

OPINION

Why I Left Israel, and Why I'm Going Home

By Shari Motro

Today Israel turns 60. When I was growing up in Herzilya, people celebrated Israel's Independence Day by shooting each other with toy guns that covered the victim with fluorescent string. Later, when I was studying Arabic in Jordan, Palestinians I knew mourned the 1948 war as the *Nakba* (Arabic for "catastrophe").

Now I live in Virginia, where Israel's birthday is invisible, and this year I mark it by packing. I'm preparing to move back for my sabbatical, preparing to embrace the double life I've been trying to deny since I dodged the draft into the Israeli army 18 years ago.

"Are you excited?" I get asked at least once a week. No, I say, I'm just going home.

I'm going home, and I'm scared. I'm scared not because of Iran's nuclear capability or Hezbollah's Katyushas or Hamas's suicide bombs. These threats are real, but they feel abstract. I'm scared because I'm not sure I can resist absorbing their reverberations, the pent-up aggression that flows like a river through so many daily interactions; the constant noise, the sense that life is a zero-sum game, that the planet is too small for both of us, that your gain is my loss, that listening to our story will erase my own.

When we studied Zionism in high school, I asked my history

teacher why Jews have a historical "right" to the land. I could understand saying we had a "connection," but what do we mean when we speak of a "right"? What does that say about the rights of the people who were here before us?

"If you ask such a question," he said, "you shouldn't be here." So I left.

What does it mean to have a 'right' to the land?

I left because I wanted to think my own thoughts, to read Socrates and Rousseau and Kierkegaard and ask the "real" questions of existence. I left and I built another life, not as a Jew, not as an Israeli, but as a human being. I left, and (even after returning briefly to Israel after college to complete my military service) I embraced what I imagined America could give me—an identity that was all about the future, all about possibility.

Being American, I imagined, meant that it didn't matter what I came from: that I could shed my grandparents' traumas and my parents' generation's sins; that I could claim America's light without seeing its darkness; that I

could take its freedom without its slavery and its Indians.

I was wrong. Slavery is part of my American self just as the *Nakba* is part of my Israeli self. America has taught me that these truths coexist, and that I can't be a full human being without acknowledging and honoring what I come from. So I'm going home.

I'm going home not because I have a "right" to a home. Lots of people come from nowhere in particular, perhaps from a suburb their family left when they were teenagers, people with free-floating identities I can't ever understand. I'm going home because I happen to have one.

I am blessed to have a home that still exists, a home with parents and sisters whom I love more than I've let them know. I miss them. I miss my family and I miss my childhood friends. I miss the dust and the sun, the warm salty Mediterranean, watermelon with Bulgarian cheese, droopy Eucalyptus branches and their brittle leaves cracking underfoot.

I miss Hebrew—rough, jagged, unforgiving Hebrew. When I hear it, an invisible film between me and the world dissolves. I come from a place—from streets I remember when they were still unpaved, from the house where I lost my first tooth, from the beachside terrace where my grandmother taught me how to tell time, from the

cemetery where we buried her.

I didn't choose these places, and I didn't expel anybody. But that doesn't change the fact that my joy is someone else's pain. My home is someone else's home, a home they can't return to, because of me. I can't reconcile this, but running from it doesn't reconcile it either.

One of the Palestinian women I knew in Jordan believed that the Quran predicts the Jewish State will be destroyed and the Palestinians restored to their land. When I told her that in addition to being American I was also Israeli, and that I had served in the army, she was shocked. She liked me, and it took her a few moments to absorb that I could be this terrible thing.

I assured her that I enlisted after dodging the draft only so I could see my family, and that I had no intention of living in Israel again. She thought about it, and finally said something I didn't fully understand until now, 10 years later. I'm so sad for you, she said, to have to live so far from your family.

She could feel both things at the same time: She could pray for Israel's destruction and also hope that I might find a way home.

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