
Israel From the Passenger Seat of an Ambulance

Tal Raviv

Someone passed me a plate between the elbows and “excuse me’s”, and I started working my way around the table in the crowded kitchen of the ambulance station. “Where’s the food from?” I asked the paramedic next to me as I tried to pin down a falafel ball between my fork and thumb.

“Matza.”

“Mm.” Four years ago, a suicide bomber blew up inside Matza Restaurant of Haifa, Israel. Fifteen people were killed. Nowadays, they occasionally donate food to Magen David Adom, the emergency medical service of Israel—Red Star of David. But before I could finish thinking about the macabre logic of the buffet in front of me, the paramedic continued, and raised his voice for the punchline:

“And you know what? I could really use some meat here, too. Can someone see about getting some food from Maxim tomorrow?”

I was torn between tasting the mental mirage of Maxim restaurant’s juicy, salty, lamb kabab and the fact that Maxim was also bombed nearly three years ago. Why should I think about the latter? I could go to Maxim for dinner.

Scratch that thought. Missiles were falling on Haifa, which was why restaurants were providing us with lunch. My fork landed in the center of the table that afternoon and killed four falafel balls that did not have shelter.

My mom was born in Haifa, my dad in Kfar Saba, and I in Cleveland, Ohio. I grew up in Florida and learned my first words of English by watching *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. You can decide whether I'm telling the truth when I call myself Israeli, but I always felt like America and my home were two different countries. My front door was like an embassy's gate, inside of which different rules applied; instead of international law, what differed were my family's attitudes, values, and jokes.

Despite having visited Israel more than ten times (and admitting it to my interviewer), Birthright Israel accepted me for a trip early last May. Getting off the plane at Ben-Gurion Airport and walking towards customs, I was the only Birthright participant to stand under the ISRAELI PASSPORT sign. The truth was, however, that I had spent every one of my previous trips attached to my family. I knew I was missing a lot, and change was the answer. This summer I decided that this could not just be another trip to Israel where all I returned with were photos of my sisters posing with my cousins. I wanted to meet "real" Israelis and make friends with people my age.

When my friends from Birthright flew back to Newark, I stayed behind in Israel for ten weeks and lived with my grandparents. During the weekdays I volunteered on an ambulance at the Haifa station of Magen David Adom. The Jewish Agency wouldn't take me for their foreign volunteers program, so I showed up at the station with a copy of my Pennsylvania EMT certificate and was issued a uniform the next day. Over the next two months I shared emergency calls and long shifts with high school students, IDF medics, university students, adult volunteers, and drivers. This summer, I got what I came for.

This summer isn't the story of "how I fell in love with Israel." It's the story of how I learned to recognize in my life that which, growing up in America, I forgot was actually important to me. If anything, my time in Israel made me less religious and even less of a Zionist (relax, I got better). For lack of a better word, it's the realness of life you experience when suddenly everyone speaks

that language you spoke only at home, or when you stand on Mount Carmel, look out over the Haifa Bay and downtown, and realize that the thousands of buildings before you were recently constructed and defended by people not unlike yourself. It's also the realness of a cucumber that tastes good enough to eat without salad dressing, or eating a tomato like an apple. It's the realness of watching violence on the television news and at least one person in the room saying "Holy crap, I served 6 months there," or passing three memorials in an evening jog.

It's also the story of how I heard my first explosion. Or my first ten explosions. Like my previous trips to Israel, I didn't really count them.

A week before the buffet I was reading a newspaper in the same kitchen when the loudspeaker crackled out: "Moti, *nesiyah*." My paired driver today, Moti, had an emergency call. Inside the ambulance, as I closed the door, the radio came to life. Our call was to HeChalutz Street for "a man lying in the street." I thought I caught Moti rolling his eyes as he turned on the sirens and drove ahead.

As we arrived, I had my own moment of recognition. We pulled into a gas station and there the man sat, wearing a hospital gown, holding a plastic bag. I remembered rolling him away in a stretcher from a storefront down the same street a week earlier. Sitting with him in the back on that ride, I turned the air conditioning on full power to compete with his stench. I was not looking forward to another ride where I might need the oxygen tank more than the patient.

He was homeless, a regular customer of MDA. Once or twice a week, we participated in the same game of hot potato. A storeowner would get annoyed and call the police. The police would shrug their shoulders and summon MDA. Some lucky ambulance driver would shuttle him to the hospital. The hospital staff would sigh and release him as soon as possible. Rinse and repeat, without the rinsing.

Sometimes he would run away from the hospital, in which case he kept

his hospital gown. That's how we found him, alive and well, at the corner of a gas station whose owner couldn't hide his relief at our arrival. I first put on latex gloves and then began talking to the man. Nothing seemed to be wrong. He feels okay. He didn't know of anybody calling for an ambulance. We reported this and left him.

A much more interesting call was the subject of a lecture at the MDA Northern Israel Forum. In the broad, wood-paneled lecture hall of Rambam Hospital in Haifa, a paramedic was describing—amid the chuckles of medics and doctors—how a man decided to dig himself an underground cave in his sandy backyard. When the sides inevitably caved in, he was trapped with only his head above the ground.

That day's forum cannot translate into English. It began, as we walked in, with 1970s Queen music playing through the auditorium speakers and the entrance of the chief surgeon of Rambam Hospital. He was dressed in clothing more suited to a game of golf, and climbed the podium to yell at all the "punks" (ranking paramedics, in fact) sitting in the back row. As everyone began settling in, affectionate insults were hurled back and forth among volunteers, medics, and administrators. In this room, I realized, the world's top trauma surgeons and most experienced paramedics had convened to discuss serious emergency procedures. And they were laughing with each other.

George wasn't laughing when he stormed down the stairs of the station. In fact, he was really pissed: "You're all the same inside—it's in your blood, damn it," and he sat on the couch and put his face in his hands. Julie sat down next to him and asked him what had just happened in the briefing meeting upstairs. I sat across from both of them with my nose in a book.

During the meeting, a new electronic device was introduced, and each driver was given a chance to practice replacing the battery inside the small unit. When George's turn came, he fumbled the battery and had trouble slipping it

in. Avi said loudly: “Well George, I guess you won’t make a good *shaheed*.” A *shaheed* is a martyr, a suicide bomber.

George is a Christian Arab. “You’re all the same! I’m sick of this racism all the time.”

“I can’t imagine working anywhere else,” Ohad told me, “I have more fun in one shift, more funny moments, than most people have in a week at work.”

Ohad is a paramedic. He played on Israel’s national hockey team. He works on the Advanced Life Support ambulance, which is called for the most serious of emergencies. If anybody sees a hard time during a shift, it will be the ALS crew. And yet he talks about his job almost as if it’s not real work.

Growing up in Jewish America, it takes a lot for a person to realize that Israeli culture is far from the patriotic collection of correctness and values of our imagination. For me, it took many ambulance rides to see this. MDA naturally showed me the extremes of life, but it drove home the features of Israeli culture which I only intuited. It wasn’t what I’d learned about in day school or summer camp. For some reason, it’s not considered ‘Zionist’ to talk about Israel’s problems. Forget the *Kotel* or the IDF, I think Israel’s weaknesses are the most Zionist thing to talk about.

Sometimes, you can hear Israel better when sirens are blaring.

Tal Raviv is in his third year at Penn studying chemical engineering. He spent the past summer volunteering with the Red Star of David in Haifa, Israel.