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WebMail - Tel Aviv & Back, Letter 28

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Date Sent: Monday, May 20, 2002 12:41 AM

From: daroskies Add to Address Book

To: mikerand <mikerand@rcn.com>

Subject: Tel Aviv & Back, Letter 28

Status: Urgent New

MEMORABILIA

Once, at Brandeis, in Intermediate Hebrew, Prof. Baruch Levine played an LP called Sounds of Jerusalem. It had birds chirping away, an Arab peddler calling out "alte zah-khen," and children playing in Hebrew. This record has been much on my mind as I enter my fourth and final month in Jerusalem, and as the sounds that accompanied my stay--sirens upon screeching sirens, the drone of helicopters on their way to the war zone--are receding from memory. Maybe I should record the opening spiel on Kol Yisrael, with the "Shema" recited in hyper-correct Sephardi pronunciation, followed by the 6:00 am news. Over the standard-issue couch in my living room I have hung a huge green sign that I salvaged from Gan Sacher. It features a happy lion over the caption OHAVIM OTKHA TEDDY [KOLLEK], but it's much too flimsy and unwieldy to take back with me to the States. As for the magnetic ads for Inbal Shutters and Gan Eden Flowers on my refrigerator, they remind me of nothing, other than that they showed up in my mail box.

A most useful memento is the spiffy black cloth briefcase that was given out to all participants at the International Theology Conference held at the Shalom Hartman Institute back in April. The briefcase will remind me of two havruta sessions, one on Jeremiah, and another on Jewish mystical encounters with God, and of lesser encounters over lunch with Christian and Muslim theologians--I, an interloper, who wouldn't have gone at all, if Stuart Schoffman hadn't twisted my arm. It's a great briefcase, and it will spread the gospel that Hartman has made a mark on the religious landscape of Jerusalem.

In an age of mechanical reproduction, Ari's TRY Program has come up with a high-tech memento of their semester here, a CD ROM, which they are producing themselves, complete with interviews, video footage, TV snippets, animation, and voice-overs. Will it reverse the barrage of misinformation in the media? Convince their vastly relieved parents that it was the worst of times, the best of times?

All this is very silly, of course, because what I really need to remember no memento can preserve. The brisk morning air before it burns away. The serenity of the view from my balcony, of the red tiled roofs and Jerusalem stone interspersed with trees and dark purple flowers. The children skipping down the block on their way to the Paula Ben Gurion School. The retired American Jews on their way back from shul. The cars parked on the sidewalk blocking pedestrian traffic. The guards bored beyond words in front of every cafe and bank. My favorite bank teller who thinks it positively charming that I teach Yiddish literature. All the taxi drivers who are so

grateful for my business. The two makolet brothers who would offer me credit if I only asked for it. The fresh humous at Bein Azza leBerlin. Yaakov the Barber, who used to cut Saul Lieberman's hair and who told me that when Shamma Freidman or Dov Zlotnik accompanied Prof. Lieberman to the barber, they would wait outside, out of deep respect. The joy of a rainstorm out of season. I will even miss the messianic Rebbe ads popping up where you least expect them. Here at least they're in Hebrew.

Jerusalem, May 20, 2002

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