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Upstairs in the women's section of my brother Marc's synagogue in Jerusalem, we are seated in the front row. My ten year old daughter, Daniella, and her first cousin, Ashira, are on one side of me, and my friend, Gloria, on the other. I scan the room for my sister-in-law, Batya, who is sitting a few aisles away.

Daniella looks up at her slightly older, much taller cousin. They catch eyes and share a smile. Then she peers over the balcony to watch her youngest cousin, a baby boy, prepare for his *brit milah* or circumcision ceremony. As I watch the men milling around below in the main sanctuary, Gloria whispers into my ear.



"Is that Philippe and Benjamin?" She points toward my husband and teenage son, who are in their regular weekday attire of jeans and polo shirts. After the ceremony and meal, we will return to work and school. "They're sure easy to spot," she says with a hint of laughter. Most of the other males present, including Ashira's two brothers, wear the customary black suit, white shirt, black hat, white tallit fringes hanging outside their pants, typical of the Ultra Orthodox population. Both my nephews tuck tufts of longer hair called peyot behind their ears.

I watch Marc gently hand the baby to the mohel, who is ready to perform the circumcision. Four men encircle my brother. They are mysteries to me, with their worn white prayer shawls draped over their heads. Their beards look like cotton candy, in shades of red, black and silver. Only Marc appears different with his black-and-blue silk robe over his suit, his outfit for special occasions. Unlike Ashira, whose body is still during prayer, the men rock back and forth as the mohel cuts the baby's foreskin.

Seven days postpartum, Batya looks healthy and strong. It's her third son, her third *brit milah*. One of her friends strokes her back as the baby's screams pierce the air. Her girlfriends swarm around her, uttering words of praise. Like Russian matryoshka dolls, they wear seemingly identical smocks over their full, shapeless bodies, headdresses that hide every strand of hair, and thick stockings to cover any skin, following their community's traditions of modest dress. They start every sentence the same way, with "Baruch Hashem" or Thank God.

Today's date weighs heavily on my mind. It is November 4, 2007, the twelfth anniversary of the assassination of former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. On this same day, in this tiny country, another baby boy is being circumcised and welcomed into the Jewish community: the son of Rabin's murderer, Yigal Amir.

Haaretz, November 3, 2007

AMIR SON'S CIRCUMCISION TO BE HELD INSIDE PRISON

The assassin of former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Amir, will not be allowed to leave prison for the circumcision ceremony of his newborn son, which is scheduled to take place on Sunday, the 12th anniversary of the assassination.... Yigal Amir, an ultra-nationalist Jew, shot Rabin to death after a peace rally on November 4, 1995, because he opposed the prime minister's policy of ceding West Bank land to the Palestinians. He was sentenced to life in prison.

For me, the day Rabin was killed had started like any other. Faded, irregular-shaped leaves danced along the sidewalks of our northern California neighborhood. Shortly after our Saturday morning breakfast, Philippe left with then two year old Benjamin for Shabbat services at our synagogue where I joined them a few hours later. My husband greeted me in the entryway of the building, his expression serious. "Did you hear?" he asked. I shrugged my shoulders. "Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally."

Not amused by his quirky sense of humor, I raised my eyebrows and rolled my eyes. "Right!"

"No, I'm serious. It was some right-wing fanatic. That's all I heard."

Tears sprang to my eyes. In my mid-twenties, I had spent five of my most important young adult years in Israel. There, I had met and married Philippe, learned Hebrew, earned a Master's degree at Haifa University and given birth to a sabra or native-born Israeli. I had said "Shabbat Shalom" on Fridays to the butcher and the baker, had camped in the Sinai desert before it was given back to Egypt and had celebrated the Jewish holidays with the entire nation. I had lived through stone-throwing in the late 1980s, the Gulf War in 1991, and bus bombings in the 1990s.

When we were twenty-nine, we left Israel. Philippe wanted to pursue an MBA abroad, and I craved a life closer to my parents in California. But by the time we settled into our American lives in the fall of 1995, my heart was divided. I had wanted to leave the Jewish homeland, yet when tragedy hit, I felt sad and guilty for not being with the rest of the country during such a difficult time.

CNN, November 6, 1995

“SOLDIER FOR PEACE” RABIN BURIED

Yitzhak Rabin, a “martyr for peace,” was buried Monday after eulogies by world leaders, including Arabs, who promised that efforts to end religious and ethnic bloodshed in the Mideast would carry on despite the assassination of the Israeli prime minister....Thousands of Israelis gathered Monday at the Tel Aviv square where Rabin was slain, lighting candles and mounting a quiet vigil. Thousands more huddled outside the apartment building where the 73-year-old prime minister lived....an estimated one million people, in a nation of five million, filed past the coffin as it lay in state outside the Knesset.

When the *brit milah* service in the synagogue ends, Gloria and I follow the crowd downstairs to the social hall for the traditional post-circumcision celebratory meal. En route, I mention the other baby boy’s ceremony which is the top story on every television station and in every newspaper in Israel.

“Oy, don’t talk to me about it,” says Gloria. She leans lightly on her Lucite cane as she walks. Her soft eyes harden. “I don’t know why that man Amir’s getting so much press or why he’s even still alive for that matter. It’s only because it’s a Jewish state. If we were in any other country and someone had shot the prime minister he’d be on death row or dead by now.”

She’s right. For the past few days, I have been mesmerized, listening to all the news reports and reading all the articles about Amir’s baby, the upcoming *brit*, the countrywide controversy over his desire to attend.

I step into a sparsely decorated room and am reminded of just how different my brother’s world is. Seven round tables are set up, three on one side of a *mechitza* or partition and four on the other. The first—and only—time I had seen separate seating during a meal was at Marc and Batya’s wedding seventeen years earlier when dozens of men had eaten and danced on one side of a tall, make-shift divider while dozens of women had eaten and danced on the other.

Yet that wasn’t where my brother’s story had started. Five months after graduating from an Ivy League university, he had immigrated to Israel because as a Jew he felt more comfortable there. Beyond that, he didn’t know what his future held. After serving in the Israeli army for one year, he settled in Jerusalem and enrolled in an institute of Judaism, or yeshivah, to study sacred texts. As Marc’s involvement with yeshiva life deepened, so did his passion for living his life according to every Jewish law. Called a *ba’al teshuvah* or returnee to religion, he refused to eat from our parents’ non-kosher dishes. He had to ask his rabbi for permission to kiss and hug me. After his wedding, he and his wife moved from the hip side of Jerusalem to a run-down, crowded neighborhood, where many staunch English-speaking “returnees” to the Jewish religion live.

Over the years, Marc’s political views formed and crystallized. A believer in Greater Israel, a term that denotes the Biblical boundaries of the Land of Israel, he does not agree with any leader who wants to give up or exchange land for peace.

The New York Times, September 29, 1995

MIDEAST ACCORD: THE OVERVIEW, ARAFAT AND RABIN SIGN PACT TO EXPAND ARAB SELF-RULE

Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, and Yasir Arafat, the chairman of the P.L.O., signed an accord today that transforms their reconciliation into a concrete plan to transfer much of the West Bank to the control of its Arab residents....Under the agreement, the Israelis will withdraw their troops from most towns and villages of the West Bank....and relinquish control to a new, elected Palestinian council, with more territory to be transferred later....The accord...spells out in intricate detail...the withdrawal of Israeli forces from much of the territory....

When Rabin was killed, Marc didn't shed a tear. His murder was one of many things my brother and I could not discuss in any rational way. While he rejected the secular leadership of the state he inhabited, I embraced it. I believe that if Israelis want to achieve peace with their Arab neighbors, they will have to compromise, make a daring move. Rabin was the first leader that I remembered in my lifetime to advance toward peace.

Rabin's courage had given me hope. Pregnant in Israel in the spring of '93, my dreams for my unborn child were connected to the cautious optimism that infused the country for the first time in decades. I was carrying a boy, and all I could think about was his having to serve in the Israeli army. Now, maybe he wouldn't have to. Just because I had decided to live in the Holy Land didn't mean I would be ready or willing to sacrifice my child, something that every proud Israeli parent does, but something I wasn't ready to embrace.

The long, hot summer of swollen feet and *What to Expect When You're Expecting* was also a season of political dialogue, peace talks, agreements and accords. As my pregnancy progressed, the Oslo Accord unfolded. When I returned home from the hospital with my newborn son, the excitement of motherhood almost matched the excitement of the news blanketing the airways. My mom, visiting from California, reached down to turn on the television.

"When's Judy coming?" she asked, fiddling with the channels.

"Any minute. Is it on?"

The doorbell rang and in walked Judy, my childhood friend who lived an hour south of us. She scooped up my baby, cradling him close. Her long, tight ringlets flew in his face. "Can you believe he's yours?" she asked. I turned my head quickly to nod in her direction, but couldn't take my eyes off the TV.

"Shush," my mother said. "Look."

With Benjamin in her arms, Judy sat down on the carpet next to me. My mom plopped herself on the crazy-colored couch. We watched together with the rest of the world as I began to wind myself tightly in a cocoon of illusions.

BBC, September 13, 1993

RABIN AND ARAFAT SHAKE ON PEACE DEAL

Yitzhak Rabin, and...Yasser Arafat have shaken hands before cheering crowds on the White House lawn in Washington....The handshake – the first ever in public between the two former arch enemies – marked the signing of a Declaration of Principles for peace between the Arabs and Israelis....Under the terms of the deal, Israel has agreed to withdraw its troops from Gaza Strip and West Bank by April 1994. Elections will be held in the territories to allow the Palestinians some form of self-government.

This morning, en route to my nephew's circumcision in Jerusalem, we had picked up my husband's brother, Yvan. Disheveled as usual, he squeezed his body into the backseat of the car with the kids. His energy woke us up like a shot of coffee.

"I've got a good one for you," Yvan said. "You know how it's Yigal Amir's baby's *brit* today, right? Well, some journalist ran into Amir's father in a bakery while buying challah for Shabbat and they started talking. Apparently they knew each other and the journalist asked about the baby's name." Yvan was smirking, waiting to tell the punch line of a joke. "The father said he hopes they name him Shalom, after Yigal's grandfather. What do you think?" We laughed.

"I don't get it," the kids said. We tried to explain the irony. In Hebrew, shalom means peace. An odd name for the son of an assassin.

I knew better than to ask my new nephew's name. In Eastern European Jewish tradition, a baby boy's name isn't announced until the circumcision. For seven days, he's an empty slate as parents discuss who he looks like or whose grandfather's name needs to be carried on in memory.

Seated in synagogue, we all become quiet, eagerly waiting to hear the father utter the child's name. My brother whispers to the mohel; the mohel speaks quickly. "Did he say it?" I ask Gloria, whose Hebrew is better than mine. "Did you hear the name?"

"Shalom Simcha," she says. I tell Gloria that my mom, who wasn't able to attend, will be very happy. Simcha was her father's Hebrew name.

After the meal, Marc stands up and thanks all of us for coming and sharing in his family's celebration. Then, in his usual sermonic way, he explains his son's name comes from the root word *shalem*, which means "wholeness." Apparently, the baby's name Shalom has nothing to do with peace.

I shiver as I sit in my brother's synagogue this sunny November morning, contemplating the arrival of new life, the departure of lost life. I am struck by the synchronicity of events. For me Shalom means peace. But, for both the murderer's son and for my nephew, who will forever share a birthday and most likely that name, peace has nothing to do with it.

Politics invade every aspect of daily life; Israelis eat, sleep and breathe war, danger and the possibility of annihilation. I wonder if Israeli-born citizens experience this as intensely as I do, or if I feel it more acutely because I am American. Maybe they're numb because, as they say in Hebrew, *cacha ze*, it is what it is. Tragedy strikes. War happens. Life goes on.

Until I moved to Israel and opted for citizenship, I had led a typical American life, coddled by a sense of security, protected from war. The suicide bombings, the hatred between Arabs and Jews and their inability to coexist peacefully were nothing more than stories in the media. Then I chose to live among them, to become Israeli. Now, twenty years later, no matter where I live, I am deeply affected when catastrophes occur in Israel. I will always remember November 4—when Yitzhak Rabin was murdered, when his murderer—and my brother—celebrated the circumcisions of their new baby boys. And shalom didn't mean peace.

7 comments on "In the Name of Peace"



Tim Bascom

June 8, 2010 at 10:36 pm (<http://www.ducts.org/content/essays/in-the-name-of-peace/#comment-993>)

Jennifer, Thanks for telling your story in such a way that I could understand the bigger story even more. Thanks for being brave enough to tell that story. Shalom. Tim Bascom



Port Machnicki-Hynes (<http://www.chorvatskodovolena.com>)

June 28, 2010 at 4:30 am (<http://www.ducts.org/content/essays/in-the-name-of-peace/#comment-1083>)