mikael levin / gabriel levin pleasant if somewhat rude views

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Pleasant If Somewhat Rude Views

Pleasant If Somewhat Rude Views

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Texts by Gabriel Levin

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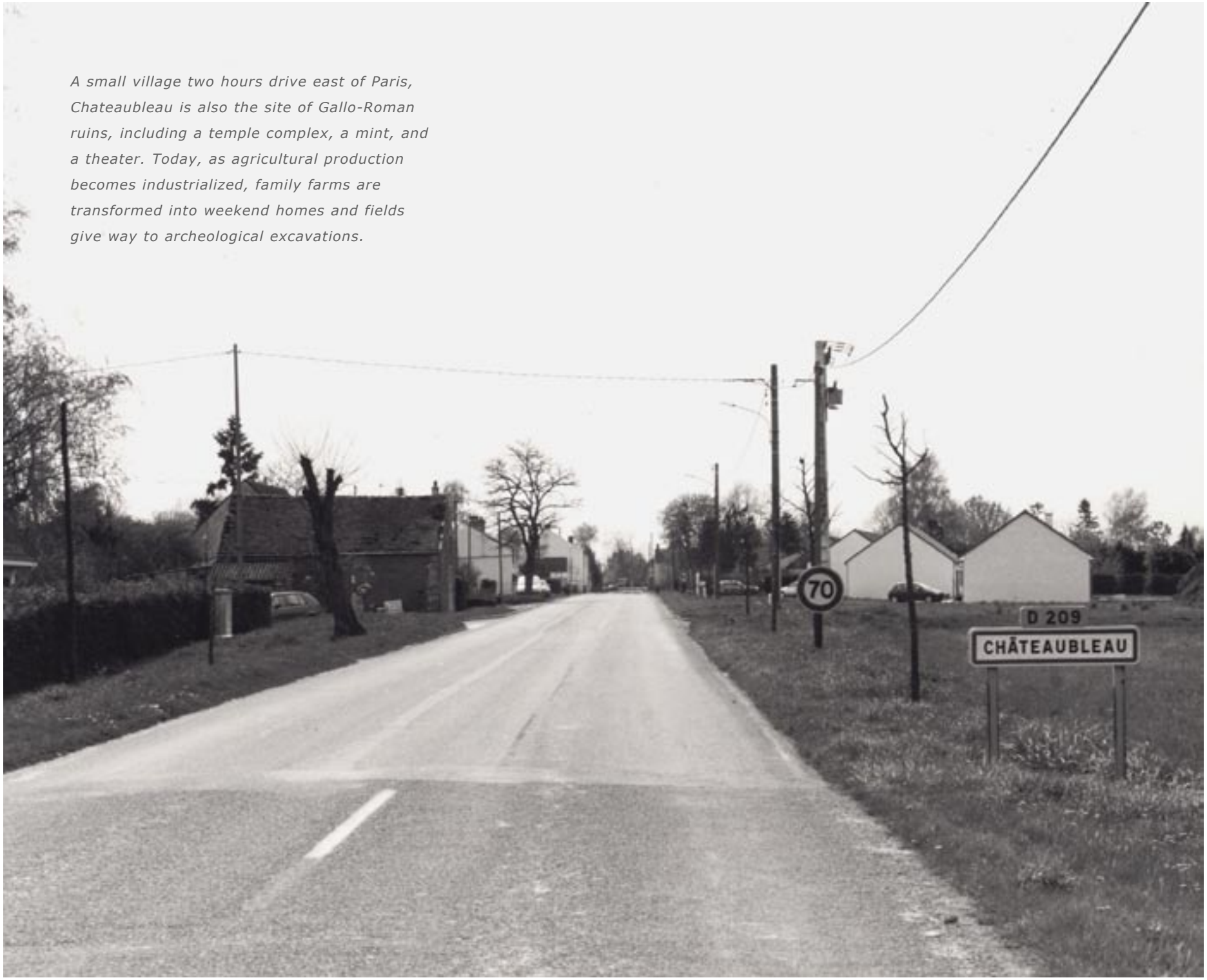
ATTIR

Several of Suleiman's fat-tailed sheep are not doing all that well. One has a blotched fleece, another's eye is covered with a blue film, and a third has curled up in a corner dejectedly. Suleiman bin Musa leans against their pen in faded gray sweatpants and a light windbreaker. The dawn air is refreshingly crisp, and to the east foreboding layers of cloud mantle the bare hills. I ask whether it could possibly rain this early in the year. Suleiman smiles and says that in an hour or two I'll be feeling the heat. In the early morning light his stone house stands out clearly with its outlying shacks of sheet metal. In one

of them lives his eighty-year-old mother, while another is home to a daughter who has temporarily moved back to Attir with two small children after quarreling with her husband. He lives in Hura, the official, state-sponsored Bedouin township some eight kilometers to the west and one of seven such townships in the northern Negev. Suleiman's wife brings us coffee and poppy-seed cakes on a small silver tray. We greet each other politely. Bareheaded and wearing an ankle-length black dress embroidered with red, she vanishes down the slope and soon returns with two plastic stools. I feel the slightest of chinks has opened in the veiled diffidence common to Bedouin women as she allows herself to engage in playful banter with her husband in my presence. Might I be the subject of their talk? You mean to take *him* out with you to graze the sheep? My Arabic, however, is too poor to piece together their animated exchange and for a moment I feel all too keenly the presumption of my weekly forays out of Jerusalem: what was I doing driving south into the dusty margins of the desert when my ignorance of Bedouin life was so broadly manifest? Admittedly Suleiman's eyes had lit up when I'd confessed my admiration for the pre-Islamic poets of Arabia. But was there any relation to speak of between my own nostalgia for a long vanished nomadic culture and the current plight of the Negev Bedouin?

I had discovered on a previous visit that my rudimentary knowledge of the language was useful solely as an ice-breaker: make a fool of yourself and people immediately feel at ease. Suleiman had to drive off to Hura and so instructed his son, Turc, to shepherd me across the dry gully that cuts through the village, to the hill where his father lives. We found Musa bin Husain

A small village two hours drive east of Paris, Chateaubleau is also the site of Gallo-Roman ruins, including a temple complex, a mint, and a theater. Today, as agricultural production becomes industrialized, family farms are transformed into weekend homes and fields give way to archeological excavations.

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twisting rusty wires through a hole in one of the corrugated sheets serving as sides of a small pen behind his home. Lean, stooped and clad in a tattered *jallabiyya,* Musa, at eighty-five, is the village sheikh, while Suleiman and a second brother, Salim, are his deputies, or, as Suleiman put it, "his wings." We pulled up some chairs under the shade of a scraggly tree and before I knew it four of his sons and a half- dozen children had joined us in a circle. I had tried to get Musa to talk about the past—the Mandate days—when the Al-Ke'an tribe camped further west and grazed their livestock on broad fields that since the mid-fifties have been farmed by kibbutz Beit Qama. Musa, however, kept returning proudly to the fact that he had sired over thirty children. He extended his arm first to the right and then to the left, indicating the homes of his three wives. *Ya'attik il-afiya*, I blurted out – may He give you strength. Musa stared at me. "What did he say?" he asked his sons. *Ya'attik il-afiya, Ya'attik il-afiya,* they answered rolling with laughter. Out of the corner of my eye I couldn't help noticing that the wives of two sons, who'd been pouring us sweet tea in small glasses at regular intervals, were equally amused. One of Musa's sons, named Hasan, a school-teacher in Hura, must have felt that it was now his turn to rile his father: "Why is your jallabiyya all ripped and torn?" "What are you talking about," Musa replied, pointing at me, "look at his shirt; I bet it isn't worth more than a shekel."

Suleiman has called to his wife who hurries out of the house with a carton of medicine

bottles and hypodermic needles. The medicine – penicillin, supplementary vitamins, eye lotion – was bought from the vet in Beersheba where Suleiman must renew his shepherd's license on a regular basis. After injecting two of the sheep and cleaning the third's eye we're ready to go. Suleiman opens the gate and his flock trots out in a wedge. He asks me to run ahead up the dirt path towards the road that leads to Hura and to make flapping sounds with my tongue, *grrrr, grrrr, grrrr,* while he takes the rear, picking up a stiff rubber pipe that will serve him as a goad.

There is a pleasant, if somewhat rude, view of the village from the road. Most of the homes scattered on the flanks of the wadi are made of tin or sheet metal hammered to wood frames, but here and there are squat cinderblock homes and even a few homes faced with limestone brought from the quarries near Hebron. Large, rusting, cylindrical water tanks are permanently parked on the barren hillside. And at one entrance to the village stands the hospitality tent, or *shigg*. Its black canvas roof stretched over a rectangular ribbing gives the impression of an old river barge run aground.

The sloping turnoff to Attir, however, is unmarked. Nor does it appear on any Israeli road map, for Attir is officially designated as one of forty-five "unrecognized" Bedouin villages in the Negev. Ranging from some 300 to 4,000 inhabitants, such villages make up half the Bedouin population of the Negev—today numbering 150,000—who over the last thirty years have refused to move from their land. The pressure has come from the Israeli government which in 1969 initiated the planning and development of Bedouin townships in the northern Negev. This scrubland, the *sayig,* covers a thousand square

kilometers where in the early fifties the military had concentrated the dwindled population of the Negev Bedouin. Close to 100,000 Bedouin, making up ninety percent of the populace, were expelled or fled to Sinai and Jordan during or in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

First the exodus, and then the displacement and restriction of movement of the remaining tribes came as the coup de grâce in a process that began well over a century ago during the Ottoman period—referred to by the Bedouin as the "government of the bayonet" (*hukm bi-sanja*)—when large tracts of land in the Negev was declared state-owned. Inter-tribal warfare began as early as 1799 when the Tiyaha and Tarabin tribal confederations lit out of Sinai and jostled for territorial supremacy, particularly in the fertile north-west regions of the Negev, previously dominated by the Wuhaydat. The Bedouin closed ranks briefly to join the country-wide rebellion against the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha who wrested Palestine from the Turks in 1831. The rebellion was quelled, however, and the Pasha wrecked his rod on the Bedouin by having many of them deported or conscripted into his army. In 1840 the Turks restored Ottoman rule and rival Bedouin factions resumed the periodic raiding of each other's camps, culminating in the twenty-year long War of Zari and, close on its heels, the Azazme-Tarabin War (1887-1890). The latter was brought to an end only after the Ottoman governor of Jerusalem, Rashid Pasha, dispatched an army to the Negev and "carried off," as the British archeologist W.M. Flinders-Petrie—excavating at the time near Gaza—would write, "Thirteen sheikhs in irons to Jerusalem." The British Mandate period witnessed further upheavals, including the taxation of crops and

the continuing penetration from the north of *fellaheen*, Arab peasants seeking work in the south. In addition, the Jewish Agency began purchasing land in the 1930s from Bedouin chiefs and would soon establish, in defiance of British rule, a handful of Jewish communal agricultural settlements, or kibbutzim, in the region.

To the nine tribes that already lived in the *sayig* in the fifties were added a further eleven tribes whose grazing grounds outside the enclosure were subsequently expropriated by the Israel Land Administration (ILA). Ostensibly the purpose was to provide centralized services such as health care, education, housing, and in such a way to narrow the economic and cultural gap between the semi-nomadic Bedouin and the rest of the population. Moshe Dayan spoke of the day when "Bedouin children will be accustomed to a father who wears trousers, does not carry a *shabaria* [traditional Bedouin knife] and does not search for vermin in public. The children will go to school with their hair properly combed. This will be a revolution, but it can be done in the space of two generations. Without coercion but with governmental direction … this phenomenon of the Bedouin will disappear."

That was in 1963, a time when the entire Arab community in Israel still lived under marshal law. Two generations have passed, and as I clamber down the other side of the road into a deep pocket of waste ground along with Suleiman and his 250 head of sheep, I breathe a sigh of relief that the Bedouin have not vanished, in spite of considerable government coercion, though the changes have been profound and frequently traumatic, and Suleiman's gem-studded *shabaria* is no longer fastened to his waist but hangs on the wall of his living-room-cum-*shigg*. His sheep are

moving at a slow pace, heads lowered, nuzzling around dry thistles and munching at thin yellow stalks. Suleiman is beaming: this, I am told, is a particularly nutritious patch of land, although all I see are parched weeds. Whenever he watches his sheep grazing bountifully, he confides, he feels he's on his knees eating alongside them. I'm reminded of Nebuchadnezzar, who "did eat grass as oxen." We're moving deeper into the wadi and the skies have cleared to a milky blue, not unlike the filmy eye of Suleiman's ailing sheep trailing behind the rest of the flock. To the north-east are the rugged West Bank highlands. Closer lies Yattir Forest, planted by the Jewish National Fund as part of its effort to "redeem the land of the Negev," while the round, blurred contours of bare hills to the south hint at the vastness of the desert stretching towards the Gulf of Aqaba. Although sparsely populated, the Negev desert, shaped like a massive pressure-flaked arrow-head, covers over half the area of modern-day Israel.

Suleiman recounts how his tribe moved to Attir in the mid-fifties. Unlike other tribes living outside of the *sayig* who were ordered by the military administration to relocate, the Al-Ke'an tribe turned to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as a result of a long-standing inter-tribal dispute over grazing rights and asked to be moved. "We were a small tribe," Suleiman explains, "who'd migrated from Arabia some three hundred years ago and had lived for many years, under the protection, *fi batan*, 'in the stomach,' as we say in Arabic, of the Al-Huzayil. By the 1940s our tribe had grown and my father asked the Al-Huzayil tribal council to be released from their protection. We no longer want to be *fi batan*, he said, leave us alone. But once we were on our own word spread that

we weren't true Bedouins, since we'd lived for years under the protection of the Al-Huzayil, and it was only in 1980—when one of our members went on a Hajj to Mecca and traced our ancestry there—that we were able to prove our lineage. In 1956 we asked to leave Beit Qama, where we'd dug a well, and the army set us marching eastward. I know it was 56 because that happens to be the year I was born. In fact I was born during the journey. We stopped in a field right after the Shoket junction and my mother gave birth. The Israeli commander came up to my father and asked, Why have you stopped, and he told him, My wife has just given birth to a son. That night my father slaughtered seven sheep for I was the first-born boy after six girls. When we got to the wadi where we now live the commander gave my father an old assault rifle and told him to keep an eye on the Jordanian border for infiltrators."

He recalls how once his father was shot in the leg while they were grazing sheep along the demarcation line. He thinks it was a Jordanian from the village of Samu'a who hoped to scare off the pair and steal their herd across the border. Theft and the smuggling of livestock were fairly common. This was a time when thousands of Palestinians, refugees from '48, recrossed the border illegally every year seeking lost property and relatives, or merely wishing to reap the harvest in their abandoned fields. But there were armed bands as well that slipped across the armistice line intent on raiding remote settlements, and the IDF, shooting first and asking questions later, showed little tolerance for any form of incursion. Suleiman was six and remembers getting his wounded father onto his donkey and riding back to their encampment where his cousins squeezed Musa into a beat-up Dodge, the only

car in the village, and drove off in a cloud of dust to the nearest hospital in Beersheba.

We reach a low stone outcropping. Suleiman unzips his windbreaker and spreads it on the ground for me to sit on. Several weeks ago the area was declared off limits by the IDF and Suleiman had to herd his sheep elsewhere as the wadi droned with tanks and half-tracks on maneuvers. But he is unfazed by the military. They come and go, and once they’re gone he's back grazing on his favorite terrain with the two tall trees planted by his uncles in '56 and its deep ravine incongruously lush in the otherwise parched landscape. But what does worry Suleiman endlessly are the ILA and the Ministry of the Interior. Representatives of the latter beefed up by police and the notorious Green Patrol—a paramilitary unit set up in 1976 by Ariel Sharon, then Minister of Agriculture, to patrol the Negev—descended on Attir last July and served the villagers four demolition orders, including for his own home. "The government put us here in '56 and now they're trying to force us to move to Hura so they can build a Jewish town on the ridge behind Attir." Coercion—or as Dayan put it, "direction"—on the part of the government has meant withholding from all the unauthorized villages such services as running water, electricity, sewage, roads and public transportation, and also the constant threat of house demolition (any structure with a cement floor and cinderblock or stone walls), a threat which has been stepped up since Sharon—nicknamed "the bulldozer" by Jews and Arabs alike —took office. Crops grown


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on land the state considers its own have been routinely plowed over, and in the last two years close to 20,000 dunams of "illegally grown" crops have been destroyed by aerial spraying. Sharon, who owns a large sheep-farm in the Negev, has criticized the Bedouin for "seizing new areas and eroding the state's last reserves of land." For years the official position has been that Jewish agricultural settlements and bedroom communities must go up in the northern Negev as a means of curbing the sprawl of Bedouin shanties, even though the Bedouin, making up twenty percent of the Negev population, live on only two percent of the land.

Yet the Israeli authorities seem less concerned about the social and economic needs of the Bedouin population than of the perceived demographic threat. With one of the highest birthrates in the world, it is only a matter of time before the spreading Bedouin population will serve as an uninterrupted "Arab presence" across the narrow waist of the Negev that separates the West Bank and Gaza. And although the Bedouins are Israeli citizens and many have served as trackers in the IDF, their loyalty to the state continues to be questioned.

Suleiman pulls a thermos out of his knapsack and pours Turkish coffee into two small glasses. So why not move to Hura? I ask him. It's only eight kilometers away; you could build yourself a two-storey stone house and even keep a sheep pen in the back yard and bales of hay, like the other residents of Hura. Suleiman twirls a short dried stalk of flax between his fingers.

He confesses to owning two lots in Hura, bought in 1989 when the township was founded. At the time three Abu Al-Ke'an clans agreed to move there. It was only his grandfather's clan who decided to stick it out in the hills and is now dispersed in loose clusters of tents and shacks along the twelve-kilometer stretch between the township and the lower slopes of the Hebron mountain range where the 1967 border once ran. But despite countless inquiries at the Beersheba office of the government-appointed Administration for the Advancement of the Bedouin in the Negev—the ILA affiliated agency in charge of Bedouin land claims, known as the *minhelet*—he has never been able to ascertain the whereabouts of his two dunams of land.

Located in cramped quarters above the yellow neon sign of the Golden Geese restaurant on the outskirts of the city, the *minhelet* is, as one official told me, the carrot to the rod wielded by the Ministry of the Interior: the latter is in charge of issuing demolition orders for illegal house construction, while the *minhelet*'s aim is to work out a compromise with each and every Bedouin family still living outside the townships. Ideally, each household would be compensated financially for land and property loss, and offered a plot of land in one of the official townships at a reasonable rate. The ILA, moreover, intends to develop new townships which, at least on paper, are planned as model communities. For the Bedouin, however, the task of demarcating land claims is fraught with internal tensions caused by disputes between families and clans over the parcellation of land, while the thought of living in a planned township has little appeal in light of the chronic dysfunction of the existing townships, populated largely by fellaheen Bedouin regarded

as inferior by those Bedouin claiming Arabian descent. Living in the same township, even if in different neighborhoods, has been a source of constant friction between the two groups and in spite of the *minhelet*'s avowal that the new townships will be planned according to individual tribal needs, most Bedouins remain deeply skeptical of the government's intentions.

"They probably sold my plots to someone else as well," Suleiman remarks. "Anyway, I'm not planning to move. The simplest solution is to recognize our village so that we can go on living here as we have for the last forty years. You know what my identity card has for my home address? The name of our tribe, Abu Al-Ke'an. I don't even have an address because the homes you see don't exist as far as the government is concerned. Three of my brothers teach in Hura, another brother has a furniture shop there, and a cousin of mine, a tile factory. But when they finish work they all return to Attir, even if it means, as it did till three years ago, coming back and sweltering under a tin roof."

I ask Suleiman why the village-clusters along the road from Hura are all tin structures while there appears to be a boom of modest-looking stone and cinderblock homes in his own wadi. Five years ago, he explains, in October, a storm raged through the village and destroyed most of the shacks. Zinc roofs and tattered sacking flew in every direction. But worst of all, three young girls, two of them nieces of his wife, were swept away by the torrent that streamed through the gulley. Their bodies were found the next day on the outskirts of Beersheba, where the riverbed empties onto the floodplain. A week later Sharon (who in his various ministerial guises keeps popping up like a jack-in-the-box in the checkered

history of Bedouin-Jewish relations), serving at the time as Minister of Infrastructure, arrived on a condolence visit and told the villagers that they should build permanent homes. "He gave us his word," Suleiman adds. "'Go ahead and build yourselves homes,' he said, 'you don't want something like this to happen again. I promise you it'll be okay.'" Suleiman and his relatives took Sharon at his word and have been building ever since: several yards away from Suleiman's own home are two box-shaped one-room homes nearing completion, one for his aging mother, the other for one of his sons. Across the wadi Yahya, his eldest son from his first wife, who works as a gardener in Tel Aviv and has four daughters, is building his own home on a rise hard by the low tin shack where he has lived with his family for the last eight years.

"But what if he breaks his word—surely you're aware of Sharon's reputation." "I know, but among the Bedouin a man's word is binding." I remind Suleiman of Sharon's much-publicized Five Year Plan for the Bedouin, that called for improving the deplorable conditions of the current townships, as well as the construction of seven new towns and the razing of what government officials call the remaining *pzoura*, or "dispersion," of shanty towns on state land, including Attir. He shrugs his shoulders, whether in resignation or defiance I can't tell. All he sees—he says—are people moving *out* of the townships, giving up their homes in order to move back into shanties on the periphery of the congested urban settlements, which are rife with poverty and crime. A Bedouin wants to see the horizon, and not the walls of his neighbor's house. (Or, as the school principal in the township of Tel Sheva put it to me, rapping his knuckles on his desk as he spoke,


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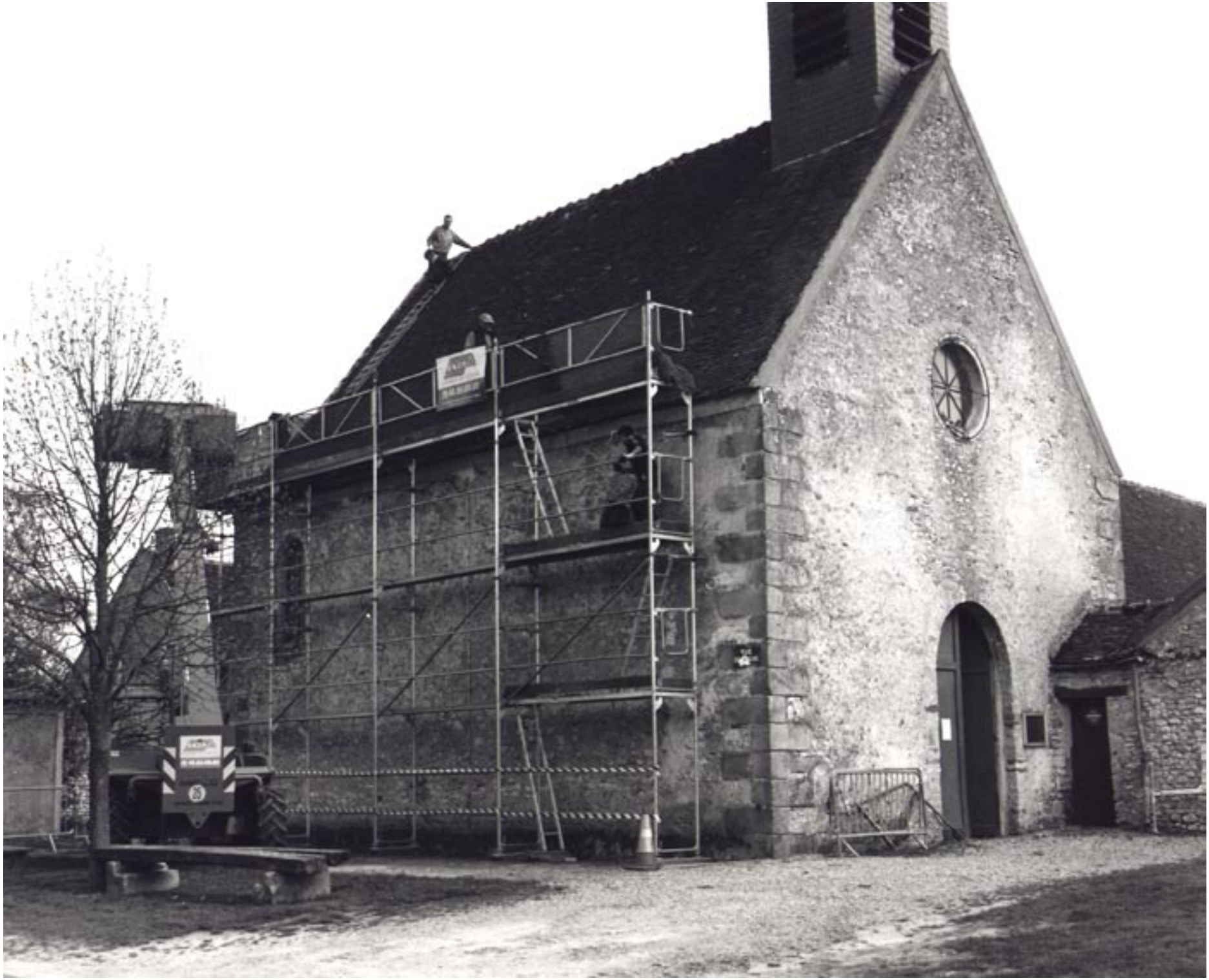

"A Bedouin desires three things: open space, a fast horse, and an obedient wife.") Suleiman recounts how he studied welding in a vocational school in the north of Israel since there were no high schools for the Negev Bedouin population in the 70s. It was there—in the Galilee—that he acquired his fluent, colloquial Hebrew. He has worked everywhere—Tel Aviv, the coastal plain, Beersheba—and earned decent wages, but this is what he likes best, to herd his sheep in the wadi fanning out on the other side of the pitted road that leads to and from Hura.

I'm startled by the muffled sing-song tones of a mobile phone coming from Suleiman's knapsack. After an animated exchange in Arabic peppered with Hebrew catchwords and phrases—a common phenomenon among many male Bedouins—Suleiman snaps the cell phone shut. He smiles, "If you're not connected to the world the world forgets you." We round up the flock, casting stones at a couple of sheep that have strayed in the wrong direction. It was one of his young cousins who had called. His wife had taken their daughter and returned to her family a couple of weeks ago. But now that she's ready to come back, her husband is making problems: he wants Suleiman to tell her not to bother. "If you have more than five daughters, like I have, then you're considered an Abu Banat, someone that the tribe can turn to in settling marital or family problems." "So what happens next?" "I try to talk sense into him." Suleiman relishes his role as a counselor, and not only to his own tribe. Twice a week he drives to Beersheba in his white Mazda and volunteers at the Welfare Department, counseling the Bedouins. He has also attended courses at the Adler Institute for Family Counseling and is hoping to set up a program in Hura on parenthood and child rearing.

Courtship, marriage, and the division of labor in the family follow strict patterns, all to the male's advantage; Suleiman admits as much and would like to see some changes but at the same time feels protective regarding the Bedouin woman's traditional role in the family, which, he adds, can best be safeguarded by the tribe, living within its own *dira*, or territorial boundaries. He himself has three wives and has fathered twenty children. His first wife moved back to Jordan after they divorced. I hadn't yet met his second wife, but Suleiman tells me that she lives in the village. "Sure, we're in touch," he responds to my prodding, "but most of the time I live with Salma." How did he and Salma meet? Suleiman describes paying frequent visits to the *shigg* of a cousin in a hamlet a kilometer down the road. He'd catch glimpses of her sitting behind the partition in the woman's section and felt drawn to her. "The next step," he explains, "is to get your mother to visit the girl's family on some sort of excuse like bringing eggs or a chicken, and then have her spy on the girl. She doesn't talk to her, but just looks and forms an impression." "Then what?" I ask as we lag behind the flock, where heads are raised high, smelling the path home in the warm air. "My mother spoke to my father. She liked Salma, so all that was left was for my father and one of his brothers to visit Salma's father and declare my intentions. Salma's father told my father to come back in two weeks." "Did he consult with Salma?" "Sure, and in our case we even met, once, for about an hour, in the *shigg*." "And she liked what


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she saw?" "Yes, but the truth is she'd noticed me before. And her father approved because of my standing in the village – that counts for a lot." "What would have happened if she had said sorry, but no?" Suleiman laughs, "He'd probably have tried to exert some pressure, but in the end the decision would have been hers to make." "Is that typical?" I ask.

By way of answer Suleiman tells me about a young couple from Hura who had married against their parents' wishes and fled to the center of the country, living in hiding for a number of years before their families were finally reconciled to their union. "But there are," he adds, "less happy endings." I knew that inter-tribal blood feuds could be fierce, and that such tensions often surfaced in the townships where boundaries between rival tribes were no longer operative.

In the case of Suleiman's own son, however, there had been an unexpected reversal of circumstances. Eight years ago, while traveling in Jordan, Suleiman had received a phone call, "Your son has kidnapped our daughter," the voice said in Hebrew on the other end of the line. "That's impossible," he replied and hastened back to Israel where he discovered that Yahya had brought home a Jewish girl from Tel Aviv. Far from being abducted, Rita had fallen head over heels for Yahya, and to her parent's consternation agreed to live with him in his village. On first telling me about his daughter-in-law, Suleiman had claimed that her parents were from Poland, but I later found out from Rita herself that she was a second generation Israeli whose grandparents had come from Thessalonica.

That was in August. Pointing to where a bulldozer was leveling the ground near his son's home, Suleiman had suggested I walk over and talk to him. I slipped down the ravine, bypassed the skeleton of a flat-bottom truck snarled in a bend of the dry riverbed and slowly made my way up the opposite slope. Yahya, a white *kafiyyah* wound tightly around his head, ushered me into his future home. He was a huskier, more exuberant version of his father, and every now and then dashed out of the house and waved at the bulldozer as he barked instructions. The home was close to being completed and with its three bedrooms, spacious living-room, kitchen and porch, might have passed for a modest villa. We sat on a mattress and talked. He spoke warmly of friends in Tel Aviv and heatedly of the authorities who were threatening to raze his home to the ground before he'd even had a chance to move in. When the border police had descended on the village and issued him with a demolition order he walked up to the commanding officer, stuck out his neck and pointed to his jugular: "Destroy my house," he'd said, "and see if the blood doesn't come spurting out of my vein."

Yahya sprinted out again and I trailed after him in the sun. We stacked some bales of hay and then he led me into the shack, standing on the edge of the ravine, where he'd been living with his family for the last eight years. There were two windowless rooms, an old crib, and some broken-down furniture. A woman stepped

out of the shadows and was introduced as Rita. She smiled faintly and returned to the back of the room which served as a kitchen. As we were leaving it dawned on me that I'd just been introduced to his wife. For a second I had been fooled—by her reticence and her Bedouin style long-sleeved, ankle-length dress—into thinking that she was one of Yahya's sisters or cousins. But Rita had simply been following the custom of a Bedouin woman that forbids her to speak to a male stranger. Would he mind if I spoke to his wife, I asked Yahya nervously. He stared hard at me for a moment, and then smiled and said, "Go ahead, ask her whatever you want." He waved me back into the shack and strode off to have a word with one of the workers.

Rita was startled to see me. Her husband, I explained, had consented to my asking her some questions. "What do you want to know?" The room filled with children. Minutes later one of Suleiman's teenage boys entered and sank to the floor, absorbed in punching the buttons of his Nintendo. I suspected he had been sent to act as chaperon. Rita spoke haltingly, leaning against the kitchen partition. Since moving to Attir she'd visited her parents once, about five years ago. In the last year, however, she occasionally spoke to them on the phone. She had worked as a bank teller before meeting Yahya. She had a twin sister whom she hadn't seen in eight years, and believed was abroad, and a younger brother who was in the army. Her answers were vague and short. Life was hard. She rarely left the village, and only if accompanied by her husband. The day went by swiftly taking care of her four small girls. Her only company was the other women of the village who visited frequently and would spend long hours with her, chatting and sharing

in the household chores. She smiled shyly and lifted her youngest daughter into her arms as the child knocked over a bottle of water and burst into tears.

Two weeks later I returned to visit Suleiman and found Yahya lounging in the living-room with his father. Yahya spoke of their courtship. All had gone well until Rita's parents heard that they were planning to get married. The door then slammed on Yahya and Rita was confined to her home—"locked up" in Yahya's words—for six months. They spoke on the phone, however, and decided to elope. All ties with her family were severed until a year later when Yahya called Rita's parents to announce the birth of a daughter. They met, for the first time, in the maternity ward and Rita's mother lit into him. "She screamed her head off, and in the end I picked up and left." The next day, however, to his utter stupefaction, Rita's mother greeted him warmly in the hospital and introduced him to the rest of the family. Things went smoothly for the next two years, although Rita's family still refused to visit Attir. But then an Israeli film director shot a television documentary about the Bedouins. Rita was interviewed and made no effort—probably in all innocence—to hide her identity, unlike the other Bedouin women whose faces were shown blurred. Since then her parents have refused to see her while continuing, curiously enough, to maintain ties with Yahya who drops in on them whenever he's working in the neighborhood.

Yahya is a bit of a wild card. He was married at fifteen to a Bedouin woman and divorced

a year later. All a husband has to do is proclaim three times in front of his wife, "I divorce you," and the marriage is annulled. Suleiman, reclining on a mattress next to his son, explained that it was his son's early, arranged marriage that had made him think twice about interfering with Yahya's choice of a second wife. This time he was going to let his son make his own choices. As it turned out, it was a good marriage and he respected Rita for embracing the Bedouin way of life. But Suleiman was worried that Yahya, having four daughters but no son from Rita, might seek a third wife, and the effect this could have on Rita. Yahya remained silent for a minute and then admitted that he did have someone in mind as a third wife, "She's also Jewish, in fact she's ultra-Orthodox and the daughter of a rabbi." For the moment, he told us, she's just a friend, as is her father who assured him that his home would remain standing since he prayed every day against its demolition. It appears that Yahya's good looks and charm and his desert birthright have won him many a conquest. There was the blond American in Eilat who begged him to return to the States with her, and there were "loose" women in Tel Aviv, and an ultra-Orthodox girl in Jerusalem whose father accused him of violating his daughter and had him arrested. "But the girl arrived at the police station and couldn't stop sobbing and kissing me, so the police released me and arrested the father for threatening to kill his daughter."

Listening to Yahya was disconcerting. He was clearly a traditionalist when it came to Rita, but a libertine outside of the home. I shuddered at the thought of what would happen to Rita if and when he did bring home a new wife, whatever her origins. He claimed that he'd spoken to Rita

and that she had no objections, but in the same breath told me how everything—a woman's happiness and sorrow, her freedom and responsibilities—were in the hands of her husband. To my surprise, Suleiman had argued with his son against bringing another woman into his home. It wasn't only a question of Rita's predicament. From his own experience he could assure his son that having two or more women under the same roof just didn't work. Times had changed and women had different expectations. His own second wife left a year after Salma moved in. "And the same happened with the other women," he added. "What other women, I thought you had three wives." Suleiman smiled, "Well, actually I had six wives, but the other three were for very short periods, so they don't really count."

Later that day I trudged up the dirt path leading to Yahya and Rita's new home on the other side of the ravine, hoping to get another chance to talk to Rita. Her nature had eluded me. "Who is Rita?" I had jotted down in my notebook. How was it she had "given up everything," as Suleiman had put it admiringly—her family in Tel Aviv, her friends, her job—to live with Yahya and accept with equanimity, if I was not mistaken, the Bedouin woman's burden? Since my last visit some of that burden, certainly the physical discomfort of living in a shack, had been alleviated by the move to their new home, even if the windows and doors had yet to be fixed into their frames and only the first five steps leading up to the roof had been completed.

But Rita would remain as elusive as ever on my second visit. As I entered I caught a glimpse of her, feeding her children around an old primus stove in the kitchen, and shuffling in and out of the empty rooms of their home, before vanishing

again only to reappear briefly with a tray of sweet tea. It was then, however, that Rita spoke in the faintest of whispers, almost as an afterthought to her husband's words, though the irony in her voice left its mark. Yahya was speaking, a touch dramatically, of their prospects of holding on to their new home. His lawyer had explained to him that implementation of the demolition order was inescapable. All he could do was buy time. A month, perhaps even a year might pass, but in the end the bulldozers would come – and to add insult to injury, Yahya would be required by the state to cover the cost of the demolition. But the honest truth, Yahya then told me, was that he had no objection to moving to Hura. It was a young town and life would be a lot easier. He was stuck out here *in the middle of nowhere,* he claimed, because the village elders in charge of negotiating their terms of compensation with officials from the minhelet kept making demands that could never be met by the authorities. I foolishly lamented the view they'd be missing by moving to town, at which point Rita spoke up for the first time. "We can have a view of the desert from Hura as well," she murmured, and slipped back indoors.

As we cross the road a car breaks to a halt and lets the last of Suleiman's sheep file pass its fenders. The driver leans out of the window and waves to Suleiman. We're now out of last week's military zone and on home ground. Several years ago the Jewish National Fund planted a large grove of acacias along the ridge leading into the village as part of its ongoing efforts to roll back

the desert. The more saplings planted and taking root the less runoff water eroding the soil. The pods of the thorny acacia, I soon learn, provide extra nourishment for Suleiman's sheep. As we enter the grove he raises his rubber goading stick and thrashes away at the branches ("'What is that, Moses, thou hast in thy right hand?'" reads Sura XX of the Koran, "'Why, it is my staff,' said Moses, 'I lean upon it, and with it I beat down leaves to feed my sheep'"). The pods shower down and within seconds his sheep are busy crunching them.

Salma and five of her youngest, three boys and two girls, are in the large sheep pen, sweeping the dung into piles that then get shoveled into burlap bags and wheel-barrowed out of the pen. They pause as the flock trots determinedly through the gate. Three hours of grazing and their hunger seems unabated. One of Suleiman's sons herds the lambs into their own cordoned-off section of the pen. The others head for the water trough and minutes later, at the sound of barley seeds being poured into a second long metal trough, they huddle forward for their final course of the morning. It is 9 a.m. Cleaning the pen takes at least another half hour. Salma has brought a stiff-haired brush and is vigorously scouring the inside of an empty trough set in the middle of the pen. She silently hands over to me for safekeeping the white *kafiyyeh* that keeps slipping off her hair as she bends over the trough. I hold the headdress gingerly in my hand as though it were a tiara.

By ten we're sitting in the shade of Suleiman's front porch. Unperturbed by the demolition order he received in July, he has in fact extended the porch and even added an outdoor sink. The water is pumped in from the tank behind the house,

but since the devastating storm of '97 the village receives a limited amount of running water from the National Water Carrier, conveyed above ground in what looks like narrow-gauge garden hoses. Suleiman's home is also one of the few in the village that has a septic tank. Otherwise villagers simply walk out into the hills where they can't be seen. I remember how once, while talking to Suleiman's relatives, one of his half-brothers darted into his shack and returned with a transistor radio. "I'm going for a shit," he proudly announced before sauntering off in the direction of the acacia grove. The ethnologist Clinton Bailey, who has recorded the poems recited by Bedouin in Sinai and the Negev, cites one that ends with an allusion to the Bedouin proverb, "He who has no land will shit in his hand." The poem, composed in the early forties, castigates a number of Bedouin chiefs for selling their land to the Jewish Agency. The last four couplets in Bailey's translation read:

Look at Ibn Sa'id and Rabi'a, O my!
They've built houses of stone, painted
red and so high!

They've wed daughters of peasants who
spice spoiled meat
And spurned those whose fathers
spice coffee-pots.

Their wives stand around in a thin
chemise gown,
Fried foods and soft bread are their
only renown.

Even Zirbawi this life couldn't abide,
When, after shitting, it stuck to
each side[1]*.*

Suleiman brings out his favorite book, *Kalila and Dimna*, and recounts how the animal fables

were translated into the Persionin the Middle Ages but go back even futher to ancient India. While I'm admiring the book's cover depicting two rogue foxes in a not-unfamiliar landscape of rocks and sandy tussocks, Salma serves us bitter coffe. Suleiman wants me to take a look at his entire library. I follow him into the kitchen where he opens a metal cabinet and pulls out a dozen books, for the most part dealing with geography and history. Salma has been preparing for us two bowls of *ful* and humus and urges us to return to our seats on the porch. Soon their eldest daughter comes out with a large silver tray laden with food – humus and *ful*, tomatoes, hot peppers, lentil soup, and piles of paper-thin flat-bread, called *sajj*. The latter is traditionally cooked on a convex metal plate set over a wood fire, but today most Bedouins use a modernized butane heated plate. Suleiman invites his wife to sit with us. The children crowd around, giggling. I compliment Salma on the food. She answers in halting Hebrew, but won't venture more than a few words.

A Bedouin buttonholed me on one of my visits south and recounted his favorite tale, struggling to stay poker faced. A man goes out into the field to relieve himself. Inadvertently he kicks a bottle in the sand and out comes a djinn who asks him to make three wishes. The Bedouin ponders for a moment and says, "I'd like a donkey." "Okay," says the djinn, "what else?" "A ladder," "Yes, and what is your third wish?" "A toad." "Why on earth would you want a donkey, a ladder and a toad," asks the djinn. "It's

simple," says the Bedouin, "I need a donkey to travel on, a ladder to mount the donkey, and a toad to croak, *crkk, crkk, crkk,* to get the donkey moving." I didn't make too much of the story at first—supposedly the yarn showed how few were the Bedouin's needs—but now I have begun to think that perhaps its self-deprecating humor and its narrative of diminishing mobility are especially relevant to the plight of the Bedouins in the Negev, though who knows whether the Bedouins of Sinai (whose tribal territories once extended into the Negev), Jordan and Arabia do not find themselves in a similar predicament?

Having lived traditionally as nomads on the periphery of society, the Bedouin are left with precious little space in which to thrive – culturally, socially, or economically. Whatever the depredations of Ottoman and British rule, it has been in the last fifty years, since Israeli statehood and the implementation of wrong-headed, strong-armed policies coupled with the inevitable expansion of urban communities (modern Beersheba, founded by the Turks in 1903 to service the Bedouin population, is now a sprawling city of close to 200,000 residents), that the lives and tribal mores of the Bedouin have unraveled at an accelerated pace. The Bedouin have devolved from pastoral nomads, both tilling the soil and grazing the land, to their present paradoxical condition of *sedentary* nomadism, living for the most part in squalor on a fraction of the land they once roamed freely. The low-slung hospitality tent pitched behind tin shack or stone home may very well bespeak of the ghostly vestige of a life of wandering that has turned into the husk of a memory. It is not without significance that when a Bedouin speaks of god-given good fortune he uses the term for spaciousness (*wusa*)

whereas the word for confinement (*dig*) is synonymous with bad luck. Hence the poignancy of the tale in which the make-do of a ladder serves as a substitute for the desert ethos of prowess, while the age-old seasonal migration to pasture and water on horseback and she-camel—the mighty *naqa* described by Tarafa, one of the great pre-Islamic poets of Arabia, as a ship's prow rising out of the Tigris—is replaced by the immobility of a donkey barely coaxed into motion by a toad.

I'm invited into the living-room, shaped and furnished like a miniature shigg, for a last glass of tea before leaving. Mattresses and embroidered pillows are spread on the floor and Koranic inscriptions in gold and silver calligraphy hang on the walls. We remove our shoes and recline comfortably on our sides, our arms supported by a leaning tower of pillows. Salma enters with a pair of white Nike socks. They both giggle as she leans against his raised feet and struggles to fit the socks on properly. "I'd love to herd your sheep with you again," I tell Suleiman. "So you'd better come back soon," he replies. "I'm planning to sell most of them." I wonder if I have heard right. Suleiman explains, "Holding on to the flock is costing me way too much." "So what will you do instead?" Suleiman sits up, "I'm thinking of opening a shoe store in Hura."

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[1]Bailey, Clinton, *Bedouin Poetry from Sinai and the Negev* (Oxford, 1991).

III

Dangling in New York

On the Double Life of a Hebrew Poet

In 1985 Gabriel Preil, a small man in his seventies with delicate features and impeccable manners, read his poems in a gentle, halting voice to a packed audience in Jerusalem. Holding a loose sheaf of poems close to his thick eye-glasses Preil paused over a line every so often as though momentarily confounded by his own words – words, one might add, written by a Hebrew poet living in New York for over fifty years. "A young man on American soil," Preil writes in an early poem, "Not exactly an anoma-lous creature/writing poems in Hebrew." After reading four or five poems Preil sat down to listen to the Brooklyn-born poet and translator, Robert Friend, read his own elegant renditions of Preil's poems, which would soon appear in book form

as *Sunset Possibilities and Other Poems*. So the evening progressed, first Preil and then Friend, back and forth, until a power failure caught Preil midway into "A Sober Challenge" and doused the hall in darkness:

> The white page is of the whiteness
> that comes with night,
> a landscape that makes visible
> wounds awake since dawn.
> I need the crumb of challenge
> in the imprisoning white.

Soon enough, though, a candle materialized and Preil went on reading, unperturbed, his bald head bent over the flame:

> Not appeasing restraint,
> nor sleepy tributaries
> of provincial streams,
> not the stale season
> bring sweetness to things—
> only the blaze of white beginnings
> deprived like glowing cold
> of every summer eloquence,
>
> only the challenge of the sober page.

Most if not all Hebrew poets from the early part of the twentieth century were born in the Diaspora and grew up in Yiddish-and Hebrew-speaking homes before immigrating to pre-state Palestine, the *yishuv*, either as children or young adults. What makes Preil unique to modern Hebrew letters is that he never actually lived in Israel. Born in Estonia in 1911 and sailing to the United States at age eleven, Preil chose to remain in America, and, with the exception of some youthful poems written in Yiddish, to write exclusively in Hebrew while cultivating the figure of the anonymous, rootless poet seduced by the weathers of Manhattan. "Perhaps I have been

condemned to dangle over the void, in an alien yet enticing landscape," Preil softly complains in a letter written in 1965 to Avraham Shlonsky, the reigning Israeli poet at the time.

The wonder is that as early as 1945, with the publication of his first collection of poems Preil was hailed in the yishuv as a leading modernist and innovator in Hebrew verse. How then does it happen that a Hebrew poet born in Estonia and living a threadbare existence in the Bronx, whose Hebrew is inevitably of the bookish sort, learned from one's parents in the old country or in the cheder, who doesn't set foot in Israel until 1968 (and then only for a brief visit), how then does such a poet, whose delicately woven poems are so often written as little queries and reminders to himself—scribbled on napkins in his beloved coffee-shops and cafeterias—and as memos posted from such places as Williamsburg, the Bronx, Murray Hill, and Dobbs Ferry (far-sounding to the Israeli ear), how does such a poet disengage himself from the small, curious band of Hebrew-American poets (Halkin, Regelson, Efrat—all of whom would settle in Israel by the fifties) and come to be read in Israel as widely and appreciatively as any of its leading poets?

I was a boat at anchor
in a pink fishing village in Maine—
not a wood-chip floating palely
in black Bronx waters.
Nailed to a seat in a stagnant coffee
shop,
sipping cola through a straw,
I ignore my patches,
I can at least be courteous to myself.
A suspicious cloud in my eyes,
I disregarded in Jerusalem
my title to nobility.
In New York I am a threadbare jacket
hanging on an old clothes-hanger.

This little poem has the flavor of much that is modern in Hebrew verse—the forlorn self-irony, the crisp language and easy rhythms, and even the small compass of the poem, its shying away from any form of ambitious statement. At the same time "Courteous to Myself" does go back further, echoing and in its quiet manner summing up and bringing to a close (with Preil's death in 1993) a tradition—as long as exile—of Hebrew exilic verse.

Preil's laconic, suggestive notations of the New York metropolis are frequently but an initial, cordial nod to the material world before allowing for the actual inner blossoming of the poem's landscape. This, I believe, is the poetry's most urgent lesson: that poet and reader may find a brief solace in the sober page, or in the "conflagrations" and "confabulations"—favorite words of Preil—of the imagination. Undoubtedly the fact of his living in two languages and leading a double life of sorts enhanced the poet's aesthetic distance from his surroundings. Even as he assumed the voice of the *taloush*, the dangling figure so dear to Hebrew literature in the early decades of the last century, Preil's polished self-investigations, his aura of privacy and sense of wonder, enabled him to absorb the inner geographies of more than one land (Jerusalem always remained for him a rather dreamy, festive city where, significantly, "street words are hurled about like kingly stones"), and to assimilate directly into his poems the lessons of American modernism. So we have the adaptation into Hebrew of William Carlos Williams' use of the concrete image, of the multiple perspectives so common to city life, and diction and measure that is colloquial and "pared to its essentials:"

The lit-up electric boot
no longer proclaims a thing.
A brown yearning of chestnuts, baked
    bread
drifts through the street.

A flashing bus like a beast
from a brown wood runs by,
and fire-engine-clang,
spiraling between
thick walls of silence,
shakes the brown air.

But above all Preil was embracing the colors of that other poet of the imaginative life:

Stevens is reading a poem
on the credences of summer.
The window is covered with forest,
the glass in my hand collects
a small conflagration.

With flickerings of a hidden wisdom
and the defined beauty of things,
the voice of the poet himself
sounds in the air
like a dark sailor's—
remote
from any credible color.

Here then is not biography *per se* but rather its imaginative counterpart, its courtly shadow. Courtly because with its knights and messengers, ambuscades and "beasts in bitter forests," with its "sadness of renunciations" and for all its fleeting evocations of the streets and weathers of Manhattan, the dreamtext of the poem will finally tip the balance: life will acquiesce to its shadow, the season to its text and marginalia; the poem pulses in the space opened by the poet's retreat. Blackmur's phrase, "the objective virtue of anonymity," keeps ringing in my ear apropos of Preil's occultations: writing in Hebrew—in a fluent, modern, yet exilic Hebrew—constitutes precisely a quest and a virtue, it is the poet's cloak of anonymity and his proudest summoning: a life wrapped, to borrow a line from David Vogel, one

of Preil's immediate predecessors, "in fine, transparent words." And if life does indeed acquiesce to the letter then are we not liable to both fear the letter and hold it in awe? "Once more in thickets of the alphabet/the eye gropes through/the thorn-entangled verse."

That life is a mimicry of the written word and not vice versa may sound familiar to readers of Mallarmé ("Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book"), or of Borges and Derrida. But it is also inherent to Hebraic thought. Ancient Hebrew texts and Jewish lore are replete with parables, explications and legends in which the Torah—Scripture—is portrayed as preceding life: "When God was about to create the world by His word," reads one Midrashic legend, "the twenty-two letters of the alphabet descended from the terrible and august crown of God whereon they were engraved with a pen of flaming fire. They stood round about God, and one after the other spoke and entreated, 'Create the world through me!'"

Preil has both profited from and remained skeptical of the overexposed word, of vernacular Hebrew, its antique creases smoothed and its rhythms now breathed in the streets of Tel Aviv. The poet's choice has been clear: to live along the seam of two languages and to hold on to Hebrew as a talisman in the stir and bustle of New York. He realized that to write of his American surroundings in Hebrew was an anomaly and a small miracle, "hermetic and touched by fire." Hence the ever so slight riffle in the flow of words, suggesting not only a disruption in the poet's diction, but also within the complex nuances of tone. Preil's Hebrew is at once intimate and distant, an open avenue of discourse and a cryptogram. It could not be otherwise, given, as noted earlier, the poet's chosen anonymity. And yet Preil's handling of such a precarious position vis-à-vis language is precisely the "sober challenge" that gives the poetry its edge and transforms mere anonymity into an "objective virtue:"

1

Night. And I am drinking smoky black tea
    from China.
The cup is gay with flowers and figures of
    musicians.
Rice whitens in a saucer placid as a
    brook.
And from a pipe, tobacco
lures like dim gold.

My thoughts are folded now like birds on
    branches.
My feet rest, having trodden
the fields of obliteration.

2

I am a man approaching middle-age,
sitting by myself in the evening breeze of
    Brooklyn
as other men before me sat in their
    various Brooklyns,
making their calculations,
skulls furrowed, like mine, by wrinkles,
mouths, like mine, pain-twisted
for imagined or palpable reasons.

But he has still to come and fetch me,
descending from the mountain—
oblivion's dark master.

The photographs of Chateaubleau were taken in 2001 and commissioned by *La Direction Régional le l''Environnement d'Ile-de-France*. Project coordinator: William Hayon.

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Mikael Levin has exhibited widely in Europe and America. Projects include *War Story* (1996), *Common Places* (2000), and *Notes from the Periphery,* which was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2003.

Gabriel Levin's most recent collection of poems *Ostraca* was published in 1999. *Poems from the Diwan*, his translation of the medieval Hebrew-Andalusian poet Yehuda Halevi, appeared in 2002. He lives in Jerusalem.

Mikael Levin / Gabriel Levin

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