

Mitzpe Ramon, Israel, July 2006.

Dear J,

I recently arrived in the Negev desert, east of Sinai where we were together a year ago, carried by my usual wanderlust and an insatiable, perhaps naïve, often lyrical, willingness to understand: what is this place?

This country could have been incredible. You find here people from many different cultures, all distant relatives united by a common identity. Yemenites and Caucasian Juhurim from the mountains of Dagestan, Ethiopian Jews from the Horn of Africa, Kaifeng Jews from Henan province in China, Telugu Jews from India, the Romaniotes of Greece and Buckharan from the Kafirnigan Valley in Tajikistan, all gathered here on the same land. This diversity could have been the basis of a new understanding of the global paradigm. The majority, however, are self-admiring Ashkenazi Jews from Europe and the United States that insist Israel is "Western", and they have built this country in much the same way Europeans created colonies for hundreds of years, from Africa to the South Pacific: pretentiously.

As you know, Jews came back to this land in masse only sixty years ago. Or at least some Jews did: the Israelis (few understand that while Israel is Jewish, Jews aren't necessarily Israelis). But how to come back? It is not like in Rwanda where Tutsi survivors were trying to return to the homes they had been forced to flee and that were occupied by Hutus. It is not like Bosnians trying to return to the land of their fathers after living for five years as virtual nomads. Jews were away for four thousand years.

This is a land that consists of merely sand and rocks, but it is beautiful (though I doubt it is for its beauty that all these people are dying). And to whom does it belong?

Today, Israelis are in power in Galilee and Palestine like the Germans were in power in Europe, the Francists in Spain, the Hutus in Rwanda, the Belgians in Congo, the French in Algeria, the Turks in Egypt and Armenia, the Greeks in Macedonia, the English in Swaziland, the Japanese in China and the Russians in Chechnya.

Hebrew is a condensed language in which one word contains ten. It is said, in the beginning there was the word. I sometimes wonder if it won't also be the end of things. The Holocaust began with words; a misuse of words that grew into a strategy. A "train of prisoners" became a "convoy of merchandise." A "corpse" became a "piece." Our time sees language becoming corrupted, using "underprivileged" instead of "poor" etc. In Tel Aviv and Jerusalem these days, it seems to me that words are being similarly twisted.

When Elie Wiesel met the poetess Nelly Sachs in Stockholm before she entered an asylum, she told him she couldn't use several German words in her writing. He asked why. She answered that they had been used by the killers.

It occurs to me that the way the Israelis fear the Arabs is similar to the way the Germans

feared the Jews: they resemble them. I am reminded that the Nazis (as Giorgio Agamben has written) called their Jewish prisoners *Muselman* in the Camps.

This same population, which was exiled by the Babylonians, has exiled the Arabs. The Jews were put in concentration by the Germans. Now they place the Palestinians in concentration. They were placed in ghettos. Today they place in ghettos. Today the Israelis build walls of the same size as those in Warsaw and Berlin.

Surely, the Jews are responsible for the Israelis much as Cain was responsible for Abel. "Am I my brother's keeper?" was his question to God.

So what will Jews do today? Will they be their brothers' keepers?

It is written that when the European kingdom of Kuzar converted to Judaism in the 12th century, a dialogue took place between king Hakuzari and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi. During the conversation, the Rabbi mentioned to the king the atrocities his people had committed, to which the king responded that when Jews have their own nation they would do worse.

My feeling is that the Jewish body, the flesh of the Semitic body, is old and secular, full of the wisdom of thousands of lives, mixed more perhaps than any other with the blood of many populations. The opposite of that ancient body is the State. The State of Israel is young, a teenager tormented by hormones that goes around breaking things, changing its mind overnight and laughing too loud.

Many Jews were opposed to the creation of the State, and they are often called anti-Semitic themselves when they criticize it. So who are these Jews that came here? Mitzpe Ramon or Be'er Sheva for instance are full of Russian Jews who came from poverty, maybe from the western shore of the sea of Okhotsk or the suburbs of Moscow. They are people of a similar nature to those Han Chinese from Sichuan province or the neighborhoods of Beijing that I saw in Tibet, from Lhasa to Ngari. They also were settlers, sent by Beijing to redeem land from the Dalai-lama. Here, these men and women, who were nothing where they come from, become heroes of a new kind.

Mt Kailash is sacred to the Hindus, the Jainists, the Buddhists and the Bon shamans much in the same way Jerusalem is sacred to the Christians, the Muslims, the Jews and the Orthodox priests. But if Tibet is as sacred a land as Galilee, with a government now in exile, does Tibet belong to the Chinese?

If someone asks me, I would say that I believe Tibet, as Galilee, belongs not to these nearsighted settlers receiving money and advantages to legitimate their fanatic efforts to inhabit a promised land they probably care less about than their own pride, but to the intellectuals, the theologians, the poets and the monks.

In this, I am probably naïve and romantic. So be it.

Taking the bus from Tel Aviv to the south, one feels as if the State of Israel might have been created so that Russian Jews could claim a place in the sun, or for American Jews to redeem five thousand years of a history they cruelly lack. Everywhere groups of “Birth right” youth on a free desert trip are hiking around with an Israeli flag as if they are looking for the messiah.

Things have evolved since Ben Gurion was doing his gymnastics at the side of a pool in Mitzpe Ramon in the Sixties. The “State” (the 51st state?) is ready to make some terrible mistakes that will defy the very essence and brilliance of its own great intellectuals: Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi and Walter Benjamin among many others.

In fact, the most terrible fighting I came to witness during my wanderings here is probably that of the wombs. In the old city of Jerusalem, as in most of the rest of this odd land, Jewish, Muslim and Christian mothers are giving birth compulsively, as if in a state of panic, bringing forth child after child, brick after brick, building mausoleums or pits, piling up hills of flesh to swallow the other.

These placentas, factories producing death with life, appear to me as the most horrific and fascistic tool I’ve come upon, or read about.

Finally, I recall that the Kabbalah recounts the legend of the Golem, which has been brilliantly explained by Gershom Scholem. I have thought that perhaps the State of Israel is the new Golem. But whereas that creature once stood as protector at the entrance of the ghetto in Prague, this new Golem might be a jailer rather than a guardian.

The State of Israel could well be the contemporary version of that artificial monster created by Rabbi Loew in the 16th Century: a shapeless mass supernaturally endowed with life for some mysterious purpose, and usually bound, like Frankenstein, to run amok.

In friendship,

Eric Van Hove