

## The Softer Side of Collision

Yaakov Garb

I was driving with Samir, a Palestinian taxi driver from East Jerusalem, past a small family hotel in West Jerusalem, whose ad hoc synagogue my father sometimes attended. The hotel reminded Samir of a certain period in his life. It began when he was stopped by a *Haredi* (Jewish ultra-Orthodox) woman near Sabbath Square. She sat in the back. They talked. Then they joked. Then he booked into this hotel. “I came out of the shower, and she was on the couch. We started fooling around. Then I almost had a heart attack—her head came off in my hands!”

As opposed to most religious women, who simply cover their hair in public, in the strictest ultra-Orthodox communities women shave their heads, over which they wear a scarf or a wig—which is what had come off in Samir’s hands. He wasn’t expecting this. “She was bald, Yaakov, completely bald! But what a bombshell. We carried on, and really liked each other, so we met again, and then again, quite regularly. For half a year we kept meeting. I started to get scared that her people would find out and come after me, so I broke it off. But she was great.”

I was new to Jerusalem when I heard this story in the late 1990s, and discounted it as a delightful and outrageous anomaly. As I continued to live in the city, however, I kept hearing and seeing things that crossed the ethnic, religious, and national lines many of us have come to hate. These stories were no longer anomalous but evidence of a hidden shared life. Away from the posturing and political declarations about a united/occupied Jerusalem, everyday passions, kindnesses, mischief, and creativity weave us together—more than anyone dares to acknowledge. I share some of these stories because they are what makes life in Jerusalem livable, even enjoyable, for me. But I also want to suggest that they are indicative of a different kind of life, the kind that has been, is, and could be possible.

My stories center around East Jerusalem taxi drivers (and Samir in particular) who introduced me to this mixed-up world where two Jerusalems come together.

Over half the taxi drivers in West Jerusalem are East Jerusalemites, mostly operating Arab-owned cabs. Indeed, several of the larger companies are Arab-owned or co-owned—a Jewish partner having been added to lubricate relations with the authorities.

Think about it. What other opportunity do young Palestinian men have to circulate unobstructed around the city? There are none more mobile than those who make a living by roaming. And not just in West Jerusalem. They swing back and forth from West to East (eat lunch; give the wife a lift; pray at the mosque), effortlessly crossing the lines that govern most people. And there are also long distance trips to other parts of Israel and the West Bank (settlers often prefer Arab drivers who know how to “handle” themselves in the Occupied Territories). What other Palestinians move through Jewish space unhindered, in command, on duty? Who else spends their 10, 12, 14 hour days conversing with Jews in an unstructured, anonymous, and intimate way, bracketed by the clean start and clear finish of a given ride—if both parties so wish? Where else does the Arab in such encounters have a modicum of authority—behind the wheel, often of a late-model Mercedes few passengers could afford?

You have to be pretty “together” to be an East Jerusalem taxi driver. Your Hebrew must be good if you are to thrive (and if good enough to pass for a North-African or Middle Eastern Jew—all the better). You need to pass the taxi driver certification course, get a commercial license, have an accountant, and stay out of trouble. The latter can be difficult when a hard-to-please client’s complaint to the Ministry of Transportation places you under the presumption of guilt, because of your dual ethnic and occupational inferiority. Many drivers own their vehicles—a big capital investment that feeds one or more families. These are kept in top shape and running, often 24 hours a day in two 12-hour or three 8-hour shifts. Among Jews, a taxi driver is seen as someone who lacks alternatives, whereas it is a fairly well respected job in East Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

### **Crossing Lines**

I began with Samir and his ultra-Orthodox lover not (just) as prurient gossip about a community assumed to be “above such things,” but because there is something so

hopeful about a simple human frustration reaching across boundaries—far across boundaries—to be met.

Ironically, in such cases, it is precisely distance which is at play: ultra-Orthodox men and women regard dalliances with non-Jews as less sinful. Indeed, as some ultra-Orthodox men explain to their taxi drivers on the way to the red light district of North Tel Aviv, the Diamond Exchange in Ramat Gan, or the “escort institutes” of South Jerusalem, the Jewish prohibition on extramarital sex does not apply if their partners are non-Jews. I doubt they suspect the extent to which their wives and sisters are enjoying this loophole (and for free!), or would appreciate Samir’s deft recycling of their Talmudic logic as he playfully introduces this exemption to ultra-Orthodox female passengers who may not be aware of this finer point of religious law.

Another driver also told of ending his affair with a religious Jewish woman, indeed one living in a hard-core political settlement near Jerusalem. This was not for fear, however. “After a while, when I saw how serious it was getting, I told her that it was not fair that I go home to my wife at the end of the day and she goes back to an empty house. I told her she had to find a man she could marry. She protested, but I encouraged her, and eventually she did. She still calls me all the time, to talk or for advice. We’ve stayed friends.”

This was relayed to me by way of explanation for a call that came in on the speakerphone while I was in the taxi: a consultation about visiting family that just couldn’t wait. I can vouch: this was a real relationship, respectful, mature, not sleazy. Others are more usurious, I am sure, but that runs both ways.

Setting aside the ethics of these infidelities, there is a lot of clandestine consensual cross-national mingling going on in Jerusalem. I doubt there is a reasonable looking Palestinian driver on the road for more than a couple of years who has not been approached, by an ultra-Orthodox or other Jewish woman at some point in his career (and more than a few have acquiesced). Because Jewish law prohibits one from being alone with an adult non-family member of the opposite sex, this is the only chance ultra-Orthodox women, many of whom marry in their late teens or early twenties, have of interacting informally with men. And, apparently, they take advantage of it

when needed. But it's not just Jewish women. Sometimes the passenger is an Arab woman, though an affair within the Palestinian community is much more risky, sometimes even fatal.

I joked with Samir once about how many Jewish kids he may have unknowingly sired, and that one of them, now old enough to be in the army, could stop him at a checkpoint. We laughed, wondering if they would recognize each other. What we were really laughing at, of course, was the messy muddle beneath Jerusalem's surface.

Samir's son is of a more casual generation than his father: jeans, T-shirt, sunglasses. He has his father's charm, but of Israeli, not Jordanian vintage. He often stayed with his Russian immigrant girlfriend in the Jewish town of Beth Shemesh, until he entered into an arranged marriage with an East Jerusalem girl. Recently, I stopped with him to buy some soda at an East Jerusalem shop where a wild male finch in a cage was chirping away. The owner explained that he was trying to "marry" it with two domesticated female canaries. If a female likes the finch's voice, she will start nesting, and the two can be put into the same cage. If they have offspring, the fledglings will learn their wild father's tunes and zest for singing, but inherit their domesticated mother's much stronger voice—which is what makes them so valuable, albeit infertile. A female finch, I am told (by men), will never accept a male canary. You can not put them in the same cage, and she would never, "in a thousand years," let him mount her.<sup>2</sup> The finch, a native species which the laws forbids to capture or own, is expensive, around a thousand shekels, and a male's value is increased by his proven ability to produce hybrid offspring. I asked Samir's son how you say "hybrid" in Arabic. *Banduk*, he told me with relish.

The cheap trick of starting with sex to address ruptures in Jerusalem's oppressive dividing lines should not downgrade or sensationalize the phenomenon. There are more sedate and sanctioned forms of mingling too: social visits, exchanged favors, loans, joint business ventures. It starts with asking the Palestinian gardener if he wants a glass of water or a cup of tea, or two co-workers at the bus company appreciating each other's style, and then . . . humans are humans, after all.

But if I did start with mingling across gender lines<sup>3</sup>, let me be provocative: beneath the violence, distrust, and ethnic enclaving, is there not some racial fear (on both sides) of what might happen in this co-habited city (and country) if the barriers fell? We'd be all over each other! All the dietary, temporal, and other purposeful asynchronizations of Jewish law, which seem designed to make social mixing difficult, no longer guide the majority of the Jewish population. Strategists of Jewish survival worry about the demographic threat in Israel and the assimilation threat abroad. But what if the barriers were reduced to a point that allowed for assimilation with fellow Semites right here in our own back yard?<sup>4</sup>

Our pasts were fluid, and I suspect our futures could be too. Years after meeting him, a friend from East Jerusalem mentioned in passing that his ancestors were Syrian Jews who converted to Islam when they moved to Hebron during the time of Saladin. I was amazed, he was nonchalant. "Yes, sometimes when I do something stupid or make an astute financial decision my friends tease me and call me a Jew." I mentioned this to another friend, a Jordanian originally from the Hebron area who knows Hebronite families well. "That's right," he confirmed, "the Shweiks have done well for themselves in business," and then he listed off the names of several other Palestinian families known to be formerly Jewish. "In fact," he continued, "my great grandmother on my mother's side is Jewish, you know. She was a Jewish girl orphaned in some battle whom my great grandfather adopted and later married. Whenever he got annoyed with her he would call her *bint Yahoud* (daughter of a Jew). It was only years later that I learned that this was not just an epithet."

### **Playing with Lines**

Lines are a very serious thing in Jerusalem. The separation barrier is as blunt and concrete as you can get. If government inspectors (these days Palestinian citizens of Israel from Abu Ghosh) find you in a home in Azaria or A-Ram, rather than at your declared address within the municipal lines, as little as a kilometer away, you can lose your Jerusalem ID, i.e. your ability to work, visit family, or claim the national insurance benefits you have been paying into for years. Fears are real: Jerusalemites do get stabbed, shot, and blown up, arrested and tortured. I've seen my friends' kids cower the first time they heard my Hebrew spoken in their East Jerusalem homes

("Dad, why is the soldier here?"). At the height of the bus bombing period, with the kin of three schoolmates buried, my 12 year old niece matter-of-factly asked her mother to help her draft a will ("What's better, Yaakov, that I tell her not to or help her?")

The ability to play with, and thus soften, these facts of life is what I want to talk about.

Samir also had a lover in a settlement near Jerusalem. Once, his colleague dropped him off there after her husband left for work. Coming back some hours later, Samir had to take a bus. This was at the height of the bus bombing period. Samir is dark and mustachioed. Boarding the bus, he greeted the driver with a smile "to put him at ease." The bus, half full, looped through the settlement to pick up people before heading to Jerusalem. At the first stop after Samir got on, many people got off. At the next stop, the remainder got off. As the bus left the settlement for Jerusalem, only Samir and the driver remained. So he went and chatted with the driver, suggesting that the bus company hire him to ride the bus regularly, since all the fearful passengers who got off had already paid their fare and would need to pay again when they got on the next bus. Samir told me this story because at this time Jews were also hesitant to get into taxis with Arab drivers. Once, after a potential client's qualms were dispelled by the fact that I was already seated in the cab, I offered to rent Samir my reassuringly Ashkenazi face and ride along during his shifts.

Nonsensical suggestions, of course, but a way for people to talk about fears and place ourselves on the same side of these concerns, somehow.

Both reinforcing and eroding such prejudices, Akram, another friend from Hebron, gave me a half-serious standing offer after the first couple of bus bombings. "If you ever get on a bus and see an angry Arab man with a coat, get off right away and take a taxi, take even two taxis, I will pay for it." It was impossible for Akram to come to my wedding, as the closure was in full effect, but I was touched when he offered to send money to hire extra guards at the event. (In fact, Samir showed up early to circle the periphery "and make sure the grounds were properly secured").

Operating an Arab-owned and almost entirely Arab-staffed taxi company in an increasingly edgy and vengeful West Jerusalem is tricky business. The 70 or so Arab drivers at the station I use all communicate with each other over the radio in Hebrew, and have Hebrew work names with addresses to match. “Ami from French Hill” might be Amer from adjacent Issawiya; “Avraham from East Talpiot” is assumed to be more palatable than “Ibrahim from Sur Bahir,” across the valley. I once overheard a radio conversation (in Hebrew) in which a pseudo-named Arab dispatcher sent a pseudo-named Arab driver to pick up a real-named Jewish client, and told him to give the woman a fair price. “Of course,” the driver said, using the phrase Jews sometimes use to express brotherly largesse, “*kulanu yehudim!*” (We’re all Jews!)

Once Samir took the wife of Rabbi Aryeh Deri from their Har Nof home to a meeting. (Deri was then the political leader of the Shas party whose North African and Middle Eastern Jewish electoral base had shaken up Israeli politics). She needed a phone to check the address, and Samir, who appreciated Deri’s boldness and considered himself a *Shasnik* of sorts, had a color sticker of Deri on the flip panel of his mobile phone. “What’s this?” Deri’s wife asked when he handed her the phone. “Our Rabbi,” he answered, deadpan, using the Hebrew insider term of affectionate deference. They laughed together, across lines, at lines.

More calculatingly, when checkpoints were less stringent, Palestinian drivers would put right-wing stickers on their cars to increase their chances of getting waved through quickly (I imagined, perhaps wrongly, that they must have had some satisfaction at the hidden meaning of slogans like “Hebron: Ours Always and Forever”). At the time of writing, there are those who tie the orange anti-Gaza-disengagement ribbons on their antennas, to increase their chances of picking up clients who are afraid Arab drivers. (This, for some reason, unlike the stickers, is frowned upon by some Palestinian drivers as “going too far”).

With his looks, Samir, who works at a station staffed by both Arabs and Jews, could never pass as a Jew, and would not, therefore, think of trying. He uses humor rather than camouflage to reassure his clients. Often by making their fears explicit: “Come on, get in, ordinarily I would kidnap you and take you to Ramallah, but I don’t have time this evening.”

He has also been known to make good use of Jewish fears. One day, he had a big self-satisfied smile when I got in his cab: “You’ll never guess what happened. There’s a round I do every night picking up workers from a factory. And there’s a shortcut I take in Givat Shaul. It’s a one way street going the wrong way. Only 15 meters, but it saves 10 minutes. I have two passengers in the car. A police car signals for me to stop. I think to myself, ‘I can’t afford a 1000 shekels fine and 10 penalty points on my license.’ As the police officers approach I tell my passengers in Arabic, ‘Hold tight, I need to play a little here, everything will be OK.’ They’re regular clients from East Jerusalem, workers whom I take home. So I meet the police half way and say softly, ‘Guys, I saw your patrol and came right to you. You’ve got to help me. These two passengers got in, and I have a funny feeling about them. Please check them out.’ [This was just after a well publicized incident in which a suicide bomber reached his destination by taxi]. So the police check their IDs. They come back to me and say, ‘It’s OK, they’ve checked out fine.’ I say, ‘Are you sure? It’s your responsibility!’ They thank me for my vigilance, shake my hand, and wish everyone were as alert as I am—a model citizen. And off we went.”

“I wasn’t afraid that they’d rough up my passengers, they were policemen in blue uniforms, not border patrol thugs. I said to myself, ‘the fine would be 1000 shekels. If the passengers get beaten, I’ll give them half that sum, say 250 each...’”

While Samir is an expert at dispelling people’s fears, even inverting them to his own benefit, his eldest son was the lucky beneficiary of an entirely uncalculated inversion. Samir was in his Islamic period when the child was born, and wanted to call him Khomeini. When he went to register the boy at the East Jerusalem branch of the Ministry of Interior, where the lines between Ministry officials and *Shabak* (GSS, General Security Services) officers are rather blurry, he was told he could not register such a name. He argued with the GSS officers, and in the end reached a compromise: he would name his son Iran. He did not realize it at the time, but Iran is very similar to Eran, a common Jewish Israeli boy’s name, and was even spelled the same. So the child grew up with a name in his ID card which enabled him to mingle with Jews more freely than most. Samir recalls that when his son’s Jewish friends were drafted, how upset Eran/Iran/(Khomeini) was that he could not join them, especially the ones



enlisting in commando units. “When they came home from their bases for the first time,” Samir’s son told me proudly, “they let me hold their guns and showed me how they worked.” Over time, however, he saw less and less of them.

### **So What?**

What do they amount to, these stories? Some irrelevant humanistic weeds sprouting at the edges of the unrelenting concrete of occupation? Do they just barely ease the brutality of ethnic, religious, and national divisions, or do they actually reveal (or lay the ground for) something different, something more important?

I myself sometimes get annoyed at the theoretical romanticization of “everyday resistance,” and wonder at the political efficacy of peasants who fart while bowing at the passing lord.<sup>5</sup> Why tell these stories, as charming as they might be? After all, don’t the exceptions described prove that distance and separation are the rule?

Perhaps I am naïve, but these stories strike me as the hidden rule of everyday coexistence and hybridizations, temporarily occluded by circumstance. Maybe Samir had to break off his affair, but somewhere in Mea Shaarim there is a woman who remembers him, and perhaps not only guiltily. And for the 100 broken affairs there will be 10 fond memories, and perhaps one couple who live out their rule, as Alegra Bellow and Jabara Rahil did, when they met in the Mahane Yehuda market and eloped in 1929, at the height of Jewish-Arab tensions, eventually moving to Ein Karm, leaving behind heart-broken parents, but also a chain of descendents from East and West Jerusalem who share a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.<sup>6</sup>

I have not asked Samir whether he thinks these everyday breaches amount to anything. I doubt it would be a productive line of questioning. But perhaps something he told me indicates his attitude. “There’s this one Jewish driver at our station that hates Arabs. I don’t know why. He just hates us. But he likes me. He doesn’t know why. He says to me, ‘Samir, I don’t know why I like you, but I like you.’ So last night when he said this, I responded, ‘It doesn’t matter whether you like me or hate me, because either way, we’ve taken your work.’ I was joking with him. I said, ‘Tell me, did you occupy East Jerusalem or did we occupy you?’ He seemed baffled. I asked,

‘Can you sleep with an Arab woman?’ ‘No.’ ‘Do you walk around the Arab markets freely?’ ‘No.’ I told him, ‘I shop on Jaffa street, I go wherever I want. I eat in your restaurants, sleep with your women, and take your work. I think it was we who occupied you in 1967.’

“Oh,” says another Palestinian driver to whom I relayed this conversation, “Those are just Samir’s philosophies.”

You decide.

## ABOUT THE ESSAY AND THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This disparity is actually a problem because salaries for unskilled jobs in West Jerusalem are significantly higher than salaries for skilled jobs in East Jerusalem. Gifted young men are tempted to prefer the former over training for the latter. Women, however, do carry on studying, and it is not uncommon for a husband to have barely finished high school while his wife holds an academic degree.
- <sup>2</sup> Certainly, there are less Arab (especially Muslim) women who marry Jewish men. However, since I interact mostly with Palestinian men and not Palestinian women, I don't know what stories women tell each other.
- <sup>3</sup> Same-gender mingling across national lines are another, more complicated phenomenon, deserving of its own treatment. The city's gay bar, recently torched, is, perhaps, the one genuinely nationally mixed bar in the city. I am told that for many years there was tacit refuge from persecution given to Palestinian gay men joining their Israeli lovers.
- <sup>4</sup> You will always hear of mixed couples in any large town, Jewish or Arab. I am always pleasantly surprised by the low key acceptance of these.
- <sup>5</sup> The reference is to an epigraph in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- <sup>6</sup> Moshe Amirav who interviewed families on both sides, tells the story in Amirav et al, *Ein-Karem: Voyage to the Enchanted Village*, Jerusalem: Keter, 2004.