

When the Bombs Fell
(Israel and Jordan, 1998)

In December of 1998, Peg, Joshua and I decided to visit Shoshanna and Shmuel, both of whom were well into their year experience of living and working in Israel.

We first went to visit Shmuel, who was spending the Hanukah break with his adoptive host family, Mira and Ariel, in the northern Israel town of Petah Tikvah. At night, we went to a 2,000-year-old Roman amphitheater, where a large unit of Israeli soldiers gathered to light the first candle of a giant menorah. An awe-inspiring moment, considering the historical twists and turns that brought us back to our ancestor's land, alive, and healthy, to celebrate light once again in the ruins of our former Roman conquerors. After the ceremony, the soldiers served us an ample supply of the delicious traditional powdered jelly donuts, Sufganiyot, of which, Israeli's consume more than 25,000 each day during the eight-night festival!

Shoshanna was living not too far away from where Shmuel's adoptive family lived, so we took the bus to Kibbutz Galed. We arrived to find Shoshanna was now immersed in a new world. To call her, we needed to contact Josh, her new boyfriend, on his cellphone. It's truly amazing to travel so far from home to such a place and, suddenly, there materializes your child, now, no longer as I remembered.

Shoshanna, and "her" Josh, which is what we began to call him due to the confusion with her brother Joshua, led us on a tour of the hustle and bustle of the Kibbutz – the avocado groves, the dairy farm, the dining hall, the bomb shelter that was used now part-time as a recreation room for the teens of the community.

The next night, we traveled with Shoshanna and Josh to Haifa, to visit Etti, a wonderful friend of the family, who despite being in her 80s, had lots of energy to cook Hanukah cookies and play dreidel with the kids. We were having such a great time, that we didn't notice that it was already midnight. A friend of Etti's, also in her 80s, who had joined us for the festivities, readied to leave. "Let me walk you home," I said to her. She turned to me and smiled. "Thank you, but we feel safe here." What an irony, I thought. I wouldn't let my mother walk in Eugene, Oregon alone at night. Here, they are surrounded by a world of terrorism, but they feel "safe."

Shoshanna had to stay on the Kibbutz and finish some work before she was allowed to go on vacation from her program. So, Peg, Shmuel, Joshua and I took a six-hour-bus-ride from Haifa to the utmost southern tip of Israel, the resort city of Eilat.

We had arranged through one of Peg's student's family to visit the ancient mountain community of Petra, Jordan. We walked across the bridge that is the border between Israel and Jordan, a small, but sturdy bond between these two former adversaries. There were a number of taxis waiting on the Jordanian side of the border. Our driver enthusiastically helped us load our bags into his dusty taxi. He asked us where we were going, and we responded, Petra. We could see his eyes light up, as the distance to our destination would translate into a well-paid fee for the ride.

While still unclear as to his exact motivation, he told us that his friend would be better at taking us that long distance, so he was going to bring us momentarily to his home so that we could transfer cars. Already in route to his home at a high velocity, there didn't seem to be much room to negotiate alternatives. On the way to his home, he asked us if we needed to arrange for a hotel in Petra, as he knew many great places to stay. We responded that the arrangements had already been

made by Peggy's contact there. The driver nodded his head, "Ah! Yes, I know his family. Very good people, very good people." We looked at each other, unsure as to if he didn't understand our English, or if he was playing some type of game with us.

Either way, we eventually arrived to his home, where his wife served us a sweet tea and cookies. Shmuel called me over to the bathroom to ask in privacy which of the two small holes in the ground were for urinating. Confused, there didn't seem to be any signs indicating which one would be most appropriate, so I told him to hurry up and take his pick, the new taxi was waiting outside.

Our new driver had a similar dusty, old Mercedes taxi that seemed to be the norm here in the Middle East. Friendly, and excited at the long drive to Petra, he ushered us into his car. As we made our way to this 2,300-year-old ancient village, our driver asked us if we needed a tour guide, or a place to stay. When we responded that the arrangements had already been made by Peggy's contact there, the driver similarly nodded his head, "Ah! Yes, I know his family. Very good people, very good people." This was beginning to feel either spectacularly coincidental that everyone seemed to know of Peg's contact's family, or very suspicious.

As we approached Petra, we could see the genius of the design of their community in the distance. Beautiful, reddish rock mountains, proudly standing in the desert. Homes carved into the landscape, housing generation after generation of the Nabataeans, an Arab tribe, that turned this isolated mountain area into a flourishing trade route city.

Our taxi driver took us to our hotel, where we finally met Peg's connection there, Marwan. He greeted us warmly, and helped us check in to the hotel. Later that evening, Marwan had arranged for us to eat dinner at his mother's home. Sitting in a circular table, with the extravagant smorgasbord of mouth-watering

meats, vegetables, hummus, tahini, and their special form of pita bread, Marwan told us of his family. It was then that much of the confusion of how well-known his family was made more sense. We were to discover that Marwan was the son of the sheik of Petra, one of the most respected families in all of Jordan, and a personal friend to the King. Marwan told us of his life – his experiences in the military, as a security officer, and his travels worldwide.

The next day, Marwan took us on a special “behind-the-scenes” tour of the interior of Petra. Walking through the twisting, narrow dirt road entrance to the village, that wove between towering rock walls, men driving horse carts, and boys on donkeys passed by. The air seemed to change, the color of the rocks took on a variety of pink and red hues.

There was an overwhelming feeling of awe entering this town, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. We saw the traces of history that had been left over the thousands of years. There was the mountain where legend says Moses, in anger, struck the rock to cause water to gush forward. This is the same mountain where his brother, Aaron, is buried. We were amazed by the incredible architecture that had been carved into the cliffs by the Nabataeans, sacrificial altars to the multitudes of ancient gods of traders from the far reaches of the Middle East. The Treasury, better-known today as the entrance to Indiana Jones’s “The Last Crusade.”

We sat in the stone benches of the Roman amphitheater. This used to be a place that once entertained 7,000 spectators. Now, it served only for an occasional event for tourists, as few of the 3,000 villagers were allowed to live in the community that their ancestors had occupied for thousands of years. Jordanian politics had decided that Petra needed to be designated as a tourist site, and the villagers were forced into permanent housing in rudimentary buildings located in the adjacent town.

As we climbed the nine hundred steps to a sacrificial altar, Marwan noted an ominous group of black ravens clustered above and circling. “This is not a good omen,” he said.

Evening shadows came, and we reluctantly left the ruins of Petra for the hotel. There was still so much we had not seen. Marwan had told us of all the exciting events planned for the following day, and we retreated to our rooms.

Our hotel was owned by Marwan’s cousin. A third-rate spectacle, it housed a nice lobby, a warm space, with immense Persian carpets, and ample supply of sweet tea and strong Turkish coffee. We were lost in ancient times, far away from the world we knew.

The next morning jolted us back to the present. We woke and came downstairs to see Marwan standing around a television with a group of men. Their long, serious faces evident, as they watched a broadcast in Arabic detailing a bombing campaign in Iraq led by the United States.

An unknown man in the group turned to us, “Why?”

I had no answer.

What could I say, especially with the pictures on the television showing the innocent people who had been killed, their lives destroyed.

This man told us that he was afraid. He had family who lived in Bagdad. They might be dead or seriously injured, and were not answering their phones. He also knew the further implications of this escalation of violence – borders will close, tourists will not come, the people of Petra will lose their livelihood and suffer.

Everything changed, dramatically. We didn’t understand the television broadcast. Marwan tried to translate some of the Arabic for us. How accurate was the information on the broadcast? How accurate was Marwan’s translation?

As we began to feel the tension increase in the room, our predicament became a little concerning. We were eighty miles from the Israeli border – at least a two-hour ride. We were in a strange land. We did not speak Arabic, and depended on our sole contact, Marwan, for protection and guidance. While Jordan had maintained a peace treaty with Israel for years, animosity was still very present. We were told to tell people that we were Jewish, not Israeli. But now America was bombing the Middle East. How might they react to us, as Americans?

“We’re sorry,” I said. “We don’t know why the United States did this. I think we should leave now, as soon as possible. Please, can you arrange a taxi?”

Marwan called for a taxi to drive us to the border. We embraced. I could see the sadness in his eyes. I could feel the tenseness in his body. I could still hear the laughter we had shared that evening, joking and talking about life, our hopes and dreams. Today, forces beyond our control had shattered this new friendship. We left, knowing we would most likely never meet again.

Tension filled the air of the old taxi as we drove towards the border. We quickly noticed an increase in the Jordanian military along every road, stopping cars, peering inside, checking passports.

We finally reached the border.

On the other side of the bridge, two Israeli female officers blocked the way.

We showed them our passports. They began firing questions at us, with their stern, Israeli accent, intimidating us, as if we had done something wrong.

“How long were you in Jordan?”

“Where did you go?”

I was exhausted from the long, tense, drive from Petra. It seemed ridiculous to me that we were being interrogated, as if we were party to some devious plan. One of the guards turned to me, with a glare of death that she seemed to have perfected over the course of her young life. “Where did you come from?”

“Bagdad!” I answered!

Wrong answer.

Neither I nor any member of my family said a word.

Then, the two guards burst into laughter.

Luckily, it seemed they still had a sense of humor. I could just imagine what they were thinking: “No one could be that stupid, not even these Americans!”

I had provided their comic relief for the day. They let us cross.

A few hours after we had crossed back into Israel, the border was closed for a number of weeks. If we had not returned to Israel when we did, we would have been trapped in Jordan, pulled into the intensifying violence of the Middle East.

Our memories of the wonders of the ancient, “Pink City” of Petra, will forever be tinged with the sadness of today’s reality, the senseless destruction.