

I suppose that if you live in Israel long enough, war will find you. We arrived as “working tourists” in August of ’83. The *Intefadeh*, the years-long Palestinian uprising which began in ’87, wasn’t actually a war. It was more of a demonstration. Traveling in the West Bank became dangerous. We didn’t go from Jerusalem into Bethlehem as often as in the past, but we felt comfortable enough hiking the hill behind Mevasseret to visit the village of Beit Suriq, where Nasser the Gardener lived.

But Nasser hadn’t come over the hill to work in our yard for weeks now. We all knew a real war was coming, and Nasser had promised me that when it did, all the Palestinians in his village would come over the hill and ravage the neighborhood. Now, even my own husband and son, expatriates and not Israelis, had been conscripted to patrol the hill.

We were in the States when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the entire world stood upright, observing and posturing. Our kids were with the nanny in Jerusalem, and we were chafing to get back to them. Once we arrived in Israel, we couldn’t decide whether to stay or go. Iraq had given its ultimatum—if the U.S. attacked, they would fire missiles at Israel. (They would “flood the desert with our blood.”) All of our expat friends were receiving phone calls from home—parents and relatives offering them all sorts of perks, if they would just leave the country for awhile. We waited for “the call” from home, but when it came, it wasn’t so enticing. With Bud needing to stay on, we’d have to separate the family if I took the kids away.

Finally, I relented and took the kids to Cyprus to stay with friends. People were in motion all over the Middle East. As we arrived in Cyprus for safety, others were leaving because they felt unsafe. We met expats from Saudi, on their way to Greece. Others leaving Lebanon, going back to America. After only a week in Cyprus, something in my gut said we needed to be together in Jerusalem. As people were fleeing out of Israel, we took the last plane into Israel before Ben Gurion Airport shut down completely.

We began to prepare according to the government’s instructions. Israeli civil defense distributed gasmask kits to everyone. Each kit contained the mask and antidotes against various poisonous chemicals. Meanwhile, the people I thought would be the strongest, the most inured, the Holocaust survivors, were lapsing quickly into hysteria and panic. The experiences in their past, rather than proving to them that they could make it through anything, harrowed them up to images of destruction and death. The Holocaust survivors administered the antidotes when no noxious chemicals were present. It made them sick. They’d read the symptoms list: “You might have been exposed to chemical weapons if you manifest trembling, nausea, vomiting, clumsiness...” Their fright instigated all the symptoms, and the antidote sent them to the hospital.

Our house in Mevasseret was constructed of steel-reinforced cinderblock faced outside with Jerusalem stone and inside with plaster. We had a bomb shelter in the basement, but were warned not to use it. Sadam Hussein had used chemical weapons against the Kurds, so the threat could not be ignored, and the poisons are heavier than air. Better to go up. We were instructed to choose an upper room and seal the windows with tape and plastic. We chose the master bedroom as our designated “sealed room,” and dragged in the kids’

mattresses. The whole family slept together for the duration of the Gulf War. We had been instructed to leap into action the second we heard air raid sirens: gather everyone, don our gasmasks, wet a towel with water and baking soda and use it to seal the space under the door, turn on the TV and the radio. The Americans would warn Israel every time a missile was launched. A scud missile would take two minutes to get to us from Iraq.

It was Ian who let us know the war had begun. He called from L.A. The first night of real trouble, there were no sirens. I heard guns firing outside on the street and shouting. I couldn't understand the Hebrew. I opened a window and gazed eastward towards Jerusalem's city lights strewn across the Judean hills. A cacophony of sirens' wails rose into the exquisite night. The sirens in Mevasseret weren't working. Hence, the shouting and the gunfire..."Scuds incoming! Go to your sealed rooms!"

Nearly every night after that (it seemed) Mevasseret's sirens went off at intervals, robbing us of sleep and sanity. The attacks seemed timed for the convenience of American TV viewers. We'd awake to the air-raid sirens, sleepily don our gasmasks, seal the room, and turn on the radio. *Nahash sefah, nahash sefah!* The commentator would shout the warning. *Fiery, flying serpent* was the translation. Israelis saw scriptural fulfillments in every event:

Rejoice not thou, whole Palestina, because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a cockatrice, and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent (Isaiah 14:29).

"Him that smote thee" was Nebuchednezzar. The "cockatrice" was Saddam Hussein.

The radio commentator, Nachman Shai, had a soothing voice and became something of a folk hero, women calling him at home until he had to change his phone number. The Jerusalem Post named him the man women wanted most to share their sealed rooms. Sections of Israel were divided into areas with simple, alphabetic code names: aleph, bet, etc. *People in aleph can remove their gasmasks; people living in bet, keep them on*, his instructions would dictate. We listened to the soothing voice on the radio and watched BBC news at the same time, wary and sleepy in our suffocating masks.

My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me (Isaiah 21:4).

It became apparent that all the attacks were occurring at night, and that most were aimed towards Tel Aviv. Many Tel Aviv citizens left for "holiday" to Eilat in the far south. Instead of existing at a dead halt, we began to live a sort of half-life in Jerusalem. We were instructed to carry our gas-mask kits everywhere we went, but we could go out in daylight. Schools opened for a few hours a day. Mothers helped the teachers at our local Israeli kindergarten. All the kits were lined up on the window sills, but if an attack occurred, the teachers would need help getting gasmasks on all the children. The children were playing, and I was helping the teachers cut out pictures for a bulletin board

display, when the sirens began—one, then two, then three in harmony. Then one teacher began to scream at the children. The hair on my neck stood on end. I couldn't understand her all of her angry Hebrew, but I soon discerned that it was the children who were the sirens. They had been previously warned not to pull this joke again.

My little girls built a “gas tent” for their Barbie dolls. Gas attacks became part of their games of pretend.

Social functions were scheduled so families could reunite after dark, cloistered at home in case of air-raids. Work hours continued to be compromised, social contact limited, sleep sacrificed. No one shopped. No one played. No one ate out. No Palestinian workers were allowed into Israel proper, so construction stopped...also farming. It seemed as if the entire world stopped its normal business to watch this war.

After a few nights with no attack and favorable reports that the allied forces were making progress, I relearned how to sleep through the night. And then one early morning, I awoke abruptly as a powerful explosion rent the entire hemisphere of the heavens from one horizon to the other. I looked up, expecting the stones of our house to plummet down upon me. Then I heard my husband come bounding up the stairs. “It's thunder! It's thunder!” An echo came from the radio...Nachman with the soothing voice...*It's thunder, it's thunder....*

The Purim holiday approached. Kids dressed up in costume, but their parents were dragging. Yet, it soon became apparent that there might be reason to celebrate. We spent hours listening to the BBC's coverage of the allied triumph. We ventured out in the dark, leaving our gasmasks behind. We went downtown for cheesecake. The next day we went downtown again, this time with our children in costume.

We have set our gasmasks aside, but for some reason cannot bring ourselves to take down the tape and plastic sealing the bedroom windows. Is it because the paint will peel? There is no jubilation anywhere. Is it shell-shock? Is it because so many of our neighboring nations are suffering? Yet, there is quiet gratitude. There have been many miracles and few casualties here. Perhaps, later, we'll rejoice.

End

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Gale T. Boyd
1140 W. 2000 North
Mapleton, Utah 84664
(801) 491-8668
(801) 471-7794 cell
(801) 491-8765 fax
galeboyd@msn.com