

SEARCH

Go [Advanced Search](#)
[Article Archives](#)

Home

Digital Edition
Election
News

The Daily Mix
Web Extras
Israel
Open Line
JBlog
Holidays
Rosh Hashanah
Voices
Editorials
Letters to the Editor

On The Town
Arts & Life
Reviews
Simchas
Obituaries
Business
Sports
Health & Fitness

Special Sections
Calendar

[home](#) : [voices](#) : [voices](#)

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VOICES: LETTERS FROM ISRAEL

As Israel's conflict with Hamas in Gaza commenced and later intensified, two former Atlanta residents and regular JT contributors shared their thoughts. Meredith Price Levitt, Marietta native and Tel Aviv resident, was planning to write about her new home's centennial and the feelings of hope springing up internationally following Barack Obama's presidential victory when the conflict began. Now her thoughts are with the Israeli soldiers and their families. Meanwhile, humor columnist Benji Lovitt departs from his usual jokes to make a plea: Please come to Israel, it's as safe, if not safer, than any place in the United States, and it's a life-changing trip you'll never forget.

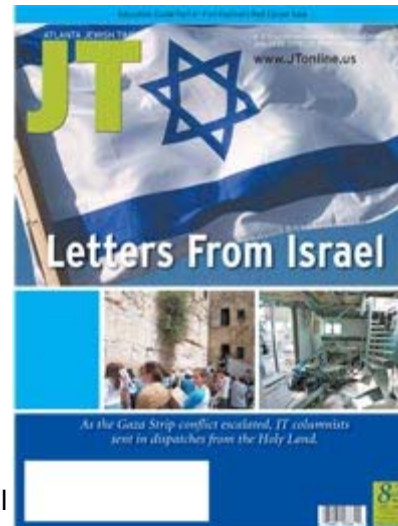
'All We Can Do Is Pray'

| Meredith Price Levitt

| Special to the Jewish Times

It was supposed to be simple. Aside from the depressing global recession and a series of damaging political scandals, Tel Aviv's centennial birthday seemed to be occurring in a year ripe with promise. 2009 was basking in the light of potential peace. The growing Iranian threat that many Israelis feared would incite an Israeli air strike and possible retaliation in late 2008 came to naught. Stanley Fischer announced the strength and

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Far left: Residents in Ashkelon near the Gaza Strip are often subject to rocket attacks from



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resistance of the Israeli banks and economy despite rising job cuts and unemployment. Barack Obama got elected and, along with many Americans, Arabs across the world joined in historic celebrations, including many in Israel.

The day after the election, I made a run to the local fruit and vegetable store. Think Kroger's produce section condensed into a five-by-five box with cucumbers, celery roots and fresh pumpkin pieces arranged in boxes from floor to ceiling alongside hummus, tchina, roasted eggplant salad and marinated cabbage. You get the point. Like most places of its kind in Tel Aviv, it's owned by an Israeli Arab family. As I griped about the ridiculous price of lemons and tried to decide whether or not to splurge on a tray of homemade bachlava, Yasin greeted me with a wide smile.

"So ... Obama," he said, leaning back on his heels and making a "psh psh" sound with his lips. Yasin keeps track of his clients so that he can talk world politics with the right nationalities. He knows the immigrants from the locals, and he can speak a few words of many languages. Merci beaucoup, he'll say to the French mesdames. Or bonne journée, as he waves them out. Yasin can say "thank you very much" in German, Spanish and Italian, but his favorite is the Yiddish phrase - a sheynem dank - which he says as slowly and carefully as a royal messenger announcing the king's passage. Slim and gregarious, Yasin is the quintessential salesman that everyone instinctively loves.

"What do you think about Obama? What's the reaction in the Arab world?" I asked him.

He thought for a moment and then said, "The Arabs feel that Obama understands world politics, that he can make a change and bring peace. All over Al-Jazeera they showed celebrations, people hoping that Obama will have the answers and be able to make a difference."

I watched him move a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other with his tongue - a peculiar habit he'd picked up after quitting smoking.

"And what do you think?" I asked.

He weighed a bag of oranges for an elderly gentleman before replying. "I think Obama will be good for peace. I like him."

That was the most hopeful statement I'd heard from Yasin about any politician in ages, and knowing that his sentiments were joined by many other Arabs and Arab nations was enough to make anyone hopeful.

Hamas, a situation which prompted Israel to invade Gaza. Left: Despite the threat of attacks from neighbors, life goes on in Jerusalem for both tourists and residents.

Meredith Price Levitt

Benji Lovitt



As 2008 drew to a close, even Hamas seemed to be conciliatory and respectful of the latest cease-fire attempt. The peace process had an illusion of solidity, and I planned to write about Tel Aviv's fascinating history in January. Since the 60 founding families met on the sand in the spring of 1909 to receive their plots of land in what would later become known as the seashell lottery, a lot has happened. The garden suburb dreamed up by a few Zionists has come a long way.

Then the plans changed. While I was on vacation for the last two weeks of 2008, another war broke out. It was the second time I had returned to Israel after a war began, but you never get used to something like that. The first time, I'd been in the air between Tel Aviv and Atlanta when the war with Lebanon began in 2006.

"Israel is the only country that can be at peace when you take off and at war when you land," my taxi driver had said with an intonation that reminded me of Rodney Dangerfield. "Welcome to the war zone," he'd chirped. Israelis have a weird sense of humor.

This time, the landing was slightly softer. I'd already heard from well-informed fellow tourists traveling in Thailand that a war had ignited in the Gaza Strip.

"Over 300 poor Palestinians have already been slaughtered, and the big bad boys at the IDF are talking about putting Gaza back 40 years," a British guy informed me.

"Oh," I said, picking at a jagged fingernail and closing my book.

He stood there, waiting for me to say that Israel has indeed been bad - a powerful parent beating its defenseless child again. The world seemed to think that Israel should be reprimanded by the courts, and I knew the point wasn't worth arguing with someone who doesn't understand the psychological distance between Gaza and Tel Aviv or what it's like to live with terrorism and constant rocket fire.

I was tempted to ask a question: What would Gordon Brown do if an imaginary third-world France suddenly started sending 80 rockets a day its way, hitting major cities and targeting innocent civilians? Would England not respond because poor France doesn't have very good aim and it's not really killing that many people? I couldn't imagine Margaret Thatcher or Winston Churchill adhering to that line of thinking.

But instead of arguing, I sighed and held up my hands. I was still on vacation. I watched the waves crashing onto the sand, trying to concentrate on sea foam rather than the young IDF combat soldiers I'd interviewed in early December.

"You go on vacation and all hell breaks loose," my father wrote in an e-mail. But it's not me. It's the reality of life here. It's just that kind of place.

In the 40-minute cab ride home in thick Sunday morning traffic on Jan. 4, I heard enough of the mounting tragedies on both sides to feel sick. "I just hope the operation ends soon and successfully so I can get home to my wife and children," said one reserve soldier interviewed on the radio. The Israeli reporter discussed the grave danger and imminent challenges posed by a ground assault. Just four days into the new year, people were already past theorizing about whether it was right or wrong. Most Israelis agreed that this war was unfortunate but necessary.

And how can you concentrate on the architectural accomplishments or the cultural landscape of the eclectic city of Tel Aviv when thousands of soldiers a few kilometers away are pushing their way into the Gaza Strip, risking their lives for this country's existence?

Instead, I went to buy some milk and eggs and get some air.

"Where have you been?" asked Gilah the cashier as I walked in to the corner store.

"I was abroad. Terrible about the war," I said, depressed.

She looked at me for a minute and then replied, "It's not in Tel Aviv sweetie," as if because I'm American I don't understand the difference between the Gaza Strip and my city.

"I know, but it's Israeli soldiers and it's other cities and it's mothers and children on both sides," I replied.

"All we can do is pray," she said. "We're all praying."

Meredith Price Levitt grew up in Marietta and bought a ticket to Tel Aviv on Sept. 10, 2001. She writes a column on Israeli innovations and cultural features for The Jerusalem Post. You can reach her at meredithprice@yahoo.com.

Please Come To Israel

| Benji Lovitt

| Special to the Jewish Times

Do you remember me? I lived in your fine city just a few years ago. When I arrived, you were still "HOTlanta" and anybody who was anybody hung out at Rose 'n Crown Friday night. Times have changed, huh? I recently moved to Jerusalem after living in Tel Aviv for two years. Sometimes I run into some nice Atlantans who come here for a visit. In fact, just last month, I unexpectedly and literally walked right into a group of Atlanta men in Jerusalem studying Torah for a week.

So why am I nervous? If you think it's because of the images you're seeing on the television, think again. I'm nervous because I know what happens when things heat up in this part of the world. CNN goes nuts, ratings go through the roof and Jews stop visiting Israel.

To many of you who have been here before, what I'm about to write will sound familiar. To those of you who have not, you will probably not believe what you're about to read. (drum roll...) Ready? Being in Israel is as safe as being in America. Seriously. No, seriously. If you need a few minutes to think it over, I'll understand. (pause) Back? OK, let's talk about it.

Life in Israel is not what you see on the news. Since the war broke out in Gaza a few weeks ago, the cameras could have filmed me and numerous other Israelis hitting the late-night bars or eating a delicious Israeli salad at an outdoor café, but it probably wouldn't have glued viewers to their seats. People say that Israelis are a resilient people who quickly move on after adversity, but that's not the whole story. For most people around the country, during conflicts like this, when we're talking about day-to-day life, there IS no adversity. While we take very seriously what goes on in Gaza, it's going on IN GAZA. Our hearts ache for residents of the affected nearby areas and we worry about the reservists and soldiers serving there right now, but for those of us who live elsewhere, it's business as usual. We go to school, work, the movies, the mall.

When deciding whether or not to visit Israel, people ask themselves the question: "So just how likely is the risk of encountering danger?" Well, we all know its history - Israel must be a dangerous war zone, right? So just how great is the risk? Maybe not as great as you think. According to social psychologists, the availability heuristic is a phenomenon in which people base their prediction of the frequency of an event or the proportion within a population based on how easily an example can be brought to mind. We all remember the grisly bus bombings of the mid-90s and early 2000s, right? You'd be a fool to ride a bus in Israel, right? The last bus bombing occurred in mid-2004. The next time you're driving on Atlanta's downtown connector at 70 mph chatting on your cell phone with your favorite radio show on, you might want to consider how much danger you're in. Certainly a lot more than you think. But nobody tunes into the news to watch car crashes and it's too easy to not change bad habits because "bad things only happen to other people." Thank goodness for the Israeli bus system; how else would I get to work?

If an alien were to come to Planet Earth and watch the U.S. news for a day with the daily acts of random violence in the mall, schools or on Black Friday, I suspect he might think twice about stepping foot in America. Meanwhile, Israel is blessed to have an incredibly low rate of street crime, with women and children able to walk home late at night in most neighborhoods.

Some of you aren't convinced. "It can't be. . . . I just can't believe Israel isn't dangerous." Anyone who's followed the news over the last five to 10 years has learned, sadly, that it's a dangerous world out there. London, New York, Mumbai, Columbine . . . tragedy can strike anywhere. But even if you remain convinced that there IS a greater risk of danger in Israel, you should still come visit. I'll tell you why: When we make decisions in life, we do so by weighing risk vs. reward. There's a lot of reward to drive a car on the connector to work so we put up with the risk (or minimize it in our heads). Who has the time to take public transportation? Could I convince anyone to visit South Central Los Angeles and hang out with the Crips and the Bloods? Unless you're seeing some hidden reward, probably not.

So what's the reward of visiting Israel? Where to begin? If your Jewish identity means anything at all, I suspect you might find a visit to Israel anywhere between quite interesting and life-changing. Don't take it from me; take it from the millions of Jews who have made a visit to the Jewish state in their lifetime and have returned home having experienced a feeling and connection to their Judaism like never before. Ever felt a connection to God when celebrating Shabbat at the Kotel (Western Wall)? Felt Jewish peoplehood by volunteering at an absorption center with Russian or Ethiopian immigrants? Been able to keep kosher at a certified kosher McDonalds? Gotten off the treadmill at the neighborhood gym to light Chanukah candles along with everyone else around you? These are special moments in life, which warm our hearts and connect us to our Judaism in a way that cannot be recreated anywhere else in the world. And if you haven't been to Israel, trust those who have. It's that special.

But there's even more to it - there's a risk to not visiting Israel. Rabbis and Jewish leaders stress one thing more than any other for the continuation of the Jewish people: Education. While the importance of Jewish education at home cannot be overstated, a visit to Israel provides a seminal moment in the development of a Jewish soul. Parents, when your children go off to college and begin to make adult choices as to what kind of Jewish life they plan to lead, it doesn't happen in a vacuum. They draw from past experiences, memories and lessons. Some of their most powerful ones will take place in Israel. A visit to Israel on a group program as a teen or young adult can be one of the most rewarding and life-changing experiences in one's life.

Years ago, after an hour-long dispute with a friend who had never been to Israel, I finally realized that no statistics or reasoning could convince him to

visit. The images we get from the media are simply too strong for many to overcome. Most first-time or even repeat visitors return home thinking, "Wow, this hardly resembles what I imagined. I just can't believe how safe I felt." I implore anyone who has ever echoed this sentiment to voice it to anyone around you, Jewish or not, who is considering or questioning a possible trip to Israel. It helps the economy, it makes a statement to our fellow Jews in Israel and to the world around us, and it strengthens our connections to our Jewish identities in a way that simply cannot be achieved in our home countries.

And if that's not worth taking a stand for, what is?

Thanks for reading and say hello to the Waffle House for me.

Benji Lovitt is a stand-up comic and writer. While his apartment is in Jerusalem, part of his heart remains in Atlanta. You can read about his hilarious immigrant perspective of Israel at www.whatwarzone.com and see his stand-up comedy at www.benjilovitt.com.

Tell us what you think

Please feel free to submit your comments.

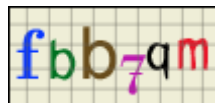
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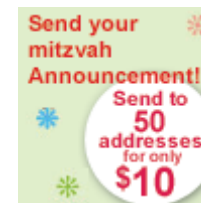
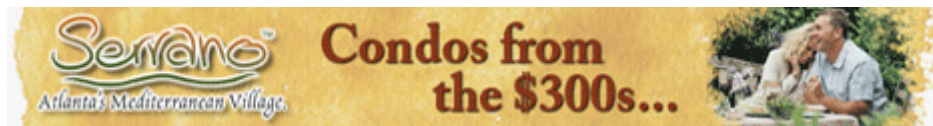
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