

narrative

ISRAEL, AS HURT- GEOGRAPHY

Any real catastrophe in Israel would affect me more deeply than almost anything else. Hannah Arendt (letter to Mary McCarthy, 17 October 1969)¹

Israel, to borrow a phrasing from poet Carol Rumens, has been my ‘hurt-geography’ since 1975. It was then that I spent my first extended period on an Israeli kibbutz as a volunteer.

Zionism had not been particularly present in our family. My parents were not especially interested in Israel, unlike some of their friends who had spent time as Israeli immigrants and kibbutzniks. As a Rapport, part of a business family, it was felt more important to fit in: to keep a low profile in Cardiff and not advertise one’s Jewishness. When my sister and I were first taken to Israel – I was eight – it was more accidental: a brief stop scheduled on a Mediterranean cruise berthing in Haifa harbour. I remember nothing, however, about the Six-Day War in 1967 (I was 10).

During the Yom Kippur War in 1973 – I was now a boarder at Polacks House, the lodging house for Jewish boys at Clifton College in Bristol – my overriding memory is of embarrassment at a Polackian housemate who insisted on walking around with a small transistor radio next to his ear so that he would hear breaking news from Israel. (It was bad enough that our particular house necktie and rugby jersey made us at all times identifiable as Jews.) I looked at my housemate with distaste and hoped that the non-Jewish majority in the school – 600 to our 70 – would not asso-

ciate others in Polacks – me – with such an un-English display of concern

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After gaining my university place at Cambridge in the autumn of 1974 (to read archaeology and anthropology), my idea was to spend the next nine months before the start of the academic year travelling. I imagined being a Camp America counsellor, and then touring the United States. Another plan had been recommended to me by the friendly admissions tutor at Gonville and Caius College. He had heard that a research assistant was needed on a study of the wild horses of the Camargue, and helpfully suggested that I might apply. I duly went for an interview at a London hotel to meet the young scientist in charge, but she ultimately decided that a student of ‘arch and anth’ might not be as appropriate as one with a science background and destined for a degree in zoology. The timing of Camp America did not fit either. I was running out of ideas about how to use this precious and proclaimed character-building period: the ‘gap year’.

My parents then suggested Israel and spending time as a kibbutz volunteer. My close friend Danny was planning such an excursion in his gap year; why should I not go too? Initially, the idea did not appeal. It even felt like something of a defeat, after all my grand plans to break with convention. Israel had played no positive part in my identity to date, and the thought of going there now, merely because other plans had fallen through, felt inauthentic, retrogressive.

Visiting Israel seemed to me so *expected* a part of growing up Jewish that to ‘give in’ to this felt like a return to a Jewish familism and Cardiff provincialism. Surely my time at an English public school and now an ancient and universally renowned seat of learning presaged an escape (an ascent) from parochialism? I had intended an assimilation into secular British society; now to sign on as a Jewish volunteer on an Israeli kibbutz felt like a kind of failure. Was I really no *better* – no more original and adventurous – than my Cardiff peers, observant Jews, sheltering amid the traditionalism and mediocrity of communalism?

There had been a furious argument with an older, religiously orthodox cousin from London – Jonathan was studying law at Oxford – when he came on a visit to Cardiff. He exhorted: Did I not recognize my membership of the Jewish people – the history, community and tragedy that were mine, and my duty to uphold? I insisted not. My identity, my belonging, were my own to determine; no one was going to decide for me who I was, ascribe me an identity, a belonging, a peoplehood.

I felt closer to the American Indians (the Comanche and Kiowa), I insisted – a chosen identification since childhood – than to the Jews! That was my ‘tragedy’: the Indian wars of the Wild West. At the very least, I would follow the advice of 18th-century Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. He, at the time of the French Revolution – a revolution that would for the first time emancipate Jews en masse and grant them equal citizenship – had counselled: ‘Be a Jew on the inside, in private, but be a man



Fig. 1. Members of Polacks House, the boarding house for Jewish boys, Clifton College, Bristol, 1973.

NIGEL RAPPORT

towards the outside world'. There was, I felt, a kind of presumption in my cousin's stance – a London arrogance coupled with a religious intransigence – and it pushed me to want to make an extreme kind of riposte. There was no resolution to our argument: Jonathan had left with an uncomprehending shake of the head and a dismissive scoff; surely, the Jew who seeks to deny his historical burden merely expresses a juvenile and unworldly self-denial.

In the end, I was convinced to go to Israel, at least for a short while. I would, however, travel independently of Danny; I would arrange my trip by way of a non-Jewish organization, Project '67, and it would be only until something better came up. I also chose Kibbutz Yas'ur, inland from the Crusader city of Acre; it looked safer – less of a partisan commitment – than the other option that Project '67 offered me, Kibbutz Bar'am, whose land was adjacent to the perilous Lebanese border.

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Israel was a revelation: flying into Tel Aviv, a Jewish metropolis; the sheer normalcy of being Jewish; people in streets, on buses, in offices, not having to pass themselves off as gentiles. In particular, my time on Kibbutz Yas'ur was formative and rather than leaving Israel and the kibbutz after three months (for Camp America) I stayed on through the summer, until I needed to return for Michaelmas term at Cambridge.

The very first kibbutz, Degania Alef, had been established on the shore of the Sea of Galilee by refugees from Russia in 1910 – in what was then still the Ottoman province of Southern Syria. By 1949, when Kibbutz Yas'ur was formed (and the State of Israel had been established by United Nations Resolution 181), there were some 214 kibbutzim with 68,000 members – only 8 per cent of the national population but representing something of a cultural elite in the institutions of state and the army. Kibbutz Yas'ur was first settled by refugees from Hungary, joined in 1951 by immigrants from Britain and in 1956 by a group from Brazil.

My first sight of Yas'ur was the inviting avenue of trees that wound in from the main road as you entered the kibbutz. On the left was a small hill or *tel*: the remains of an ancient Jewish settlement whose detritus over the centuries and millennia had raised the ground level to a sizeable mound. I was to learn that this particular *tel* had figured in a Leon Uris novel, to the pride of some kibbutzniks.

The kibbutz itself resembled a large park. People lived in small, semi-detached bungalows, amid lawns, fruit trees and cycle paths; on my way to the swimming pool after work, I could pick passion fruit or pomegranates from bushes. There was a communal dining room and coffee room, also kitchen, laundry, schools and children's boarding houses. There were numerous bomb shelters; I frequented the

dark and cool of one of these to practise my weightlifting. There was a kibbutz furniture factory, extensive cotton fields, a number of long chicken sheds, cowsheds and dairy, a fish farm, a pear orchard and a large citrus grove. To me, the kibbutz felt like an oasis of peace and planning amid the hubbub, crush, pace and insecurities of wider Israeli society – and the enviroining, threatening Middle East. There

was an enormous sense of relief – and homecoming – whenever I walked down the tree-lined avenue into Yas'ur from the bus stop on the main road. I felt strongly affiliated to the kibbutz ethos and its members. I realized how it might be worth living here – and dying for it. Yas'ur became my romance.

The Israeli word used for citrus grove is *pardes*, apparently from the Persian for 'para-



Fig. 2. Founding Kibbutz Yas'ur, 1949.

Fig. 3. Members of Kibbutz Yas'ur greeting the neighbours, 1949.

Fig. 4. Kibbutz Yas'ur communal dining room, 1975.

Fig. 5. Irrigating the pardes, Kibbutz Yas'ur, 1975.

BENNO ROTHENBERG

BENNO ROTHENBERG

NIGEL RAPPORT

NIGEL RAPPORT

dise'. I soon found it so. The *pardes* came to be my habitually allotted work site, for six hours per day, six days per week. Getting up at around 6am, I would help Ilan, a kibbutz member of my own age, shift irrigation pipes between rows of grapefruit, orange and lemon trees, before having a breakfast of scrambled eggs with cheese and tomato, and French toast, cooked for me in the *pardes* hut. Each morning, I managed three eggs scrambled together and a further two in the French toast. (Two more eggs at supertime in my finely diced Israeli salad made a total of seven eggs per day and some 49 eggs per week, and a raised cholesterol level when I finally returned to Britain.) After breakfast, it would be back out to the tractor to prune, plant and doctor trees, pick fruit – pay a brief visit to the lychee grove for a snack – and finish the day's work at lunchtime. Besides Ilan, there were five kibbutzniks, whose regular workplace (for longer working hours) was the *pardes*, and I have never felt more part of a working team. The early morning air, the fragrant, laden trees, the sweet yellow grapefruits, manning the tractors, wielding the irrigation pipes, walking back to the centre of the kibbutz over the meadows behind the cow barns – I was setting out finally on the adventure of adulthood, and inhabiting a kind of paradise.

My workmate, Ilan, was part of a group of Israeli teenagers called the *Noar*, meaning 'Youth', now being brought up on the kibbutz. There were about 30 of them, all from broken homes or from large, usually Middle Eastern or North African (Moroccan, Yemeni, Syrian) economically impoverished Jewish families. The *Noar* had lived in Yas'ur since they were 12 or 13; now they were 17 or 18 and preparing for their conscription into the Israeli Defence Force for their first three years of military service. Besides fulfilling the civic duty of fostering a deprived group of Israeli youth, the kibbutz was also hoping to ensure lifeblood and support for itself in the future; after their military service, it was hoped that members of the *Noar* might return to Kibbutz Yas'ur as adult members.

Being the same age, and enthralled by the confident comradeship I could see that Ilan shared with Yossi, Moshe, Menachem, Shmuel, Uri, Dinah, Ronit and Mazal – intoxicated by their energy, physicality and fun – the *Noar* became an important part of my sense of what a kibbutz, an Israeli, a Zionist, meant. The practical efficacy of Kibbutz Yas'ur combined with its beauty, the normality of Jewish, labouring (agricultural) effort and the friendliness and familial warmth extended by everyone to me, made me feel not only that I belonged but also enormous pride: here was a Jewishness that was worth admitting to, even fighting for. Indeed, fighter jets from the Israeli Air Force routinely screamed overhead, with sonic booms, on their training runs. Army uniforms and guns were ubiquitous (since, after an initial three years of military training, men and unmarried women were required to return to the army as reservists for six weeks every year, until they were in their 50s). There was no way to avoid the equation that life in

Israel was precarious, literally so. The threat of war, the threat of terrorism, were unavoidable. But how much more intense was the sense of being alive here than in Britain? Life was precious and it was lived with awareness, application, hard work and commitment – with extreme moral attentiveness.

The kibbutz volunteers, some 30 or 40 of us, lived in spartan accommodation: wooden

huts that had been used by the first 'pioneers', the founders, in the 1950s. It seemed fitting. I shared a room with Dave, a long-haired hippy from Coventry who suffered from crabs; he taught me some guitar chords, and I bought him anti-lice shampoo. Next door were three girls from New Zealand. Volunteers came and went: I became something of an old hand. Most volunteers were not Jewish, arriving



Fig. 6. Members of the *Noar*, Kibbutz Yas'ur, 1975.

Fig. 7. Volunteer accommodation, Kibbutz Yas'ur, 1970s.

NIGEL RAPPORT

NIGEL RAPPORT

from all parts of the world: Denmark, Sweden, South Africa, the USA, Brazil. All quickly became part of the working and frisbee-throwing, folk-dancing, swimming-and-sunbathing community of volunteers. I was taught some words of Danish – ‘I would love a cup of tea’ – by some girls who were prepared to repair my frayed trousers.

Each month, the kibbutz provided the volunteers with some ‘pocket money’: tokens to spend in the kibbutz shop (on beer and chocolate). But we lacked for nothing. Clothes were provided, even cigarettes and talcum powder. The food was plentiful, if a bit monotonous: a lot of chicken and yoghurt and bread, salad and eggs. I was also allocated a kibbutz family to visit on Saturdays or after work: the Bunzls. As their ‘kibbutz son’ – they also had a real son and daughter – I would go and have afternoon tea and ice cream with them, tell them my news and receive further education in kibbutz living. Their house was cramped – and I often seemed to be waking them from a siesta when I arrived – but they were always extremely welcoming. Henry was an electrical engineer who ran the small kibbutz electronics factory; Marion was a high school teacher.

After six months on Yas’ur as a volunteer – and working in the chicken sheds as well as the *pardes* – I felt fit and tanned, and more confident.

I returned to Britain for my degree at Cambridge, but I also had a newfound loyalty and belonging. I felt people in Britain should be made aware of how difficult life was in Israel, and how much effort was going into making the country successful and secure. Life in Britain seemed so much easier, less self-reflective. In Israel, so much effort and energy went into ensuring little things functioned, every day, and all with the constant backdrop of further possible sacrifice – unto death. I came back to Britain with a new anxiety alongside the pride, then. Would the Jewish State – a place the size of my native Wales – survive the massed ranks of those whose hate seemed brutish and whose prejudices I felt to be ignorant? I knew that the repeated, violent warring of Israel’s enemies need only succeed once for the country to be destroyed and for the Jews (as threatened) to be pushed into the Mediterranean Sea.

Part of me knew that a kind of myopia accompanied these sentiments and that they were a reaction to a prevailing anti-Zionism, even anti-Semitism, in Britain. It had been a revelation, as admitted, on my first bus ride in Tel Aviv after arriving in the country to realize that almost everyone I saw around me – on the streets, at the bus stop, on the bus – was likely to be Jewish. After the oddity and shame of minority status and marginalism in Cardiff and boarding school, what a luxuriant, empowering feeling! The bus driver, the shopkeeper, the policeman, the girl on her bike, the waiter, the young people in khaki uniform with rifles and knapsacks ... the normality and ordinariness of these Jewish lives were luxurious to me, the feeling of catharsis bringing me to the brink of tears.

I had started to use the words ‘us’ and ‘our’



Fig. 8. Volunteers on a day out, Kibbutz Yas’ur, 1970s.

Fig. 9. The author cleaning out the chicken sheds, Kibbutz Yas’ur.

for Jewishness and Israel. It was the first time I had consciously admitted to an ‘us’ larger than my family. But the sense of community and of communion that Kibbutz Yas’ur had afforded me – working in the *pardes*, being accepted among the *Noar*, learning Israeli folk dancing after dinner in the dining room, being with a kibbutz family that resided amid a parkland of fruit trees and lawns, and being engaged in an intellectual project that combined an overcoming of historical injustices with a vision of social improvement and self-building, self-overcoming – was intoxicating. Israel: a very small country, multiethnic (with no official religion), democratic and a place where Jewishness existed as a majoritarian identity – the only such place; and where the persecution, discrimination and murder of millennia were not an ordinary Jewish fate.

Witnessing the barbaric acts of violence perpetrated by Hamas in October 2023 – the ‘pogrom’, as British prime minister Rishi Sunak named it, and the worst massacre of

Jews on a single day since the Holocaust – is a hurt-geography that does not heal. ●

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1. In Arendt, H. & M. McCarthy 1995. *Between friends: The correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975* (ed. C. Brightman). New York: Harvest Books.

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