

JOURNEY INTO ISRAEL

Zionism has exhausted itself ... If the Zionism of today isn't a success story, it's the fault of the Zionists. It's because of the religiosation and Likudisation of Zionism and because what was supposed to be a state of the Jews has become a Jewish state.

Amos Elon, *Haaretz*, 24 December 2004¹

The Jews' long history as the victims of murderous persecution must not cause us to wrap ourselves in a cult of self-pity, but, on the contrary, should encourage us to take the lead in the world-wide struggle against racism, prejudice and stereotypes that begin with incitement by vile demagogues and can end up in genocide.

Uri Avnery, March 2005²

IN EARLY 2005, I spent more than a month in the Middle East and the USA, researching this book. It was the first time I had visited Israel and Palestine, and I had two aims: I wanted to see the situation for myself and talk to ordinary Israelis and Palestinians; I also wanted to hear some of the alternative voices in the debate first hand. Many—such as the grandfather of Israel's peace movement, Uri Avnery—are established

journalists, authors and activists in Israel and Palestine, and their views are derived from their lived experience of the Israel–Palestine conflict, but their work receives little attention in Australia.

I had been warned that at Tel Aviv’s Ben-Gurion Airport, zealous immigration officials would probably grill me about my plans and intended destinations. A number of pro-Palestinian activists had been barred from entering the country. Ironically, as it turned out, I was questioned for over an hour by a security official apparently obsessed with why a Jew such as me had not made it my business to visit Israel before now. Eventually I persuaded him that the time had never previously been right.³ I was a Jew in a Jewish country and I was made to feel unwelcome.

The timing of my visit was fortuitous: since Yasser Arafat’s death in late 2004, there had been a lull in violence between Israelis and Palestinians—partly because of the Hamas ceasefire negotiated by Palestinian President Abu Mazen—as both sides waited to see what the new Palestinian leadership would bring, though Israeli incursions and settlement construction continued unabated. This relative calm would enable me to travel around much more easily than at other times. During the cab ride into Tel Aviv, I asked the driver whether he thought the situation would continue to improve. ‘The death of Arafat, the super terrorist, was a good thing’, he told me. ‘I hope things will improve. We’ve given them [the Palestinians] a lot already’. The driver clearly felt that Israel had made enough concessions towards the Palestinians and received little in return. Such misguided views of Israel’s supposed generosity appeared constantly throughout my trip.

The centre of Tel Aviv brought to mind the cities of Eastern Europe before the fall of communism, but with more colour and life. The buildings were almost all uniformly grey but interspersed with pleasant green spaces. By arrangement I met a former Australian citizen, Guy Spiegelman, near Rabin Square, the site of the assassination of former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Spiegelman, a bespectacled 34-year-old, was running for the Israeli Knesset as a member of the Labor Party.⁴ Born and raised in Sydney, and a former head of the socialist Zionist youth movement Habonim Dror, he has lived in Israel since 1994.

He told me he is driven to fix Israel’s myriad social and economic problems. ‘We’ve spent 60 billion dollars in the territories, and the fastest growing business in Israel today is soup kitchens’, he said. ‘Our education system in the 1970s was the best in the world and now we’re number 25’. The cost of holding on to the territories is simply excessive, he said.⁵

Spiegelman, a progressive, argued that Zionism needs to change and adapt its mission. He talked about the need to evolve a ‘new Zionism, sustainable Zionism or post-establishment Zionism’, a concept that I will hear other Israeli intellectuals discuss on my visit. What this means is not always well defined, but in Spiegelman’s case it seems to mean finding a footing that will provide security and prosperity for Israel, while recognising the validity of Palestinian demands for their own state. Spiegelman told me that he supports in principle the return of half of Jerusalem and the evacuation of the settlements in West Bank and Gaza. He would also back it in practice ‘if I could be convinced that they [the Palestinians] weren’t going to keep on shooting rockets and sending over suicide bombers’.

He has pushed for Jewish leaders to accommodate left-wing viewpoints because the Left is ‘attempting to do the tough work of engaging those who are expressing anti-Israel views. It is a lot more difficult than speaking to the pro-Israel Christian right’.⁶

He derides former Likud minister Natan Sharansky for complaining about the rise of antisemitism and anti-Zionism on US campuses. To Spiegelman, the answer to building a sustainable Israel is greater tolerance:

If you want the future leaders of the Jewish community to stop being silent, to stop feeling like they are in Soviet Russia, encourage criticism and all streams of Jewish thought, left, right and in between to get out and make their many voices heard. Let them speak about Israel for good and for bad, warts and all. You may not like some of what they say—but if you don’t let them say it, you may alienate them forever and be left with no footsoldiers in the battle for public opinion, especially amongst academics, unions and left-wing politicians—who used to be Israel’s greatest supporters.⁷

Playing pool in Ramallah

From Tel Aviv, I travelled on to Jerusalem. My first priority was to visit the nearby town of Ramallah. A short bus ride took me to the Qalandia checkpoint. Signs of the occupation didn’t exist for most Jews living in Jerusalem. Travel down the road, however, and Israel’s elaborate occupation was apparent. The ‘security’ fence snaked around the horizon. The high, imposing concrete wall looked impenetrable. As I easily passed through the checkpoint into the occupied territories of the West Bank, many Palestinians were waiting on the other side of the turnstiles to cross in the opposite direction.

The place they were leaving was a revelation: dusty and uneven roads, signs in Arabic and virtually no Westerners or Israelis, most of whom are legally barred from entering the territories. I arrived in the centre of Ramallah to discover a teeming, chaotic environment. On the walls, posters advertising Mars Bars and portraits of newly elected Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas were pasted cheek by jowl.

I visited Yasser Arafat's compound, or Muqataa. As I approached the site through the carpark, I saw destroyed buildings inside the compound, the aftermath of a major attack by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) in 2002. Arafat's request to be buried in Jerusalem had been vetoed by the Israeli authorities, and thus his grave stood inside the Muqataa, housed in a glass-encased room guarded by Palestinian soldiers. I was the only visitor, but I noticed floral wreaths from Norway, France and other European countries. The place was strangely moving, perhaps because of Arafat's contradictory life and his decidedly mixed achievements; he was a man both loved and feared, a dictator and freedom-fighter.

Later, I met Chris Sidoti, a former Australian human rights commissioner, now based in Geneva and working with various NGOs. He had been leading a human rights conference in Ramallah. After dinner, a handful of young Palestinian journalists from the city took us to a smoky, underground pool hall. The men were all in their early twenties, with various levels of English fluency, and were studying either law or media. I was told about frequent delays at Israeli checkpoints. One of the young men had seen a woman giving birth at Qalandia checkpoint the day before. Another told of waiting sometimes three hours a day to simply get to university. 'It's hard to like the Israelis', one said. They talked of feeling trapped. Chris said that being in Ramallah was like living in a Third World country, while the First World beckoned 10 kilometres away in Jerusalem. I left them all at around 11 p.m. and travelled back to the checkpoint. It was virtually empty aside from a handful of Israeli soldiers. Palestinians weren't allowed to leave after early evening, but foreigners could get back into Jerusalem until midnight. An IDF soldier waved me towards her, opened my backpack and asked for my passport. 'Why do you want to be in Ramallah?' she said. 'There is nothing to see there.'

Listening in Jerusalem

The following day I attended a conference at Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel, entitled 'Human Rights in Times of Conflict, Human Bombs and Targeted Killings: The Human Rights Perspective'. Professor Eyal Ben-Ari, a specialist in sociology and anthropology and director of

the Jerusalem-based Harry S Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, argued that the IDF's attitudes towards human rights had improved greatly during the 1990s. There was 'growing transparency of IDF actions', he claimed, and demonising Arabs was now 'a rarity'. 'Targeted killings', the act of murdering perceived political opponents, was 'given cultural legitimacy in Israel'. He suggested that the intifada had given Israelis the confidence to support the killing of suspected 'terrorists'. I found his views unconvincing, not least because I knew many Israelis were blissfully unaware of, or complicit with, their government's extreme anti-terror measures. Besides, innocent civilians were often killed during such operations.

The next speaker, a Palestinian, discussed why a handful of Palestinians are drawn to suicide bombing. Lawyer Mohammed Abu-Harthieh attempted to get inside the minds of such people. 'We know we cannot match [Israel's] balance of power, but we can match the balance of terror', he said. When Israel responds with collective punishment rather than targeting individual responsibility, he argued, it is a clear violation of international law. The conference revealed the chasm between the two peoples and the vastly different perspectives on human rights. Israelis were portrayed as righteous while the Palestinians appeared weak and humiliated.

It was a depressing and negative discussion of human rights, but West Jerusalem itself nevertheless seemed to assert the possibilities of a relatively harmonious coexistence between the peoples of Israel. I particularly loved the Old City, a small portion of land populated by Jews, Muslims, Christians and Armenians. The Muslim quarter was dark and its alleys filled with shops selling spices, silver and jewellery. One sign caught my eye: 'Industrial Islamic Orphanage School'. The Jewish quarter revealed men with dark, heavy beards, dressed in the religious Jewish uniform. Some of them were accompanied by their wives; the women walked a few steps behind as they carried the luggage for their husbands—a surreal sight.

The Western Wall was impressive, if disturbing. Religious men offered to place tefillin, leather objects used in prayer, on my arms or head. I declined; they persisted; I refused again, and they became irritable. Nearby a bar mitzvah was in progress. A Jewish boy recited from the Torah, attended by his male relatives, while the women in his life looked on from a distance, standing on chairs placed on a dividing line extending from the middle of the wall.

Nearby is East Jerusalem, almost a completely different world from the rest of the city, predominantly populated by Palestinians and increasingly

isolated by Israeli checkpoints and the ‘security’ fence. Successive Israeli governments have deliberately aimed to isolate and punish Palestinians in an attempt to force them out of the city. Palestinians rightly demand that East Jerusalem be declared the capital of their state, an issue that has a long and fraught history. During my time in the area, I barely saw any Israelis. It was like visiting an Arab country in the heart of the Jewish state.⁸

One evening, I arranged to meet Fadia Daibes and her husband Said in an East Jerusalem hotel.⁹ Fadia is a consultant in the Palestinian water sector, and Said a musician. They are a well-travelled couple, fluent in English, evidently well educated and middle class. ‘Most tourists don’t come to East Jerusalem’, Fadia told me, ‘because the media and guides say it’s dangerous and full of thugs’. In reality, the lives of roughly 250 000 Palestinians in the area are very difficult:

We’re Palestinians but have Israeli ID cards and Jordanian passports. Officially, we are not Palestinian. We have no sports centres. There is nowhere for us to take our children on long walks. Often I have a meeting in the occupied territories and the checkpoint closes so you have to cancel. After a while, you just make less of an effort to go.

In the mid-1990s, according to Fadia, life for Palestinians in East Jerusalem was ‘privileged’:

We could go abroad easily, get permits or exit visas to anywhere. After the second intifada in 2000, we were locked in. I used to go and shop in a mall in Israel very close to here, because they had very nice clothes. Now I don’t have the guts or I feel ashamed of myself if I go. I feel like a prisoner in Jerusalem. I can’t easily go to the West Bank [because of the excessive waiting at checkpoints] or to West Jerusalem, so we have one or two entertainment restaurants here that we go to. When I do go to Ramallah, with all the blocks and the wall, I still feel it’s more freedom than here.

Fadia had recently won an award from a Swedish philanthropic organisation dedicated to environmental rejuvenation for her work on water-conservation issues. As she talked about the regional water crisis, I began to see that it was a metaphor for the larger Israel–Palestine conflict. The Jordan River, a major supplier of water for the region, is

diminishing fast and is filled with sewage.¹⁰ In Israel and the occupied territories, the Israeli authorities control the distribution of water. The topic was virtually ignored during the Oslo agreement of the 1990s. 'We [the Palestinians] just followed our emotions that we wanted all the water and that doesn't work. They delayed the water issue to the final status negotiations, and when Rabin was assassinated everything was blocked', Fadia explained.

Fadia paints a damning picture¹¹ of Israel's disregard for the water needs of the Palestinian people. Former Israeli water commissioner Meir Ben Meir quotes the official line: that international law does not apply to Palestinians because Palestine is not recognised as an independent state. Palestinians should buy water from the Israelis, he said. Fadia concluded that long-term sustainable agreements were the only way forward.

Although she believes in cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians, she said that too often this amounts to little more than dinners being held between the two sides rather than concrete plans being laid. She is critical of organisations such as the World Bank and the European Community for shifting their attention from development to emergency relief:

The World Bank cancelled all the water-development programs and shifted them into emergency, which is fixing a pipe here, fixing a trench there, all the bits and pieces that were damaged by the IDF. Maybe they fix it today and then the IDF will come tomorrow and destroy it again.

She demanded international sanctions against Israel: 'Many donors are in fact subsidising the occupation. I say don't stop the emergency program, but it must be done in parallel with long-term development'.

If Fadia Daibes saw her ideal solution to the conflict implemented, there would be a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, shared water resources, a divided Jerusalem and shared responsibility on border and security.

From Jenin to troubled Hebron

I wanted to visit the large West Bank town of Jenin, so with a handful of Palestinian passengers I took an overpriced minivan ride across the West Bank. Well-kept Jewish settlements dotted the small hills, alongside poor, dusty Palestinian towns. Farmers carried their produce on goats. The landscape was surprisingly green, and often beautiful.

The roads near Jerusalem and the settlements were smooth, but these soon turned into a pot-holed mess (often caused by Israeli tanks, I was told). We crossed a handful of checkpoints. I noticed that cars with Israeli plates could pass straight through while Palestinian vehicles were checked individually. Access to towns such as Jenin was hassle-free for me, as I was travelling around the West Bank in a period of 'relative calm'. Had I come even a few months earlier, I was constantly reminded, I would probably have faced great difficulties passing Israeli checkpoints.

Jenin's town centre was eerily deserted, the shops closed. It was Friday afternoon, a time of Muslim prayer. In the empty silence, I noticed that thousands of posters covered the walls. Written in Arabic, they showed men carrying guns promoting martyrdom in front of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. The faces of assassinated Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi seemed to be everywhere.

The place was dusty and unclean, and the buildings decayed. I walked around the deserted market and a few people appeared and stared. I found my way to the refugee camp, site of an infamous Israeli invasion in 2002. A number of children started to follow me and to throw large stones in my direction. I shouted at them to stop but to no avail. I picked up my pace but the kids wouldn't let me out of their sight. At last an old man appeared and screamed at the kids to cease. He spoke very broken English but told me that the children probably thought I was Israeli. 'Not many people come here other than the Israelis', he said. That I was wearing green trousers resembling military fatigues probably didn't help me!

The camp contained many re-built houses and walls. Water ran along the cramped, steep paths. I could see hundreds of houses sitting on small hills in the distance. I was expecting to see visible reminders of the Israeli incursion, but only traces of the destruction remained. When I found the Palestinian Red Crescent office, I learnt that the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia had funded programs to rebuild the refugee camp.

One small building housed a makeshift hospital and a handful of male nurses and doctors. They were friendly and spoke broken English. One man, with growing rage in his eyes, said, 'Sharon is the biggest terrorist. Tell the world this!' I started chatting with Abdul Raouf, a nurse.¹² He was 32 and had once lived in Zurich for a couple of years. 'After 9/11', he said, 'life for Muslims and Arabs in Europe was very hard; they think we're all terrorists'. He told me about life under occupation, about ambulances being fired upon and destroyed by the IDF. A burnt-out ambulance sat outside the Palestinian Crescent building. A few years earlier an IDF sniper had taken aim at the ambulance, and the vehicle had caught fire. Inside the

building I met the Palestinian doctor who had been in the ambulance. After 15 months' treatment in a Jordanian hospital, the man still looked sickly. He had several visible skin grafts, and the skin on his face appeared tight.

Raouf told me of many pregnant women dying at checkpoints because the Israelis wouldn't allow their ambulances to pass. He earned 40 shekels for eight hours' work and worked as a cleaner at another hospital to supplement his income. 'Everybody here wants peace, to make a living and space for our children to play', he said. 'This is our land. The Jews should go back to Europe.' When I said that the Jews could not go back to Europe, he acknowledged that it was impossible: 'They say that we should go to Jordan or Syria, but that's not right. We will stay. Most people here think we can live with the Jews, but I don't think so'. He told me about a public hospital in Jenin that had 28 stretchers for beds and was trying to deal with 64 sick children in only seven rooms. Next to the Red Crescent building was the Palestinian police headquarters, still half destroyed by the Israelis. I saw a handful of men in uniform trying to march in time.

As depressing as Jenin was, nothing there prepared me for my visit to Hebron. According to the Bible, Hebron is one of the most spiritual places in historical Palestine, and this is partly why it has become fiercely contested territory. Often virtually inaccessible because of intense violence between the IDF, Palestinian militants and Jewish settlers, no place better exemplifies the apartheid-like policies of the Israeli state. Around 500 settlers live among 170 000 Palestinians, and successive Israeli governments have supported the fundamentalist Jews who openly advocate Palestinian 'ethnic cleansing'.

Unlike other West Bank cities, where I was comfortable discovering places and people myself, in Hebron I followed advice and found a guide. Gunhild Louise Forselv, a tall, lanky Dane whose blonde hair drew attention to her, was a senior press officer with the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH). The TIPH is a civilian observer mission staffed by personnel from Europe; it was set up after a massacre in 1994, when a settler killed Palestinian worshippers. Its main task is to monitor and report misconduct by either side in the conflict, although they are not permitted to intervene directly and have no military or police functions. The official TIPH mandate is to assist in efforts to 'maintain normal life in the City of Hebron, thus creating a feeling of security among Palestinians'. I soon discovered just how difficult that was.

'We have no agenda, such as ending the occupation', Gunhild told me. I asked her how the IDF responded to their presence ('our relationship is average'), the settlers ('they dislike us, often calling us "Nazis"')

and Palestinians ('kids sometimes throw stones at us out of frustration, but mainly we are liked'). The city is divided into an H1 area and an H2 area, an arrangement agreed upon in the 1990s. The intention was to delegate responsibility to both the Palestinian and Israeli authorities, but in reality the arrangement resulted in de facto Israeli control. The result is a Palestinian population virtually kept prisoner in their own homes with their markets and roads closed.

Driving in a four-wheel drive with reinforced windows (for protection against Jewish extremists), we entered H1, where Palestinians are allowed to walk but not drive. The buildings were run-down, and IDF patrols stopped almost every Palestinian man. The streets were virtually deserted, however. 'This is supposed to be the busiest day of the week', Gunhild told me, 'but everybody stays inside'. We spotted a couple of young male settlers with dark beards and untucked white shirts, both carrying automatic weapons. These were representatives of the infamous 'hilltop youth', an extremist Jewish rabble who threaten violence against Ariel Sharon and regularly attack Palestinians.

We entered H2 and got out of the car to look around. I was told to keep my hands visible at all times and not to make eye contact with any Jewish settlers. 'Sometimes they've beaten up members of the TIPH', Gunhild said. In this part of town, only IDF and settlers' cars were allowed. Palestinian land and houses were routinely stolen for 'security purposes'. Areas that were once thriving were now routinely deserted. Many boarded-up shop fronts were sprayed with the Star of David, a crude way for settlers to claim the property as their own. Comparing this behaviour to 1930s Nazi Germany was considered outrageous, Gunhild said. The Christian Peacemaker Teams released a series of photographs taken in Hebron in recent years that showed the attitudes of many settlers to the Palestinians.¹³ Some of the graffiti in English included: 'Die Arab Sand Niggers'; 'Exterminate the Muslims'; 'Watch out Fatima, we will rape all Arab Women'; 'Kill All Arabs'; 'White Power: Kill Niggers'; 'Gas the Arabs' and 'Arabs to the Gas Chambers'. It was hard to believe that anybody, let alone Jews, would want to emulate Nazi behaviour.

As we walked through the deserted streets, Gunhild told me that many Palestinians were not allowed to walk down the same roads as Jews, forcing them to leave their homes through neighbours' doors or alleys. Only old men were still selling their wares because they were too old to move away and start a new life. Fences, gates, barbed wire, aggressive IDF soldiers and constant settler provocation made Palestinians prisoners in their own city. The West Bank settlers were more extreme than those in

Gaza, according to Gunhild: 'It's more religious here, rather than political'. The week before I visited, a 15-year-old Palestinian boy had been shot dead by the IDF. He allegedly wielded knives while approaching the soldiers. We both wondered why the boy had to be killed. Gunhild said young soldiers wanted to prove their masculinity and show who was boss. Boredom was a significant factor. The IDF have complete control over the area, being able to issue orders to demolish houses, bar access, close shops, take land and impose curfews.¹⁴

Virtually all the shops in the souks were closed. Sheets of wire mesh were suspended above the markets. Gunhild explained that this was to prevent settlers, living on the levels above, from throwing rubbish and faeces onto the Palestinians, although the meshing was already groaning under the weight of discarded bottles, clothes and rubbish. As we walked through the market, a Palestinian man approached Gunhild and told her that he and his friends had been sitting and talking in their courtyard when a soldier stationed above them in a guard tower had told them to 'go home'. No reason was given for the directive.

The difficulty of TIPH's mission was underlined early in 2006 following worldwide Muslim outrage over the publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons that were seen as insulting the prophet Muhammad. Around 300 Palestinians attacked the observer mission in Hebron, threw stones, smashed windows and tried to set the building on fire. Sixty unarmed TIPH members were inside at the time but were unharmed. A week before the protests, eleven Danish members of the mission had left Hebron after receiving threats from local Arab extremists. Gunhild told Associated Press that TIPH had decided, in consultation with the Hebron governor, to keep a low profile and to temporarily cancel patrols.¹⁵ She claimed that Palestinian groups had guaranteed the mission's safety just days before the attack.

Wide-eyed near Gaza

I wanted to enter Gaza but Israeli authorities claimed I didn't have appropriate press credentials. Fellow journalists also told me that Israeli authorities were notoriously suspicious of independent reporters unattached to a major news organisation. A 2003 Israeli directive demanded that all foreign nationals who enter Gaza, including United Nations (UN) workers, sign a form that absolves the army of responsibility if they kill or injure you. It is especially aimed to restrict non-violent direct action against the Israeli military, namely by the International Solidarity Movement (ISM).¹⁶

I travelled as close to Gaza as possible and rested at Kibbutz Nirim, around 2 kilometres from the border and situated in the Negev desert.

My hosts were Sam and Mara Wisel, now in their seventies, who had migrated from Melbourne to Israel in the late 1950s, keen to live the Zionist dream of building a new nation from scratch.¹⁷ Sam, a solid man with white hair, beard, an Akubra hat and large, worn hands, still used words such as ‘proletariat’ and ‘bourgeoisie’. ‘I wanted to come here’, he said, ‘to be a hard working man with my hands and work the land’. ‘I was very gullible’, Mara, a petite woman who is fiercely critical of IDF conduct in the territories, told me. Both Sam and Mara retain Australian accents and a strong love for their birth country. They have two children living in Australia, an academic and an artist, and another son who is a senior commander in the IDF and often works covertly in the West Bank. His career choice is a sensitive subject. Mara regrets it, but Sam told me he thinks Ron is ‘a good kid who would never do anything wrong’.

The kibbutz felt peaceful. With its green surroundings and 1960s-style concrete architecture, it was like being in a time warp. A few times we ate at the communal dining room, akin to a school cafeteria but with better food. Mara and Sam’s apartment was small but decked out with any number of modern appliances.

The local landscape was agriculturally rich, with greenhouses dotting the horizon, noticeably different from the West Bank’s rocky, ragged terrain. Several monuments commemorated the lives of Israelis who fell in the conflicts from 1948 to 1967. One plaque referred directly to Kibbutz Nirim: ‘In memory of the heroic stand of a handful of Kibbutz Nirim members, who unaided repelled the invading Egyptian army on 15 May 1948, the day of Israel’s Declaration of Independence’.

The Negev has been transformed from a desert into rich, fertile farming land, and many *kibbutzniks* reside in the area. Nirim is relatively small, with around 600 members; some kibbutzim have thousands of residents. I was told that some young people no longer wanted the traditional kibbutz lifestyle, and only around 2.1 per cent of the Israeli population lived on kibbutz. Even during their peak in the 1960s and 1970s, no more than 6 per cent of Israelis resided on kibbutz. Once privatisation arrived, the collective spirit started to erode, according to Mara and Sam. I had always presumed that those on kibbutz were politically left-leaning. Not anymore. Many on Nirim were rightists, opponents of the Gaza withdrawal and supporters of the settlers. How had this happened? The post-1967 period was a watershed, Mara and Sam said. A hardening of hearts and a firmer resolve against the Arabs resulted in a determination to keep the occupied territories. By the early 1970s, the fundamentalist settler movement was on the rise, and the country started becoming ‘less egalitarian between

social and economic classes'. All these factors contributed to the couple's increasing disillusionment with Israel.

As we drove through the Negev countryside, studded with red poppies, I was struck by the absence of Arabs. We approached the entrance of a Gaza settlement block, Gush Katif. Land appropriation was common in the area, with Jewish-only roads and farmers paying residents of Khan Younis a pittance to work in their greenhouses. It was exploitation under conditions of virtual slavery. When I visited, it was only a few months before the planned withdrawal from Gaza, but Mara said she'd heard on the radio that millions of shekels were still being spent on facilities for the settlements, including a library.¹⁸

On the way back to the kibbutz, we spotted a Bedouin family tending their sheep and were invited into their camp for tea. The family was wary but soon warmed to our presence. A man aged in his twenties, his striking wife and young child all lived under a plastic sheet along with his two brothers. There are about 150 000 Bedouin living in the Negev, about half in urban centres and half in traditional Bedouin rural villages, which the Israeli government refuses to recognise. The result is that rural Bedouin are not connected to national infrastructure and are left without access to water, electricity, sewage, health services, educational facilities and roads. Mara and Sam have long worked to improve their rights.

We sat on Mara and Sam's outside veranda and heard the constant whirring of F-16s overhead. 'Until about three weeks ago, you couldn't sit out here', Mara said. 'There was gunfire, loud helicopters and explosions within earshot all the time.' Sam maintained his faith in the country, its media and its government, despite vehemently disagreeing with much of the current situation. Mara was more pessimistic. 'The spell has been broken here some time ago', she said. She and a group of friends protested every Friday afternoon at the road to Gush Katif—'we haven't missed one in four years'—holding up signs for the settlers inside to read: 'Come back to Israel. We welcome you'.

Sam and Mara impressed me as honest people who had lived their lives according to a combination of Marxist, revolutionary Zionist and pro-Palestinian sympathies: 'We only learnt about what really happened in 1948 much later with the New Historians [such as Ilan Pappé and Benny Morris.]'. Mara acknowledged that their initial ignorance of the events was because 'nobody told us, or we didn't want to hear or we were brainwashed. We very much wanted to believe the dream'. I enjoyed hearing about their belief in an alternative to capitalism and the ways in which they had put this into practice over the years. 'We were both Zionists from

the beginning, but we were always very conscious and very sensitive about the Arab issue', Sam said. 'We accepted at face value the equality of Jews and Arabs in Israel.'

The couple's idealism is not completely shattered. 'I still do believe that Jews need a national home', Mara said. 'I remember we even thought of once going to South Africa to fight against apartheid. Israel was that sort of business. We were going to do a little more than just live and die as a nuclear family.'

Sam's family had lived in Palestine for generations before they migrated to Australia. None of his relatives had died in the Holocaust. Sam identified strongly with the Australian working-class culture in which he grew up. He thought he saw its egalitarian impulse in Zionism:

I felt that Zionism also recognised the right of other peoples. I've often heard the argument, even to this day, that if we have the right to demand national independence, so do others. I can see in the Jewish communities in the world, in America, Australia and England, the Jewish question has been paramount, and they don't recognise that if you're a Zionist, you're a Zionist for everybody.

The 1982 Lebanon war was another turning point for Sam and Mara. Sam was one of the first to protest against the war in Tel Aviv, a mere three weeks after its beginning. 'That would have been unheard of before', Sam said. 'People certainly disagreed with Israeli actions but would never dare say it in public.'

Mara struggles with disillusionment: 'I often say to Sam that I'm losing hope and maybe we should move back to Australia. I think it was first when Sharon became Minister of Defense. The second time was when he became Prime Minister. I said I can't stand this any longer, but I'm still here'.

The following day I met Alon Schuster, Mayor of Sha'ar Hanegov, the region where Sam and Mara live.¹⁹ Sha'ar Hanegov advertises itself as 'fulfilling David Ben-Gurion's vision of settling the Negev and making the desert bloom'. Six thousand citizens are scattered across 45 000 acres, and some are re-establishing relationships between Israeli and Palestinian communities. A large photo of Ariel Sharon was displayed in Schuster's office. I asked him about it. 'I'm a leftie', he said, 'but I support Sharon because I think he is the best accomplisher of my agenda. He is doing what we were dreaming by pulling out of Gaza. He's a son of a bitch but he's our son of a bitch now'.

A bit like Guy Spiegelman, Schuster believes that Zionism has achieved its aims and it is now time to reinvent the ideology. But again it is complicated: he believes in a Palestinian state, but refuses to accept Israeli responsibility for the failure to establish it.

As we talked I discovered that, as for Sam and Mara, Lebanon had been a turning point for Schuster: 'I volunteered for the war in Lebanon because I believed in supporting the decision of a democratic state. But three weeks later I was publicly protesting the wrongness of the campaign'. I asked him if he supported soldiers who refused to serve in the occupied territories because of their objection to the occupation. 'In a democratic society, good people shouldn't be acting like that', he said. 'The army needs good people to stop the bad people.' Sam had expressed similar views the day before in relation to his son. Perhaps this was his way to deal with his son's role in the IDF.

Meeting a refusnik

I was keen to meet an Israeli refusnik. Matan Kaminer refused to serve in his country's army and paid the price, spending nearly two years in prison.²⁰ In 2004 Kaminer joined five others in one of the more high-profile cases of this relatively new movement in Israel's militaristic society. The three sentencing judges said they were guilty of a 'very severe crime which constitutes a manifest and concrete danger to our existence and our survival'. During their 21-month gaol term, their families launched an effective public relations campaign to highlight their plights. One of Kaminer's colleagues-in-arms, Haggai Matar, told the *Guardian* that Israel was punishing them especially harshly because they had gone public and could 'affect other people'.²¹

I found Kaminer to be a highly articulate 22-year-old and unlike anyone else I've ever met. Sitting in his small, messy student apartment in Jerusalem, he told me that his father had refused to serve in the Lebanon war and had gone to prison for his beliefs. Despite being part of the radical Left in Israel, Kaminer said that he had felt moderately optimistic during the 1990s and the Oslo agreements:

I remember thinking when I was 10 or 11 that when I was 18 there wouldn't be any need to go to the army. With the outbreak of the second intifada, the Zionist Left evaporated and what remained was to be radical. We were told that you were either for [Ehud] Barak and the proposals he made to the Palestinians—accepted by most of the Zionist Left—or you disagreed and said that any

acceptable offer would have to include the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem and a settlement to the refugee problem. For me, refusing to serve in the occupied territories was a political act.

Kaminer's ideological opposition to the occupation stems from the belief that 'being ruled by another people . . . is as far from democracy as you can get'. A declared anti-Zionist, Kaminer said that the definition of Zionism had changed radically over the years: 'Noam Chomsky said that 50 years ago I was called a Zionist and now I'm called an anti-Zionist, even though my views haven't changed'. The palpable fear and racism within Israeli society towards Arabs and Palestinians are because 'we want to be a western European country and the Palestinians are not from those origins'. His objection to Zionism is based on its inherent bias towards one people over another. During Kaminer's court martial, the authorities threatened that the five men would have to enlist again after their sentences since they had never served their full terms in the IDF.

Yet other conscientious objectors had started to come forward. In December 2003, thirteen reservists from Israel's elite military commando unit sent a letter to Ariel Sharon explaining their refusal to serve any longer in the occupied territories.²² They joined a growing group of individuals, from former security chiefs to reserve pilots, who, by the early part of the decade, had started openly questioning official government policy.²³

In the same month, a group of elite soldiers released a letter of refusal to the public. It began, 'We, reserve combat officers and soldiers of the Israeli Defense Forces, who were raised upon the principles of Zionism, self-sacrifice and giving to the people of Israel'. It succinctly summarised the 'corruption of the entire Israeli society', declaring that 'We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people'.²⁴

Kaminer told me that his refusal started by gathering a handful of friends together while still at school and issuing a high school seniors' letter that articulated the reasons for their proposed action. They began as 62 people and within a year had gathered 350 signatures. Despite their principled stance, he said, 'most young Israelis are completely oblivious to any possibility of revolutionary change' and are fearful of refusing military service because of the known consequences. Kaminer reminded me that not everybody goes into the army in Israel: 'Twenty per cent of the population are Arab citizens of Israel and another 10 per cent are the ultra religious Yeshiva students who also get exempted. Something

like 30 to 40 per cent don't complete their service at all'. During his time in gaol, he found many of the other prisoners were less than sympathetic with his political stance. He was not physically abused but often threatened or simply ignored.

His ideal solution to the conflict is a one-state solution, with Palestinians and Israelis living together, but he acknowledges that separate states are a more realistic option for the foreseeable future. The right of return is a more complex problem. The idea that every Palestinian refugee has to return exactly to where they came from is unacceptable:

Most of the refugees today were not actually born there, and they are second, third and fourth generation. There is not really anywhere to return to. Many of the places have been completely destroyed and the ones that remain are mostly occupied by other people, so to right a wrong that was made years ago, and throw people out of their homes now, is a mistake. I don't think the Palestinians want them there either.

Kaminer continues his activism as he believes the current direction of the Jewish state is leading to further tension with the Palestinians. He now works for Rabbis for Human Rights, an Israeli NGO dedicated to resisting Israeli oppression of Palestinians.

A day with Amira Hass

The following day I spent in the West Bank with Amira Hass, one of Israel's leading journalists.²⁵ 'I'm called "a correspondent on Palestinian affairs"', Hass once said, 'but it's more accurate to say that I'm an expert in Israeli occupation'.²⁶ Between 1993 and 1997, she reported exclusively from Gaza and wrote a book about her experiences, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*.²⁷ Now she is based in Ramallah and reports on life in the occupied territories for *Haaretz*. As a child of secular Holocaust survivors, she inherited a strong sense of justice and sympathy for the struggle of persecuted peoples. She loves Israel despite being an avowed non-Zionist.

When few other journalists questioned the official version of events and their consequences, Hass understood—not least because she was living among those the Israelis were trying to suffocate—that Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza was leading to inevitable failure: 'The only Israelis this generation of Palestinians know are soldiers and settlers. For them, Israel is no more than subsidiary of an army that knows no limits and settlements that know no borders'.²⁸ Her stories generate masses of

emails from readers, some of which are vitriolic. She told Robert Fisk in 2001 that some messages compared her to the Nazis; others hoped that she would suffer from breast cancer, and many argued that there would be no peace until all Palestinians were expelled.

I met Hass—a plump woman, dressed in black and wearing a white scarf and trainers—at a central bus stop just outside Jerusalem. An *Haaretz* photographer accompanied us, and our driver and guide was Dror Etkes, settlement watch coordinator for Israeli group Peace Now. We travelled to a German school on the outskirts of Beit Jala. There are 830 boys and girls at Talitha Kumi School, a German Evangelical Lutheran Institution; 70 per cent are Christian and 30 per cent are Muslim. Students from Bethlehem and the West Bank learn together in a coeducational environment. There is a dormitory for boys, though they stopped accepting girls from Gaza in the mid-1990s because of Israel's closure policies. Girls were often unable to visit Gaza or return to school after a visit.

Most students only attended school three days a week because of the difficulty of getting home to Palestinian towns and villages. Free movement was a significant problem for staff as well as students. The school's music teacher, who lived in Bethlehem, had written a Christmas song that was aired on Israeli television. Despite this, when she requested a permit to enter Jerusalem to buy a new piano, the Israeli authorities refused and gave no reason.

The school's principal, Dr Georg Duerr, told us that the proposed path of the fence would restrict access to students living a mere half-kilometre from the school. Israelis authorities informed him that a 'humanitarian tunnel' would be built to facilitate easier access. Duerr said that he held little faith in official guarantees as past experience taught him to believe virtually nothing they said. 'Our school is trying to make a model of harmony', he told us. Duerr worked in South Africa during the years of apartheid and opened a school that allowed both white and black students. The similarities to current-day Israel were highly unfortunate, he said.

Talitha Kumi is a beautiful school with bright, airy rooms. From the roof, we were treated to wonderful views of the lush valleys soon to be criss-crossed by the wall. Etkes said that Israelis were currently 'battling between hating Arabs and hating settlers, but hating Arabs was a stronger feeling'. Many Israelis increasingly felt that settler extremism had crippled the Jewish state economically and socially, but ingrained anti-Arab racism permeated every level of society. Hass responded pessimistically: 'Maybe in 50 years, the economic situation will be so bad that things will change, but not before then. Things will only change with Israeli,

Palestinian and international pressure. And when the Left offers more than slogans'. She has an infectious laugh, but remained resolutely serious throughout the day.

We drove to the Efrat settlement. My companions commented that every time they visited it appeared to have expanded further. Fences sprang up, then were moved; Palestinian land was taken, and new Jewish-only roads were funded. We went through Tamar settlement, situated on a hilltop near Bethlehem. Some men were erecting power poles and looked at us suspiciously. The mobile homes at Tamar were illegal, but Etkes said that the authorities turned a blind eye. There were panoramic vistas from the settlement and I could see how Palestinian towns were being surrounded by Jewish settlements.²⁹

We drove on to the settlement of Beitar Illit, a massive development whose many red-roofed houses blotted the landscape. Empty land behind was slated for further development. Shrinking Palestinian towns sat on one side, soon to be surrounded by the wall and more settlers. Hass was exasperated. She said she'd seen such developments even during the 'peace process' years. Bypass roads for Jewish-only traffic were everywhere, but we didn't use them, as cars were sometimes ambushed by Palestinian militants.

We stopped in a Palestinian village and were invited into a house. One of the men there knew Hass's work. As we sat in the lounge room, Hass told me that the Palestinians were 'resigned mainly, not angry' about the wall and imposing settlements. The view from our guest's roof was spectacular, but the ultra-Orthodox Beitar Illit settlements were now virtually on their doorstep. He told Hass that a few weeks before our visit, a few of his friends had tried to meet up with some Israeli activists, including Matan Kaminer, from peace group Ta'ayoush. When the IDF discovered the Israelis were coming, they placed a military cordon around the town and restricted access. Another time they demanded the phone numbers of all the participants meeting in a house. They stood outside, Hass was told, 'as if they were going to shoot us'.

Etkes and Hass said that most Israelis had no idea about what really went on in the occupied territories. There was almost full media complicity with Israeli authorities, they told me. Hass said that *Haaretz* was the only outlet that would publish her work, though her current editor wasn't always supportive and sometimes held pieces or placed them at the back of the paper. The last intifada had caused the Israeli media to question less and to accept more government spin, Hass said.³⁰ She found fault with the other side, too: 'It's frustrating that often the Palestinians don't protest or complain until the bulldozers arrive [to demolish their houses]'.

Her work consistently gives voice to perspectives rarely articulated in mainstream Israeli society. ‘What drives me is anger, the injustice of it all’, she said. ‘Sometimes I get very frustrated and have to turn away and read fiction. Somebody has to write what happens so nobody can say they didn’t know. It’s important that Jews write about this. It’s who we are and we shouldn’t hide it.’

Maintaining the rage

Along with Amira Hass, Gideon Levy is Israel’s other truly maverick journalist. Having worked at *Haaretz* for over 20 years, he’s spent many of these writing solely on the occupation. ‘I want to write about what Israelis are doing on my behalf’, he told me.³¹ A tough-looking man with cropped hair, Levy reminded me of Hass, with a seemingly endless supply of determination and anger.³² He doesn’t see himself as being like Hass, however:

We come from different backgrounds. Amira was raised in a communist community and she came already loaded with a lot of political ideals, while my development was much more gradual because I was just an ordinary guy and not very political. I worked for four years with Shimon Peres when he was leader of the Opposition. I became more radical later.

Levy said that the occupation had become more brutal during his years of reporting:

I can recall the famous scene during the first intifada, broadcast on CBS, that showed Israeli soldiers breaking the bones of Palestinians with stones. Everyone was shocked by that scene and it was broadcast all over the world. It was, we thought, the most terrible thing that we could imagine. Today I wouldn’t even mention it because kids are killed like flies.

He argued that Israelis have been conditioned to believe that ‘Palestinians are not human beings like us’, otherwise ‘they would never be able to live with the thought that they were doing such terrible things to other human beings’. He told me how world Jewry both supports and condones Israeli brutality:

For them, military strength is the only strength. American Jewry, and maybe in Australia too, offer the ultimate self-orientation:

‘We are the ultimate victim’ and nobody else has the right living here, especially after the Holocaust. Every time I hear this slogan that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, I don’t know if to laugh or cry, because a state with one of the most brutal and cruel military occupations in the world isn’t a democracy.

Levy calls himself an ‘anti-Zionist’ although he believes Jews living in Israel have every right to live there. He imagines a two-state solution and a return of some of the Palestinian refugees:

Listen, we absorbed one million Russians in ten years, more than half of them were not Jewish. So why, for God’s sake, can’t we absorb half a million Palestinians who were born here, who own this land, whose memories are here, whose everything is here? They belong to here ten times more than all the Russians and the Europeans and maybe me. After this solution will take place, we may realise that it’s better for both states to federate or become one state.

Despite having a high profile in Israel, his media appearances have significantly decreased in recent years. Levy used to have a weekly television show but is now rarely asked to participate on radio or television talk shows: ‘They take someone from the extreme Right and from the centre and never from the radical Left. There have been tensions at *Haaretz* but generally they can live with me’. Although he receives hate mail, including death threats, he believes that some reaction is better than indifference.

He holds the Israeli media heavily responsible for hiding the true face of the occupation and showing ‘our’ victims but never ‘their’ victims in the same light:

We face a deeper problem of self-censorship, not because somebody tells them to be like this, but because they believe that their place is to sit in the bulldozer who ruins the house and not with the families who are left behind. If they show something they will show the bulldozer and not the families who are left. They will tell you about the so-called reasons why the house was demolished but they will never check. They will say today Israel assassinated a big terrorist, but they will never check

whether he was such a big terrorist. Every settler who is scratched by a stone will get two pages in a newspaper and nobody will mention the Palestinian family who lost three children. It's easier for Israelis to dismiss Amira [Hass] because she lives in Ramallah and not here. With me it is harder because I am here and part of it.

'I think deep in their hearts, most Israelis are really racist', he told me sadly. He compares present-day Israel to apartheid South Africa:

When you drive a road in the West Bank which is a road for only Jews, what is it if not apartheid? When you cross a checkpoint which is only open for Jews, what is it if not apartheid? If you are an Israeli citizen of Palestinian origin who tries to find in this liberal neighbourhood an apartment to rent and you have terrible difficulties doing so because you are Palestinian, what is it if not apartheid?³³

Despite this attitude, he loves his country: 'I wouldn't live in any other place in the world. I'm part of it; I was born here and I think I will never leave'.

Levy supports sanctions against the Israeli state, believing that only outside help can end the occupation: 'I think if the American President wanted to end the occupation, it could end in two months. But we will never have it because of the Jewish lobby'. He encourages Europe to play a more active role but understands the historical difficulties: 'Europe is neutralised because of the Holocaust. Every time there is just a small voice against Israel, immediately this whole mechanism is saying "anti-Semitism" and "Europe, don't you dare"'. Israel today is an immoral state, one of the most immoral states in the world'.

Israel's Chomsky

One of the most trenchant critics of the Israeli political and media establishment is linguist Tanya Reinhart. Like Noam Chomsky, she attacks the media for the responsibility they must bear for the failed peace process. A columnist for Israel's mass circulation daily *Yediot Aharonot*, she spends six months of every year teaching at the Netherlands' University of Utrecht and the rest of the year at Tel Aviv University. Her book *Israel/Palestine: How to end the war of 1948* is a devastating critique of the Israeli establishment and its desire, in Reinhart's interpretation, to provoke a Palestinian intifada in October 2000. When Sharon described Israel's war

against the Palestinians as ‘the second half of 1948’, she wrote, ‘there can be little doubt that what they mean is that the work of ethnic cleansing was only half completed in 1948, leaving too much land to Palestinians’.³⁴

A central aspect of Reinhart’s book is its forensic analysis of the failed peace talks at Camp David in 2000, between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat. The book was released in Hebrew in 2005, and *Haaretz* reviewer Yitzhak Laor praised Reinhart’s ability to expose the fallacy, still accepted by many, that the Israeli leader had offered the Palestinians ‘the lot, they rejected the offer and then they launched an attack on us’.³⁵ Former head of Israel’s Military Intelligence Amos Malka told *Haaretz* in 2004 that every effort was made by the political and military elite to turn Palestinian disquiet into war.³⁶ When Sharon visited the Temple Mount in 2000, the Israeli response to Palestinian protests, orchestrated by Sharon and Ehud Barak, was deliberately brutal. In the first days of the uprising, soldiers in the territories fired 1 300 000 bullets, according to *Haaretz* in June 2004.³⁷ ‘The intent was to score a winning blow against the Palestinians and especially against their consciousness’, according to the report. ‘This was not a war on terror, but on the Palestinian people.’ Reinhart argued that this was a deliberate attempt to crush Palestinian nationalism once and for all, and that the media sold the propaganda line that the intifada seriously threatened Israel’s very existence.

One would expect such revelations to cause a massive stir. And yet Reinhart knows that Israeli society has remained mute. The majority of Israelis are fed up with the occupation, she told me, so

how do you get this majority to stay obedient? The only way is to convince them that the government is doing everything possible to find peace and it’s just impossible. The first intifada brought a change in Israeli public opinion. We began to understand that the occupation has a price, that it’s not coming for free.³⁸

She wrote in May 2005 that one must read the *Guardian* and watch Aljazeera in order to find out what goes on in Israel.³⁹ ‘The spokesman of the Israeli regime writes the news, the media prints and broadcasts it and the analysts recycle it’, she said. I asked whether she had considered leaving Israel permanently and she told me that she and her husband ‘talked about it all the time. We talk about a red line and that line is being crossed’. The week before my visit, Reinhart’s husband had one of his poems pulled from *Haaretz*. ‘You can’t call Sharon a murderer in public anymore’, she complained. Surely Sharon’s bloody record should be a legitimate target of satirists, artists and writers, she said.

The grandfather of the peace movement

My last interview was, perhaps appropriately, with Uri Avnery, the ‘grandfather’ of the Israeli peace movement. We met in his central Tel Aviv apartment overlooking the city and the Security Services building. His lounge room was filled with numerous bookshelves, artefacts from around the world and two framed photos of himself and Yasser Arafat. One was of their first meeting in 1974 and the second was taken at a more recent peace conference, where Arafat approached him and they embraced. Avnery is in his eighties, with piercing eyes and a white beard and hair, but he remains optimistic about the prospect of peace, and is highly engaged.

Avnery’s life has reflected the history of his country. He was a soldier in pre-state Israel, is a writer and journalist, and a former politician and founder of numerous left-wing political movements including Gush Shalom.⁴⁰ Avi Shavit wrote in *Haaretz* in November 2004 that Avnery’s major political contribution was to bring Yasser Arafat ‘into our lives’.⁴¹ ‘Arafat will be remembered as one of the greatest leaders of the second half of the twentieth century’, Avnery predicts.⁴² Nevertheless, Avnery’s voice is marginalised within Israel itself, though the Internet has allowed many more to read his weekly columns.

During our long conversation, Avnery was part philosopher and part pragmatist. ‘Zionism has not changed’, he said, ‘but circumstances have changed. Zionism is becoming more powerful and therefore the possibility of taking hold of ever-greater parts of Palestine is real. It’s a war. War prevents seeing the other side as it is. Ariel Sharon is the epitome of all this. He’s the ultimate terror fighter’.

Avnery argues that Sharon is the direct heir to founding father David Ben-Gurion:

Ben-Gurion was determined to have a Jewish state as big as possible with as few non-Jews in it as possible. He was determined to reach this in stages, achieving at every stage only that what was achievable. Sharon is very much the same. He is immovable. He wants all of Palestine to become a Jewish state with not a single Arab in it. He is not fanatically blind and he does not want to overreach himself, so he wants to use the circumstances of every stage in order to achieve what is possible, leaving it to the future to achieve more.⁴³

He dismissed the self-proclaimed leaders of the Israeli peace movement Peace Now and the Labor Party as the ‘moderate parts of the Zionist

enterprise'. 'They have very little to do with peace', he said. The real peace movement, however, had had immense influence:

Fifty years ago, there were not 10 people in all of this country who even recognised the existence of a Palestinian people, not to mention a Palestinian state. It was unthinkable. Today, the fact that the Palestinian people exist is accepted by practically everyone. Most people considered it treason when we made contact with the PLO in the 1970s, including the government of Israel. Today the Left generally supports Sharon. You have this curious duality in Israeli life, which amazes people, including Israelis. In the public opinion polls, the majority accept our point of view, more or less. While in the same opinion polls, the majority supports a right-wing leadership, which is doing the exact opposite. This is not new; it has been around for as long as I can remember.

Avnery wants Israelis to see themselves as an 'Israeli civilisation, not a Jewish civilisation'. What does he mean?

The settlers and their allies, a considerable minority in Israel, want a Jewish state in the real sense of the word. Separation between state and religion is quite unthinkable for them. They want a state ruled by the rabbis, according to Jewish religious law, very much like the Islamic fundamentalists. Against this you have the majority who want a democratic state ruled by Parliament. I've been saying since before the state of Israel that a Jewish democratic state is a contradiction. There is a law that says you cannot stand for elections if you deny this is a Jewish democratic state.

The USA and Australia share a deep affinity with Israel for 'unconscious reasons', he said. 'Namely, trying to eradicate the local population and committing genocide. For Americans, Israel is really not just a second America, but justifies American history. America, I believe, has never come to terms with its own history.'

According to Avnery, the future national identity of Israel is the next major challenge.

Guess who's coming to dinner

Although I had never visited Israel, I have family there, based in Ramat Hasharon, about a 20-minute drive from central Tel Aviv. I had met some

of these relatives years before in London, where some then lived, and distinctly remembered their bellicose views on the conflict.

Ronnie and Lilly Green, both in their sixties, welcomed me into their home. Ronnie is a warm, gregarious man with a strong English accent. I told myself it would be best to avoid mentioning the conflict, but he knew I was researching a book. I offered the briefest of explanations of its likely content. 'Your book will have the wrong views', he told me. Over the coming two days, I experienced a barrage of Ronnie's vitriol. Some 'highlights':

Germany is the devil. I've never been there and never will. And my children, luckily, share the same view. We have no German products. I don't think Israel should have accepted Germany money [soon after its birth] or support for at least 50 years. But when it's a matter of survival, it's a difficult decision.

You can't be pro-Palestinian without being anti-Israel. But you can be pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian.

I've never read in the Israeli press any incitement or hatred of Arabs. Never.

We should be harder against the Palestinians, crush them, until they realise that we aren't going anywhere. Only force will make them understand.

The world hates Jews and hates Israel. They always have and always will. They hate now that we're strong.

I don't care if the Palestinians are suffering. We must come first.

The checkpoints, the wall and bypass roads are all necessary to keep Palestinians from killing Jews.

I don't know of any Arab or Palestinian academic, protester or individual, except for a few, that don't hate Israel and Jews.

His passion was violent and astounding. I tried to stop the conversation numerous times, but he refused, determined to convince me how wrong I was: 'The only good book on this subject is Alan Dershowitz's *Case for Israel*', he told me. 'He understands . . . I used to be left-wing but not when I realised that they hate us. It's not their land. It's ours. The

country hasn't been hijacked by right-wing fanatics and the settlers. I'm willing to compromise, probably on Jerusalem and the territories.' This last sentence contradicted many of his previous statements, but he refused to elaborate.

Other members of the family were invited over for a Sabbath meal. Ronnie and Lilly's daughter, Danielle, was equally confrontational. 'In Israel', she said, 'people are very political and we all have very strong views on everything'.

I was mildly reassured when Ronnie told me that, despite our disagreements, 'Blood is thicker than water. We're family'. A few hours later a suicide bomber ripped through a crowd waiting for entry into a popular Tel Aviv nightclub, killing five people. It was the first such attack inside Israel for many months. Emotions were frayed inside the house. Ronnie paced in front of the television and lectured me on the reasons why negotiations could never work with 'these people'. I didn't know what to say.

I felt saddened by Ronnie's attitude. I wondered if I'd be just as intolerant if I lived in Israel. There was a complete lack of empathy or understanding of the other side, and there was demonisation of Arabs, and hatred of the UN and France. Israel was the eternal victim, continually fighting for its very existence. 'We used to allow Palestinians to work here [in Israel]', he said, 'but now we don't anymore, thankfully'.⁴⁴

In an article he wrote to mark the sixtieth anniversary of Auschwitz, Tom Segev described the condition that seemed to afflict my cousins, and many others I met in Israel. The Holocaust had created an Israeli society unable or unwilling to see other's suffering. In Segev's words:

The hatred of Arabs has become legitimate. A state in which so many of its citizens survived the Holocaust is supposed to be strict in its observance of democracy and human rights ... Ironically, the oppression in the territories is encouraging anti-Semitism, and in various places in the world it is even endangering the safety of Jews.⁴⁵

Before my travels, I had hoped to discover voices of optimism in Israel and Palestine, and I did, here and there. It was clear that some Israelis were ready for a different future, ready for a different Zionism, even if their own thoughts about it were sometimes self-contradictory, and they were still struggling to see the way ahead. There was concern about the impact of continued conflict, not only on Palestinians in the occupied territories, but on the future of Israel itself. Progressive voices had

been marginalised for too long, partly a result of Palestinian suicide attacks and hardening Israeli attitudes. The Oslo years may have been initially embraced by the wider Israeli and Palestinian populations, but an ever-deepening occupation soon turned this hope into hatred for many Palestinians.

The overriding sense was one of frustration. Palestinians knew their voices weren't being heard on the world stage, and Israelis felt persecuted in the court of global opinion. I had little sympathy for the latter. Operating an illegal occupation for nearly 40 years must have a cost. I felt ashamed during much of my time in Israel, and this became even more acute while travelling around the West Bank. I was embarrassed to be a Jew in a country that so openly and brazenly discriminated against non-Jews. Especially given our history, this situation was deeply shaming and morally unacceptable.

I sensed a growing awareness, however, that the current direction was doomed. When a former deputy director of Mossad can publicly lambast the IDF as 'soulless and merciless',⁴⁶ one knows the tide must be turning. The likely outcomes are less clear. My relatives' callousness, while shocking, shouldn't have surprised me. After all, successive Israeli governments wouldn't have been able to get away with such murderous policies had it not been elected by a majority of voters in a free country with a relatively open press.

The trip made me question the role of my journalism. Was I simply trying to report the situation on the ground, a reality often ignored in the Western media? Or did I have a broader agenda: was I trying to show the precarious position of an undemocratic Jewish state in the middle of an autocratic Arab world? Ariel Sharon said in 2001: 'Israel may have the right to put others on trial, but certainly no one has the right to put the Jewish people and the State of Israel on trial'.⁴⁷ That kind of hypocrisy permeates the attitudes of many Jews and Israelis to their homeland. I realised I needed a better understanding of where this hypocrisy came from. I needed to know more about Zionism, and the related issue of antisemitism.