

# **A Month Without Rest**

*Travel Notes From Israel During The Intifada*

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# I. The First Six Days: Getting Used To The Heat

**I** make two stopovers on the way from San Francisco to Tel Aviv. Between Detroit and Amsterdam, I am seated next to a beautiful Indian woman named Sumitra. She asks why I'm going to the Middle East, and I say because I'm bored. I ask why she's going to Romania, and she says for a wedding, which, I have to admit, is a better reason.

Inside the high-security area for the Israel flight, a beefy guy with thick black hair and bad skin asks me if I'm Jewish. I nod cautiously, and he indicates his approval. Then he tells me he's a prophet.

"A biblical prophet?" I ask.

"A big one," he replies.

Great, I think. *I'm not even there yet, and already I'm meeting crazy religious people.*

**I** was never a good Jew. When I was fourteen, I was locked up in a juvenile detention center where the juveniles were not allowed to smoke, but the adults were. Once a week I would go to synagogue in a room at the back of the compound and listen to the rabbi for a little while, because afterward we could eat and smoke as much as we wanted.

I was transferred from that center into a violent group home on the South Side of Chicago, but later I was moved to a better home run by the Jewish Children's Bureau. The move was the rabbi's doing, and it would not be unrealistic to say that if I hadn't been placed in this more forgiving home, I would not be around today.

I haven't spoken to the rabbi since.

**A**rriving in Jerusalem, I check into the Tabasco Youth Hostel in the Muslim Quarter. The Old City pulls my breath: the arches and the doorways. The foot-long, oddly shaped rocks pasted together with cement. Hundreds of Jews in black coats knocking the brims of their hats against the Western Wall, lit by arc lights. The Arab kids who grab my elbow, ask where I'm going, then run away. The tunnels and the cobbled streets and the apartments with no windows or roofs.

My first night, I am awakened at two in the morning by either a bomb or a gunshot; I can't tell which. Then at 4 A.M. the Jews start singing their sad song down at the Wailing Wall, followed by the bells from al-Aqsa Mosque at 4:45: the sounds of two great monotheistic religions disturbing a good night's rest.

While the priests clack along to the Ethiopian Monastery of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Old City glows with religious intensity, and I decide that religion is not all evil and stupid, as I always thought, but rather a reflection of both our best and our worst sides: an excuse for both abstinence and rape, war and peace, nationalism and homeless shelters, missionaries and the missionary position.

All of it is tied up here, behind the white stone walls of Old Jerusalem.

**O**n my fourth day here, eight Palestinians are killed in Nablus by an Israeli helicopter. The Muslim Quarter is quiet. The stores have closed early and are not expected to open tomorrow. The owner of the hostel sits in the poolroom watching Yasser Arafat on Arab television. He tells me Arafat is demanding international oversight. The chief of police has declared Jerusalem the new hotbed for Palestinian terrorism, citing the stoning of some Orthodox Jews last Sunday. They were attempting to place the cornerstone of the new Jewish Temple atop Haram ash-Sharif, the third-holiest place in Islam, where Mohammed rose to heaven — if you believe in that sort of stuff.

**I** meet Janos, a German backpacker, at the youth hostel. We decide tomorrow to visit Hebron, where five hundred Jewish settlers (religious fanatics) are protected by two thousand Israeli soldiers, surrounded by 120,000 Arabs. Then it's off to Gaza for two days. Seventy-two hours of chaos altogether. What should we do in the meantime? "Well, I'm German," Janos says, "so I have to go to the Holocaust Memorial."

The memorial is depressing and real. We tour the children's museum — a shrine to the 1.5 million children killed in the Holocaust — then the Warsaw Ghetto exhibit: the maps, the stories, the pictures. After the war, in 1946, the Poles slaughtered fifty more Jews in a small town. Fifty out of two hundred, which before the war had been twenty thousand.

"We did this," Janos says and draws his fingers across his forehead. He asks if I think he would have been a Nazi. I say, "Sure. You're athletic and blond. You'd have done well for yourself."

## II. Dreaming Of Hebron

**A** long time ago, Abraham made a covenant with God in Hebron, but God has not been kind to this place since. The temple in Hebron is one of the holiest sites in both Judaism and Islam, and for a long time, Jews and Muslims worshiped there together. Then, in 1929, some Arabs brutally massacred more than a thousand Jewish men, women, and children.

Now the city is divided. Janos and I arrive in Hebron, Palestinian-controlled Hebron, at about noon. The streets are choked with traffic. The market is in full swing. Vendors line the sidewalk, selling fruit juice and *shawarma* and flaky pastries smothered in honey. Shoppers crowd the pavement until it feels the place will burst. And this isn't even downtown.

We wait under the shade of a pharmacy sign for Rick

from the Christian Peacemaking Team (CPT) to arrive. A Palestinian police officer stops to question us. While we're showing him our passports, a passerby tugs at our arms; he wants to show us something. "They shoot at us from up there," he says. I look where he is pointing and see the barbed wire and the bleached white building. "The military or the settlers?" I ask. "What is the difference?" he responds. There are bullet holes everywhere.

Rick arrives, and we follow him through the market to a street where the crowd thins. That's when we hear the *pop-pop* of gunfire. We step into the middle of the empty street and cautiously approach an Israeli guard post on the border with H2, Israeli-controlled Hebron. The soldiers raise their guns tentatively. Rick asks what they are firing at, but they ignore him. They don't like the CPT; the CPT asks dumb questions. "Who are you?" one of the soldiers says to Rick with a sneer. "You are nobody."

Then the rocks come, big ones. The soldiers step forward with their guns aimed. I hide around the corner. Janos takes pictures. Rick protests that they are only rocks. But these are not pebbles; they are round bars of cement. "We'd better go," Rick says to us. "They're throwing rocks because we're here. They see the camera." Rick is one of those good Christian types who believes in the power of love. He thinks if he talks nicely to everybody, then everything will be ok. But I don't believe in the power of love. I don't believe in good guys.

Once we get past the soldiers, we are in H2, Hebron's real downtown. But the streets here are empty and quiet except for occasional gunfire from behind us and the sounds of children from within the buildings. The stores are all closed. Nobody is out. The walls have been spray-painted with Jewish stars and slogans: NO ARABS, NO PROBLEM; ARABS GET OUT. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of a face between the bars in a window. This is the ninth day of round-the-clock curfew for all Palestinians in H2. They are not allowed outside — at all. The curfew is supposed to be lifted today.

I ask Rick how many people are under lockdown in these houses. He says forty thousand. Knowing his bias, I cut that number in half and figure there are at least twenty thousand people who have not been allowed outside in nine days. Prior to that, there were six days without curfew, and before that, eleven days with curfew. This particular curfew went into effect after a fight in the market between a Jewish settler and a Palestinian. There were no guns; nobody was

killed. "The settler probably started it," Rick says. I don't think it matters who started it.

There are two thousand Israeli soldiers in H2: standing guard in watchtowers, at intersections, behind cracks in the walls. The five hundred Jewish settlers walk around freely.

Of all the settlements in Israel, this is the only one in the middle of a town. The settlers here are the most extreme Jewish militants, many of them members of the outlawed Kach Party, whose leader has been quoted as saying, "The only good Arab is a dead one." The stated goal of the Kach Party is the removal of all Arabs from Palestine, by any means. The Kach Party has been outlawed since 1994, when one of its members, Baruch Goldstein, walked into Ibrahimi Mosque and opened fire on the occupants as they prayed. Twenty-nine were killed, and many others wounded. In nearby Kiryat Arba stands a shrine to Goldstein, who is considered a hero there.

Outside the four-building settlement, I talk to Karen, an Israeli guard. She was grazed by sniper fire a week ago and has a thick red scar along her neck. We stand in front of a devastated market surrounded by thick coils of barbed wire. Karen says the two groups — settlers and Palestinians — will stay here until one of them is gone. She says once upon a time, one side hit the other, and the other hit back, and they have been fighting ever since. She says the soldiers do not interact with the settlers, because sometimes they must face them, too. The settlers are crazy, she says. She just follows orders.

Entering the settlement, Janos and I try to speak with people on the street, but they ignore us. Rick told us the settlers would attack us, especially the women. The men carry large automatic weapons. I can feel my heartbeat in my throat. Then Janos pulls out a red napkin and does a magic trick for some children. Their mother wants to know how he does it. More children come. He says it is magic. He performs the trick three times, and the children shout and laugh, and the mother gives us water, because children everywhere love magic, and mothers everywhere love to see their children happy.

Above the settlement hangs a large sign: THIS IS A JEWISH MARKET STOLEN BY THE ARABS IN THE MASSACRE OF 1929. Across from it is a tent the settlers have set up to protest the government for prohibiting their expansion. The settlers do



not like the government. They do not recognize Israel.

When the curfew is lifted, Janos and I sit near the edge of the settlement and watch a slow trickle of Palestinians emerge and walk past the bus stop. We are joined by S., a photographer for the *Washington Post*, who has been covering Hebron for six weeks now. At the bus stop are six Jewish children. At first, the children taunt the Arabs, mocking them, holding their noses to protest the stench, walking behind them imitating monkeys. I ask S. what would happen if an Arab hit one of the children, and he says the Arab would go to jail for a long time. Soon the children grow bored and start throwing stones at the Arabs. One of the stones hits an old man walking with a cane; he doesn't even turn to look at the children. Then they throw rocks at two Arab women.

Janos looks pained. "I just want to do something," he says.

"Can you imagine the rage," S. asks, "the humiliation of being taunted by children?"

I wouldn't believe it if I weren't here to see it myself.

The children are finally quieted by one of their elders, who doesn't want the bad publicity. But where do young children learn these things?

"It's too late for your magic trick," I tell Janos.

### III. When The Bomb Goes Off

I'm in downtown Jerusalem when a bomb goes off, the worst incident since the June 1 bombing of a disco in Tel Aviv. Within twenty minutes, the streets are blocked off, and helicopters fly overhead.

It was a suicide bomber again, this time at the Sbarro's franchise on Jaffa and King George. I rush to the scene. A worker still wearing his Sbarro's smock walks back and forth on the perimeter in shock. I take out my notebook, and people immediately approach me to say, "You see what they do to us? And the world is angry when we kill them first." Holding on to the sleeve of a reporter from the *London Standard*, I manage to get inside the cordoned area. Nobody cares if your journalism credentials are phony once you're inside the police lines.

At first, there is concern about a second bomb, but it turns out to be an exploded tire. The restaurant itself is just a blood-stained skeleton. Forty reporters, not counting myself, jockey for position to interview Israeli minister of security Uzi Landau, who speaks firmly and with resolution, his smart white shirt shining in the afternoon sun.

The victims have all been taken to hospitals. The last count was thirteen dead, including six babies, and eighty wounded, but it's early; those numbers are low. It's been four hours, and they're still picking up the glass.

I was on my way to buy a bus ticket when the bomb exploded. I was going to get out of Jerusalem for a few days, lie on a beach somewhere.

Landau says the Palestinian Authority has already declared war. There is no difference between Fatah and Islamic Jihad and Hamas, he says: "If they hoped to find a society of people that are going to give in, they are mistaken."

I turn to the shell of the building, looking for clues to help me understand the situation. It was a big bomb, that's for sure. Even the cement around the foundation is cracked and broken. The windows are completely gone, the steel bars twisted, the floor and the ceiling destroyed. But the metal cooking grills in the back seem undamaged. I move away to get a wider perspective. Two hundred feet from the building, a journalist tells me to watch out: I'm wearing sandals, and there are big pieces of broken glass in the street.

At four and a half hours, the numbers are eighteen dead — four babies, two children — and ninety wounded. Islamic Jihad is claiming responsibility for the attack, which was committed by a twenty-three-year-old man from Jenin.

One store inside the cordoned area is still open, and I buy a lemon soda. The reporter from *Newsweek* and the photographer for *Time* are speculating on Israel's retaliation. "It's going to be massive," one of them says to me. "Go to Gaza this weekend if you want to get a story. That's where the action will be." We all laugh. A latecomer from a Swedish paper asks about the body count, and we rattle off numbers. It feels as if somebody is about to make a bet:

"I've got a hundred dollars on six missiles in Nablus."

"I'll take it, plus two-to-one on a curfew in Hebron and four police stations hit on the Strip."

After a while, there's only so much information to be found at the scene. The usual gaggle of bloodthirsty demonstrators stand outside the police lines howling for Arab blood. A tourist from Toronto tells me he was a hundred feet away during the explosion and saw a body fly out the window in a haze of smoke. He's hoping to sell the pictures he took. All of the major news sources will print the numbers — there's no other way to measure the loss — followed by some standard information about the length of the conflict. Already the mayor is taking phone calls from the *New York Times* and saying that the Israeli people are not afraid and will act as one.

It's all drowned out by crying mothers and hawks bellowing for revenge.

(end of excerpt)