

Feeling My Way Along the Seam Line of Jerusalem

Mira Sucharov*

I'm in a taxi, on my way from my hotel in Jerusalem's German Colony neighborhood to the Hand in Hand bilingual school. As I give the driver the address of my destination, I casually mention that it's near the "seam line" (*kav ha-tefer*). I figure it's a more politically neutral term than Green Line, the 1949 armistice line separating Israel from the West Bank, a demarcation that Israelis, in their West Bank settlement project, have worked hard to forget. It's early in the morning, I'm still drinking my coffee, and I'm not looking for a fight. Plus, I love the economy of the Hebrew language. Turning over the word *tefer* in my mouth makes me think of sewing, *tfira*, and how the zone between East and West in this city is stitched up with tragedy, tension, and possibility. At least I know there's possibility where I'm headed. In a country where nearly all Jews and Arabs study in separate school systems, Hand in Hand School in Jerusalem is one of a handful of experiments across Israel in shoring up the idea of a shared society. Classes are delivered simultaneously in Hebrew and Arabic (by two teachers in a sort of bilingual dance), and students learn about the holidays of the three major religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity), while tackling both the Israeli-Jewish and the Palestinian historical narratives. In a country riven by deep structural inequalities, and where there is little daily contact across the ethnic divide, the school symbolizes what could be if the identity silos defining Israeli society were to begin to erode.

The taxi driver doesn't take kindly to my terminology, however. He's angry. He starts to lecture me on Israeli history. 'What do you mean seam line?' he asks derisively. 'Jerusalem is all ours.' Stupidly, and partly because I grab every opportunity to extend any Hebrew conversation, I do what Dale Carnegie, in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, has warned millions to avoid: I spar with the driver over the basic facts of Jerusalem's geopolitics. Trying to diffuse the budding tension, I tell him that I'm consulting Wikipedia on my phone to ensure that I've got the correct date — I'd hate to be giving him wrong information, I add, my voice thick with fake sweetness. Yup, 1980, I tell him, I'm not mistaken, that's when Israel extended its sovereignty over East Jerusalem.¹ But, unlike what the driver claims, I tell him that hardly any of the 300,000 Palestinians who live in the eastern half are citizens. I try to explain just how significant this is: these residents can't vote for the national government which makes the major decisions over their lives.

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¹ Israel conquered East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and extended its rule over East Jerusalem in a 1980 Basic Law which opens with the clause "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel."

Onto the driver I realize I am placing my frustration with the many Israelis who are willingly ignorant of the depth of Palestinian suffering under a government that has become addicted to the occupation. And toward me I can imagine that he is directing his rage over an international community that has steadily attempted to isolate his country, and toward Diaspora Jews who think they can tell Israelis what to do. By the time we reach the front gates, I am rattled, and he is fuming.

My guide — Rebecca, a parent at the school and one of the senior development staff — arrives soon after. I write for *Haaretz*, among other publications, and I have suggested to her that I may get a story out of this.² While this is my first site visit, I've been tracking the school for some time. I've written about it twice before, and I have seen documentary footage of the students and teachers in action.³ The truth is, my week-long trip in Israel has been packed with intensity, much of which has involved higher-octane experiences than a visit to a kindergarten-to-grade-twelve school. Those other trips and tours have enabled me to lead with anger and disdain over the occupation, a position that I embrace easily. When this school visit almost didn't happen, then — there was some difficulty in finding a mutually-convenient time — I wasn't entirely disappointed. All this leads me to be especially floored by my own ensuing emotional reaction.

With warmth, intelligence, and an unassuming beauty, Rebecca — originally American — is generous with her insights and her time. She also happens to be married to another American I knew years ago when he and I were overseas students in a wide social circle at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In seeing them having immigrated to Israel together and raising kids there, I am aware that — vis-à-vis my personal relationship to Israel, a place I once pictured immigrating to — this couple is my 'road not taken.' I am both a little envious of them and a little relieved. I'm envious because they've actually had a chance to cast their lot with the homeland we all professed attachment to when we were young. And in sending their kids to this school, they get to be part of a direct experiment in challenging the political status quo. But amidst my twinge of envy, I gather relief from knowing that soon I will retreat to my placid life in Ottawa, with its relative material and political comforts, without worrying about placing myself or my children on the front lines of violence or of justice-seeking, where, for different reasons, the stakes are high.

We enter a kindergarten classroom. Despite being used to media and visitors, the kids display great curiosity towards me. I chat with a group of students who have gathered. A boy named Shachaf — seagull, in Hebrew — has a lot to say. Another boy, outfitted in a shirt and tie — arrives, a little late. It's his birthday, and he's mobbed by classmates smothering him with congratulatory hugs.

² Three months later, I did. 'Are Israel's Jewish-Arab Coexistence Schools Setting Kids Up for a Cruel Fall?' *Haaretz* (8 September 2016). <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.740786>

³ The school is featured in Danae Elon's fine documentary film, *P.S. Jerusalem*, a highly personal and moving account of her family's political and emotional struggles in relocating from Brooklyn, New York, to Jerusalem, where she was born and raised. I wrote about this film in *Haaretz*. 'When Making Aliyah Can Lead to More Questions than Answers,' *Haaretz* (9 September 2015). <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/the-fifth-question/.premium-1.675187>

I am suddenly grateful that the physical design of the school requires us to move inside and outside, California style — the kind I've seen only in movies — much different than the insulated compounds designed for the unforgiving Canadian winters back home. This way, I have an excuse to keep my sunglasses on for the simple reason that my eyes are welling up with tears. I recognize this feeling, one I often have when attending a concert at my kids' school, with all the promise and innocent enthusiasm that those youthful performances entail. Those concerts are infused with a joyful purity and a lack of self-consciousness as children allow themselves to frolic freely — whether possessing what one would typically consider talent or not. At those school concerts, there is no irony, no satire, no pessimism, and no cynicism. In those settings, I find myself easily moved.

But in my welling tears I will later recognize something else too, something a little scarier. This physiological response is something I'm used to in certain other settings, and I recognize it as a frantic attempt to mask my own chaotic thoughts. The urgency of my almost-crying forces me to give that embodied experience all my attention, with none left for attending to my own conflicts and private questions about the politics of what I'm witnessing. It's a pattern of avoidance I well recall. Occasional forays into psychotherapy have led me to sob as soon as I entered the therapy room; it is easier to focus on my tears, I suppose, than on the material that is crying out for excavation.

I know there is more I need to ask myself about my political judgments and commitments occasioned by this school visit. That will come later. For now, I need to focus on not crying.

We wander upstairs as Rebecca continues the tour. The school leadership has placed bilingual signage in the staff lunch room, she explains, so that Arabic doesn't get swallowed up by Hebrew in the staff culture of the school. A microcosm of Israeli society, all the Arabic-speaking teachers are fluent in Hebrew, but the reverse is not the case.

In the curriculum, there is the calendar of multiple holidays to consider, and the question of the optics of certain religious symbols with historical baggage for some. And in the older grades, especially, there is the challenge of how to convey and contend with disparate political narratives. For example, the meaning around 1948: whether it is a cause for celebration as Israel's birth, or a time of catastrophe. The Israeli law of return, enabling any Jew worldwide to immigrate and gain Israeli citizenship, tends to rankle Palestinians who demand the right of return for Palestinian refugees. And then there are terms like terrorist versus martyr — the disparate language each community tends to use when trying to make sense of violent attacks. Rebecca puts it this way: How do we recognize real differences and still attempt to be part of a whole?

In my own university teaching on Israel and Palestine, I regularly deploy a dual-narratives approach. My students sometimes take well to it; and sometimes not. Some students appreciate what, I suppose, they see as fairness and balance. Others think I am providing problematic moral equivalence to the two narratives, as if by teaching both I am endorsing both. Here in Jerusalem, I realize, the two narratives exist for these students by virtue of being socialized within a particular family and ethnic context — whether or not teachers promote the approach as a pedagogical tool. I feel like it's a powerful reminder of the value of the lens I use, and it is particularly welcome

now, as I am still reeling from an intensely challenging semester I had the past year teaching the topic.⁶

Memorial Day, Israel's state-sponsored day for remembrance of fallen soldiers (and, more recently, victims of terrorism), my guide explains, is potentially fraught. In response, the school has decided to hold two parallel ceremonies — one to discuss the Nakba; another to commemorate fallen Israeli soldiers and terror victims. Pupils are free to choose which to attend, before coming together for a joint assembly where parents and teachers share their personal stories. (The Nakba is also studied at additional points — by all students — throughout the year.) The intended message, Rebecca says, is one of equality and partnership. In a country where discussion of the Nakba by Jewish citizens is nearly absent — and where the government has even outlawed its public commemoration, I recognize that the idea of holding a Nakba ceremony in a school half-full of Jews is nearly revolutionary, however imperfect it is in not being able to land on a single conception of justice and reparation.⁷

I am biting my cheek hard. In trying not to cry, I hope I do not draw blood. I keep my sunglasses on. We enter the library. Thankfully, it is sunny and bright, so I do not need to remove my glasses just yet. At a nearby table sit four girls — sixth graders, the age of my daughter — working on a craft project. More convenient distraction for me. The girls chat among each other affably. I ask them their names. I tell them about my daughter back home, telling them her Hebrew name. Re'ut, I say. I don't have to tell them that it means friendship in Hebrew. They already know. They are living it.

A big part of the school's mission, Rebecca tells me, is to engage parents so as to create a sense of community, to model the values of shared society they are attempting to instill in the classroom. The 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict, she says, was particularly challenging. That it occurred mostly during the summer probably helped stave off what would have been extremely trying circumstances for parents and students. Still, parents decided that they needed to take a stand in favour of coexistence, even as 'Israeli warplanes were bombing Palestinian targets in Gaza,' as the school's communications director later put it to me. Rebecca describes how every week during that fateful summer, parents led a march along the public pathway that runs alongside the school. Others from the broader Jerusalem community joined. As Rebecca speaks, I feel moved by the thought of this tender act of defiance. Still, I know that to some critics of the conflict — especially some in my own scholarly and activist circles, such a march would seem misplaced. For those critics, the only protest should have been to register revulsion at the bombing. It's another cognitive conflict that I need to keep hidden, for now, so I can focus on not crying.

⁶ I have recounted the teaching challenges I experienced during that particular semester in Douglas, Stacy; Kuzmarov, Betina; Schwartz, Karen; Sucharov, Mira; and Todd, Sarah L., 'Teaching Subjectively: Interdisciplinary Insights,' *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 7, 4 (2016).

⁷ In 2011, Israel's Knesset passed the Nakba Law, allowing the finance ministry to revoke funding from institutions which publicly commemorate the Nakba.

I am also aware that co-existence is a contested concept more broadly, not least in the context of Israel/Palestine where most Israelis, the holders of the lion's share of material power, would prefer a peaceful status quo while Palestinians are seeking justice. But I also know that many of the structural inequities that undergird Israeli society are overcome in a bilingual and bicultural school such as this one.⁸ Disparate funding across the school sectors and the natural othering that comes with studying in silos are obviated by a school that brings students together across the ethnic divide. Arab and Jewish students are automatically being funded equally, by virtue of studying under a single roof. And brute othering is actively avoided, as students naturally make friends without regard to ethnicity.⁹ I long to embrace this empirical inference just as the critique of co-existence initiatives continues to nag at me.

I bite my cheek harder.

The father of one of the students has joined Rebecca and me. His name is Fadi. He is a Palestinian citizen of Israel who grew up in Haifa. We had seen his daughter minutes before, an ice cream cone in her hand and a bounce in her step, emerge from a classroom where she had been helping out with the younger grades.

There is a point where one must determine, usually involuntarily, whether to give in to bodily demands. I realize I can no longer hold my tears in check, and I begin to sob. Uncontrollable, heaving, loud and vocal sobs. And while there is physiological release, I realize that that release now too demands my full attention. Now, for all of us in the room, the visit has become about my crying, rather than about the school, and I am a little embarrassed.

Fadi offers me a Styrofoam cup of water. Rebecca hands me some tissues which I quickly use up. Fadi and Rebecca shoot me sympathetic looks as I continue to weep. Rebecca is gracious. 'We cry here all the time,' she offers. They believe that the school — in its unique mission in trying to bridge two ethnic solitudes in the country — is special, so special that even staff are regularly reduced to tears. Clearly, I feel it too. But I also know that there's more to my weeping. Later, I will try to force myself to be intellectually and emotionally honest — privately, at least. But not just yet.

⁸ Here, I am referring to Israel within its 1949 armistice line borders, where 20% of citizens are Arab and 80% are Jewish. The dynamics of the West Bank occupation are altogether different. There may come a time (for example, in a possible confederal system) when coexistence will need to be shorn up between Jews and Palestinians in the West Bank, but until that area ceases to be organized according to IDF military rule for Palestinians and Israeli civil law for Jewish Israelis, that conversation might best be deferred. And as I type this, I am aware of the tensions inherent in considering whether the occupation must end as a precursor to a two-state solution or whether pressure should be brought to bear on Israel to grant full and equal rights now, to all inhabitants between the river and the sea. It is a discourse I have been toggling between in recent articles and on social media.

⁹ According to the description of the social dynamics given to me by one graduate I later spoke to, the school's students tend to befriend each other freely without regard to ethnicity in the early years and in the later years, with some apparent separation during middle school.

My tears eventually subside. Feeling vulnerable and exposed, I interview Fadi, who has been waiting patiently for my questions. We discuss his childhood and teenage years in Haifa, where he attended an elite Jewish school. This, I realize, explains his unaccented Hebrew. Fadi's parents, he tells me, wanted him to have all the opportunities that Hebrew fluency and Jewish social-networking affords in Israel.

I wonder, silently, if he knows my husband's Haifa-based cousins. In a city of beautiful coastal views, they live high on a hill. My mind wanders to a series of pleasant afternoons I spent in their family home a few years ago, talking with their mother on her porch, in between sessions I was spending at an academic conference nearby. I ate while she smoked.

There is something that Jews worldwide like to call playing 'Jewish geography.' Many Jews, upon meeting, try to develop an easy intimacy by tracing degrees of Jewish separation. 'Do you know this person? That person?' If Fadi were to know my cousins, my feeling of tribe — so crucial to the collective sense of attachment I feel for this troubled land — would extend outward, toward the Other. And that would give me a feeling of equanimity in a place where the collective self has wrought such hardship on that Other. But I don't bother asking. I have delayed him enough with my slightly inappropriate display, I realize, of emotion. These questions might sound superfluous and indulgent.

Yet there is a more painful reality to consider: that I might unconsciously long for the kind of hermetic seal that Jewish life in Israel affords against the Other. It's a seal that this school is seeking to break and which I, through my sobbing, also deeply embrace. But it's a claim I've made on my research subjects in the context of nostalgia and Canadian multiculturalism, and I owe it to myself to consider that this, too, might be true for me, however much I'd be loathe to admit it.¹⁰

I can picture Fadi as a teen. He's bright and articulate; handsome, with an athletic build. I imagine he would have had little trouble socially. Still, in Fadi's primarily Jewish school, he tells me, he felt like a guest.

In raising him with social mobility in mind, his parents also hid some of the most salient aspects of collective Palestinian trauma from him. Here, at this school, he says, with some irony, through his children, he has finally learned about the Nakba and the Naksa (how Palestinians refer to the events surrounding the 1967 war). Here, his people's history is given the intellectual hearing it never had as he was growing up in relative political silence. Here at Hand in Hand, he says, he no longer feels like a guest. We shake hands. I thank him for sharing his time and his insights, aware of the unintentional intimacy that is created when one stranger has spontaneously broken down in front of another. He leaves for work.

¹⁰ Mira Sucharov, 'Imagining Ourselves Then and Now: Nostalgia and Canadian Multiculturalism.' *Journal of International Relations and Development* 16, 4 (October 2013): 539–565.

Rebecca and I, now joined by another staff member, continue our tour. By the end, I feel slightly embarrassed and emotionally purged. Now physically more relaxed, I know I will have a chance to mine my feelings later. I will start with Facebook, where I expect to get an enthusiastic response to my self-deprecating story. I do well with post-hoc descriptions of public vulnerability, just as I know that it also serves to mask the deeper mining necessary for authentic self-understanding. The enthusiasm I expect from my many friends and followers will gird me emotionally, until I have a chance to reflect on what is really going on inside. Later, I will poll my thousand-plus friends on whether they cry in public, and I will ask them what triggers it. It's perhaps why I've chosen conflict to study: it's more comfortable to watch other people's public suffering than attempt to uncover directly the sources of my own private conflicts and tensions and anxieties, without at least some mediating effect of the knowledge of others' experiences.

Maybe because I studiously avoid bringing up politics, my new taxi driver is much gentler. We talk about religion. He takes off Saturdays, the Jewish sabbath, — not because he's observant, he says, but because he wants to spend time with family and friends. He hands me his card — 'if you need anything.' When we arrive at the market — where I plan to source souvenirs for my kids and try out the *jachnun* (a savoury Yemeni pastry) joint I had spotted the other night, I realize a staff member at the school has already paid my fare.

A couple of weeks later, I decide to relay the crying incident to Matt, a colleague-friend (not his real name). I'm a little nervous to hear his reaction. I worry he will write this off as the response of a naïve liberal Zionist looking for hope where there should be none.¹¹

Most pressingly, I worry that Matt will give or withhold friendship intimacy — the kind that has derived of late from an intertwined professional and personal connection where we clearly have a lot to say to one another — based on what he thinks of my politics. It's a pattern that I have recognized in our conversations and which elicits anxiety. I feel keenly vulnerable.

And while I deeply believe in the mission of the school, I'm aware that its existence — as a representation of controversial 'co-existence projects' can be used for purposes very different from simply shoring up a shared society. *Hasbarah* (Hebrew for public diplomacy) outfits, for example, meaning organizations established to place positive public-relations spin on Israeli government actions, have been known to bring visitors to the school, in order to exhibit all the 'good things' Israel does and by way of whitewashing the pernicious effects of the occupation.¹²

Matt may or may not be aware of the *Hasbarah* itineraries on which the school sometimes appears, but he's well aware of the issues surrounding coexistence and peace-building. In the context of Israel and Palestine, he and I have debated the question of peace-building initiatives ver-

¹¹ I say where there should be none rather than where there is none, because I'm aware that hope is not only an involuntary position, but in some ways a political commitment. That sense of hope is what was consciously animating my emotions on that school visit, just as it challenges me to ask what I actually believe.

¹² A staff representative of *StandWithUs*, a Los-Angeles-based Israel advocacy organization, confirmed to me by email that the school sometimes appears on their Israel tour itineraries.

sus boycott in the past, sometimes heatedly. I fear that my relaying the experience of having been caught up emotionally in the visit to the school will be met with judgment.

But I also had to ask myself something else. Was I even still a liberal Zionist, that label I had used to great effect when blogging for one of the early critical-supportive outlets for policy critique around Israel, but a label about which now I was becoming increasingly suspicious, and which, I worried, was costing me social capital even as it kept certain audiences appeased? On one hand, I had staked my public-commentary career on adhering to a liberal Zionist position. When *The Daily Beast* launched its Open Zion blog, I was invited to become a regular contributor, joining my work at Israel's liberal daily, *Haaretz*. At Open Zion, we would often rehearse a liberal-Zionist-versus-BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) script. Each side would trot out familiar arguments: whether to press Israel from within, or whether to boycott it from without. Whether to press for the maintenance of a Jewish state, or whether to push for Palestinian refugee return.

Over the years, I had become used to defending my flank in the press and on social media, from those from the 'right' who thought Israel could do no wrong, and from those from the 'left' who advocated boycott and a 'one-state solution' against my stated commitment to respecting the 'material and identity needs of both sides' (a phrase I wrote frequently). There, I advanced what I saw as the only solution which would represent the Venn diagram of overlapping needs and desires of both sides: a 'two-state solution.' At times, I even felt possessed by the arrogance of someone who feels she has logic and pragmatism on her side, even if full and perfect justice remains out of reach.

From blogging came regular speaking invitations from liberal Jewish communities, but nearly all from self-described Zionist ones. Were I to stray too far away from the hopeful position that liberal Zionism advocates, namely that Jewish nationalism can be reconciled with Palestinian nationalism through a two-state framework, I fear I would become altogether isolated.

But now I find myself wilting in the face of criticism from those I care about, just as I have begun to advance positions that challenge the so-called liberal Zionist paradigm for what I now see are its blind spots. I have begun to be vocally impatient with the liberal Zionist claim that the two-state solution is the *only* solution.¹³ And I have begun to be impatient with another claim I once defended to the core: namely that Palestinian refugee return is wholly unrealistic and therefore wrongheaded.¹⁴ My public writing has begun to reflect this move, though tentatively. While I get

¹³ I have tried out these ideas in 'No, Palestinians Don't Need to Empathize with the Zionist Narrative,' in *+972 Magazine* (with Peter Eisenstadt), (8 August 2016). <http://972mag.com/no-palestinians-dont-need-to-empathize-with-the-zionist-narrative/121240/>

¹⁴ I experimented with these ideas in 'Uncovering the Lost Palestinian Villages Under Glitzy Tel Aviv,' *The Jewish Daily Forward* (19 July 2016). Both this and the piece cited in the footnote above felt like a sort-of political coming-out for me, and which gave me a sense of personal satisfaction as new readers — those who would have previously resisted the 'liberal Zionist' cast of my earlier writings — reacted positively: a case of new pockets of social capital. <http://forward.com/opinion/345430/uncovering-the-lost-palestinian-villages-underneath-glitzy-tel-aviv/>. Yet in writ-

caught up in the positive response I'm now getting from new audiences, I worry that my bread and butter supporters (editors, public conference conveners) might turn away from me. And then there's the feeling that I'm watching my multi-scene performance from the wings, not entirely sure whether the audience I believe I'm performing for is paying in social or political currency. Are my breathless interactions — column-writing, social media, speaking gigs — pitched at the mutual admiration that comes with friendship or the collective solidarity that comes with politics? It can be both, of course, except that the former can too easily hinge on the later, making some friendships — like mine with Matt — feel frighteningly contingent.

Luckily, Matt is empathic and insightful that evening. He provides an open emotional hearing for my anecdote and suggests that perhaps my reaction at the school arose from the defensive crouch I usually adopt when observing and discussing matters related to Israel and Palestine; that visiting a place so devoid of others' defensiveness made me give way emotionally. I could, he says, finally let go of my own apparent need to display a fighting stance. I chew on this insight, enjoying its intellectual and emotional heft. And most of all, I'm relieved that he has kept me near.

Though I'm not altogether hardboiled, Matt is right. I do fancy myself a bit of a gadfly — in my column-writing and on social media — and especially in my own Jewish community in Canada. I had stacked this particular week-long Israel trip with the kind of brash political consciousness-raising activities I could publicize on social media and subsequently write about for a wider audience. During my trip, I had visited the ruins of Palestinian villages across Tel Aviv, led by an Israeli activist seeking to 'de-colonize' Israeli society, as he puts it. I had visited the impoverished neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem with a leader of the NGO Ir Amim ('city of nations') to better understand the less visible manifestations of occupation and annexation. I had been to Hebron, the epicenter of the occupation, with Breaking the Silence, a much-villified Israeli NGO founded by military veterans seeking to end the occupation. Stopping in the adjacent settlement of Kiryat Arba, I had seen the memorial to the late racist politician, Meir Kahane. Turning a corner, we had come upon Baruch Goldstein's grave, where I felt ill with revulsion. In Hebron, we were cursed by a screaming settler who was being restrained by police. Disgusting traitors, he called us, as I slunk towards our military reservist-NGO-activist guides, reveling in being part of the collective object of his fury.

I am constantly girded for fighting the occupation, in my own tiny way, as I like to think I have been for as long as I've been aware of it. I am also aware that this stance can include a strong dose of self-righteousness, particularly when communicating with the mainstream core of my community. But when seeking friendship and professional association with those who have positioned themselves even farther outside the collective Jewish consensus, the stakes feel higher, and my self-righteousness dissolves into what sometimes feels a cowardly desire to prove my social justice credentials. As I soon begin to wonder whether that conversation with Matt would be one of the last we'd have, I am stuck between feeling liberated from what had become a painful pattern of worrying about his erratic absences and whether those absences were motivated by my not

ing this very footnote, I again recognize the pleasure-pain cycle of writing for immediate response while worrying about the fickleness of audience assent in which I have become stuck.

having the ‘right politics,’ and a desire to maintain the connection. And by the pleasure-pain cycle of presence and absence, I realize that my own political compass has become blurred. In some ways, keeping the compass fogged feels good, for now, like liminal space giving me time to eventually land on my authentic self. For now, I feel, I am not quite ready to land. Nor do I even know if I ever can be expected to do so. Maybe I will never find a single political point of authenticity. Instead, maybe my role-identity as public commentator is meant to challenge and provoke where I see the need — and where I desire to do so, even if my later self eventually challenges my earlier one.¹⁵

And amidst my self-interrogation about my ‘liberal Zionism,’ there is the lingering question of hope. It is so easy to fall into a cynical frame of mind, especially for someone who came of age during what felt like the idealistic era of Oslo¹⁶. Since then, my optimism has given way to serious doubts that anything will ever change. Like water looking for lower ground, pessimism seeks an active outlet; cynicism serves it well. But here, at the bilingual school, was a living example of ordinary citizens actively seeking to recast the perennial conflict narrative and perhaps undo some effects of settler-colonialism, however modestly. My crying jag had helped obscure the fact that I desperately wanted to share the hope of the school’s community of teachers, students and parents, while another part of me resisted it. Is there indeed realistic hope for deep, structural transformation within Israeli society? I want desperately for there to be. And yet perhaps I also do not want to allow for hope. Perhaps it is easier to be angry at the false promise of Israel, the country to which I feel great attachment, its language being the only one I speak to my kids, its kibbutz discos being the source of deep personal nostalgia for me, its pop music playing in a loop in my car, especially when I am feeling under political attack. In some ways it is easier to remain in my defensive crouch, righteous in my sense of scholarly and political activism, angry at the country rather than trying to save it with love and a sense of possibility. I soon realize that the urgency of keeping my tears at bay had insulated me from the discomfort of holding these two positions simultaneously. And while rising from my defensive crouch allowed me to relax the political muscles I had kept flexed, it was also emotionally dislocating.

Back at the market that afternoon after my visit to the school, I was famished, and I savoured the jachnun. With plenty of happy shoppers and diners to observe, and infectious music playing in the background, I felt lighter. But as I was preparing to leave, I spied an employment sign. It was advertising for ‘post-army’ veterans. I knew enough to know that this was code for ‘Arabs need not apply.’ I snapped a photo. Onto social media I went to ‘out’ this discriminatory practice, with supporters and naysayers, average Israelis and civil rights activists taking to my Facebook wall to debate, in English and Hebrew, the intention and implications of the help-wanted sign. There was

¹⁵ This type of pleasure-pain cycle is discussed by bestselling author Eckhart Tolle in a book I bought at my children’s school used book sale that spring, seeking a way out of the kinds of emotional dynamics that had trapped me. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Novato, California: New World Library, 1999).

¹⁶ In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed a Declaration of Principles known as the Oslo Agreement. That agreement was supposed to give way to a peace process and a final agreement. While there have been intermittent peace talks since then, and some internal withdrawal from towns and cities within the West Bank, a full peace treaty remains elusive and the occupation marches on.

the handsome Israeli, my peer, who I hadn't seen since I was twenty when I had been spending weekends on his kibbutz, rebuking me, telling me that I was reading too much into it. And there was the Israeli civil rights activist assuring me that I was correct, and mentioning that, along with other NGOs, he had worked at getting signs like these removed.

There, with one Facebook post, my cheeks had dried, my eyes had cleared of tears, I had removed my sunglasses, and I had resumed my defensive crouch. The moment of sharing raw, human emotion as I broke down in front of two adults and four sixth-graders in a sunny school library filled with Hebrew and Arabic books was already receding into memory. I could be angry and despairing again, awash in self-righteousness. At least until the time came to prepare to understand what had really gone on for me that morning in the sunny, California-style school compound on the seam line of Jerusalem, and determine where the boundaries of my own political commitments — sometimes comfortably out of my field of vision — actually lie.