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A Loud and Promised Land

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TEL AVIV

On my 12th visit to Israel, I finally had my baptism by traffic accident. I was sitting at a red light, when a bus turning the corner honked at me to back up. When I did, I scraped the fender of the car behind me.

The driver — a young, hip-looking, alt-rocker dude — came running out of the car in a fury. He ran up to the bus driver and got into a ferocious screaming match. Then he came up to me graciously and kindly. We were brothers in the war against bus drivers. Then, as we were filling out our paperwork, another bus happened by and honked. The rocker ran out into the street and got into another ferocious screaming match with this driver. Then he came back to me all smiles and warmth.

Israel is a country held together by argument. Public culture is one long cacophony of criticism. The politicians go at each other with a fury we can't even fathom in the U.S. At news conferences, Israeli journalists ridicule and abuse their national leaders. Subordinates in companies feel free to correct their superiors. People who move here from Britain or the States talk about going through a period of adjustment as they learn to toughen up and talk back.

Ethan Bronner, The Times's Jerusalem bureau chief, notes that Israelis don't observe the distinction between the public and private realms. They treat strangers as if they were their brothers-in-law and feel perfectly comfortable giving them advice on how to live.

One Israeli acquaintance recounts the time he was depositing money into his savings account and everybody else behind him in line got into an argument about whether he should really be putting his money somewhere else. Another friend tells of the time he called directory assistance to get a phone number for a restaurant. The operator responded, "You don't want to eat there," and proceeded to give him the numbers of some other restaurants she thought were better.

We can all think of reasons that Israeli culture should have evolved into a reticence-free zone, and that the average behavior should be different here. This is a tough, scrappy country, perpetually fighting for survival. The most emotionally intense experiences are national ones, so the public-private distinction was bound to erode. Moreover, the status system doesn't really revolve around money. It consists of trying to prove you are savvier than everybody else, that above all you are nobody's patsy.

As an American Jew, I was taught to go all gooey-eyed at the thought of Israel, but I have to confess, I find the place by turns exhausting, admirable, annoying, impressive and foreign. Israel's enemies claim the

country is an outpost of Western colonialism. That's not true. Israel is, in large measure, a Middle Eastern country, and the Israeli-Arab dispute is in part an intra-Mideast conflict.

This culture of disputatiousness does yield some essential fruits. First, it gives the country a special vividness. There is no bar on earth quite so vibrant as a bar filled with Israelis.

Second, it explains the genuine national unity. Israel is the most diverse small country imaginable. Nonetheless, I may be interviewing a left-wing artist in Tel Aviv or a right-wing settler in Hebron, and I can be highly confident that they will have a few things in common: an intense sense of national mission, a hunger for emotionally significant moments, an inability to read social signals when I try to suggest that I really don't want them to harangue me about moving here and adopting their lifestyle.

Most important, this argumentative culture nurtures a sense of responsibility. The other countries in this region are more gracious, but often there is a communal unwillingness to accept responsibility for national problems. The Israelis, on the other hand, blame themselves for everything and work hard to get the most out of each person. From that wail of criticism things really do change. I come here nearly annually, and while the peace process is always the same, there is always something unrecognizable about the national scene — whether it is the structure of the political parties, the absorption of immigrants or the new engines of economic growth.

Today, Israel is stuck in a period of frustrating stasis. Iran poses an existential threat that is too big for Israel to deal with alone. Hamas and Hezbollah will frustrate peace plans, even if the Israelis magically do everything right.

This conflict will go on for a generation or more. Israelis will keep up their insufferable and necessary barrage of self-assertion. And yet we still dream of peace and the day when I am standing in line at an Israeli cash register and an Israeli shopper sees a chance to butt in front of me, and — miracle of miracles — she will not try to take it.

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