

On 12 July, 2005 my family drove our rented car back to Netanya, a large coastal city in Israel, north of Tel Aviv—but traffic had stopped. Ambulances and police cars were speeding their way down the shoulders of the highway towards Netanya. It wasn't until I got a string of phone calls from worried friends that I understood: a suicide bomber from the Islamic Jihad had detonated himself on the crosswalk outside the mall where I had been two days before. Five people were killed that day and about 90 wounded as nails and ball bearings were packed tightly inside the bomber's belt to increase his range. To do more damage. To hurt more people. I sat, 20 minutes away from their murder, with my sister and parents in our rented car. I had not heard the screams. I did not even hear an explosion. It was the first attack in five months.

My family returned the next year—we brought my grandparents this time, and I went off on my own to volunteer on Kibbutz Hokuk in the north. I wasn't even 18, and it was my first real taste of independence. I relished the chance to soak up local opinions, questioning and listening to what my new friends would share about their experiences in the Israeli army. I was often surprised by what I heard: few people I met wanted to be in the army, and few people enjoyed their experience. Yet there was no anger or resentment, just resolve in its necessity. They served as their fathers and mothers had served, as their brothers and sisters would. They served so that their children and children's children would be able to have a home in Israel too.

On 12 July, 2006, the one-year anniversary of my first encounter with terror in Israel, came my second. That Wednesday, Hezbollah crossed the Lebanese border into Israel, kidnapping two soldiers and killing three. The Israelis who worked with me on the kibbutz were cautious to explain the situation to me: I was from Canada. Canadians don't live beside bomb shelters, have homes equipped with gas masks, nor do they ride in bullet-proof buses. I had never been in a war zone before; I had never been a civilian target.

When *ketusha* rockets began falling, one of the men who worked on the ranch said it looked like a fireworks show up in the hills. I was awakened frequently that night by the explosions sounding, wondering if they had hit their targets. As scared as I was, I knew that Israel had seen worse; Israel had survived worse.

Reality sunk in when the *ketushas* struck further south than ever before. They were falling all around me. Cities were shutting down. The kibbutz's guest houses grew empty; the restaurant employees lost their jobs because there was nobody left to serve. I have a friend, Shaked, who lives close to the Lebanese border. I met her when she came to visit Canada, and last summer my family and I visited her settlement, Moshav Dishon. Shaked had explained that strategically, Dishon was a very safe place because it was built amongst hills, making it difficult to attack. So when homes there were struck by rockets, Shaked called immediately, assuring me that she was safe, and that I shouldn't worry because nobody had been hurt. Her village was evacuated and families were taken in by strangers in the south. Shaked's family was given one bedroom to share among the six of them, with four other families also seeking refuge in that house. The Israeli government, various Jewish agencies and private philanthropists funded programs and arranged housing for the tens of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons from the north. Many of them were uprooted quickly, leaving everything behind—praying that their homes would not be bombed. Wishing that when the war was over, they would still have lives to reclaim in the north. Whenever I turned on the TV, ads streamed with phone numbers to call if you had space to open your home or if you needed one. The solidarity and Israeli people's sense of responsibility for their fellow citizens astounded me—the pace at which such programs were implemented and how unitarily the country seemed to respond was awe-inspiring. Whenever I spoke with Shaked, she would express how grateful she felt for the goodwill and kindness that was shown. But all she really wanted was to go back home.

My parents had been staying in an apartment in Netanya and were out of the *ketushas'* range. I spoke with them everyday, insisting that I was

safe. I felt safe. The community farm-settlement where I was boasted about 80 families. Hezbollah preferred dense civilian locations to maximize both damage and casualties when catapulting their rockets over the border. And, my friends would add, "Hokuk sounds Arab. We won't be a target." (Ironically, though I didn't know it at the time, Arab Israeli villages were struck by Hezbollah-fired *ketushas* as well.)

So I stopped being scared. Instead I focused on the uncomfortable certainty around me. Soldiers stopped coming home every second weekend. People I worked with were called off in the night to join the Reserves. I could not help but lament that each effort Israel made to warn Lebanese civilians to evacuate an area before an attack, alerted Hezbollah as well. Every Lebanese civilian killed in this war was one too many, and I admire Israel's integrity and caution. But my friends were on the front lines, 18-year-olds were fighting this war for me, and those warnings by leaflets, announcements—even text messages—jeopardized the Israeli army's safety and contributed to its high death toll.

I returned to Canada at the end of July and I felt as though I was turning my back on Israel. My family and I sat in the airport and listened to Canadian news reported that a Muslim-American opened fire at the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, wounding six people. He was unhappy about what was going on in Israel.

It hit me. Somehow I felt safer in a war zone, working, sleeping, eating to the sound of bombs until I stopped flinching, and it too became a part of my routine. Four kilometres away. That was the closest *ketusha* that fell. The smoke billowed over the field it struck above houses on the kibbutz. My boss had to drive across Tiberias to get a replacement part for a piece of farm equipment. A *ketusha* fell just shy of the road he was on maybe five minutes before he sped past. And somehow, the certainty of an enemy made me less anxious than the anonymity of my Canadian contemporaries and their opinions ranging to every extreme—worst of all, perhaps, being indifference.

I was transfixed by the daily reports. People criticised Israel's "disproportionate" reaction to Hezbollah. But what is an appropriate reaction to terror? Sometimes I feel like I am stuck in the rental car on the highway to Netanya. There I sit, waiting for horror to be swept off the streets, for remnants of atrocities to be discarded. There I sit, waiting for the roads to clear, the sirens to stop and traffic to continue as usual. I resist every impulse to bolt, open the locked doors, rest both my feet on the solid asphalt, and take a look around before the gloss and judgments take over.

In the land of Milk and Honey

A journey through Israel
written by Rivka Kushne

