

## Israel Now

The thunder and lightning and the commanding Voice of Sinai, which nearly jumped off the parchment in last week's Torah portion, settle this week into more mundane considerations. Matters of everyday life begin to be codified. Subjects include the obligation to help one's enemy when his animal goes astray, judicial procedures, the punishment for theft, not cursing a chieftain or sacrificing to a strange god, observing the Sabbath and the three pilgrimage festivals, not accepting bribes or ever oppressing a stranger. (The parashah begins by listing limitations on the practice of slavery – but this will be a subject for another time.)

It reminds me of a point made this week in a lecture by Gershom Gorenberg, an Israeli journalist and historian who spoke at the University of Chicago. He reminded the audience that the generation of the founders of the State of Israel had – like all successful revolutionaries – to make the difficult transition from the struggle for liberation to the day-to-day running of a state, with countless bureaucratic decisions. They managed to create a messy democracy with proportional representation that can easily result in near paralysis (as we see in the latest election results). The Supreme Court stepped in early on to insist on a free press, and the Court has remained the great defender of civil rights and liberties. The new government created an economy that managed to absorb immigrants from all over the world - including traumatized survivors of Hitler's death camps, polygamous Jews from Yemen, refugees from Iraq who arrived on foot – and mold them (sometimes rather insensitively) into a new version of Jewish life.

What we hear about Israel today in the press - the aftermath of war, the election results, and the jockeying for position in a new government – are only part of the story. The texture of life is always much more complex, and interesting. In our six Sunday sessions on “Modern Israel”, which begin the day after tomorrow, we will try to get a handle on some of the dynamics of Israeli society and culture, from the political system, to poetry, to LGBT issues. There is more going on than anyone can keep full track of. Here is a smorgasbord of stories from recent dispatches from a variety of sources.

Ari Folman may be about to receive an Academy Award<sup>1</sup> for his animated documentary, *Waltz With Bashir*, based on his effort to dredge up memories from being a soldier in the first Lebanon War, 25 years ago. That was the war that is remembered for the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. In an interview on Salon.com Folman was asked about whether he hesitated to address such a loaded subject:

I was interested in the common soldier, his point of view, and in the chronology of massacre. Meaning, when do you put all the facts you hear and see, and all the hints you get, into one frame that makes you realize there is a mass murder going on just around the corner? I was interested in that -- telling that story through the eyes of a simple soldier.

... And frankly, I didn't feel responsible. I was a soldier; we were clueless. We didn't know what was happening until it ended. Then we knew. Of course the government was found guilty. They didn't send the troops in there, but they didn't stop it for three days. They could have stopped it. They could have reduced the casualties. They could have done something. They did not. ...

**Your film has a very specific Israeli and Lebanese context, but it could be about Vietnam or World War II or Iraq. ...**

Definitely. This story could have been told ... by an ex-American soldier in Vietnam, or by an ex-Russian soldier in Afghanistan or by a current American soldier in Iraq. It could have been told by a Dutch soldier, a peacekeeper, who witnessed the Srebrenica massacre in June 1995, in Bosnia, where they did nothing to stop it. It's a universal story, unfortunately.<sup>2</sup>

There is another recent Israeli film about Lebanon, which Susan and I just watched on DVD. *Beaufort* portrays the final days of the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. It is tense and dramatic and very real. It is based on the best-selling book, the English translation of which was done by our friend Evan Fallenberg who spoke here a while back.

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<sup>1</sup> Well, not quite.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew O'Hehir Interview with Ari Folman.

<http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/btm/feature/2008/12/26/folman/> (via Nextbook)

And then there is, this week, a controversial video posted on YouTube about Hitler looking for a parking space in Tel Aviv. It seems there is a genre of taking a scene from one of the films about Hitler's last days (in German) and putting altogether new subtitles on it. It is in very poor taste, of course, and Holocaust survivors in Israel have objected to it. But it also represents a certain kind of Israeli gallows humor that imagines yet another kind of revenge against a Hitler who is driven mad by rules and regulations of a bureaucracy that Israelis have to deal with every day.<sup>3</sup>

*Jewcy* has an article on a clinic that treats sexual dysfunction among Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

The new Peace House, the Peres Centre for Peace, is about to open in Jaffa, on a prime stretch of seafront, in a striking modern building that was originally (ten years ago) going to be located in Tulkarem, near the Israel-West Bank border. The Peace House is designed in a very avant-garde style, and has a bomb shelter on each floor.<sup>5</sup> (Is that more gallows humor?)

The website Israel 21c publicizes Israeli technological and humanitarian innovations, stories one does not usually read in the papers. This week it is featuring, among other stories, aid being sent by an Israeli animal welfare group to the animals in the Gaza zoo.<sup>6</sup> Here's another story:

Sarhan Mahamid, an Israeli Muslim from Haifa ...[has] ... become Israel's first Arabic-speaking [medical] clown, healing sick kids in Hebrew, Arabic, and gibberish. ...

"At Schneider [Hospital], there are both communities, and I am helping bring them together," he says. ...

While parents of sick children may carry animosity toward the Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21Cplia5ERw>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.jewcy.com/post/sex\\_haredi\\_jew](http://www.jewcy.com/post/sex_haredi_jew) (via Nextbook)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/17/peace-house-israel-architecture> (via Nextbook)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.israel21c.org/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Articles%5E12462&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=vw&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZone=Democracy&>

or Muslim "other," the kids that Mahamid meets in the hospital have "clean hearts." It's only when they grow up do things become different, he points out.<sup>7</sup>

Also, a new youth village has been opened in Rwanda, to help orphans of the genocide there integrate into society. It is based on an Israeli model for integrating Holocaust orphans into society that was developed in the early days of Israel.<sup>8</sup>

And perhaps you did not know that

...Southern California Edison (SCE) and BrightSource Energy from Israel have signed the world's largest solar energy deal. Now awaiting approval from the California Public Utilities Commission, when the contracts are fulfilled -- this could happen by as early as 2013 -- the Israeli-CA sun project will power almost 1 million California homes. ... it will be the world's largest solar energy project.<sup>9</sup>

We are no longer standing at Sinai. The echoes of the thunder have long since died away. The revolutionary generation of the founders has given way to bureaucrats and politicians. Israel, in all her messiness, her throbbing beauty and ugly corruption, may yet be the place from which Torah goes forth, along with technological innovation, medical breakthroughs, and profoundly humane literature.

In six Sunday mornings we will not quite resolve all of the conflicts that beset Israel, from within and from without. But we can arrive at a more nuanced appreciation of her many gifts and faults. And isn't that what love is all about?

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.israel21c.org/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Articles%5EI2453&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZone=Culture&>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.israel21c.org/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Articles%5EI2447&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZone=Democracy&>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.israel21c.org/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Articles%5EI2460&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZone=Technology&>