Of Walls and Bridges: Teaching and Studying

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I can trace the seeds of my abiding interest in the intersection of Jewish/Israeli and Arab culture to two specific events that occurred while I was a high school student on a kibbutz in the eastern Galilee. The first took place when the group of American high school juniors of which I was a part travelled to the nearby Arab town of Daburiyya, at the foot of Mt. Tabor. We met Arab Israeli youth of our age in their classroom, where we bashfully introduced ourselves to each other. From there, our hosts took us to their homes where we were graciously hosted. I also recall our playing soccer on a field of dirt and stones as our Arab peers patiently indulged our feeble footballing skills. Given our total lack of Arabic skills and our fairly basic knowledge of Hebrew, along with the Arab students correspondingly basic level of English, our ability to communicate verbally was minimal, but we felt welcomed and warmed by the exchanges of good will.

Returning to the kibbutz, I was perplexed by the fact that my Israeli peers had no contact and seemingly no interest in the Arab villagers who lived nearby. When I asked my kibbutz family about this, they told me that in the old days things had been different; that they had known and been on good terms with people in the neighboring Arab village of Kafr Misr, and there would be exchanges of visits often around holiday or wedding celebrations, but now the only contact that seemed to exist was that between employer and employed (on kibbutz!), with the Arabs performing the menial or difficult labor that the kibbutzniks preferred to avoid. When we invited the Palestinian youths for a return visit to us on the

kibbutz high school, the kibbutz kids all kept their distance and couldn't understand why we would be interested in making friendships with Arab children.

The second event took place during my senior year, after I had decided to remain in Israel and was invited to join the kibbutz class of my age. As a gift for his parents, my kibbutz brother wanted to construct a rock garden in front of their home. Without receiving much in the way of explanation, I helped hitch up a trailer to a tractor and we rode a couple of kilometers into the kibbutz fields. On the top of a small rise surrounded by gorgeous views of the eastern Galilee, Mt. Tabor, we came upon piles of black stone blocks of basalt; in a few places, parts of walls still stood in place on their foundations, while on some stones there were white markings. Nir explained to me that these were the ruins of the Arab village of Tira, whose inhabitants had fled during the '48 War.

Subsequent to their departure, the IDF had razed the buildings to prevent infiltrators from using them, and the white initials I had noticed dated from this destruction. We loaded up the trailer with the hewn blocks, brought them to my kibbutz parents' home, and built low retaining walls to form flower beds in the front yard.

But the thought of those stones and the homes of which they were built did not leave me: What had the homes looked like? When were they built? Who lived there? Why did they leave? Had they been expelled? Had they fled? How many lost their homes? Where did they go? Why did they never return? Why did the IDF have to destroy the village?

Were there other villages like this? Did the presence of these stones pose any moral quandary for the kibbutzninkim? Was the Jewish presence on this land somehow immoral or illegitimate? These questions troubled me and have continued to do so down to the present, and the images I carry in my mind of the stones both in the fields and transplanted to the kibbutz where they became a decorative garden element retains for me iconic and metaphoric significance.

In what follows, I will provide an example of a pedagogical and scholarly journey by which one person, an American Jew with strong commitments to Jewish tradition and the Jewish state, has searched for small ways to break down walls and build bridges between Arabs and Jews, despite a long and often painful history of disparate and conflicting political and religious identities. My worldview is one indubitably shaped by my own upbringing, my family of origin, my friends, my identity as an American with an abiding sense that "all people are created equal," and the privileges I have enjoyed from a lifetime in academia that provide

me the opportunity and freedom to think, teach and write about these issues in a university setting. I have no illusions that what I have done has had any major tangible impact. I do not actively advocate for rapprochement between Jews and Arabs via institutional involvement or through community organizations but I and others like me attempt through our teaching and research to expose others to examples of the human side of those with whom they may fear or hate, yet whose image is shaped to a large extent by stereotypes and prejudices inculcated by our families, our communities, and the media.

I.

I am a professor at a very large, Midwestern state university, where I serve as core faculty in both the Jewish Studies and Muslim Studies programs, an unusual arrangement in American academia. Among the repertoire of courses I regularly teach is one on Israeli culture and society. This course, enrolling approximately fifty undergraduate students, is one of a limited number through which students may fulfill their humanities breadth requirement. Most faculty at my university assiduously avoid teaching these courses as they have relatively large caps on enrollment, but, more significantly, the students, obliged to take these courses to complete graduation requirements, are mostly unmotivated. Indeed, while some of the students who enroll in my course may have some interest in learning about Israel, many of the students register based primarily on the course's fit with their schedule. While I am thus compelled to "sell" the students on the topic, I personally enjoy teaching these courses for the opportunity they offer to expose students from a broad spectrum of majors to matters of wide societal import and have them engage with texts in a critical fashion. While among the students signing up for the course is a contingent of Jewish students who have some knowledge of Israel, may have visited on a Birthright trip, or learned a sanitized version of Israeli history from day school or after-school synagogue education, the bulk of the students are of non-Jewish background, and for them, this is the first encounter with Israel beyond that provided by the mainstream communications media. Typically, I am also fortunate to have a small number of American students of Middle Eastern descent, primarily Muslims and Chaldeans, as well as international students, often from the Gulf.

The course is divided into three units: in the first, "An Old-New Nation" (playing off the title of Herzl's 1902 utopian novel, Altneuland), we establish a theoretical framework through which we structure our investigations: collective memory and (re)constructions of the past. During this part of the course I also provide a basic overview of Jewish history so that students may understand the bonds that connect Jews to each other, to their languages and cultures, and to their land;

however, the core of this unit is comprised of the rise of the Zionist movement in its European context and the foundation of the State, and we explore such topics as the Haskalah, emancipation, anti-Semitism, the notion of the New Jew (and its corollary, “the negation of the Diaspora”), the Old Yishuv, waves of aliyah, the revival of Hebrew, etc. In the second unit, “The Dream and the Reality,” we compare the utopian Zionism vision with its actual implementation. Here, we examine the centrifugal tensions within Israel along religious, ethnic, national, and gender lines and why, in spite of these, the society is somehow able to cohere and thrive. In the final unit, ‘Growing Up in Israel/Israel Growing Up,” the students connect their life experiences with those of youth from a variety of Israeli communities and consider what is different about childhood and young adulthood in Israel. We also consider the creative dynamism of its people and economy, the challenges and contributions of recent influxes of immigrants, and the costs of the ongoing violence. We conclude our survey by looking at the ways in which the Zionist revolution is still working itself out, including the revisionist history of its foundations and the shift from a mobilized collectivist society to a more individualistic one.

Given the diverse population of students, the course goals vary for each of the groups involved, but writ large, I see my role as complicating their understanding of Israel. For the majority of students, those who have little or no background, I seek to provide some awareness of the causes that led up to the push for a Jewish state and some insight into the complexities of the society as it exists today. For those Jewish students with some knowledge of Israel, I want to challenge their often simplistic and sometimes chauvinistic notions of the contours of the society. For students of Middle Eastern background, I seek to gain their trust and, by my example, get them to think openly about a country and society that for many of them has primarily negative associations. I make it clear from the outset that all questions are encouraged, nothing is out-of-bounds, and I encourage the students to think critically and “outside the box.” All the students are interested in understanding current events and making some sense of the scenes of violence that emanate from the Middle East as a whole and from Israel in particular, and we of course deal with these issues; but I try to provide a nuanced introduction to Israeli society that takes into account the history and modes of identity that underlie these conflicts. The major work for the course consists of the compiling of a response journal in which students are asked to engage a diverse range of texts—written and filmic—in a critical fashion. The approach is one that views the country as a social laboratory and a work in progress, one in which we have the unique opportunity to observe a revolutionary movement that in large part accomplished its goals: reestablishing Jewish sovereignty, gathering in exiles, and

creating a vibrant culture. I believe this openness to critical approaches to Israeli history and the injustices and tragedies that necessarily accompanied a revolutionary movement encourages the students to think critically about their own assumptions. I am particularly gratified by the fact that among the students who seem to get the most from the course are the Arab and Muslim students, who appreciate the openness with which I treat the Arab-Israeli conflict and the tragedy of the Palestinian people.

I also teach a course on the Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that focuses on the similarities and contrasts between the three monotheistic traditions that arose in the Near East. Again, this is a humanities breadth requirement course with similar enrollments in terms of number and ethnic background. After introducing the students to the tools of comparative religion, we examine the basic history and central tenets of each of the three faiths, and then proceed over the remainder of the course to examine each in conjunction within the frameworks of sacred text, sacred beings, sacred space, and sacred time. Among the highlights of the course are the site visits the students conduct to a mosque at the Islamic center, a Chabad synagogue, and the Catholic Newman Center. At each site, they meet with students and leaders of these houses of
worship, observe a prayer service, and submit a visitation report written from the standpoint of an ethnological observer. For the majority of students this is the first visit to a house of worship outside of their own tradition, and for nearly all the non-Muslim students, it is their first visit to a mosque.

Finally, I have the great pleasure of regularly leading a university summer study abroad program in Jerusalem at the Rothberg School for International Students at the Hebrew University. Typically, around half to two-thirds of the students are Jewish; the remainder are Christian or non-identified. The program consists of two courses: a lecture course on “The Emergence of the Modern State of Israel” taught by a Rothberg School faculty member, and my field-based course on the cultural and historical geography of Jerusalem. The pedagogical opportunities offered by such an intensive experience in a new culture are manifold.

In the course on Jerusalem, we take full advantage of our presence there by walking the city and delving into the major events in its history, while considering its significance as a source for tremendous cultural innovation and its status as a bitterly contested locus of contention. During our tours we look at attempts by successive settlers and conquerors to destroy or, alternatively, co-opt the symbols and structures of the preceding civilization. Central to our considerations is the construction of narrative and ritual and sacred time and space within

competing ideological, political, and religious systems. In our discussions of the contemporary situation, we cover such topics as religious-secular tensions; poverty and municipal budget constraints; various immigrant subcultures; city planning; the status of the “unified” city (i.e., East and West Jerusalem); and the problem of Jerusalem in final status negotiations. Especially meaningful for the students are the meetings we conduct with a variety of individuals in order to develop a multidimensional understanding of the city and its citizens. For example, in our tour of Silwan we meet with a leader of the local Palestinians who see their homes being threatened by the encroachments of Jewish settlers and archaeologists. We also meet with settlers and try to gain an understanding of their motivations in purchasing property and living at some risk in areas such as Silwan and the Mount of Olives. We meet with a prominent Western journalist who describes the tightrope she must walk in covering Jerusalem. We meet with members of the organization Parents Circle-Families Forum, a grassroots organization of bereaved Palestinians and Israelis whose members seek to promote reconciliation as an alternative to hatred and revenge. We meet with representatives of the Haredi community, and religious leaders from the Muslim and Christian communities. Students undertake a final project on some aspect of Jerusalem that reflects their academic and perhaps future professional interests and for which they are expected to conduct original research and consult experts in the field. These projects have included social protest movements, water rights, home destruction by the Israeli authorities of Palestinian homes, the Separation Barrier, graffiti art, the Haredi lifestyle, journalistic coverage of the city, the history of various Jerusalem institutions, and many others.

For many of the students this is a life changing experience and I derive much pleasure and satisfaction from and observing them learn and grow. Here is the report of one, a non-Jewish student:

Israel was not at all what I anticipated it to be. The few expectations that I had coming in were erased on day one, and I am so glad for this. I really felt that I learned so much more about the history and complexity of Jerusalem by being physically present instead of being taught in a classroom. I cannot even begin to explain what it felt like to stand on Temple Mount, touch the Western Wall, and go inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Our trip truly encompassed aspects of each of the Abrahamic religions, which I deeply appreciated and found to be extremely interesting. Not only did we see and hear about the background of these religions and how each has had some influence in Jerusalem, but we were able to apply our knowledge to current issues through meetings with local Jerusalemites, including an Arab villager, a Jewish settler, a Sufi sheikh, and two

men that have each lost a family member in the conflict—one a Palestinian and the other an Israeli. Being able to go into the city and explore, talk to people, and learn about past and present issues was truly an amazing and invaluable experience. Although I learned so much about the history, life, religions, and the formation of the state of Israel, I think the thing that most impressed me was the true complexity of the land. While we were only there for five short weeks, I know that everything I learned, saw, and experienced will stick with me for a lifetime. I really cannot say enough about this experience—as my friends and family who have been forced to hear about it constantly can tell you. Even pictures aren't enough to convey the incredible wonder of Israel and particularly Jerusalem. Standing on top of Masada and looking across to the sun rising over the Dead Sea and Jordan, looking up at the Dome of Rock, and even wandering the Old City with friends are irreplaceable memories for me. I met people from all over the globe, saw the holiest places in the world, learned an incredible amount, and made lifelong connections to a place that will always remain close to my heart because of the fantastic experience I had there. It was an amazing trip—the highlight of my college career.

II.

One of my primary interests as a scholar is the history and dynamics of the intersection of Jewish with Muslim and Arabic culture. The history of these contacts is a complicated one, but one that in the popular imagination is often viewed as some sort of utopian symbiosis, or, alternatively, as a story of Muslim repression of the Jewish minority culture. Of course, both of these perceptions are simplistic caricatures. In Stories of Joseph: Narrative Migrations Between Judaism and Islam (Wayne State University Press, 2005), I take as my focus a popular and widespread Judeo-Arabic retelling of the story of Joseph known as "The Story of Our Master Joseph the Righteous." This tale is widely represented in the Genizah materials and manuscript collections of Jewish communities throughout the Muslim world.

Perhaps no richer theme exists for an analysis of cultural competition over sacred figures and the transfer of cultural artifacts than the Joseph story. Claimed as an illustrious progenitor within Islamic and Jewish tradition, Joseph and his tale have a commanding presence in both scriptures; he is the central focus for the final third of the Book of Genesis, while in the Qur'an, Joseph's tale, comprising the entire twelfth surah which bears his name, is the only instance in which we are provided a 'complete' and sequenced story of a biblical protagonist. Each of these scriptural accounts served as a springboard for rich traditions of exegesis and narrative expansion or retelling of the core tales. Within Jewish tradition, the

Joseph cycle has come to stand as the prototype of the people's experience in Exile, while in Islam, Joseph serves as a precursor for the Prophet Muhammad and the difficulties he faced in gaining acceptance for his mission.

There thus arose two distinct bodies of traditions of the story in post-biblical and post-quranic literature typified by the midrash-based retellings of biblical narratives and "The Stories of the Prophets" collections, respectively.

I am able to demonstrate that while "The Story of Our Master Joseph" was intended for a Jewish audience—recorded as it is Judeo-Arabic and employing the Hebrew script—remarkably, it is actually an adaptation of a Muslim tale. What we have then is a dramatic example of the migration of cultural artifacts across multiple cultural borders: a Jewish text has taken its form from an Islamic prototype, which itself is largely based on midrashic works, which in turn draw from Hellenistic literature, ancient Near Eastern material, and so on and so forth, back all the way into the mists of the earliest human stories of parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, separation from loved ones, sexual mores, and the struggles for continued communal existence outside of the homeland. This Judeo-Arabic text, drawing as it does from a shared reservoir of materials, provides a window into the flow of ideas, motifs, and traditions between Jews and Muslims and my work on materials such as these is a way I am able to directly experience and hopefully share the richness of two rich cultures that have much to teach each other.

Recently, I have turned my attention to a contemporary situation involving Arab-Jewish dynamics, this time of an Arab minority within a Jewish majority culture in the State of Israel. In collaboration with an Israeli colleague, Dr. Rivka Bliboim, I am looking at a work of contemporary popular culture: the Israeli sitcom Arab Labor, created and written by the Israeli Arab journalist and writer, Sayed Kashua. The show, which is entering on its fifth season, is broadcast by Channel Two in prime time. Its popularity continues to rise, and it has won multiple broadcasting awards. The flipping of the power relations Arab and Jew is also mirrored in issues of language, and our research explores the linguistic choices made by the writer. In particular, we focus on the linguistic code-switching engaged in by the Arab characters: When and under what circumstances do the characters use Hebrew and when do they opt for Arabic? What factors, such as gender, generation, and ideology, affect these choices? When the Arab characters do use Hebrew, what register do they employ? The show's primary language is Arabic, and given the dismal state of knowledge of the language among Israeli Jews, this therefore requires almost all Jewish viewers to read subtitles. The fact that despite this the

show is at the top of the ratings in its prime-time slot is revolutionary in and of itself.

Although seemingly conforming to the conventions of the sitcom genre, the events and characters are presented in exaggerated stereotyped manner that serves an ultimately subversive role: to question the gap between the State's commitment to equality of all and the quotidian reality of its Arab citizens. Beyond the humor, what I believe makes the critique of Israeli society palatable to its largely Jewish audience is the willingness of Kashua to lampoon himself through the somewhat autobiographical main character. Amjad is an obsequious Israeli Arab journalist desperate to fit into the WASP (White, Ashkenazi, Sabra with Protektsia) Israeli culture, but is invariably rebuffed in his attempts to do so. At the same time, Kashua doesn't hesitate to point out the hypocrisy of ostensiby "enlightened" Jewish Israelis. The show is audacious in its taking on such heavy issues and events as the Separation Fence, the 2008 IDF Cast Lead operation and the identification of the show's characters with the plight of their Gazan brethren, Independence Day or Day of the Catastrophe (al-Nakba), lack of public services provided to the Arab sector, discrimination in housing and the marketplace, forced removal or excision of the Arab population from the boundaries of Israel, kidnappings, settler violence, etc. The show reveals the underlying fears and stereotypes of its characters—and through them, of ourselves, the viewers.

I see Kashua's project as a model for the ways in which knowledge and education can be used to change attitudes, knock down walls built on stereotypes and ignorance, and build bridges between peoples separated by different and conflicting identities. Not only is the Arabic language more present in the daily lives of Jewish Israelis, but it is also likely that both the status of the language and those citizens for whom it is the mother tongue has risen perceptibly. Moreover, the show has educated Jewish Israelis on the realities of the lives of their fellow citizens who live among them but are largely invisible. I now return to the story I told at the beginning of this piece, and the metaphorical valence of the stones from the razed homes of Tira. In university life, we have the opportunity to engage our students in inquiry about cultural artifacts—language, texts, implements, and, yes, stones to build houses or walls. Sometimes, when we understand our common humanity and look to the needs of others, these same stones can also serve to build bridges between individuals and communities otherwise divided by prejudice and hatred. My work has been a small effort to build such bridges.