

# ALLY



My Journey Across  
the American-Israeli Divide

**Michael B. Oren**

FORMER AMBASSADOR OF ISRAEL TO THE UNITED STATES

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the American-Israeli Divide



MICHAEL B. OREN



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# FOREWORD

WASHINGTON, MAY 1970

Crowded into the basement of a low-budget hotel, we stared at the double doors and counted the seconds. Even now, more than four decades later, I can still feel the anticipation. Along with some fifty other fifteen-year-olds in our Zionist youth movement, I bused from New Jersey to Washington D.C.—my first-ever visit to our nation’s capital. I suppose we toured the Capitol, the White House, and the sites along the National Mall. My only memory, though, is of that basement glazed with fluorescence and the moment those doors swung open.

He marched in with curt, single-minded strides, ahead of his security guards, who struggled to keep up. A shorter man than the giant I imagined, he climbed onto the foot-high riser that served as a stage. “On behalf of the State of Israel,” he said, “I want to thank you for your commitment and support.” (At least that is what I think he said, for his voice was also surprisingly small, almost bashful, and our cheers drowned him out.)

We sang at the top of our teenage voices, “Heveinu Shalom Aleichem”—we welcome you in peace—and clapped until our hands grew numb. I could scarcely believe that I was seeing him. Here, only a few yards in front of me, stood the hero of the 1967 Six-Day War, the former commander of the Israeli forces who rescued Jewish dignity from the pall of the Holocaust, who enabled us—so American Jews claimed—to stand with our backs straight. And now he addressed us as Israel’s ambassador to the United States, the representative of the reborn Jewish State to the world’s greatest power.

He spoke only for a few minutes and concluded with a reticent smile. He then stepped off the improvised dais so that the guards could hurry him back through the doors. As he passed me, he managed to extend my hand. He accepted it—shyly, eyes looking down—and gave me a perfunctory handshake. But that was enough. Silently, I vowed, “That is what I’ll be someday—Israel’s ambassador to America.”

His name was Yitzhak Rabin. And his life remained a model for mine. Following his example, I would devote myself to Israel, fight in its wars, and defend it from critics. I shared his vision of peace in spite of disappointments and bloodshed. Years later, together with countless candle-holding mourners, I filed past Rabin’s casket. Though I never had the opportunity to tell him about the impact he had on me, I never forgot that encounter in the basement. Or the pledge I made to myself.

Forty years would pass before the day arrived that I—however improbably—moved into Rabin’s Washington residence. With Israeli flags fluttering from its hood, a limousine pulled up and bore me along Pennsylvania Avenue. Through the wrought-iron gates, the limo glided onto the crescent-shaped driveway of the White House. I entered, nodding at the Marine guards stiffening to attention, and proceeded to the Oval Office. There, presenting my credentials to the president, I fulfilled that vow I made at age fifteen. I had become Israel’s ambassador to America.

If only a few miles, my journey from that Washington hotel to the White House was scarcely effortless and marked by at least as much tragedy as triumph. It took me from baseball fields to battlefields, from work in kibbutz fields to interrogations by the KGB. Burnt-out buses and peace

signing ceremonies, “dumb” classes and Ivy League halls, orthopedic braces and athletic medals, the scars of racism and lustrous family mementos—all lined that path. But the journey did not end in the Oval Office. Exiting that illustrious place, I embarked on the most tortuous and exalting passage yet.

This is the story of that journey. It crosses two countries and spans their extraordinary relationship. The United States and Israel are bound by ideas far older than both, by values they commonly cherish and interests they have come to share. Theirs is the deepest bilateral friendship that either has sustained since Israel’s founding in 1948. And the reasons are many-sided and profound.

In addition to a spiritual affinity unrivaled by that between any modern nations, Israel and the United States are akin in their commitment to democracy. Listeners to Israel’s Declaration of Independence can easily hear the echoes of 1776. In America, Israel has an immensely generous source of diplomatic support and annual defense aid. In Israel, the United States has a stable, loyal and militarily proficient asset—a scientific and technological powerhouse—and a pro-American island in an often toxic sea. Surveys regularly show that Americans and Israelis lead the world in patriotism and in their willingness to fight for their country. They are ideologically, strategically, and naturally allied.

*Ally* is a simple, beautiful word. It evokes warmth—indeed, fraternity—and its meaning invariably positive. One may be a partner, but never an ally, in crime. *Ally*’s Hebrew counterpart is even simpler and more stirring. *Ben brit*, literally the son of the covenant, recalls the circumcision rite and, beyond that, the Jewish people’s special relationship with God. Fittingly, a “special relationship” is said to exist between Israel and the United States. And like its biblical precedent, that *brit* is both physical and eternal.

Or, at least, in theory. For the reality is that, alongside their immemorial ties, the U.S.-Israel relationship includes bitter differences. The United States does not recognize Israel’s capital or its claim to large parts of the ancestral Jewish homeland. Israel frequently disagrees with America’s approach to peacemaking with the Palestinians and its friendship with Middle Eastern rulers who are technically or actively at war with the Jewish State. Vocal segments of the American Jewish community—a vital component in the alliance—are critical of Israeli actions, while Israel, in turn, does not validate the ways in which many of those Jews practice their religion. Israel is a contentious issue in the American press and on many American campuses. In recent years, public disagreements between the two countries’ leaders have become commonplace. America and Israel are allies in the most meaningful sense, yet their alliance is scored with divides.

This is the story of that alliance and also its divides, as experienced by one who treasures his American identity while proudly serving the State of Israel. My personal journey intertwines with the story and never more intimately than during the more than four years—from mid-2009 to late 2013—that I represented Israel in Washington.

This was a transformative period for America and a time of violent revolutions throughout the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands of the region’s people were killed, and the lives of millions more threatened. Israel and America grappled not only with the peace process and other complex bilateral issues, but with the terrorism and Iranian nuclearization that imperiled the world. The alliance would be subjected to enormous strains and its future questioned by commentators in both countries. On more than one occasion, the friendship’s very fabric seemed close to unraveling. At all times, though, it was my task—and my privilege—to hold it together.

The job of ambassador is widely misunderstood in today’s world, in which presidents and prime ministers can chat or shout at each other by videophone, without any need for go-betweens. B

ambassadors not only represent leaders, they link peoples, and none more closely than Americans and Israelis. As Jerusalem's envoy to Washington, I enjoyed a strategic viewpoint and a depth of access unattainable by even the most senior Israeli officials. That unique perspective is also part of the story.

It is a story for those who care about Israel and America and the challenges they face in the Middle East. It is a quintessentially American story of a young person who refused to relinquish a dream, irrespective of the obstacles, and an inherently Israeli story about assuming onerous responsibilities. It is both a chronicle and a confession. Never before have I written in the first person, as a participant in history rather than a dispassionate observer of it. Instead of distant figures from the past, I have described my contemporaries, among them many colleagues, family members, and friends. More than a memoir, this is a testament. It is my tribute to the enduring bonds between the United States and Israel. This is the story of an alliance that was and, I unreservedly believe, will remain vital for both Americans and Israelis, and beneficial to the stability of the world.

*Michael B. Oren*  
*Tel Aviv, 2015*



*Mediterranean Sea*

LEBANON

**GOLAN HEIGHTS**

SYRIA

Haifa

*Sea of Galilee*

Nazareth

*Jordan River*

Kibbutz Gan Shmuel

**Judea & Samaria/  
West Bank**

Tel Aviv

Nablus

Itamar

Jaffa

Shiloh

*Jordan Valley*

Ashdod

Ramallah

Jericho

Ashkelon

Jerusalem

Bethlehem

*Dead Sea*

**GAZA STRIP**

Hebron

Be'er Sheva

**ISRAEL**

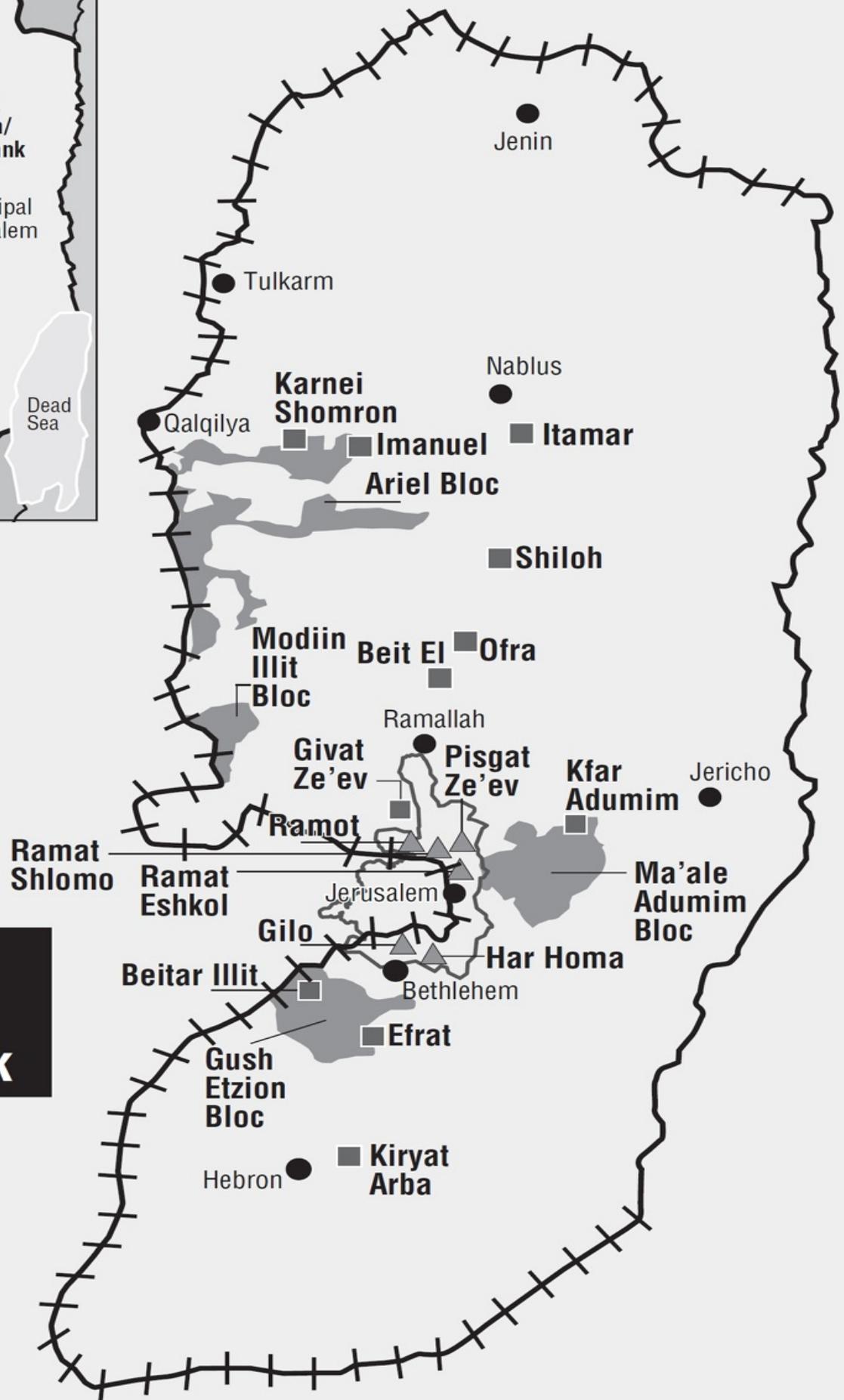
Sde Boker

JORDAN

EGYPT

Eilat





# Judea & Samaria/ West Bank

KEY:

■ Settlement

● City

▲ Jewish neighborhoods in unified Jerusalem

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1949 Armistice Line (1967 Lines)



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# THE PERFORATED PASSPORT

The Embassy of the United States to the State of Israel should be a majestic structure. After all, it is the hub of America's most special relationship with any foreign nation. And yet the building—squat and colorless—looks like a bunker. Perhaps the purpose is to discourage the hundreds of Israelis who daily line the sidewalk outside to apply for tourist visas, or to confound any terrorist who managed to skirt the concrete obstacles girding the grounds. Whatever its purpose, the bleak exterior reflected my mood as I entered the compound in early June 2009 and presented my passport.

That Yankee-blue document announced that I had been born Michael Bornstein, in Upstate New York and had been a U.S. citizen for more than half a century. With a faded cover and pages tattooed by customs, it had accompanied me on innumerable transoceanic flights. Presenting that passport at Newark's Liberty International Airport, a twenty-minute drive from where my parents raised my two sisters and me, I beamed each time the inspectors wished me, "Welcome home."

I believed in that passport—in the history it symbolized, the values it proclaimed. Awareness of the nation's darker legacies, such as slavery, did not make me less sentimental about America. My eyes still misted during the national anthem, brightened at the sight of Manhattan's skyline, and marveled at the Rockies from thirty-five thousand feet. Once, when reading aloud the inscription on the Lincoln Memorial and already choking at "four score and seven years ago," my children rolled their eyes and sighed, "There he goes again...."

My affection for America sprang naturally. Growing up in the northern New Jersey town of West Orange, I played Little League baseball, attended pep rallies, and danced—in a lamentable banana turtleneck—at my senior prom. My father, who fought in World War II and afterward served in the army reserves, took me to his unit's reunions and to summer maneuvers to watch the color guards parade. I, too, marched, albeit across halftime gridirons puffing into a baritone horn. At Boys State, the American Legion's semimilitary seminar, Vietnam vets put me and other selected seventeen-year-olds through a basic training in American democracy. The following year, I starred as Don Quixote in our high school's production of *Man of La Mancha*, the musical based on Cervantes's classic. Arrayed in rusted armor, I tilted at windmills and strained for the high notes while enjoining the audience to "Dream the Impossible Dream."

Yet there were handicaps. Like many in our working-class neighborhood, my parents struggled financially. They could not afford to send me to the pricey Jewish summer camps, and instead packed me off to a rustic YMCA program with mandatory church services and grace before meals. Overweight and so pigeon-toed that I had to wear an excruciating leg brace at night, I was hopeless at sports. And severe learning disabilities consigned me to the "dumb" classes at school, where I failed to grasp elementary math and learn to write legibly.

Yet, fervently determined, I managed to overcome these obstacles. At fourteen I went on a draconian diet and slimmed down, forced myself to run long distances while keeping my feet straight

and forged myself into an athlete. Meanwhile, my mother lovingly showed me how to type on an old typewriter. I was transferred into a “smart” class, taught myself grammar and spelling, and ultimately attended Ivy League schools. All the hallmarks of an American success became mine, I acknowledge thanks in part to uniquely American opportunities.

If sentimental about the United States, I also felt indebted. From the time that all four of my grandparents arrived in Ellis Island, through the Great Depression in which they raised my parents and the farm-bound community in which I grew up, America held out the chance to excel. True, prejudice was prevalent, but so, too, was our ability to fight it. Unreservedly, I referred to Americans as “we.”

Now I was about to forfeit that first-person plural. The Marine behind the glass booth at the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv examined my passport and wordlessly slipped it through the window. The coolness of his reception would soon become routine. Landing at Liberty Airport, I would never again be greeted with “welcome home.”

Americans, I would often remind Israelis, are painstakingly nice—until they are not. “Have a nice day” can become “screw you” in an instant. That morning, officials at the U.S. embassy were in courteous mode, expediting the security check, escorting me between the cubicles of the consular section. There passports are extended and new ones issued. Mine would be neither.

My knees felt rubbery and my shirt, already dabbled by the humidity outside, stuck to my flank. Relief came in the teddy-bearish form of Luis Moreno, the deputy chief of mission, an old acquaintance. Luis brought me into the office of U.S. Consul General Andrew Parker, who sat behind his desk surrounded by mementos from his previous postings and fronted by a gold-trimmed Stars and Stripes. We exchanged pleasantries, griped about the *khamsin*—the gritty desert wind plaguing Tel Aviv—but could not ignore the reason for my visit.

Bespectacled, neatly goateed, Parker could be mistaken for a kindly professor if not for his undertaker’s tone. Raising my right hand, he asked me to repeat after him: “I absolutely and entirely renounce my United States nationality together with all rights and privileges and all duties and allegiance and fidelity thereunto pertaining.” I repeated those words while gazing at the flag to which I had pledged allegiance every school day from kindergarten through high school. Then, across his desk, Parker arrayed several copies of an affidavit. This reaffirmed “the extremely serious and irrevocable nature of the act of renunciation,” acknowledging that, henceforth, “I will become an alien with respect to the United States.”

I signed each copy, swearing that I knew precisely what I was doing and that I was acting of my own free will. I must have appeared shattered because Luis Moreno leaned over and gave me a hug. But the ordeal was not yet complete, Consul General Parker indicated. Officiously, almost mechanically, the consul general inserted my American passport into an industrial-sized hole puncher and squeezed. The heart of the federal eagle emblazoned on the cover of the document was pierced.

## Growing Up American

How did I reach this unnerving moment? Back in the sixties, young radicals burned their passports and cursed their fascist country, “Amerika.” But my reverence for the United States had always been deeper—deeper than any hole puncher could bore. No, renouncing my American citizenship was not an act

protest. It reflected, rather, a love for another land—not that of my father, but of my forefathers.

That love could not be presented in a passport, nor could it be renounced. When did it begin? The answer was the distant cousin who arrived one day from a far-flung place and gave me, an eight-year-old numismatist, a shiny coin inscribed with letters I recognized from Hebrew school. Somewhere, intuitively, people actually spoke that language. There were the nerve-fraying weeks of May 1967, when the enemies of those people amassed and my parents murmured about witnessing a second Holocaust. Then, the miracle. A mere six days transformed those victims into victors. Draped in belts of .50-caliber bullets instead of prayer shawls, paratroopers danced before the Western Wall in Jerusalem. They were *our* paratroopers, suddenly, *our* people.

Because Israel was young and righteous and heroic, I fell in love with it. The country appeared to be everything to which I—at age twelve still incapable of learning the multiplication tables or of running around the bases without tripping over my own pigeon-toed feet—aspired. Even then, I had a keen sense of history, an awareness that I was not just a lone Jew living in late 1960s America, but part of a global Jewish collective stretching back millennia. Already I considered myself lucky to be alive at this juncture, when my existence coincided with that of a sovereign Jewish State. I fell in love with Israel because I was grateful, but also because I was angry.

The only Jewish kid on the block, I rarely made it off the school bus without being ambushed by Jew-baiting bullies. Those fistfights left my knuckles lined with scars. One morning, my family awoke to find our front door smeared with racist slogans; one night our car's windshield was smashed. Then, when I was a high school freshman, the phone rang with horrendous news: a bomb had blown up our synagogue. I ran to the scene and saw firemen leaping into the flames to rescue the Torah scrolls. The next day, our rabbi stood with Christian clergymen and led us in singing "We Shall Overcome." But no display of brotherhood could salve the pain.

In the post-World War II, WASP-dominated America in which I grew up, anti-Semitism was constant. Hardly confined to my blue-collar neighborhood, it festered in the elite universities with their quotas on Jewish admissions, and pervaded the restricted communities and clubs. Superficially, at least, we American Jews ranked among the nation's most successful minorities. We took pride in the Dodgers' ace pitcher Sandy Koufax, in folksinger Bob Dylan, and actors Tony Curtis and Kirk Douglas. It tickled us that Jewish humor became, in large measure, America's humor, and the bagel grew as popular as pizza. Jewish artists wrote five of America's most beloved Christmas songs and practically invented Hollywood. One could hardly imagine a community more integrated, and yet we remained different. Alone among the hyphenated ethnic identities—Italian-American, African-American—ours placed "American" first. And only ours was based on religion. No one ever referred to Buddhist or Methodist Americans. As Jews and as Americans we were *sui generis*, as difficult for us to define as for others. A graffito on the wall of my bathroom at school asked, "Are Jews white?" A different hand scrawled beneath it, "Yes, but..."

Anti-Semitism completed that sentence. Whether being beaten up for my identity or denied certain opportunities because of it, I often encountered hatred. And after each incident, my father took me down to our basement. There, in a cubbyhole behind the stairwell, he secreted a musty album that his brother, another veteran, had brought home from World War II. Inside were yellowing photographs of concentration camps, piles of incinerated corpses, and snickering Nazis. "This is why we must be strong," my father reminded me. "This is why we need Israel."

Those photographs needed no captioning, as the Holocaust haunted our lives. The ovens at Auschwitz, I often felt in high school, still smoldered. Yet American Jews hesitated to talk openly

about the murder of six million of their people, as if it were a source of shame. Then, in my sophomore year, survivor and world-acclaimed author Elie Wiesel visited our community. He spoke of his ordeals in Romania's Sighet ghetto and the Buchenwald concentration camp. In a voice at once frail and unbroken, he challenged us to face the Final Solution publicly, not only in our basements. We did, but confronting the horrors of Jewish helplessness also forced us to face the harrowing truth that America did nothing to save the Jews. Worse, America sent thousands back to be murdered and close its doors to millions.

That knowledge alone would have sufficed to make me a Zionist. This meant, simply, that I believed in the Jews' right to independence in our ancient homeland. But there was more. Zionism was not merely a reaction to discrimination, but an affirmation of what I felt from an early age to be my fundamental identity. For deep-rooted reasons, Zionism defined my being.

Though I was not raised religious—I read my Bar Mitzvah in transliteration—the Jewish story of the Exodus from Egypt to the exodus from Europe resounded with meaning. Our story was the vehicle for our values: family, universal morality, social justice, and loyalty to our land. Half of humanity believed in the one God we introduced to the world nearly four thousand years ago and refused to relinquish, even under unspeakable tortures. God owed us an explanation for the Holocaust, I insisted. But Zionism offered a way of saying “we're finished with you, God” and “thank you, God” simultaneously. It allowed us to assert our self-sufficiency, even independence from formal religion, but in the one place that our forebears cherished as divinely given. Zionism enabled us to return to history as active authors of our own story. And the story I considered the most riveting of all time was that of the Jewish people.

I belonged to that people and needed to be part of its narrative. Being Jewish in America, which was culturally and materially comfortable, felt to me like living in the margins. The major chapter was being written right now, I thought, and not in New Jersey. History, rather, was happening in a state thriving against all odds, thousands of miles away. How could I miss it?

That is why I joined the Zionist youth movement that brought me to Washington in May 1970 when I shook Yitzhak Rabin's hand. That is why, throughout that year, I mowed lawns and shoveled snow from neighbors' driveways to raise the airfare. And why I made repeated trips into New York City, alone, to browbeat kibbutz movement representatives into accepting me as a volunteer despite being two years short of the minimum age. The representatives relented and, in the summer of my pivotal fifteenth year, I finally purchased my ticket. I acquired my first U.S. passport and boarded a plane for Israel.

## **Rising to Israel**

Descending the ramp, the Israeli heat hit me, hammering-hot. But even more fazing was my encounter with the country I had only imagined: smelling the citrus-scented air, seeing trees alien to New Jersey and all the signs in Hebrew. This was Israel of 1970, before serious talk of peace or the Palestinian issue, when fighting still raged on the Egyptian and Jordanian fronts. The hourly news, announced with a series of beeps, had passersby running ear-first for the nearest radio.

Behind the tension, though, lay a raffish élan and self-confidence. Toughened old-timers could still recount how they drained the swamps, battled malaria and British occupation troops, and struggled bitterly for independence against invading Arab armies. Along with its valorous past, Israel's present

was scintillating. The streets thrummed with shoppers, beggars, policemen, workers, stunning young women and men in olive army uniforms, almost all of them, inconceivably to me, Jewish.

A few days after my arrival, a wobbly Israeli bus dropped me into the dust of Kibbutz Gan Shmuel. Invented by Zionist pioneers at the turn of the twentieth century, the *kibbutz*—in the Hebrew plural *kibbutzim*—was an utterly revolutionary concept. Members of these hardworking agricultural communities shared all their worldly possessions, ate every meal in a common dining room, and raised their children in separate “houses” managed by nursemaids. Ideologically utopian, the *kibbutzim* fulfilled the practical goal of settling the land and absorbing Jewish immigrants. In wartime, the farms served as fortified redoubts. Though representing only a fraction of Israel's populace, “*kibbutzniks*” served in the toughest combat units, accounted for as much as half of the officers, and fell in disproportionate numbers. Well after the founding of the state, the *kibbutz* remained the apex of the Zionist ideal—selfless, grounded, caring, and, throughout successive battles, courageous.

Some of that patina had nevertheless worn off by the summer of 1970. But Gan Shmuel clung to its radical roots. After outgrowing the children's houses, teenagers moved into the *mossad*—the institution—and took responsibility for maintaining their own quarters, preparing their food, and reporting for work in the fields. Once assigned to the *mossad*, I received dark blue work clothes, sturdy boots, and a brim-down sailor's cap called a *kova tembel*—“the idiot's hat,” Israel's signature headwear. Each sunrise, a tractor hauled me out to the alfalfa pastures where I lugged irrigation pipes through calf-high muck. And each evening we danced to Israeli folk tunes or huddled around a gas stove eating boiled corn. Back in America, the youth culture convulsed with protests and drugs, but Israel was my rebellion, my stimulant. Israel was cool.

“When I walk around Gan Shmuel at night I'm in such ecstasy, for I know who I am and what I am doing here,” I wrote my parents. I described the rigorous work but also the *kibbutz* bomb shelter, decorated, paradoxically, with a poster of Picasso's *Guernica*. Though surrounded by war, I concluded, Israelis never ceased craving peace. “There is God in all of them.”

Did I fail to face the bloodshed out of which Israel had been born and the improbability of a Jewish state serenely integrated into the Middle East? Could I see the conflicting Israeli identities of secular and religious, right and left, Arab and Jew, and the mess that sovereignty entails? In time I would certainly. The fantasy of Israel would eventually dissipate, but never the dream.

On the contrary, I would cherish the contradictions, for they were ours alone. Throughout most of our history, Jews rarely had the right to wrestle with sovereign problems and, for our statelessness, we paid an unspeakable price. But sovereignty also came at a cost. Theodor Herzl, Zionism's founder, famously said, “If you will it, it is no dream,” to which I always appended a quote from Irish laureate William Butler Yeats, “In dreams begin responsibility.” Zionism, for me, meant Jews taking responsibility for themselves—for their dreams as well as for their mess.

As a teenager, though, my Zionism was still simple, a passion for an Israel that furnished muscular answers to anti-Semitism and a dignified response to the Holocaust. Someday I would live there, I knew. Until then, I would return to America and prepare myself politically and spiritually. Back in New Jersey, I marched in protests demanding freedom for the millions of Jews suffering under Soviet rule and prevented from immigrating to Israel. A Chabad rabbi, Shalom Gordon—cherubic face, copious beard—volunteered to teach me Talmud. Rejoining the Zionist youth movement, I began to learn about Israel's historic alliance with America.

During the movement's meetings, I often heard the words of Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish U.S.

Supreme Court justice, who said, “Every American Jew who supported Zionism was a better American for doing so.” The United States and Israel, I came to value, were both democracies, both freedom-loving, and similarly determined to defend their independence. One could be—in fact, should be—Zionist as well as a patriotic American, because the two countries stood for identical ideals. Quite naturally, I stood and sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” and, in the next breath, Israel’s national anthem, “Hatikvah,” the Hope.

Meanwhile, I mowed more lawns, shoveled and raked, to save enough to work each summer in Israel for free. At eighteen I was on horseback rounding up cattle on the Golan Heights. The job had risks—cows occasionally set off old Syrian antitank mines—but it further transformed me. Once weak and tender-looking, I became leathery and fit. No longer a stranger in my own land, I blended with my ancestors’ topography and conversed in their language. I longed to become Israeli. The last stanza of America’s national anthem still left me cheering, but the conclusion of Israel’s, “to be a free people in our land, the Land of Zion,” made me yearn.

Yet, still I did not move to Israel, telling myself I could contribute more to it with an undergraduate education. My assumptions were that Israel would remain invincible and largely above reproach, but then these proved wrong. Suddenly attacked by Egypt and Syria on the afternoon of Yom Kippur 1973, Israel was nearly overwhelmed. Though it eventually drove back and encircled the invaders, in mere three weeks the Israeli army lost a staggering 2,500 soldiers—the equivalent of 230,000 Americans today.

The Yom Kippur War signaled the beginning of other onslaughts. On the diplomatic front, holster-packing Yasser Arafat, founder of the militantly anti-Israel Fatah movement and chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), received a standing ovation at the United Nations General Assembly. A year later, that same assembly equated Zionism with racism. Palestinian terrorists infiltrated the Israeli towns of Ma’alot and Qiryat Shmona, machine-gunning women and children.

I covered these travesties for Columbia College radio and, in the numbing cold, stood on street corners handing out Zionist leaflets. I felt useless and absurd. While jointly completing BA and master’s degrees in Middle East studies at Columbia, the questions still hounded me: Why was I a student instead of a soldier? Pulling fraternity pranks and not guarding Israel’s frontiers?

My life bifurcated. Outwardly, I was all-American: the recipient of a State Department–affiliated scholarship, the author of novels, plays, and film scripts, one of which won first prize in the PE Young Filmmakers’ Festival. Such proclivities led me westward, to Hollywood, where I spent the summer nervously holding cue cards for a splenetic Orson Welles. At the same time, I studied Hebrew literature and Arabic, rowed varsity crew, and ran marathons to prepare for the paratroopers. And I worked—as a security guard, bartender, even a football scoreboard operator—to save enough money to move east, to Israel.

But then, after graduation, I again delayed my departure in order to serve as an “advisor”—so my ID defined me—to Israel’s delegation to the United Nations. My responsibilities included explaining Israeli policies to American Jews, many of them senior citizens whose first question was, invariably, “Are you married?” I also observed special UN sessions where Arab diplomats in tailored suits accused Israel of poisoning Palestinian wells and rendering Palestinian women infertile. Saudi ambassador Jamil al-Baroudi wondered aloud whether Jews were in fact human.

In addition to listening to diplomats in three-piece suits spouting anti-Semitism, I had to sit among some of Israel’s fiercest foes. The Jewish State’s name in English begins with the letter *I*, awkward

placing its delegates next to those of Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Libya, as well as the Iraqis and Iranians. ~~The only respite came from Ireland, whose jaunty young diplomats comforted me with Guinness. They also arranged a family-hospitality tour of their homeland that left me hooked on Irish music and soul.~~

Fortunately, my last experience at the UN proved to be the most memorable—Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan came to address the General Assembly. Standing before me with his trademark eyepatch was one of the mythic figures of my youth, the storied warrior. He came to the UN not to talk about war, though, but about the groundbreaking peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. I helped him write his speech, aware of his frailty—he died two years later—and the failing sight in his remaining eye. In those pre-computer days, I had to scour all of New York for a printer with letters large enough for Dayan to read.

Dayan's speech was an inspiring respite from the revolting hatred of Israel I encountered almost daily at the UN. With immense relief, I concluded my service in New York and at last embarked on that life-altering journey. In Zionist parlance, one does not merely immigrate to Israel but rather goes up—makes *aliya*—and in 1979, finally, I rose.

### 3335335

The ascent was less than exalted. I arrived alone, in the middle of a drizzly night, with only a backpack. No one greeted me at the airport or offered me a ride to the Jerusalem absorption center where no one was awake to open the door. Yet the mop, the foam rubber mattress, and mini-refrigerator I received as a newcomer to the state seemed like treasures to me. I stared at the meager contents of that refrigerator, all purchased at an Israeli store, and thought, “Wow, that's mine. I'm home.”

Under Israel's Law of Return, any Jew making *aliya* can almost immediately become a citizen. From then on, I would carry two passports, both of them blue, one American and the other Israeli. I also Hebraicized my name to Oren, meaning pine tree, which recalled my American roots but also my regeneration in our ancestral land. Those two identities finally felt melded in me. I could not have been luckier.

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The next few months were spent working for a social service agency, visiting the “other” Israel of poor development towns and remote Arab villages. The poverty often shocked me, as did the sometimes vast cultural gaps between Israel and the United States. Unmindful of the personal space so precious to Americans, for example, Israelis would cut into lines, leer at adjacent drivers at stoplights, and lecture total strangers on the best way to raise their kids. Unlike the Americans, who were swift to hit and slow to shout, Israelis would yell at each other for hours without ever coming to blows, and occasionally end up having coffee. And whereas Americans always wished me “Have a nice day” but did not always mean it, Israelis sometimes said, “Shalom”—peace—and always did.

Still, in spite of the privations I witnessed and the social chasms that needed to be crossed, I felt privileged to be part of Israel. My great-grandparents fleeing pogroms would have been envious of my opportunity to assist the inhabitants of a free Jewish state and to learn their ways, however different. My forebears would have thought themselves blessed to be able to protect that state from harm.

know I did, opening the plain brown envelope inscribed with a sword sheathed in olive leaves. That was the symbol of the Israel Defense Forces—the IDF—and inside the letter were orders summoning me to the Bakum, the central induction base.

Most recruits no doubt feel jittery while first putting on a uniform. Buttoning the epauletted shirt with *Tzahal*—the Hebrew acronym for the IDF—stitched on the breast pocket, I, too, felt nervous. Yet, along with anxiety was the pride of becoming part of the first Jewish army in two thousand years. This was the answer to exile, to the Holocaust. The fact that here, too, Jews were given numbers only underscored the contrast—and the justice. Excitedly, I became Personal Number 3335335.

That elation ended when I tried to fulfill my goal of joining the paratroopers. I never forgot the image of those airborne troops dancing in Jerusalem during the Six-Day War and was determined to be one of them. No other unit would do. Unfortunately, the army had other ideas and assigned me to the artillery corps. I refused to board the bus to basic training, even under threat of court-martial. “Come ahead, arrest me,” I dared the officers, who promptly confined me to my tent. Days passed before they relented. Perhaps they understood what I never imagined, that the tryouts would prove so grueling that they hospitalized me for a week. But in the end, I made it into the paratroopers.

Or at least into the paratrooper course. No amount of rowing and marathon running could have prepared me for the next seventeen months. There were nightlong marches that flayed our feet, and daylong drills crawling through brambles or laying our bodies across barbed wire while others used our backs as springboards. The drinking water was rationed, sleep denied, and showers virtually unavailable—I once went six weeks without one. Less than a third of the unit finished the course, and often I questioned whether I could. Such as the wintry night we finished maneuvers at 5 A.M. with reveille set for forty-five minutes later, and a twenty-minute guard duty in between. While lacing up my boots, my eyes involuntarily welled with tears. I forced myself to remember the Jews of 1948, who held off Arab armies with handguns, the pioneers who gave their youth, and often their lives, to cultivate a patch of our homeland. It worked. I sleeve-dried my eyes and knotted my laces.

All that was agonizing enough, yet not all of the army’s challenges were physical. My knowledge of Hebrew, while sufficient to order falafels, fell short of understanding rapid-fire orders or instructions for disassembling a gun. I was a “lone soldier,” without a family to feed me and clean my fatigues when I came home famished and filthy. The IDF of the seventies was poor and I was poorer still, unable to afford the expensive woolen socks the army did not furnish. But my Hebrew improved and I grew accustomed to caring for myself. Each time our bivouac moved, I collected the socks that invariably remained behind, brought them home, and boiled them until I amassed some forty pairs. Lacking sufficient hot water to take a bath and wash my uniforms, I did both, simultaneously.

Despite the exhaustion and the loneliness, I still felt indebted—for the camaraderie, the maturity, and the chance to protect my country. Never would I light the Hanukkah candles without remembering the soldiers who huddled with me over a tin military-issue menorah and shielded its flames from the rain. Never would I come in from the biting cold and not recall the cup of oversweet tea that my sergeant handed me after completing an eight-hour, open-jeep patrol. No one could take away the silver wings and the paratroopers’ red beret and boots I won. By the same token, I never got over my fear of jumping out of an airplane, at night, while lugging my 7.62 mm machine gun, five hundred rounds of ammo, and C-rations. Rather, two hefty men, positioned on either side of the open hatch, *pushed* me out.

The day I completed my compulsory service, March 16, 1981, Sally Edelstein arrived in Israel. ~~A native San Franciscan, she had hung out with Janis Joplin and Jefferson Airplane in the sixties~~ traveled through Europe at age seventeen, studied at Berkeley, and performed modern dance in New York. Like Israel, she was cool, and bewilderingly alluring. I could hardly bear to glance at her. She was also worldly, crisp-witted, effortlessly warm, and real. And, like me, she felt secure in her American and Israeli identities, a harmonious amalgam of the two.

After chancing to meet Sally on Jerusalem's Street of the Prophets, I rushed to call my parents and inform them that I had just met my future wife. That was obvious from our first date. We rendezvoused on a rocky field that separated our neighborhoods, in front of a Jordanian tank knocked out in the 1948 war, and climbed up to my moonlit roof. There we sang every moon song we knew.

Indifferent to material goods and willing to haul jerry cans of kerosene to fuel the stoves that heated our spartanly furnished apartments, Sally was the resilient partner I needed as I pursued this often rugged Israeli path. Here was a person who shared my dreams and commitments. That bond, welded with love, would enable us to weather any trials, I thought—perhaps too heedlessly. A few months later, I was underground in a hostile country, subjected to gruff interrogations, and wondering if I would ever see Sally again.

## A Free People in Our Land

Though difficult to fathom today, the empire then known as the Soviet Bloc denied the right of three million Jews to freely practice their religion, learn Hebrew, or make *aliya*. For committing such “crimes,” the refuseniks, as they called themselves, were fired from their jobs and relentlessly hounded. Others labored in the infamous Siberian camps known as gulags, or, like the math and chemistry master Natan Sharansky, languished in solitary confinement. The Soviets also backed Israel's Arab enemies and spurned all relations with the Jewish State.

Israel took responsibility for the Jews behind the Iron Curtain. It dispatched teams to make contact with members of the Zionist underground, to smuggle in Jewish books as well as the blue jeans that could be traded for food. Most crucially, Israel assured them they were never forgotten. Israelis who served in combat units and who held two passports were especially sought after for these missions. Meeting those criteria and having demonstrated throughout my youth to free Soviet Jewry, how could I decline? The training was cursory, the warning blunt: if you get caught, you're on your own. You could be sent to a gulag or simply disappear.

Before departing, I proposed to Sally. I got down on one knee, a position too traditional for the former flower child, which only made her chuckle. Still, she accepted, but then suggested that my motives might be mixed. “I know what you're thinking,” she said as she helped me to my feet. “You're thinking, ‘If I get arrested, I want a wife like Avital Sharansky who'll send me food packages and campaign to get me out.’ ”

Sally had a point, I admitted to myself after landing in Moscow. Except for my partner, Yitzhak Sokoloff, a spirited Columbia College friend and fellow IDF veteran, I was utterly alone in this dangerous land thousands of miles from home. Our cover story as American photojournalists was thin. Stiffly, we approached the border guards, who eyed us coldly before stamping our U.S. passports. Then we entered the city.

The Soviet Union in the late winter of 1982 was in its death throes and looked it. Behind mounds

garbage and open ditches of sludge sagged immense gray buildings that appeared on the verge of collapse. Food lines stretched endlessly. Everywhere, we assumed, lurked agents of the secret police—the ruthless KGB—and their local informers.

Fearing they might fall into the KGB's hands, we carried none of the refuseniks' names, phone numbers, or addresses. Rather, we had spent weeks memorizing them. The easiest for me to recall was Yuli Edelstein, who shared Sally's last name. He answered the phone immediately and, within minutes, met us on a darkened subway platform. The handsome and self-confident twenty-three-year-old had been arrested for his Zionist activities and expelled from the university. Now he was cleaning streets and would soon be sent to Siberia. Yet Yuli was anything but broken. Instead, he intrepidly introduced us to other activists and sneered at our KGB tails.

Several days later, Yitzak Sokoloff and I boarded a train that bore us over the snow-packed Trans-Carpathian Mountains and into the Soviet Ukraine. There we linked up with underground cells composed of people from incongruous backgrounds—scientists, factory workers, teenagers, retirees—whose only tie was their insistence on being Jews and living in Israel. Secretly listening to radio broadcasts from Jerusalem, these Prisoners of Zion taught themselves fluent Hebrew and followed the Israeli news as closely as if they were living there. They sang Israeli commercials as if they were prayers. All of them knew that the authorities would eventually arrest them, set them before kangaroo Soviet court, and sentence them to years in the gulag. They were ordinary people with superhuman courage.

Such was Yehudit Nepunyache, the leader of the Odessa underground, sixteen years old and barely five feet tall. Once, while crossing a courtyard for a meeting with her cell, I was accosted by seven clubwielding KGB thugs. Knowing that I was about to be beaten, she threw herself into the arms of the largest brute and began shouting "Rape! Rape!"—so loudly that all the windows in the courtyard flew open. The agent dropped his bat, clutched her throat, and lifted her off the ground, but Yehudit did not flinch. Instead she looked him in the eye and said, "So, you're going to hit me, too?" The goon released his grip, cursed, and led his gang out of the courtyard.

Yehudit saved me, but only for a while. My partner Yitzhak Sokoloff and I were repeatedly arrested and interrogated at length. Sometimes the KGB subjected us to full-body searches, other times endless harangues about the "hoodlums" we contacted. They implied that we could face beatings and imprisonment. Our response was to insist that we were merely American photojournalists. We waved our blue passports and demanded to see the U.S. ambassador.

Released, we went right back to work. This often meant rising before dawn and going out for a jog in the arctic air because, we discovered, the KGB kept regular hours. Before daybreak, we could reach the refuseniks unimpeded. But one time, in a grim industrial town, we failed to shake the agent trailing us and, in frustration, finally jumped into a cab. Our destination was a workers' dormitory and the Zionist activist Isaac Skolnik. His wife and daughter had been allowed to leave for Israel years before—the communists delighted in separating families—and he had not seen them since. Our mission: to send Skolnik their love.

In the cab's rearview mirror, I saw five government cars following us and felt sick to my stomach. As we headed into the bleak countryside, the convoy doubled, including military vehicles. We arrived just ahead of the KGB and dashed across frozen mud to the prisonlike dormitory. But the babushka at the desk told us that Skolnik was not there. Devastated, we turned around to face a throng of angry KGB goons. "If you get out of this alive," I muttered to Yitzhak, "tell Sally I loved her." In the lobby, they set up a blinding lamp and two chairs and ordered us to sit.

Hours of furious interrogation passed before the KGB brutes brought in another suspect, a young man, slight, dark, balding—and beaten, with huge welts across his face. They sat him next to us and continued to pummel us with questions.

“Who sent you here? What is your real identity?”

“We’re American journalists photographing the scenic Ukraine,” we responded as innocently as possible. “We demand to see the U.S. ambassador.”

The interrogators ignored our story and began shouting at us. I began to wonder whether my face would soon resemble that of the young man seated next to me. Just then, he leaned over and whispered to me in English, “Keep it up. You’re doing very well.”

“Are you sure?” I asked him. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

I shrugged. “And just who are you?”

“Don’t you know?” He smiled. “I’m Skolnik.”

Eventually, they let us go, but then Yitzhak refused to leave the dormitory without giving Skolnik a box of Passover *matzah*. The thugs started screaming at us again, and I hissed at Yitzhak, “Enough! Let’s get out of here.” But he would not concede and finally the KGB gave in. Yitzhak handed Skolnik the *matzah*. We hugged him and said, “Shalom, we’ll all be reunited soon in Israel.” Our interrogators laughed.

Passover came early that year and we celebrated it like Spanish Jews during the Inquisition—in a locked room with the shades drawn. Despite the risks, our hosts, ranging in age from fifteen to sixty, were determined to celebrate the festival of freedom. Then the pounding started, nearly unhinging the door. Jackbooted KGB agents burst in, apprehended Yitzhak and me, and hustled us down the stairs toward yet another interrogation. I trembled uncontrollably, but then suddenly I heard the refuseniks gathering on the landing above us. Together they sang “Hatikvah,” Israel’s anthem: “To be a free people in our land, the Land of Zion.”

Our mission completed, Yitzhak and I prepared to depart for London. Waiting for our plane to take off, I feared the KGB would come on board and arrest us. The relief, seeing Moscow fading below, was overwhelming. I returned to Israel gaunt and pallid. Sally met me at the airport, where I asked her to drive me directly to the Western Wall. There I conveyed the prayers of all those who were denied that sacred right.

I was free in my own land, but that “Hatikvah” sung in captivity kept reverberating in my mind. Walking the streets in Jerusalem, working as a night editor on Israel Radio, I could not escape the sound. Nor had I recovered from the clash of the courage and the cruelty I witnessed when, three weeks later—on June 6, 1982—Israel again went to war.

### **Peace for the Galilee?**

Earlier that week, Shlomo Argov, Israel’s venerable ambassador to Great Britain, walked out of a reception at London’s Dorchester hotel and into the sights of three Arab gunmen. They shot him in the head, leaving him crippled for life. The attack followed years in which Palestinian terrorists loyal to Yasser Arafat fired rockets from South Lebanon into the Galilee. Life in dozens of Israeli villages and farms became intolerable. Though perpetrated by Arabs opposed to Arafat, Argov’s shooting served as

a pretext for eliminating those PLO strongholds. Three days later, the Israeli government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin and his defense minister, Ariel Sharon, ordered an invasion of Lebanon.

Suddenly the sidewalks teemed with husbands and sons, fathers and brothers, toting olive green duffle bags and going off to war. And I would shortly join them. Like most former IDF soldiers, I no longer served in the reserves for as many as sixty days a year, and my unit, a forward recon team, was swiftly mobilized. Sally drove me to the base only to learn that the last of our jeeps had already been helicoptered to the front. But instead of returning home with my fiancée, I signed out on combat gear and hitchhiked across the Lebanese border. From there I joined various outfits battling up the coast.

Together with my adopted battalions, I made my way through the Lebanese cities of Tyre and Sidon, often fighting house-to-house, occasionally stumbling into enemy ambushes. I eventually caught up with my unit, only to discover that my direct commander, the cupid-faced Aryeh Zukerman, the father of a newborn baby girl, had been killed. Everybody else in the vehicle—the one I had just missed—was wounded.

While listening to my father's war stories growing up, I often wondered how I would conduct myself under fire. Now I knew. My Zionist bravado shrank before the reality of whizzing scraps of white-hot metal. But the courage of others astonished me. There was the officer who calmly directed our column while bullets smacked near his feet. Yitzhak Sokoloff, my college friend who accompanied me to the Soviet Union, volunteered for combat duty and fearlessly evacuated wounded under fire. Much time in warfare would pass before I grew indifferent to the hiss of projectiles overhead or the sight of scattered body parts. Once, while being strafed by a Syrian jet, I eyed a beetle creeping in the dirt in front of my face and thought, "How I envy your obliviousness."

The war, originally named Operation Peace for the Galilee, ostensibly aimed at driving the terrorists beyond rocket range of Israel. But then orders arrived to press northward. The new objective was to liberate Lebanon from its Syrian occupiers as well as Palestinian terrorists, replacing them with a pro-Western government. These were laudable goals in theory, but in practice they were unattainable—and increasingly controversial overseas and even back in Israel.

While antiwar protests mounted in Jerusalem, my column fought fiercely through the Shouf Mountains. Later remembered as Israel's Vietnam, the Lebanon War had a brutally surreal quality rare in Israel's earlier conflicts. There was the Druze family, who invited my squad to join them for lunch on a veranda stacked with food and bullet-ridden bodies. And there was the enemy officer—blue-eyed man with a trimmed mustache—who kept me company in the drainage ditch where I cowered from sniper fire and with whom I kept up a one-way conversation because he was dead. There were the Syrian troops who waved a white flag to our assistant battalion commander and then shot him in the face, and the Israel Radio announcement of a cease-fire that sent us all laughing because we were then under intense fire. Especially bizarre was the time when, clearing out a hostile village, I ran smack into a hard-baked U.S. Marine colonel.

"'Day to you, son," he said in a gritty Texas accent as he picked his way through the rubble.

"'Day to you, too, Colonel. What are you doing here?"

He pointed to the blue UN patch on his shoulder. "Observin'."

"See anything around?"

"Nah. You're good to go."

I shook his hand, hoisted my rifle, and pressed on.

Yet no sight seemed stranger than the one that sprawled below me, suddenly, as my jeep turned

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