

# Ambivalence

## *Crossing the Israel/Palestine Divide*



Jonathan Garfinkel

"This book will change how  
you think about Israel and Palestine."

• BRIAN ENO



# CHAPTER 1

## Several years earlier Kensington Market, Toronto

From the wooden benches we rise, shuffling, dutifully turning 180 degrees to face the back wall of the synagogue. Normally we face east toward Jerusalem, but for this verse we're praying west. Like a drunken geriatric choir we welcome the Sabbath Bride.

*Lecha dodi, likrat kala  
P'nai Shabbat nekabla*

*Come my beloved to meet the bride,  
let us welcome the Sabbath*

There are only fourteen men here tonight, but we belt out the song anyway.

There's Yakov on the bimah leading the way. He's a dentist by day and folksinger by night. He's gone grey and mid-life, talks bitter, a sarcastic jab to the ribs, but when he sings it's gold and you can glimpse an inkling of his soul.

Old Yankl, he's a lion with a mane of white hair, dry and saint-like. He has pale, pockmarked skin. Standing next to me with his open prayer book, his thin blue cat-eyes stare at the red-stained glass above

the women's section. He watches the shadow of a pigeon on the landing behind the window. Yankl likes to pray, drink Alberta rye and play the track. Rumour has it he lives in the Waverly Hotel, has since Milton Acorn days.

Next to Yankl is his best friend, the Engineer, droning out something that resembles a bass line. He used to be a whiz of a physicist at the University of Chicago. No one knows where he lives or what he does now; the story goes he lives on the streets. Sometimes I see him in the Lillian Smith Library scribbling in his notebook. He's working on his magnum opus, a book about the relation between quantum mechanics and aged cheddar cheese. The guy's splitting a green suit three sizes too small. The sleeves come up to his elbows, the pants to his shins, and his large belly hangs over a cardboard belt. "I look like a shlump," I once heard the Engineer say, "because that's what the world does to the poor: turns them into shlumps. And, shlump to shlump, you may notice that this once-beautiful Harry Rosen silk suit—which I purposefully washed in the washing machine to get it wrinkly and small—is the suit of Satan."

Behind me to the right is G., a real pretty choirboy's tenor. He used to be a woman. After a year's supply of testosterone pills and OHIP-assisted surgery, G. joined the men's section at the Anshei Minsk. He wears thick black glasses and has a black beard I envy. I don't think that anybody at the synagogue knows G. was born a woman except for me. He confided this to me one Yom Kippur.

"Jonathan," he said in a voice that cracked at the "Jona" and found itself again at the "thin," "I used to be a lesbian." He brushed his beard with his hand as though it were a lint brush and his beard an expensive jacket.

I thought he was joking, using that tiresome pickup line I'd heard once at a college frat party. But G. is no frat boy (although he has confessed his attraction to their barbaric, tribalistic rituals). As we sat on the park bench next to the Al Waxman statue in Kensington

Market, G. showed me an old Ontario driver's licence. Her name was Alexis Wallace. She had angel black hair and Emily Watson eyes.

"You used to be a shiksa," I said. He didn't find that funny.

"It's not my fault my mother didn't tell me she was Jewish until four years ago," he said.

"G.," I said, realizing what he needed was a friend, confidant, brother, "*mazel tov.*"

He was talking to me because of my ambivalent relationship to Judaism. Like G., I both love and reject my faith. I simultaneously crave the postmodern and worship the ancient.

G. and I sat on the bench while pigeons landed and shat on Al Waxman's head. A couple of teenagers stoned on mouthwash and nutmeg played "ding the empty beer" with stones. I surreptitiously examined the package between G.'s legs to glean just how good the operation was. Fasting does strange things to the head. Did he have a bris? Was his mother there with bowls of chopped liver and pickled herring? It is, after all, an occasion of joy when a Jewish male is welcomed into the fold. When I was at my brother Joseph's bris (I was six) I could not take my eyes off the mohel's steady hand, stared at the towel dipped in wine to sedate my baby brother. The curious precision of the mohel who wore not hospital white but a lovely navy-blue pinstripe suit. In two deft snips, my brother's covenant was sealed. Then we moved to the dining room, to stuff our faces with chopped egg, poppy seed bagels, cheese blintzes and lox.

I TURN TO MY prayer book and join the other men in song.

*Lecha dodi, lecha dodi likrat kala  
P'nai Shabbat nekabla ...*

When I sing Lecha Dodi, I think maybe it's easier this way, not to fight what I was given, the world I was handed on day eight of

my life with a *snip snip* of the *tip tip*. But Lecha Dodi is more than inheritance and duty. The music makes me feel cleaner. I sing it and lose all skepticism, stupidity, desire for the outside raciness of things. That is, until I look at the translation.

They say the mystic Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz wrote the lyrics in Safad, sixteenth-century Palestine. Alkabetz and his disciples would wander out into the fields singing this song as night fell, greeting the Sabbath Bride with these words:

*May your oppressors be downtrodden,  
And may those who devoured you be cast far off.*

In other words: *May God kick the shit out of our enemies.*

The rest of the song isn't like this. But I stumble over this verse. Why are Alkabetz and his cohort encouraging vengeance on the day of rest? Why this eye for an eye rhetoric on the holiest day of the week? I imagine Alkabetz and nine of his buddies in white *kittels*, holding hands, gently swaying in a field in Galilee. I can see two Arabs on their way home from a hard day's work. It's evening, and they hear the ten men chanting, "*And may those who devoured you be cast far off.*"

ARAB #1: Good God. What are those crazy Jews doing now?

ARAB #2: Dancing like idiots.

ARAB #1: They're singing to the friggin' wheat.

ARAB #2: Morons.

ARAB #1: Wheat needs tending to, not prayer.

THEY SAY THE JEWS FROM MINSK, Belarus, came to Canada and built this shul in Kensington Market, 1930. Brick by brick, the design is identical to the synagogue they left behind to flame and smoke, blessed be its memory.

See the white chandelier hanging like a crown over the men in this room. And the silver Torah crowns that take in that light. And the

paintings on the wall: to be strong like a lion, fast like a deer, words of encouragement in Hebrew. And more: paintings of trombones, clarinets and violins, sounds of my musical ancestors. *Praised be this klezmer, how I wish we could carry a tune.*

And the smell, wafting up from downstairs: Sarah's chicken soup, stale herring, the dust from fluorescent lights.

And the smell of men: sweet and rancid, sweat and mould, meat gone bad before the maggots.

Outside these thirty-foot-high wood doors linger the ghosts of Kensington: old Jewish, turn-of-the-nineteenth-century neighbourhood. Once there were synagogues on nearly every corner. On Chanukah, they say there wasn't a window or storefront on Augusta Avenue or Baldwin Street that didn't glow with festival candles. Gone are the kosher butchers, the Jewish tailors; gone to richer, suburban lives in Forest Hill, North York, Thornhill. Anywhere but this *shmut-sik* ghetto that stinks of you-know-where, may those rotten shtetls only be remembered in Shalom Aleichem books. Now the windows of Kensington are sticky with sweet and sour pork, Café Kim cheap beer. And inside the Minsk, these fourteen men. Our lame out-of-time, out-of-tune prayer. Praying for the Sabbath Bride and a free meal, compliments of Perl's kosher foods.

Rabbi Spero is imported from Cleveland. He comes over to shake my hand. A smile on his face, a chuckle that says, "Good to see you, where the hell you been, you schmuck?" He wishes I were a better Jew. Who can blame him? I haven't been here in months. That's how it is with me, one month I believe, the next I don't. And yet in spite of my long absences the rabbi's black eyes are warm with forgiveness. His handshake is firm in a way that makes me feel solid, secure.

Spero's young for a rabbi, forty-two, has five kids and a beautiful wife we simply call *Rebbetzen*. His face as you'd expect: skin Elmer's Glue white and his beard thick from learning. What's surprising is the guy's in pretty good shape, has decent biceps. While two of his

children hang on to his shoulders screaming for attention, he continues to pray. They're like monkeys, the two kids, climbing up his belly, his back, hanging from his neck. But the rabbi doesn't get upset or angry. Focused, he bends at the knees, bows his head and chants. How does he do it?

Sometimes I imagine the rabbi in his basement, shirtless but for his tallis, black moons of hair swirling his chest. Surrounded by candles he lies on the dank, cement floor and starts bench-pressing Torahs, five, six, seven, eight of them at once, precariously balanced one on top of the other.

"One more, Rebbetzen," he shouts to his wife. "Throw another Torah on top. This is how strong my faith is!"

I'M LOOKING FOR SOMETHING to make me believe. It doesn't have to be rabbi-level conviction—half a Spero would do. It would be nice to stumble upon a burning bush, a parting of the sea. Even a neon sign that says, "This way to revelation, idiot." Of course, what I'd do with a miracle—if and when confronted by one—is a whole other matter.

I've witnessed one miracle in my life. It happened six years ago in Winnipeg with my Baba Jesse not long before she died. She was in her eighties and couldn't speak on account of a stroke that had frozen the right side of her face. Her smile was a half-smile. Half of her alive, the other half numb to the world.

It had been three years since Baba had uttered an intelligible word. I was visiting with Laura, my girlfriend at the time. We were hitchhiking across Canada that spring and we stopped in Winnipeg to spend some time with my grandparents. It was a warm spring day. Baba wanted to go outside, so I helped her struggle to the door with the walker. Laura was fixing lunch in the kitchen. In the hallway I could hear my grandfather's continuous scribble. Behind a pile of papers—pyramids of drafts, bills and documents—Zaida

Ben worked at the dining-room table composing letters to Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton urging radical environmental reform. Earlier in the week he'd ordered vast quantities of canned tomato soup (the day Laura and I arrived we stacked 144 cans of the stuff next to the piano). An environmental chemist, he anticipated one global catastrophe after another; that week it was thermonuclear holocaust.

I helped Baba down the front four steps of the house to the walkway. She inched her way forward, feet stuttering on asphalt. Fifteen metres took five minutes. The lawns of Winnipeg's south end were smiling, winter over at last. While Baba worked with the walker, I read to her the day's news: market reports from Taiwan, financial goals in Australia, long-term predictions for Hong Kong. She loved when I read her the Business section, something I thought odd given her communist sympathies.

We stopped by the sidewalk to sit on lawn chairs. The sun felt good on the skin. Baba stared at me, and her gaze made me uncomfortable. She looked at me as though I were a foreign country. Tried to read me, a language she couldn't understand.

"Is she Jewish?" she asked.

"What?"

"Is she Jewish?" Baba repeated herself, as though to show this was no accident.

"Do you mean Laura?"

"IS. SHE. JEWISH?"

I saw two roads ahead of me.

One road was the truth: Laura was from an aristocratic family in equestrian country, New Jersey. Her ancestors came to America on the *Mayflower*. She celebrated Christmas, waxed nostalgic for Bing Crosby, used lard in her pies and bacon in her sandwiches.

The other road was the lie. I can't say I like lying too much. But I'm aware that lying is also a kind of longing. It's willing the right

answer, wishing my grandmother a small measure of happiness in her final days. A gift.

I did my best to meet Baba Jesse's gaze. "Yes, she's Jewish."

"Good," she said, closing her eyes.

This was the last time my grandmother would ever speak.

THERE'S A WOMAN up in the balcony who looks a lot like my mother. I know my mother would never set foot in this synagogue unless there was a wedding or bris. She's uncomfortable with downtown Jews, the messiness of the Market, the lack of elegance in this eclectic hodge-podge of congregants. While I have nostalgia for all things Eastern European, my mother goes to the Narayever, the hippie shul a little farther north in The Annex. My mother has zero hippie in her, but the Narayever is modern, egalitarian and clean. Like her mother, Baba Jesse, she's irritated by the idea of women being confined to three narrow rows on the second-floor balcony. "Women closer to heaven, my foot," my mother would likely say. "Jonathan, this isn't the Dark Ages. Don't you think it's time for members of the female sex to be allowed to touch a Torah?"

Three years ago my mother returned from a vacation in Europe to find my father gone—packed up and moved out. After thirty-three years of marriage, three sons, weekly Shabbos dinners, kvetching, brises, brisket, bar mitzvahs, weddings, shivas, Seders, sukkahs, chametz, Hebrew, tears, latkes, guilt, the Marx Brothers, Baba's pickles, Zaida's mustard, it's no wonder I had dreams the basement in the house of my childhood had flooded. The news swamped the foundations: My father had abandoned ship.

I don't know if my parents were wildly in love when I was a child. By the end, they patiently endured each other. They managed to sweep every disagreeable sentence, emotion and argument under the rug. Everyone was happy, happy, happy. In the eyes of our neighbours and friends, we were perfect—my parents known as the Ward and June Cleaveritches of Forest Hill. We were Conservative with a dash of

modern Orthodox. On Saturdays we went to a synagogue with separate seating for men and women, and we had two sets of dishes, milk and meat. My mother spent her days in the kitchen riffing on tradition. Her hand-made potato things tasted more *gnocchi* than *knish*, and her mandelbroit like the finest *cantucci* in Tuscany. Her gefilte fish was famous the street over, as was her cure-all chicken-carrot-ginger-mushroom soup (hers was a nouvelle-Yiddish cuisine, *herbes de Provence* meet the shit-streams of The Pale). My father went to work every day with a humble brown briefcase, drove a humble brown Ford, and attended to ballet dancers and *Playboy* centrefold models with eating disorders at the Clarke Institute. Each morning he went to listen to the problems of the anorexic, the bulimic, the nearly dead.

After my father left my mother, the Jewishness in my family, as I knew it, came to an end. We tried to continue in splintered-off versions. A Passover Seder, the odd Friday-night dinner. But nothing was the same. Judaism is about ethics, Torah and prayer. But more than anything, it's family. And ever since mine has broken apart, I've been left wondering what remains of the religion I've inherited. This is partly why in the last three years I've started to go to shul again for the first time as an adult. I need to touch a fragment of my faith.

Four months after my parents' separation, my grandmother died. With her death in 2000, Baba's "Is she Jewish?" quotient appeared to be in grave danger. My brothers are now both engaged, to a Catholic and an agnostic. My father's living with a Presbyterian. My mother, who wouldn't let my ex-girlfriend Laura stay over in our house five years ago, is heading out on a date this week with a Presbyterian. Jewish Garfinkel blood is now on the endangered species list.

My mother hasn't dated anyone since she was eighteen years old. She called me yesterday evening for some advice. Our conversation went something like this:

MOTHER: What does he want from me?

ME: He wants to take you on a date.

MOTHER: But I just want to go to the opera.

ME: That's perfect. You have a free ticket.

MOTHER: How long does a date last?

ME: Say you have to be home by midnight. You have work the next day.

MOTHER: Midnight? Does it have to go so late?

WE SING THE ALEINU. I bend at my knees and bow my head, belt out the song by rote. I've sung it thousands of times in my life. It's as natural as breathing.

I'm thinking of you, Baba, the miracle of your speech. I'm wondering: Why does the communist who hates synagogue and rejects religion still care if my girlfriend is Jewish? What is this instinct that survives Marxism and the freezing of the left hemisphere of the brain?

Sometimes I imagine my Baba standing here with me in the synagogue. It sounds strange, especially given her secular leanings (and that she's of the female persuasion). But I would've wanted her to meet Judith.

"So you got rid of Laura and got a new girlfriend," Baba would say to me.

"Her name is Judith. And we've been together three years."

I'd point her out, sitting in the second row of the women's section in the balcony.

"Nice eyes. A real Jewess, that Yehudit. What she do for a living?"

"She's a theatre director."

"An artist? Not very secure, but nourishing nonetheless. You're going to have to be the man."

I wouldn't tell Baba that Judith and I have broken up two times already. Wouldn't tell her that our relationship is barely holding itself together, and when the weave is at its thinnest we seem to cling tighter to each other.

"So when's the wedding?" Baba Jesse would most certainly ask.

I TRY TO MAKE EYES at Judith. I want to catch her attention but she's engrossed in her siddur. I make a sour-cat face, cock my head to the side, but I know she won't look. Tonight I want something to overwhelm us. A prayer: *May the confusion of the heart scatter from its chambers*. For a moment it seems to work. Judith becomes beautiful again, the way I knew her when I first met her. Can you see her long black skirt, her river of black hair tied back in a ponytail, blue eyes at prayer?

In spite of our eternal road of bumpy patches, Friday is our night. We come to synagogue to feel clean again. Shabbat is the holiest day of the week for Jews—and lovers. For it is deemed sacred, a mitzvah, when a man and woman make love on this night. Life becomes simpler in the synagogue, connects us to the ancient.

IN THE BEGINNING Judith's hands were doves, two birds Noah sent into the world in search of land. To bring back an olive leaf, a resting place, a sign of peace.

When we fell in love Judith would place her head in my neck and coo-coo me with long fingers. She'd give her analysis of a Bruno Schulz short story while S-curving my back—delightful. She sang "Falling in Love Again" in a deep tenor's voice, read Heine and Goethe to me in German. Judith showed me how to read her palm, and we read each other's lives, the maps of ourselves, love, life, fate. I held her, kissed her thin aerodynamic ears (I often imagined her jumping out of an airplane and breaking all kinds of skydiving records). Once she pressed her hands against my ears saying, "Don't listen to the world outside. Go on, go in."

When Judith was my age she toured Europe as a street actor, studied theatre directing in Berlin. She's inspired me to write with passion, love with appetite, drink slivovitz straight from the freezer. And her dead Romanian father courses through her when she dances to gypsy music, late night over the wooden floors of the bakery we live above in Kensington Market.

I watch her read the English translation of prayers, following carefully with her index finger. She reads the words in her prayer book with the kind of awe someone has when first falling in love. Judith was not brought up with religion. Her mother, a Holocaust survivor, despised all things Jewish when Judith was a kid. It was only a few years before we met that Judith came to embrace her past. Now she wants to know more, learn the heritage she was refused.

She loves that I can speak Hebrew, is amazed by the fact I went to Bialik, a Labour Zionist day school in Toronto. From ages five to thirteen I studied everything that has been denied Judith: Jewish history and Israeli literature, Tanakh and Hebrew grammar. She constantly asks me questions. How can one be a Zionist but not be religious? Why do we face west when we sing the second-to-last stanza of *Lecha Dodi*? What is the Balfour Declaration? Why the shattered glass at a wedding?

We fell in love when I was twenty-six, lying on the purple dyed cotton of her Romanian grandmother's *plapuma*, sewn silver to reflect the light. We spent the first winter unemployed, reading to each other from a book whose name we did not know. *Madrigals*, we named it, an obscure surrealist novella by a writer whose name and title were torn off the cover (we found the book at a garage sale). Our voices became the words of that unknown author. She read me the story of the watchmaker who took his grandson to a beach in Tel Aviv. The grandson wanted to learn how to fly. The grandfather stared out at the horizon of sea, his grey eyes stained silver. Led by three balloons in his hand, the grandson suddenly left the earth and drifted over the Mediterranean.

"We create the reality we desire," announced the watchmaker, following the arc of his grandson's flight.

When I fell asleep I found myself flying too, so I wasn't sure if it was the book I was hearing or Judith I was following. I'd never dreamt of flight, not even as a child. But there I was, between waking and

dreaming, the soft cadences of Judith's voice and the unknown passages of the book, soaring over a country I'd never been to, had only seen in films and textbooks.

That winter she proposed we travel. "We could go to Jerusalem." And the idea of the city glistened.

In the minds of lovers, boundaries break down, the walled-in thoughts seep under doors and a dream may be shared. The night she proposed the journey, we fell asleep reading *Madrigals* to each other, dreaming the same dream. The two of us, walking hand in hand, through the ancient walled city of David. Neither of us had ever been before.

WE'RE GETTING TOWARD the end of the service. The men are hungry, the smell of chicken almost overdone. Two women descend into the basement to make sure all is in order in the kitchen. Judith covers her mouth with her prayer book as though she were kissing its pages, looks at me from the corner of her eyes behind black-rimmed glasses. When I catch her, she turns away, pretends to concentrate on the book.

She's pissed at me. Four weeks ago I received a phone call from a theatre director in Israel who said that if I could come up with a good-enough proposal, he'd land me a playwright residency for a Tel Aviv theatre. *If* the proposal is good enough. The board wants something Jewish, Barak (the director) wants something with a broader universal appeal. "The catch," Barak explained to me over the telephone in his thick Israeli accent, "is to get it past the shit-for-brains board, while keeping me intrigued."

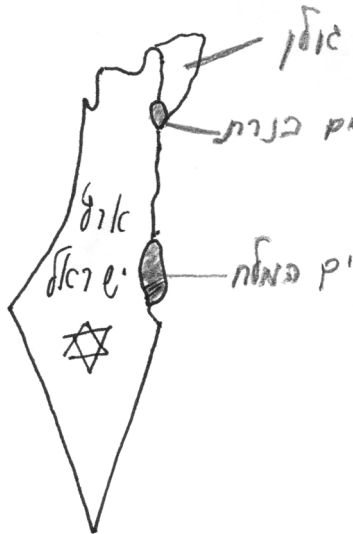
When I told Judith about the offer, she was thrilled, thinking we could fulfill the original dream. But she heard something wrong in my voice.

"Do you not want me to come with?" she asked.

I said nothing. Felt only confusion.

Aside from the fact I have yet to come up with a proposal Barak likes, there's another question that nags at me. Do I want to go to Israel? I've managed to avoid the place for thirty years and don't feel I've been lacking for it. I do not pine for Israel the way the rabbi longs for it as a place of study and spiritual revelation. Friends of mine have travelled there for free on "birthright" trips. Others have fought in the army, become Orthodox, thought they were messiahs. I have done nothing of the sort.

Bialik taught me the borders of Israel as understood by its former citizens—my teachers. For nine years I drew one map of the country after another each day in class: for Bible studies, geography, literature and history. I can draw the country by heart. As a child the maps I drew had borders that never varied—they were learned by rote as the teacher outlined the country on the blackboard, and we were expected to draw the same maps in our books. The eastern border was always the Jordan River.



I had dreams of these illustrations, my ballpoint pen tracing the lines, borders, cities, rivers, ink transforming itself magically into landscape. In my mind, I've already been to Israel.

Of course I knew I'd go to Israel at some point in my life. A Jew in the Diaspora grows up with this assumption: One must visit, *eventually*. Three years ago Judith proposed a new Jerusalem. It was a city different from the one I'd been taught as a child and this appealed to me—I could see Israel on my terms as an adult. But the promise of travel became the unwritten covenant of Judith and me: our destiny bound to Jerusalem. Whether or not we made it to Israel became the standard by which we measured our relationship's success. I certainly never intended it that way. I only wanted to visit the damn place.

Judith still talks about Israel as though it were some kind of holy mission, a life or death pilgrimage. She wants us to get married by the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Me? When she mentions the word *Israel*, I want to run, tear through a forest, bury my head in the ground. Forget the place even exists.

JUDITH PRAYS, the rabbi prays, Yankl picks his teeth. G. adjusts his crotch. Yitzhak, a black-and-white photographer who likes to capture people when they're sleeping, is himself asleep on the back wooden bench, snoring. What a gang we are. Often the rabbi brings in guest speakers to try to attract fresh blood to the withered downtown Jewish community. Today the rabbi introduces a guest speaker from the such-and-such settlement, West Bank. His name is Yosef and he wears thick glasses. His voice is unwavering, New Jersey solid.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I will keep my sermon brief. I know you are all hungry and ready for the Shabbos meal downstairs, and *Baruch Hashem*, I am told some great gefilte fish awaits us. Jews of Toronto, we need your support. Prime Minister Sharon, once a great prophet who believed in building the land of Israel, now talks about pulling

out of Gaza. But to pull out now is a message that says, ‘Terror, you have won. Fear, you’re stronger than our faith.’”

I’m not sure why he’s speaking to this congregation. As a kid I used to walk up and down Ava Road in Forest Hill, keeping an inventory of luxury cars in the Holy Blossom parking lot on Yom Kippur. One September I counted fifty-two Mercedes, thirty-four Jaguars and twenty-nine BMWs. Needless to say, if Yosef were giving this same speech at Holy B., he’d be guaranteed an audience that could generate at least a few grand. Easy. Farther north, at Bathurst and Wilson—known among some Toronto Jews as “The Gaza Strip”—thousands of Orthodox types would gladly offer their support, financially, politically and otherwise. Here in the downtown shul? Yitzhak adjusts the cap on his head. The Engineer farts. Yosef continues to speak.

“Remember the land of the Book! When I drive through Samaria and Judea, it brings me great joy to know that Abraham had a vision here, that Jacob had a dream there, and Sampson slaughtered Philistines in the name of our merciful Lord. We’ve waited two thousand years. We’ve suffered and continue to suffer for our beliefs. Do not forget Israel: our heart, our soul and our blood.”

“Amen!” shouts the rabbi.

“Amen!” says everyone else.

Yitzhak continues to snore.

“I’m not asking for money. What I want is your faith. God can tell when you waver! God can tell when you are uncertain! Let’s pray with conviction. Hashem, protect us from the anti-Semites in Europe and the anti-Semites in the Middle East.”

The men’s responses come out scattered, out of sync. “Yeshekoach. Ah-men.”

“This Sunday afternoon, we’ll be praying outside the Minsk at three,” announces Yosef. “Join us in solidarity.”

“Adon Olam,” announces the rabbi. “Everyone sing.”

Yitzhak awakes in time to join us for a rousing “Adon Olam.” On the way downstairs, the Engineer flips through a pile of leaflets for the solidarity prayer. I glance at the leaflet, feign interest and continue on my way.

WE ANTICIPATE greasy chicken soup bombarded with heavy dill pickles. And more: *lokshn*, *schmalz*, kidney beans drowned in vinegar, coleslaw with enough sugar to kill a pancreas. Yankl walks around the tables, doling out shots of whisky and vodka.

“Schnapps?” he asks. I comply. Yankl leans over and whispers into my ear, “You know, it’s been a long time since we’ve had a wedding here.” He smells like he lives in an aquarium of whisky.

“I know.”

“*I’ll pay for it.*”

“I’ll think about it.”

“The problem with you poets is you don’t know how to think. Take Milton Acorn. Every morning he said he was checking out of the Waverly. Every night he paid for his room. For ten years he pays a nightly rate. Why are poets such morons?”

“*Shabbat shalom,*” Judith says, sitting beside me. Yankl continues serving the rest of the table. There are more people here to eat than there were to pray.

“*Gut Shabbos,*” I reply. We can’t kiss. We can’t even shake hands because we’re in public and we’re not married.

“How was it?” I ask.

“Good,” she says. “I enjoyed praying tonight. I got into it.”

She likes synagogue, wants us to be coming more often.

“How’d you enjoy it?”

“Fifty-fifty,” I say, which is fairly honest.

“Fifty-fifty? What do you mean?”

“I like it when I sing, but I don’t like it when I look at what the words mean.”

“What’s wrong with the words?”

“I don’t want to get into it right now.”

Yosef sits next to me at the table. I nod to him, “Gut Shabbos.” I don’t know what to make of his speech. For all of Judith’s awe for my education, my knowledge is locked in a time capsule. Since the age of fourteen I’ve avoided reading much of anything about Israel. When I see an article in the paper, a picture of a bus bombing, a teenage boy with a stone in his hand, my eyes glaze over. “Oh, that again,” I say to myself. The Eternal Mess.

Of course I’m aware of Israel on some level. Israel is a given: It was given to me. But I’d rather not think about it too much. I never choose to bring it up in conversation. It’s too volatile. If it comes up at a family dinner, I try to excuse myself from the table; I once hid in the bathroom for twenty minutes until a heated discussion blew over. Certain friendships have become impossible simply because of this issue. Also, it’s assumed you have an opinion on the subject—everyone’s an expert. I admit it, I find Israel endlessly confusing. Do I agree with Yosef’s speech? I have no idea what to think, and I don’t know enough to say. Besides, tonight I have to put any negative thoughts out of my head. It’s the Shabbat, a night for celebration, not criticism. And who am I to criticize? I don’t live in Israel. I haven’t even been there.

My father and I rarely talked about Israel when I was a kid. During High Holidays the synagogue president, Eddie Kreplachsky, would stand in front of our small congregation, Beit Haminyan, and deliver a sermon on the need to buy Israeli bonds. We were there for Kol Nidre, to pray for our souls to be inscribed in the Book of Life. Before the davening began, little navy and royal-blue cardboard cards were passed out. Numbers inscribed in small, separate ridges at the top looked like the candles of a menorah. Each flame had a figure to fold over—100, 250, 500 or 1000. “Times are tough over there,” Kreplachsky would say. The men’s section would nod their heads, and

the women's section, seated on the opposite side of the gym (we were a wandering, nomadic shul) would nod too, almost in unison, so the congregants' heads were a kind of song, man and woman, a choir of consent. "Times are tough over there," Kreplachsky would intone again, and the task of donating money was as important as praying to God. My father would let me fold over one of the flames—I wanted to do a thousand, he insisted on a more modest amount. Neither he nor I longed to be *over there*. He sent me to Bialik, not with the hopes of me moving to Israel, but simply so I could receive a Jewish education. We were perfectly content with our lives in Canada. Yet he always gave money, and I believed in that giving. What would Jews be without the State of Israel? And should times in the Diaspora ever turn bad—for a Jew is never completely safe—there was always Israel to go to. Yerushalayim, our safety net, eternal refuge. In the meantime, to know it was there, to help, this was enough. Our Zionist prayer.

THE RABBI HOLDS two challahs in the air. He hoists them like an athlete holds a trophy to the sky. He closes his eyes, recites the blessing and rubs one loaf against the other. The rabbi proceeds to tear the delicate braided bread into giant clumps. Each piece is dipped in salt to remind us of our tears when we lost the temple, our constant exile. Like a Little League batting coach, the rabbi whips pieces of bread at all those seated at the table. A piece falls onto Yitzhak's plate, another pelts Yankl's face, grazes my left hand, lands on Judith's lap. This is a distinctly Minsker tradition.

"Barak called," says Judith after she's taken a bite of the bread. "Says he needs to talk to you."

"Thanks," I say, "I'll give him a call."

"What's up?"

"He emailed me yesterday. He didn't like the proposal."

"Why not?"

“Too North American. Too easy or too obvious. I can’t remember the words he used.”

“You know I could come and live in Tel Aviv for a few months.”

“What would you do?”

“I could study Hebrew. Maybe even take some Bible classes.” Judith plays with the plastic cutlery—a fork. She starts to bend it.

Yosef leans in to our conversation and says in a strong New Jersey accent, “Did I hear someone say Tel Aviv?”

“We’re thinking of going,” Judith says.

“Wonderful,” says Yosef.

“First I have to come up with an idea that’s going to get me there. Then we can talk about Tel Aviv,” I say.

Yosef asks, “What sort of idea?”

I rub my eyes as though I had glasses. Judith does the talking. “Jonathan’s a playwright. He might work in Israel at a theatre if he comes up with a good-enough concept.”

“That’s a big *if*,” I say.

“How about a play about the Gaza withdrawal?” Yosef scratches a zit on the end of his nose.

“Right,” I say sarcastically. “A musical.”

“Why not?” says Yosef. “A Jew can do anything.” He leans closer toward me. “Isn’t it strange—the number of Nobel Prize winners—how many of them are Jews? Just take a look at history. Freud. Einstein. Even Jesus was a Jew.” Yosef puts his hand on my shoulder. “You worry too much. Don’t. I have a good feeling about you. Israel is going to make you into a great playwright.” He takes back a shot of schnapps and turns to Judith. “You two should come in spring. It’s the nicest time of year. You can stay at my house for Pesach.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“It’s a pebble in the ocean compared to the generosity of Hashem.”

Judith: “Neither of us has ever been.”

“*Oy gevalt*. Never to the Holy Land?”

“It hasn’t been the right time,” I say.

Judith breaks the fork in two. She holds a part in each hand. One is smaller than the other.

Yosef shoos my words away with his hands. “It’s always the right time.” He takes back another shot of rye; he’s made friends with the ten-year-old bottle of Crown Royal Yankl left at our end of the table. “We have great programs for first-timers. You can come and work in the Negev, plant trees for the JNF.”

“Thank you,” I say. “We’ll be sure to look into it.”

Yosef shrugs his shoulders and dips a piece of challah into his soup. “When I stand in a field and look down into a valley, I think, this is the land God has chosen for us. If not for His mercy, if not for His election, what would we be?” Yosef waits for Judith or me to reply. Judith takes a sip of vodka, and I indulge in some rye. “We wouldn’t be chosen. We’d be like all the other nations of the earth.”

Judith nods. I look down at my feet. Yosef opens up the ArtScroll Siddur to show us that oft-repeated prayer, the Aleinu. The English translation reads:

*It is our duty to praise the master of all  
To ascribe greatness to the Molder of primeval creation  
For He has not made us like the nations of the lands  
And has not emplaced us like the families of the earth*

Yosef says, “In other words, Dear God, thanks for not making us like those stupid goys.” He cackles, takes back another Crown Royal.

I always liked that prayer. How one bows at the knees exactly when the words command, concluding the service with a gesture of humility. Yosef goes on to tell us about Palestine before the Jews: a land full of disease and disorder when we weren’t at its helm. Now the Negev

flourishes. Imagine, a nation that grows fruit in the desert, turns salt water into fresh! Who but the Jewish people? I look at the English translation again. One shouldn't put too much stock in the meaning of words.