he’s shouting now with rage and frustration.

I will, though maybe not at this moment, I say, I’ll write to you with my answer. And I want you to answer a question for me. Tell me if I am right in my perception that all over Israel there are people – and that includes you – who want something with one hand, but with another

part of themselves don't want to give up those things that stop it happening? Like you, you want a fair state, but you actually don't want to share it with the Arabs, admit it.

I want a democratic state with a Jewish majority, he says, it's true, I think that's safer. It's true I'd rather them be under us, not the Christian Arabs round here, but those others. That's what everything I've seen has taught me and that's what you don't understand.

So you say you don't want apartheid and with a part of you you can let it happen or pretend it isn't happening if that's the price?

Now there is no more talking in the room and I finish my slice of cake. I think, what a battle we've been through all afternoon, and how wrong this is. Both of us are exhausted. Yet there is an oddly peaceful feeling in the room.

Then W says, coming forward, you know I'm very pleased you came. Oh? And he tells me he has colleagues from around the world, fellow agronomists, amongst them many English who were good friends. But in the last twenty or so years he has felt them cooling towards him. And it's been painful. He comes to sit down now near me. He has needed to say what he has done, to an English person, and to be heard. We haven't agreed, but something else has happened now. We have shifted to something else.

If only the Israelis and Palestinians can get there. Like Amos Oz I believe they will, in time. But then I'm an optimist. I think of those feisty resilient people I met in Palestine, the strong women who will learn how to use power wisely, the strength of the women's movement, the human wisdom of men like Nidal and Majdi, the careers opening out gradually to Palestinians, like the art therapists on B's university course, the voices and groups speaking out against what isn't acceptable, that must grow and grow. It will happen in time. And we must help it happen.

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