

---

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

*Cousins*

For good or ill we are the products of our past. On a recent visit to Israel I spent a week with a distinguished novelist touching seventy who was also a Holocaust survivor. 'They penned us into ghettos in Europe and then exterminated us', he told me, 'and now they are planning to do the same in the Middle East'. I asked him who 'they' were. 'The forty million Arabs', he said. The second week of my stay I spent with Israeli-born friends in Tel Aviv, a couple in their forties. 'The disastrous policies our governments have pursued for so many years', they said to me, 'have set back the possibility of our children and grandchildren ever growing up in peace. Maybe our greatgrandchildren will, but we won't be there to see it.'

I too, of course, am a product of my past, and how I see myself as a Jew and how I relate to the state of Israel is of course strongly coloured by that past. My mother was born in Egypt. Her mother's grandfather was a Jewish doctor who had come to Egypt from Ferrara in the 1830s to seek his fortune. Her father was another Jewish doctor, from Odessa this time, who had come to Egypt on the first leg of a tour of the world he planned to make after serving as a medical orderly in the Russo-Japanese war. He fell in love with the country and with my grandmother, settled in Egypt, had two daughters, converted and became a Muslim, and died of an unspecified disease (probably syphilis) when my mother and her sister were five and six years old. The distraught widow eventually fell in love with an Australian journalist in Egypt on his way to

cover the war on the western front. When he died at Ypres the following year my poor grandmother, barely thirty and twice bereaved, sought comfort from an Anglican missionary and eventually decided to convert. One day, my mother told me, she called her and her older sister into the drawing room and said to them: 'Sister Margaret would like to tell you a story. Please listen carefully.' At the end of her story, which was very moving, Sister Margaret said: 'Now, girls, which would you rather be, the cruel people who killed our Lord or the good people who loved him?' Even then, at the age of seven or eight, my mother told me, she had the uneasy feeling that something was wrong, but that feeling was drowned by the general mood of the occasion, and the two little girls were duly baptised. Three years later their mother herself died in the great cholera epidemic of 1920 and the little girls went to live with their grandparents.

Yet while my aunt went on to marry a Catholic and to convert to Catholicism (and her elder daughter to marry a Muslim and convert to Islam while her younger daughter married a Greek Orthodox but remains a committed Roman Catholic), my mother married a Jew and repudiated her Anglican conversion. For though she had never been in a synagogue or had any Jewish instruction, she had obscurely felt, all the time she was growing up with her freethinking grandparents, that she was Jewish. There was no content to this thought, just a vague conviction. When she married, she and my father moved to France, in 1935, to pursue their studies, and the ten years she spent in France, the last three if not exactly in hiding at least in the daily fear of death for both her and her child, gave her ample opportunity to discover just what Jewishness meant to her.

There is one episode in particular that, to me, encapsulates my mother. She and my father had separated and he had gone off to Paris, leaving her with a child of two and pregnant with a second child. She was living by then in a pension in Nice,

which had rapidly filled up with Jewish refugees from all parts of France, since this corner of the country was under the jurisdiction of the Italians, who protected 'their' Jews. When Italy fell to the Allies, however, in September 1943, the Germans at once sealed off the region and on 8 September began what historians describe as the biggest 'raffle' or round-up of Jews in the West. By sheer chance my mother, who had decided that it was safer to be out in the open, was pushing my pram along the sea front when she felt a hand on her arm and looked up to see her one-time neighbour from her years in the small hillside town of Vence, Ida Bourdet, the wife of Claude Bourdet, the Resistance leader. Horrified to find her there, alone with her child, Ida told her if she did nothing she would soon be rounded up. She must come back with her and she would get her forged papers and put her on a train the next day for the Massif Central with some friends, also making a getaway. And this is what happened. But, my mother told me later, she had left me in one carriage with the friends and gone to sit by herself in another carriage. For though she had forged papers, she said to me, she was not sure, when it came to it, if the Germans got into the train and challenged her, whether she would be able to deny her Jewishness. Even though that meant her death and, even more, the abandoning of her child to strangers. When my mother told me this she was not boasting. She was almost apologetic. She was certainly puzzled. But she knew that there are moments that define one, and that if that moment came she might find it impossible to deny a Jewishness she knew little about and certainly never 'practised'. Fortunately for both of us the test never came. The train slowly moved away from Nice, to Lyon and finally to La Bourboule, where we spent the rest of the war. Her second child was born there, but died ten days later.

She told me these stories in Egypt, where we lived from 1945 to the summer of 1956. Because she had had no Jewish upbringing I didn't either. Yet, because we had almost perished

as a result of being Jewish, that marked me too, and set me apart from the friends I made at school and at the sporting club that was the hub of the social life of the middle classes. My circle of friends was just as likely to contain Muslims or Copts or Armenians or Americans or Germans as Jews, and even with the Jewish boys I played with, as with the various (I now realize, Jewish) friends of my mother's, questions of race or ritual never obtruded. This was the world of assimilated well-to-do Europeanized Sephardi Jewry, and it is because I grew up in its ambiance that in later life the world Proust paints of Marcel's childhood seems much closer to mine than anything to be found in the pages of Bashevis Singer or Bellow.

As a student at Oxford, then, when I went through my adolescent religious crisis, it was couched in Christian terms, since I was at the time reading Dostoevsky, Milton and Donne. And though a friend put me on to Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, I found the book a bore and it made me realize that I was not, as I had supposed, in the least bit interested in mysticism. It was only much later that I found myself growing interested in Jewish matters. This had partly to do with a discovery: I had thought that I differed from my English friends and contemporaries because of my European interests, and indeed sought out friends who shared those interests and found a job teaching literature in the School of European Studies at the University of Sussex. The models I looked to in my writing were European authors, Proust as well as Virginia Woolf, Mann as well as Eliot, Robbe-Grillet as well as William Golding, Claude Simon as well as Saul Bellow. But now I began to feel that there was a part of me that was not being catered for by this way of perceiving myself. Oddly, it was a new-found interest in the Bible that led me to it. For I found in the Bible what I realized I had experienced in contact with my mother and with members of her family, and what I now described to myself as a 'Middle Eastern' quality: a kind of flexibility, a complex sense of irony, a wise realism. Abra-

ham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, David, Bathsheba: they were the great-aunts and uncles I had never known but who came to life in the stories my mother and my aunt told me and each other. At the same time I found, as a writer, that the pared-down quality of the biblical narratives, the emphasis on action rather than description, the willingness to let actions remain mysterious and unexplained, was something I cherished and that stimulated my own work, though these narratives had been written down so long ago.

I learned enough biblical Hebrew to read these narratives in the original, and started a course with an Anglican colleague on 'The Bible and English Literature'. And naturally I began to read modern Hebrew literature, delighted to find in the poems of Bialik, Leah Goldberg, Amir Gilboa and Yehuda Amichai, as well as in the novels of Aharon Appelfeld, the kind of sustenance I had always found in Yeats and Eliot and Stevens and Borges. But, I soon discovered, there was another Hebrew literature, an Israeli literature, whose best-known representatives seemed to be Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, and which felt as alien to me as the novels of Angus Wilson or Claude Mauriac: realistic tales of people I could not summon up an interest in, within a culture I felt was very far from my own. Amichai and Appelfeld, it became clear to me, were European writers who were Jews and wrote in Hebrew, as Kafka was a European writer who was a Jew and wrote in German; Oz and Yehoshua were Israeli writers who happened to be Jewish and wrote in Hebrew.

As with assimilated Jews in Europe, but perhaps slightly differently, given that we lived in close proximity to it, Israel had never really been an issue for us. It was almost as alien as Japan or Brazil. Of course I was aware of it, and became more aware of it as my interest in the Jewish elements in my make-up grew. But it seemed to have nothing to do with me. As a child in Egypt in 1948 I heard about a war in Palestine, but I personally never experienced any antisemitism in all my time

in Egypt, only the growing sense, in an increasingly nationalist environment, of my status as a foreigner. I became more aware of it in 1956 when, after we had moved to England, all the Jews were expelled from Egypt, along with the French and the English. This seemed perfectly understandable to me at the time, given the unprovoked attack on Egypt by Israel and the two western powers and the long years of quasi-colonial rule the Egyptians had been forced to endure. Nevertheless, in retrospect, it seems like one of the first examples of that confusion between Jews and Israel that has become such a feature of the past twenty-five years.

Israel, I understood, was where the Jews had made a homeland, dispossessing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the process. I had no wish to visit the country, which seemed, like South Africa, to be a place where Whites bossed over natives, something I felt I had had my fill of in Egypt in the last days of King Farouk. Yet when in 1967 the papers and the sound waves (I did not yet own a television set) were suddenly full of the threats of the Arab countries to throw Israel into the sea, I found to my surprise that the survival of that country did matter to me. The thought of Jews once again about to perish *en masse* with the world standing by and doing nothing was unbearable. I had thought of myself as uninterested in anything but my writing and my teaching, and suddenly I had the feeling that I should perhaps go and enlist or at least make an effort to find out what I could do to help. The war was of course over so quickly that all such thoughts disappeared almost as soon as they arrived, but it was this, perhaps, that lit the fuse that would, several years later, make me wake up to the realization that Jewish matters were important to me, and were bound up, somehow, with my feelings about the region in which my family had lived for so long. Nevertheless, I still had no wish to visit Israel and totally agreed with my mother when she said: 'They've got to give back the land they've occupied as quickly as possible or they'll be storing up trouble for themselves.'

I realized after 1967 that the particular relation I had with this country I had never visited was very much like the relation one has with distant relatives. If one learns of something admirable they have done one is proud of them, if they do what one finds shameful one is embarrassed. What one cannot be is completely indifferent. Because, in a strange sense, both their glory and their shame reflect upon oneself. I suppose the citizens of most countries feel that way about the ways in which their country acts. The protests that greeted the decisions of Bush and Blair to go to war in Iraq attest to that: not in our name, the protestors said, even though the leaders of the United States and Britain had been democratically elected. Liberal South Africans felt the same way about their country in the days of apartheid, and I imagine liberal Russians (there are a few of them) feel the same way about the war in Chechnya and the elimination of investigative journalists. The oddity of Israel is that Jews who are citizens of other countries, and who therefore have absolutely no say in the ballot-box, feel that they have not only a right but a duty to speak out about the way that country is going about its business. When criticized by such people Israelis say: 'What do you know about it? If you had to live here . . .' And: 'Why should we be purer and more ethical than other countries? We're a sovereign state and this is the real world. Wake up buddy.' Perhaps that's true. As a writer and an academic I feel both ignorant and innocent. By and large, as long as I have the space and time to work undisturbed I am happy to let those who enjoy doing such things take charge of politics. Nevertheless, cousins are not like strangers. I can hate what Russia is doing in Chechnya and wish the United Nations and the rest of the world took some sort of a stand, but I don't feel I have much say in the matter. Being a fellow human being is one step further away than being a fellow-Jew. Hell, these are not just human beings, they are *cousins*!

In 1982 I was invited to lecture in Israel and decided to accept. If I didn't like what I saw there I could always put on my British Council lecturer's hat, I thought, and if I did, well

and good, I could come out as . . . what? A Jew? One of 'them'? I didn't know. Of course what I found was a country more sharply divided even than the Britain of Margaret Thatcher I had just left, and I found that on the whole the people I met and mingled with were more strongly against the policies of the Likud government than I was. I made some wonderful friends, people I felt I understood and who understood me perhaps as few people did in Europe. I began to return regularly to see these people and to take part in various literary and educational projects. Then came the first intifada and I felt I did not want to visit a country where it seemed to be official policy to break the arms of children. My liberal friends begged me to come: 'If people like you don't show solidarity with us, who will?' they said. I tried to explain that it was not a question of solidarity. I was not making an ideological or a political point. I simply had no wish to be in a country where this sort of thing was happening. Of course those were innocent days compared to what has followed, the derailing of the Oslo talks, the murder of Rabin and the whole avalanche of disastrous decisions on all sides that have led us to what is surely the darkest time ever in the history of the region.

The seeds of that darkness of course lie far back in time: in the Zionist dream, in the horrors of the Holocaust, in the establishment of the state of Israel on land that no one had the right to give to anyone. But different decisions along the way would surely have led to a different present. And even today one must believe that there is still hope, if only the right decisions are taken and leaders of courage and vision come to the fore. History is full of mistakes and human beings eventually accommodate themselves to them. International law is there to help smooth the path of accommodation. To flout it is surely a recipe for disaster.

When cousins do things you don't like the sound of, you wince. You may be wrong, and you certainly can't expect to be listened to if you offer advice, even though you mean well and



have your cousins' best interests at heart. But what is intolerable is your father telling you never to criticize because a family must always present a united front. That is the ultimate betrayal of the family's humanity. Jews should know this better than most.