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## Fantatising Israel

### Yonatan Mendel

At this very moment, long queues are probably forming outside Tel Aviv's latest culinary thing: the yoghurterias. Even in the middle of the night you have to wait in line to get a cold and refreshing ice-cream yoghurt from the busy shop on Rothschild Boulevard. Springing up like mushrooms after the rain, the ice-cream parlours have allowed the 'white city' of Tel Aviv to experience the white revolution of the yoghurt. It is sweet and sour, made of natural ingredients, both healthy and tasty, with only 1.6 per cent fat, and topped with pieces of fresh fruit freshly cut up. Mangoes and pineapples, kiwis, strawberries, pomegranates, dates, melons and watermelons, red, yellow and green, are generously placed on top of the thick white yoghurt. A small cup of the local delicacy costs 18 shekels (about £3), a medium-size cup is 21 shekels, and a huge cup is 27 shekels. This is the best gastronomic response to the humidity that prevails in Israel's 'first Hebrew city'.

The State of Tel Aviv, as other Israelis call it, is a lively, eventful and happy city. It is the centre of Israeli business activity, a relatively liberal, young, educated, secular and rich metropolis, with a long Mediterranean beach to escape to in the summer. It has a wide and diverse range of restaurants, cafés and pubs, more and more of them as demand grows. The city serves everything, from lobsters to falafel, from Weihenstephan to the local brew, Goldstar. According to the *Economist*, Tel Aviv is ranked 32nd in the list of the world's most costly cities; it is the most expensive city in the Middle East. It is the home of Israeli opera, the philharmonic orchestra, the national theatre, and Israel's largest university. Every year it hosts the biggest gay

pride parade in the Middle East, as well as some of the world's most prominent musicians and artists. Depeche Mode just came back from Tel Aviv; Madonna is on her way. However, it seems that it is exactly these positive, 'normal' and likeable characteristics of Tel Aviv that make it a paradigm of the moral and political blindness of Israeli society. Tel Aviv is not only one hour away from a European time zone, it is also one hour's drive from the Gaza Strip.

This year the city is celebrating its 100th anniversary. However, it didn't just 'emerge from the sand' in 1909, as the Zionist myth tells us. Al-Sumayil, Salame, Sheikh Munis, Abu Kabir, Al-Manshiyeh: these are the names of some of the villages that made room for it and the names are still used today – Tel Avivians still talk about the Abu Kabir neighbourhood, they still meet on Salame Street. Tel Aviv University Faculty Club used to be the house of the sheikh of Sheikh Munis. It's an amazing feat, a tribute to the Israeli imagination, to be able to pronounce the Arab names without making the connection to the original Arab population, to think of Tel Aviv as the 'first Hebrew city', and refuse to acknowledge its indigenous non-Hebrew inhabitants. This is a city where people speak French and English, but where hardly anyone speaks Arabic, one of the two official languages of Israel. There is no 'liberal' rhetoric when Tel Avivians need to rent their house to an Arab student or become the neighbours of an Arab family. Tel Aviv, the most 'liberal' and 'tolerant' city in Israel, as its residents like to imagine it, is not only 100 years old, but almost 100 per cent Arab-free.

Then there is Jaffa. Located just a few miles south of Tel Aviv, it was probably the most prosperous and cosmopolitan of all Palestinian cities, with a port, an industry (Jaffa oranges), an international school system and a lively cultural life. In 1949, after Jaffa had been almost completely emptied of its Palestinian inhabitants (only 3600 were left out of a population of 70,000), the Israeli government decided to unite the two cities in one metropolis, to be called 'Tel Aviv-Jaffa'. In doing this, Ben-Gurion not only created a new Tel Aviv that was 'part of biblical Jaffa, he erased the Palestinian city. As the years passed, it became known that the city of Tel Aviv, which is called 'Tel Aviv-Jaffa' only in official publications, had a beautiful and romantic southern 'district' called Jaffa. Tourist signs on the streets describe its history – in Hebrew, English, French, German and Spanish, but not in Arabic.

I was brought up in a small Jerusalemite quarter called Givat Oranim, which borders the neighbourhood of Old Katamon. In school we weren't told about the history of Katamon, but we were taken a few times to St Simon's Park. Beyond the park's cypress and pine trees there was a small memorial to the Israeli soldiers who died in the 1948 Katamon battle: a battle, we dimly learned, between Haganah fighters and

Arab rioters. On the way back we used to see the old Arab houses, now repopulated by Jewish families, but this didn't trouble us, since the whole neighbourhood was Jewish and, as far as we were concerned, Arabs, let alone Palestinians, had nothing to do with the place.

Besides the licence to fantasise that we received from our teachers – to speak about the Katamon Arab rioters and never the Katamon Arab people – I now believe that the whole landscape of the neighbourhood was recruited to encourage our imagination. The street names, for example, all have to do with the 1948 war. The Street of the Convoys, the Water Distributors, the Women's Corps, the Guard Corps, the Conquerors of Katamon: these were the meeting points of my childhood. The place had no past prior to 1948, and the people who had lived there had no names. Nobody thought to tell the new kids on the block the story of the people of Katamon, and none of them had any reason to ask.

It was 20 years before I finally toured Katamon, with two foreign friends, using a very old guidebook. Since there is no indication of what used to be there we consulted the pictures in our guidebook as we walked around the old Arab houses. It didn't take long to find the former Iraqi Embassy, the Greek Consulate, the Czechoslovakian Embassy, the Lebanese Embassy and the Syrian Consulate, all of them now regular residential houses, showing no trace of their past. I also found the house of Khalil al-Sakakini, perhaps the most important Palestinian intellectual of his time, about whom I learned nothing in school. A sign next to the door reveals that it is now a day-care centre run by the Women's International Zionist Organisation (Canada).

Katamon, I discovered, was once a wealthy, mostly Christian Palestinian neighbourhood with two hotels in its centre: the Semiramis and the Park Lane. I had never heard of them, or heard that in January 1948 Haganah gunmen planted a bomb at the Semiramis, killing 26 people, including the Spanish vice-consul. This was one of the main factors which caused the flight of the Palestinian residents. Today, in the place where the Semiramis used to be, there's a new house. It is a normal house. Absence can help Jerusalemites fantasise, sometimes even more than presence.

An average Jewish Israeli can live an entire life without personally knowing, let alone befriending, a single Palestinian citizen of the same country. In kindergarten, primary school, middle school and high school, the two education systems are entirely separate: Jewish Israelis study with Jewish Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel study with Palestinian citizens of Israel. As teenagers we learned about the great projects of *Aliya* (Jewish immigration to Israel) and *Kibbutz Galuyot* (the

‘ingathering of the Diasporas’). We learned about the establishment of the state, and I particularly liked the lesson dedicated to Israel as a ‘society of immigrants’. The Palestinians, I never realised then, had not immigrated to Israel from anywhere. But this didn’t stop us from dreaming. For some Israeli sociologists, the army is the country’s ‘melting pot’, but Palestinian citizens by and large are not inside the pot. They don’t want to fight their Palestinian brothers and sisters, and Israel doesn’t trust most of them to do so. So the ‘melting pot’ is made up of Jews only. One can argue that this encourages us to dream about a Jewish land for a Jewish people. It also helps us to forget that the Palestinians are part of Israeli society and citizens of the same state.

Tel Aviv University showed the power of its imagination when, in May 2008, the student council decided to hold the fun and enjoyable annual Day of the Student on the exact day that Palestinians commemorate the Naqba. The excuse given by the student council was that ‘we were not told of the problematic timing of the celebrations.’ This is arguably even more dangerous than saying that it was done on purpose: it makes it plain that for the Jews in the country, even the educated and ‘liberal’ citizens of Tel Aviv, the Palestinian people are invisible. The bill that would make it illegal for Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel to commemorate the Naqba was initially approved by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation in May this year. I don’t know if the bill will become law, but the Naqba undoubtedly took place; it is not a day of celebration for many people. A recognition of the Naqba, taking responsibility for the fate of the 700,000 Palestinians who escaped or were expelled in 1947-48, a willingness to try and compensate these refugees, now numbering several million: these gestures, even if symbolic, even if too late, would mean the beginning of the end of Israeli denial. But soon, the bill suggests, anyone who dares to express their feelings on this day will be imprisoned, in the ‘only democracy in the Middle East’.

The claim to be the ‘only democracy’, as well as to have ‘the most moral army in the world’: these phrases are great examples of the Israeli fantasising project. Another term that belongs in the twilight-zone, and helps Jewish society to maintain a liberal veneer over a very un-liberal attitude, is ‘coexistence’ (*Du-Kiyum*). It is applied to those cultural or sporting occasions when Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel actually meet. In other words, it is used when two very different forms of existence come together. Strikingly, when a school contains the children of Jewish Israelis and new Jewish immigrants from countries as diverse as Russia and Argentina, the term ‘coexistence’ is never used. The common existence of a Tel Avivian Jew and an Argentinian Jew is apparently obvious. However, when the Tel Avivian student meets a Palestinian colleague from across-the-street Jaffa, it comes under the

heading of coexistence. This ‘liberal’ terminology acts like a sleeping pill for a society that wishes to dream about being liberal and democratic. Maybe it is time for someone to wake it up.

Good morning Israel! It is very late, and you have overslept. One can’t call a country peaceful when it has an extreme right-wing government and Ariel Sharon’s party in opposition. One can’t – not logically – describe any criticism of Zionism as anti-semitism and at the same time concede that 75 per cent of Israeli Jews wouldn’t want to live in the same building as an Arab. One can’t teach high-school students about the dangers of racism and discrimination, and the next day lecture them about the Israeli government project to Judaize the Galilee. One can’t describe ending the military occupation and handing the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to its rightful legal inhabitants as a ‘painful Israeli compromise’.

‘A villa in the jungle’ is how Ehud Barak described Israel’s position in the Middle East. It’s a fantasy that the whole of Israel takes part in. In the heart of Tel Aviv one can find the Ha-Kiryat complex, the headquarters of the Israel Defence Forces. The fact that Tel Avivians can calmly walk past this building without making a connection between their army and the occupied Palestinian territories, between their independence and the continued Palestinian suffering, is alarming. Israeli decadence isn’t measured in crime rates or corruption, but in their opposite: in having a prospering society and democratic elections while directly abrogating the Palestinians’ most basic human, national and political rights.

The way of fantasising another Israel – peaceful and moral, Jewish and democratic, not perfect but not harmful – has brought into being a virtual reality in which historical and contemporary events are blurred by wishful, deceitful and blinkered thinking. In order to recruit Israeli Jewish society to this mission, no induction orders were needed. Everything has come together – Israel’s political and religious institutions, its media, its ‘friends’ around the world, its borders, its terminology, its collective memory, its imagination and also its ice-cream parlours – to enable Israel to reach the stage where it has completely lost any connection with reality.

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