

[Arts & Culture](#)

The Forward

Writing New Texts in an Ancient Land

ESSAY

By JON PAPERICK

December 9, 2005

A number of years ago, when I was still an aimless, lovesick student, I traveled to Israel for the first time — not so much to fulfill a great Zionist dream that had suddenly surfaced from the depths of my subconscious, but to escape the drab reality of my bar-hopping downtown existence, to escape a reckless woman who thought she'd stepped out of a Milan Kundera novel, to experience something with meaning that didn't involve heartbreak.

And as I traveled the country, I found meaning in everything — burdened as it was by history, religious belief and political nuance — from the size, knit and color of a man's *kippah* to the way one pronounced her Hebrew, a linguistic clue that suggested a specific route of exile stretching back hundreds of years. I spent the better part of a year first scrubbing and repainting decommissioned bombs on an army base near Rishon Letzion, then traveling to Mount Scopus and the Hebrew University to learn the first scraps of my ancestral language since cramming for my bar mitzvah in Rabbi Kirshenblatt's malodorous basement 10 years earlier. I milked cows on a kibbutz near the Green Line, where the calls of muezzins filled the morning air as I worked, and finally as the winter rains began to fall, found myself studying at a fire and brimstone yeshiva that overlooked the Western Wall.

My father had heard stories, and he was afraid I would be brainwashed, that I would disown my family and marry a widow with 12 kids and study Torah till my eyes went dim. Fat chance. The head of the yeshiva lectured the class in his Brooklyn accent from in front of a large window so that the bright Jerusalem light flowed in behind him, piercing our eyes; I challenged him on everything, not simply because I was an impudent 22-year-old but also because his logic was flawed. It was after he lectured on the existence of the soul and I questioned his use of faith as his entire body of evidence that I was summoned to his office, where he presented me with an airplane schedule.

"Give me one year," he said, removing his big black hat and mopping his brow.

"I can't," I said lamely. "I'm a writer." My English was already being pecked away by a sort of pigeon Hebrish, and it frightened me. "I need to be around other writers. Who write in English," I concluded.

"We have one here at the yeshiva. He studied with Malamud," he said, smiling. "So, you're staying?"

I didn't.

Had there been a creative writing program in Israel at the time, I might have stayed. As it was, I returned to Jerusalem in late 1995 as a journalist covering the aftermath of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. That intense cauldron of Jerusalem's manifold contradictions and manias served as the setting of my first book, "The Ascent of Eli Israel" (Arcade Publishing, 2002), a collection of political nightmares and religious comedies set against the backdrop of a collapsing peace.

This year I returned, for the first time, to the well of my creativity, this time to teach a six-week session, a sort of twice-a-week boot camp, in the master's degree program in creative writing at Bar-Ilan University. It is the only program of its kind in the world in which creative writers write in English in a Jewish context — something I felt lacking when I was a student in graduate school. Back then, classmates regularly questioned whether I would ever write anything that didn't involve Israel, as if they felt threatened by the mere presence of something foreign to their experience.

(The program is far from parochial, though: Of the 12 students in my class, two were the children of published fiction writers; one was the granddaughter of the former chief rabbi of Israel; another served in the Israeli army, missing a class when a Hamas operative was captured; at least one was in the process of making aliya from America, while another converted to Judaism two days before class began — thankfully he did not invite me to his bris — and yet another, a non-Jew, found herself on the road to Divinity school. Nearly half the students identified themselves as religious, while the other half of them were clearly secular. But unlike much of the public discourse in Israel, which is so sharply divided along ideological lines, class discussion was appropriately focused on matters of craft, on making the story better.)

I spent so long crafting my stories in the Jerusalem of my mind that I became afraid the reality of the city would not correspond with that of my imagination, that I would meet my faith-blinded characters wandering along Jaffa Street or through the Old City and would not recognize them. I chose to live in Tel Aviv, far removed from the religious tautologies of Jerusalem, the haunted stones that each told their own story; everything pregnant with meaning, everything political. And, of course, Tel Aviv has the beach. Imagine what the world be like if Jerusalem bordered on the Mediterranean rather than finding itself washed up on the windswept shores of eternity.

I realized that Tel Aviv, too, can be read as a map of the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people, whether I wandered down Trumpeldor Street and along Herbert Samuel Street to my particular spot on the beach, or heard the Arabic inflected cries of the *alte zachen* man wafting up to my window as he trotted past. In fact, my bedroom window looked out over the old Trumpeldor Cemetery, and I imagined nocturnal visits by its august denizens — Ahad Ha'am, Bialik, Tchernikovsky — who whispered in my ear. But in a sense, I had already written another version of that story.

It was a cool October night when I went up to Jerusalem to read "An Unwelcome Guest," the signature story of my collection, which I had read dozens of times in bookstores and synagogues around the Northeast. I had never read it before in Israel, and I felt a charge

of energy now that the safety net of distance was removed. The story is set in Jerusalem in the month of Tishri on a cool night — a night not unlike the evening that I gave my reading.

In the story, a young man living in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City with his young wife wakes up in the middle of the night to be confronted by a ghostly Arab family that claims ownership over the house in which he lives. The story does not have a happy ending, and as I stood in front of the holy ark of that synagogue/cultural center and cried out the words "*Allahu Akbar*," it dawned on me that for some members of the audience, the story, infused with their own meaning and fears, cut too close to the bone, and my story would not, could not, be judged on matters of craft and storytelling, but rather on absolute fidelity to history, religious belief and political nuance.

*Jon Papernick is the author of "The Ascent of Eli Israel." He has taught writing at Brandeis University and Boston University and was most recently the visiting writer-in-residence in the Bar-Ilan creative writing program in Israel.*