To Israel and back again: Journey of an American Jew

by Aliza Becker in the February 27, 2002 issue

Some of my earliest memories are of gatherings at my grandparents' small apartment in Milwaukee where my relatives would crowd around the dining-room table and talk passionately about Israel. Many had been involved in labor Zionism in their youth, before they immigrated to the U.S. from Russia.

They envisioned a socialist paradise in Israel: a home where Jews would till the soil and live free of the bitter anti-Semitism they had experienced in Europe. They were fiercely proud of our relatives who had made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel). They would talk about my great-aunt making wine on her kibbutz and the beautiful city of Haifa where many of my cousins lived. They would also talk about our Arab enemies and the great Israeli army that defended us against them.

This focus on Israel was strange to me. What was so great about moving to Israel when we lived much more comfortably in the U.S.? Why did the thought of Israel bring light to their faces? Throughout much of my childhood I had no great passion for Israel. I was influenced on this score by my mother, who was annoyed at having to spend some of her precious vacation time in Israel. While she enjoyed my father's family, she didn't feel particularly moved by the country.

I visited Israel for the first time when I was 13. I had fun hanging out with my Israeli cousins and traveling to Jerusalem's Old City. Arabs were exotic people who sold things in open-air markets and lived far from my family. The word "Palestinian" didn't exist in my vocabulary.

At the University of Wisconsin– Madison in the late 1970s I had my first personal encounter with Arabs and with groups protesting against Israel. I was dumbstruck. I knew that for many of my relatives, Israel was the beloved homeland—a safe haven for our people when no one wanted us. In their view, the primary problem was that Arabs hated us and wanted to push us into the sea. I couldn't believe that Israel had oppressed Arabs. It was the other way around.

To learn more I did two things: I got a job scooping ice cream at a shop where I would have a Palestinian co-worker, and I took an independent study course with an Israeli graduate student. From the Palestinian I heard the stories of his family's displacement. I was too disoriented to hear all that he said, but he confirmed that there was another story of Israel's birth—and that great joy and great sorrow existed simultaneously.

From the revisionist Israeli historians I heard a story very different from my family's about the founding of Israel. I couldn't make sense of what I was reading or hearing. I already felt bad about myself as a Jew. Anti-Semitism already had taken its toll on me, but this made me feel horrible. How could my family's hard work to develop a safe home for Jews have deeply hurt other people? My family was good, I was good—so all this made no sense.

After graduating from college, I went to live in South America. I returned to the U.S. in 1982, when Israel's invasion of Lebanon had just begun. I went to a meeting protesting the invasion. The only thing I remember about it was that a Jewish acquaintance gave a long speech denouncing Israel. She was bitter and angry, as if she were taking all of the wrath and vitriol that had been spewed at the Jews and directing it at Israel. Israel was not particularly close to my heart then, but the tone of hatred felt like a personal attack nonetheless. Latin American social-justice issues seemed so much simpler and easier to deal with. They didn't involve my family or my feelings about myself as a Jew. It wasn't confusing to figure out who was the enemy.

In the mid-1980s I joined a group called the New Jewish Agenda, which tried to bring a leftist agenda to Jews and a Jewish agenda to leftists. It was a good place for a Jew committed to social justice to sort through questions of personal identity. So often Jews either focus exclusively on Jewish issues or ignore their own Jewishness as they lead social movements on behalf of other people.

I loved the New Jewish Agenda but stayed away from its work on the Middle East—at least initially. Then in 1988 one of our members announced she wanted to start a Jewish-Palestinian dialogue group. There weren't a lot of volunteers, so I said I would help. The first meeting changed my life.

The group consisted of five Palestinians and five U.S.-born Jews. We weren't leaders in our communities, but each of us had an important story to tell. We traveled from

different parts of the city and suburbs to meet in each other's homes twice a month and rarely missed a session. We craved the missing pieces of our lives that the others provided for us.

The group enabled me to learn about different Palestinians' experiences in Israel and the occupied territories. I heard heartwarming stories of friendship and even marriage between Palestinians and Israelis. I also heard painful stories of loss and displacement. I finally understood that not all Palestinians were in cahoots with other Arab states to destroy Israel. My supposed enemy looked very different close up.

It was interesting to hear the Palestinians reflect on what they had learned about Jews. Especially poignant was one Palestinian's comment that as a naturalized U.S. citizen he felt at home in the U.S. even though he was born in Palestine. But you Jews, he said, have been here for generations and yet you still don't feel safe. That's why you throw so much support behind Israel: it represents the security you don't feel you have. I still ponder his observation.

Despite the lessons learned in this group, I did not become involved in Middle East peace activities. I was afraid to take a position on a situation that still seemed so complicated. I was particularly concerned that I might advocate something that would hurt my beloved Israeli family.

The next step I needed to take in order to become an activist was to reclaim my relationships with Israel and with my family. I went to Israel many times after my dialogue group stopped meeting, and I visited relatives of my Palestinian friends. Most important, though, I developed a deeper love and tenderness for my Israeli family. I saw more clearly how the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians affected their lives. The nightly television news in Israel (and hourly urgent radio broadcasts) create the sense that they are constantly living in a state of siege. Another attack is always just around the corner and the best defenses seem to be force and containment.

Israel's extremely high military budget leaves few resources to make schools and other buildings accessible for my cousin with cerebral palsy, as well as the many other disabled Israelis—including large numbers wounded in wars and attacks. My cousin has to physically carry her 13-year-old daughter to school because she has refused to segregate her daughter in a school for disabled children.

Much of my family has lived in a city with a significant Palestinian and Druze population, yet segregation has meant that most have missed out on developing friendships with their neighbors. I watched my young cousin reluctantly begin his mandatory military service while his parents and grandparents worried. They live in daily fear for his well-being. I have two more cousins scheduled to begin their service in the coming months.

My relatives' lives are circumscribed by the conflict. They are more likely to visit Europe than Jerusalem, since they are afraid to travel in their own country. To survive, they stay focused on the details of daily life, on their children and their jobs.

When I have asked my relatives about how to end the conflict, their responses in the past year have been filled with hopelessness. "We need to wait to get nonmilitary heroes in government," they say. "There is no one we can trust to negotiate with. We need to stay away from the occupied territories." The problems seem too overwhelming, so they live day to day. The unresolved struggle weighs heavily on both Israelis and Palestinians.

As a non-Israeli Jew, I have more space to think about the situation than do the people caught in the middle. My trips to Israel finally led me to conclude that I have an important role to play in resolving the conflict. Shortly after the present intifada began I organized a group of Jews who wanted to work for a just peace, believing that this was in the best interest of our beloved Israelis and Palestinians alike. I am motivated first and foremost by love for my family—the very factor that had previously been the biggest barrier to my involvement. We are all hurt by the presence of injustice even when we are not its direct targets.

Those of us who want to help Israelis and Palestinians resolve their conflict must have empathy for the internal struggles of the many Jews who care deeply about justice, but who have great difficulty thinking about or considering involvement in working for peace in the Middle East. Jews in the U.S. have a unique role in addressing this situation, since we are able to do so more objectively than can the people caught up in the day-to-day struggles. We must make it clear that by working for justice, we are working for both peoples.