The end of Jewish Jerusalem

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Abstract
I have no idea how my father met Eshkol, but there has never been more than a handful of Israelis living in Ottawa. Eshkol's television sales and repair shop had an oblong white sign with large navy blue lettering hanging outside, the kind you see on cheap motels: Open Seven Days a Week. My brother, Our-Stan, and I hung out there on Sundays and sometimes after school. This allowed my mother to shop uninhibited without the bother of two kids tagging along. She couldn't leave us at home with my father because he disliked days off. They were something to be avoided like running out of gas or milk. So, we were dropped off at Eshkol's and tried to stay out of the way while my father worked. 'Whatever you do, don't bother Eshkol,' Abba warned us every week. 'Without him you wouldn't have food in your stomachs,' he added.
I have no idea how my father met Eshkol, but there has never been more than a handful of Israelis living in Ottawa. Eshkol’s television sales and repair shop had an oblong white sign with large navy blue lettering hanging outside, the kind you see on cheap motels: Open Seven Days a Week. My brother, Our-Stan, and I hung out there on Sundays and sometimes after school. This allowed my mother to shop uninhibited without the bother of two kids tagging along. She couldn’t leave us at home with my father because he disliked days off. They were something to be avoided like running out of gas or milk. So, we were dropped off at Eshkol’s and tried to stay out of the way while my father worked. ‘Whatever you do, don’t bother Eshkol,’ Abba warned us every week. ‘Without him you wouldn’t have food in your stomachs,’ he added.

‘Life is avoda, work,’ he’d insist when my mother would ask him to take a break. ‘I don’t know who told you Canadians that life was about happiness.’

I never knew my father was Yemenite until I was already in university. My mother had told me he was Israeli and he was not a talker. I knew he was as strong as the desert heat and just as relentless. The clang of barbells hitting a floor or clashing together still make me think of him; his powerful inhalations and robust exhalations could tilt you off balance if you weren’t careful and stood too close. To watch my father doing his daily work-outs was to fill your being with a potent mixture of admiration and fear. Admiration that the human body could be capable of such physical strength; there were dozens of framed photographs on the basement walls of my father on his back with his hairy, dark brown arms and legs in the air balancing all six of us kids on his four limbs and smiling with ease into the camera. Then there was the fear, the shattering sounds of impact: fist meeting plaster, plaster giving way to muscle. It’s a good thing his own father apprenticed him to a carpenter — it made it a breeze for him to fix the holes his flying fists or his muscular heels put through the walls. It made it cheaper, too.

My eyes often lingered on my friends’ fathers. I would see them at pick-up or drop-off time at my Jewish day school. They wore neckties and suit pants and looked like they were on their way to, or had just come from temperature-controlled rooms. But my father wore the identical pair of plum-blue shorts all year round with wide-strapped brown or black sandals and pink, green or yellow short-sleeved button-downs that he only ever buttoned half way, revealing his massive hairy chest. Either the customers at Eshkol’s didn’t care or didn’t come in often enough to buy or repair a television set to notice. I am convinced that he got those shorts looting makeshift Egyptian army bases when he was a paratrooper in the Sinai War. I even mentioned this to him once.
‘Oh vadai, we take lots from them. Blankets, food, you know, cans? My mother blessed me she was so happy. In Jerusalem it was freezing.’

‘And your shorts?’

‘What these? The blue?’

‘Yes those.’

‘You going to help me match the socks or you going to talk shtuyot? Now you don’t like my shorts?’

In the icy Ottawa winters when the radio was instructing the public to leave each tap running slightly so the water pipes wouldn’t freeze, expand and burst, my father added a winter coat to his wardrobe, one that reached the edges of his shorts. His exposed thighs and calves were covered in black hair curling out of his dark brown skin. His thin neatly-trimmed black moustache sat on his purple lips that hid gleaming white teeth. He had no idea that he looked like a dangerous foreign flasher to the average pale, thin-boned Ottawan.

As a teenager, from October through March I dreaded escorting him into the bank, which he often asked me to do as his spelling was not good enough to fill out withdrawal and deposit slips. I held my breath as he pulled back the heavy glass doors; were people simply going to throw their money at us before they fled or push some red button that would signal the impending arrival of a police car?

‘Abba it’s minus thirty outside. Your legs are naked and you’re wearing a long coat. Please can you put on a pair of pants?’

‘I put boots okay. This make you feel better?’

‘No Abba, a big coat, bare legs and boots? They will think you’re a flasher or a thief or both. Can’t you take Mom to the bank?’

‘What does it mean flasher? Your mother with me in a bank! She only spends money. If she knew what I save she buy more junk for the cupboards. When I was a kid I do whatever my father told me and I don’t tell him what to wear, so don’t get too smart.’

I pictured my father then as a twelve-year-old boy in Israel’s first year of life: 1948. He was late for school again. He had spent too much time in the provisional control room on his roof, inhaling the sights and sounds of the emerging Israeli air force. There are pilots practically within arm’s reach speaking in low tones as they boil water for their first cup of coffee. A few of them are sleeping in makeshift tents or single worn-out sleeping bags, but most have already scraped the last spoonfuls of dysa, a hot breakfast cereal, out of their bowls and are preparing for another day of war.

‘Assaf, get the leftovers while they are still hot. Assaf!’ his mother calls to him in Arabic. She does not speak Temani like his father, only Hebrew and Arabic.

Assaf scatters the rest of the yellow grains to the five rust-coloured chickens they keep in their front yard, and begins to climb the wooden ladder the soldiers have attached to the back wall of their stone house: these are the stairs to the airport headquarters.
‘Hello boy,’ says the first soldier he sees as he steps onto the black, freshly tarring roof. ‘It’s Assaf, right?’

The boy smiles. He cannot understand the soldier’s question. A Jewish soldier, who speaks Hebrew in a strange accent, tells him there are men here from unimaginable places like Canada and Austria and many are not Jewish. They are all volunteers, eager to help the new Jewish state.

‘This must be very exciting for you Assaf, eh? Imagine the roof of your house is full of soldiers, your field an airport, a boy’s dream, eh?’

The twelve-year-old smile re-emerges, but his mouth does not move.

‘Well, here’s your breakfast. Take it while it’s hot. You’re lucky we always get more than enough. Beats your rations, eh? Maybe in the afternoon there will be some candy for you and your little brother.’

I see him pat Assaf’s head and return to the heap of maps and papers that cover a turned-over crate that doubles as a table. The boy steals another minute to watch him as he picks up his walkie-talkie and begins to speak. Soon the pilot is deep in conversation with another soldier. They are marking up the maps in different colours: black lines that close off parts, red lines even they can’t cross, blue circles of open spaces.

Six soldiers have their heads stuck inside small airplane engines in the recently flattened field behind Assaf’s home. He can hear them tinkering with the metal parts, the occasional curse in Arabic, Hebrew or English erupts from their mouths as they struggle with something heavy or something that won’t come loose.

Every few minutes their heads pop up like rabbits emerging from their hiding places, and they sip steaming cups of muddy Turkish coffee and take long drags on their cigarettes as they pause. There is the constant whine of airplanes overhead, the occasional sound of a shell bursting in the close-by centre of Jerusalem. On the ground, the chickens are fighting, squawking loudly for the last seeds on the hard soil in the front garden. Strange languages reach his ears and he watches the accompanying vivid hand gestures the men use in order to make themselves understood.

‘Assaf! Your little brother is hungry.’

His mother’s voice penetrates his thoughts. He becomes conscious of the hot pot of dysa in his hands. He stirs the cereal with the wooden spoon his mother gave him before he climbed the ladder, and turns in the direction of his kitchen at the same time.

‘Ima, I’m coming.’

In an instant he is inside his own kitchen and his mother is spooning out the dysa into small white hard bowls.

‘So nice of the soldiers to give us their leftovers. What else do they have up there, Assaf? I see many supplies coming and going. Is there anything else today?’
‘I didn’t have a chance to ask, but yesterday the blonde one said they would share everything with us, maybe candy later. I will check again after school Ima,’ he answers her gently and then leans over to kiss her, pleased that she allows him this show of affection; normally she shies away from even a quick hug.

* * * * *

When I was eight, wars and daring soldiers were the stuff of television shows and movies I disliked watching. I had a lot of time to watch television at Eshkol’s where my father worked. He was the new manager of the large television store. There you could bring in every kind of television that had ever existed, practically obsolete black-and-whites; gleaming polished new ones that still smelled like Styrofoam from the delivery boxes; portable ones as small as lunch-pails. You could have your television repaired, trade it in, or sell it. Eshkol’s shop was in a commercial area of town called Glenn Hill. It was one long line of fast-food restaurants: McDonald’s, Dairy Queen, Wendy’s, Burger King. In between there were independently owned shops that sold shoes, household objects, clothing and there also was Eshkol’s TV Repairs and Sales.

Eshkol was his surname but no one seemed to know his first name. He had bald-in-the-front hair of a burnt-orange colour. His high, white creased forehead and his thick brown glasses dominated his face and he had no other distinguishing facial features, no beard or moustache. A black leather motorcycle jacket was his only distinctive article of clothing. I can’t tell you if he was tall or short, fat or thin, but he was probably none of those things or my mother would have mentioned it to me often enough that I would remember. She has a habit of referring to people by weight and height that is out of fashion.

‘Which one? You mean the daughter? Oh, she was always big, even as a girl. What can you do? The guy who came to fix the windows? God he was tall. People say Jews aren’t tall, but my own brother was six-foot-four. But who remembers? He’s been gone so long. What a waste.’

Next door to Eshkol’s was a children’s hair dressing salon. There were Sesame Street drawings on the walls. Big Bird smiling down at Ernie and Burt, Cookie Monster with a plate full of crumbs, his blue furry cheeks bulging. A large paved parking lot encircled both shops and Eshkol’s cherry-red motorcycle was always parked outside the front glass door of his own store. Eshkol’s door had a bell attached to it which announced each entry. Inside the shop it was large and spacious, and humming with the muted sounds of TV. You entered into a thinly carpeted showroom full of the latest television sets.

The most prestigious was an Electrolux, but there were many large floor models with chestnut-wood panelling. As you went further in there was the repair area: long, dirty and narrow. Middle-aged Jewish men with names like Syd and Saul were bent over dusty television tubes, twisting around different coloured wiring with miniature screwdrivers.
Calendars depicting plastic smiling women in strapless or low-cut tops and tight jeans or elastic-waist shorts hung on nails jammed into the walls. Backless television sets covered most of the available space except the inches occupied by black saucer-like ashtrays and coffee cups that always had cigarette ash mixed in with the dregs.

The repairmen taught me how to ‘vacuum’ out the thick dust from the maze of wires at the back of a TV, how to put the tubes in the ‘tester’ to see if they still worked or needed replacing. A third section of the shop was partitioned off with glass walls. It was the office for calculating payments and receipts. There were three black telephones on the large desk. The kind with round dials and the phone number of the shop written in blue ink in the centre. There was also an answering machine, a grey filing cabinet, and wastepaper basket.

A wide flight of stained, carpeted stairs led down into the basement that I knew was as large as the upstairs. I never went down there because it emanated foreign, off-putting smells. The air changed, thickened, as you lowered yourself onto the first step, which I sometimes did half seriously, already panic-stricken at my childish daring. My lungs suddenly seemed threatened, in danger of closing, as though there was an invisible wall between the first and second floor.

My father told me that Eshkol was divorced and he lived downstairs. His ex-wife lived in a camping trailer near-by and they were still friends. When my father saw me place my sneakers on the first step, he cautioned me with the tilt of his head and his raised eyebrows not to go downstairs. I had learned at a young age how to read my father’s rippling body language and wide-eyed facial expressions in much the same way as I imagine he had internalized the meaning of his own father’s small movements, his voice.

* * * * *

‘Rivka!’

All three of them jump at Father’s customary bark. Father wears the clothing of his socialist political party, Mapai. Loyal Mapainiks wear khaki from head to toe, Shabbat and weekdays. He always adds his dusty gray hat to this uniform, never a kippah. Assaf thought he had gone to work.

‘Do you know what happened to me today?’ Father growls. ‘I was expecting my promotion. Went in early. That promotion was for me. In my hand.’

Three sets of eyes stare down at the cold stone floor. Even at seven, Adi knows better than to look up. His cereal-covered spoon hangs between his fingers. Now the dysa will be cold.

‘Do you know what they did? The mamzerim! Do you know what they did? They brought in this Russian Jew, some Ashkenazi from Russia. He doesn’t know the first thing. The first thing he does not know. They gave him the position and then they asked me, me who has been working, no, slaving for a decade and a
half for them, an honest to God slave I have been, they asked me to teach him the
ropes. Can you believe that?

Father’s black eyes are exploding like the small pieces of shrapnel bursting
on Ben Yehuda Street. Sharp and jagged. He is clean-shaven and he has smooth
spotless desk-job hands. He glares at his wife. Finally she looks up.

‘Well, that’s your party,’ she spits at him in Arabic. ‘Your party whose behinds,
you kiss day and night. What do you think? You’re a token Avraham. You know?
One Kurdi, one Parsi, one Moroccai and one Temani. You went up a little, but no
more. You’ll never go up more. That’s your party,’ she repeats.

Assaf can see her shoulders tense, and he knows her feet are ready. His own
toes twitch inside his shoes.

‘Silence!’ Avraham snarls and lunges for her at the same time.

But she is too fast for him, too prepared. She dives into the next room and
quickly hops onto the balcony; her most common escape route. The brothers hear
her pounding feet on the stone path that leads to the green iron gate at the end of
the garden. Soon she will be cursing her husband with her girlfriend, Mazal, over
fresh doughy saluf dipped in hilbeh. Mazal feels sorry for her.

Father returns from the balcony. He is breathing heavily. He is young, healthy
and has never smoked, but luckily for his wife he was never a good runner. Tears
spill onto the floor and Assaf remembers his little brother, Adi.

‘Don’t worry. I will stay here until Ima gets back. I won’t leave you alone.
Come Adi, finish the dysa.’

‘It’s cold now.’

I knew that in the centre of their living room stood a kerosene heater, called a
primos. My father told me it had been their only source of heat until they bought
an oven, but by then he’d become a soldier. Besides, kerosene was rationed along
with all other necessary supplies in Jerusalem.

‘He is not alone. You have school now, no time to heat baby food. Get to work.
You’ll be late. What will you be later on, the way you are about studies?’

‘I don’t want to go anyhow. I hate it. Why do you want me to go so much?
You just said the Ashkenazim didn’t give you the job you wanted. Why do you
push me toward them?’

‘You will learn something there, that’s why. What do the Temanim learn at
school? They have nothing. The teachers don’t know much more than the students.
Go.’

He said this last word in a tone that made my father understand; if he doesn’t
get going his father will simply start barking unstoppably like the wild dog they
kept tied outside in the back of the garden to scare the Arabs away. That was
before the war, before the Arabs in the near-by villages fled, Abandoning their
homes seemingly overnight.
Adi grabs his brother’s arm, but Assaf shakes it off gently and goes. It is finally spring, maybe he can start cleaning up people’s yards and save enough money to buy a bicycle.

‘Hey Assaf! You’re late, too? I will walk with you until my school.’ It was Moshiko, his best friend. He was half skipping half flying down the narrow sidewalk, with a worn-out siddur under one arm and a small piece of newspaper stuffed into his front pocket. Inside was flat brown pita stuffed with hard-boiled egg. Assaf notices it and realizes that he has nothing for lunch again. ‘My mother didn’t want to let me go today. She heard too much bombing in the night. It’s quieter now, so I begged her to let me go, otherwise, she’d have me feeding chickens and searching for wild herbs and grasses in the fields all day. I hear on kibbutzim they have real fruits and vegetables, maybe we should go there.’

‘B’emet? You beg to go to school. I wish I could go to your school. I swear if that teacher twists my ear today I will grow up to burn his house down.’

‘Misken you are. To gehenom with those white Jews, worse than the Arabs. Don’t worry. Next year you will be bar mitzvah, after that you can leave that awful place and come with the rest of us to school. Your father won’t be able to control you after thirteen. Besides, we’re going to make money. I’m learning how to fix engines. Motorcycles, cars, anything. I’ll teach you.’

‘You’ll teach me,’ Assaf repeats. ‘Baseder, my friend.’

A bomb explodes, but Moshiko and Assaf walked on. It isn’t close enough to stop and look for cover. The ground does not jump beneath their feet. Not yet.

‘Hey? There’s one of our small planes. Do you think they will let me practice on the engines a little? Use their tools?’ Moshiko asks.

‘We can ask them. My house has become the new Jewish border of Jerusalem,’ Assaf answers. He does not try to disguise his pride.

‘Your father, he doesn’t care about the airport?’

‘They promised to pay him after the war. You should have seen how they levelled the field. Chik chak. Nothing for them. They share everything with us. Come over later and see.’

They arrive at the corner where Moshiko turns off; for Assaf there is another kilometre and a half to go.

Father does not return home that night. Although it has never happened before, no one glances at the heavy iron gate or mentions his name.

‘Go up to the roof and give some fresh eggs to the soldiers.’

That’s all Mother says the entire evening while she boils wild grass in the week’s water ration. They will use whatever water is left in the pot for the dirty dishes, which they assemble and clean in one bucket and the remaining drops for the toilet.

Assaf does not go up to the roof until Moshiko arrives. A red-headed soldier shows the boys an airplane engine. The cigarette smoke fills the air and coffee
flows on the roof endlessly, like the British soldiers on their Sunday marches under the Occupation.

‘Hey, your eyes are red, ata baseder?’ Chaim asks Assaf. He is one of the soldiers in charge of the airport.

‘It’s just the smoke,’ he answers, half grinning.

‘Here, have a piece of chocolate.’

His hand was warm. Assaf feels him slip a square of chocolate into the pocket of his tight faded jacket. Moshiko’s head was buried in an airplane engine, but Assaf promises himself he will share the rare treat with him later.

As dawn breaks, the chickens wake the boys as usual and Assaf is the first to force himself out of bed and head for the washroom. They are the only ones on the street with an indoor toilet and bath. The rest of the crowded road uses outhouses and the public bathhouse once a week.

Another day passes with no sign of Father. Mother’s face relaxes a little. Maybe he has disappeared like the British patrols and their vicious dogs that never drooled on their polished black boots.

After school, the boys help Mother. They slice hard prickly sabras, the only fruit growing wild in Jerusalem. There is a knock at the iron gate.

‘A policeman came. It’s your father. He’s in the hospital,’ Mother tells them when she returns down the stone path. The only hospital is run by nuns.

‘His leg is broken; shrapnel from a bomb. He was so furious about the promotion when he left here. He probably just galloped off to work like a donkey and thought himself invisible in the centre of town, in the middle of a war.’

Mother could have been discussing the squashed juke she found on the bottom of her shapeless shoe in the morning, or the time Mazal accidentally tore the wedding dress she had preserved all the way from Yemen for her seven daughters. She could never be sentimental about a wedding dress, even one that was not her own.

An explosion erupts in Assaf’s mind and he remembers the bomb that exploded the day before on his way to school.

‘You have to go to the hospital to visit him after school tomorrow,’ she continues quietly.

The sound of the bomb is still in-between the boy’s ears. It had not seemed threateningly close. Sometimes only one landed and then there was time before another one. Time enough to get to a bomb shelter. Sometimes many landed one after the other and there wasn’t much time. The friends had dug their hands deeper into their pockets and suddenly their shoulders were touching, but they kept on walking. Assaf wondered if he should save money for a bicycle, which would lengthen the life of his shoes or if he should buy shoes he could run fast in.

‘Assaf, you must promise me you will go. He still has the paycheck from Mapai in his pocket. If you don’t visit him he won’t give us anything.’
‘I have to go to a school I hate. I have to go to a hospital. I don’t want to see him.’

‘The soldiers won’t be on the roof forever. Who knows how long? There is little need for cleaners during a war maybe.’

She stops there and her hard brown eyes catch his and he cannot look away.

‘Okay, bashed Ima.’

Before the sun sets the sky is a rich cloudless blue, the airplanes are still visible. Assaf looks up and spots two. They are flying low and he knows in minutes they will land in the field behind his home, then the weary pilots will climb the ladder up to his roof for some lukewarm water or a cup of hot coffee. The faint purr of the engines overhead comfort him. He is curious about the red-headed soldier; is he one of the pilots in the sky now and what supplies is he carrying today? Powdered eggs and powdered milk or bullets and rifles?

* * * * *

Eshkol’s was something I had forgotten about, like the pilots my father met on his roof as a boy during Israel’s first war. Then one day my mother was exhausted from showing off my new son. We were visiting Ottawa from Israel and she had organised a lavish Shabbat tea. Some of her old friends I remembered and others were strangers. There was one woman who was fond of my baby; she had trouble returning him.

‘You don’t remember her?’ my mother asked me afterwards, as she filled her outstretched palm with the crumbs she was sweeping off the table with her other hand. ‘Well, I guess you wouldn’t.’

Then she laughed girlishly; like we were friends at a sleepover, not mother and daughter. I felt a kind of gaiety surge through her like it made her touch her youth again to think about it. Afterwards, this surprised me as I would have expected something closer to a look of disgust and a shake of the head, as though turning away from a close-up view of road-kill while sitting in the passenger seat.

‘Abba, why did you hang out with these guys? How could you work for someone like Eshkol?’ I asked him after the conversation with my mother. I couldn’t stop thinking about the woman at the tea, holding my baby and cooing.

‘Hang out, shmang out. What does it mean to hang out? Eshkol, he was downstairs, he gave me his shop to run. That’s how I paid the mortgage, the bills, you think your mother could care less about bills? Visa’s calling me, not her. What do I care what drek is downstairs? They were all dopies, dummies, why God makes them I don’t know, but he makes them. Me? I made money with the TVs. It was good money all right. At least he didn’t give me to clean floors like the Canadian Jews when I asked them for a job.’

‘He made porno movies down there— of himself and all of his girlfriends, including his Jewish ex-wives. She was his first wife. No children.’ My mother emphasised the word children. ‘He used to take out Jewish girls, get them drunk...
and take them down there. Before they knew what was happening he was filming himself with these women. Reels and reels. Think of it, they’re old ladies like her now. Then he’d invite a bunch of guys downstairs; they’d drink and do God knows what and watch. He used to watch himself with these women for hours. Oh, he was something I tell you. He was a real...

She stopped reminiscing and looked into my green and gold flecked eyes. I looked directly back into her identical pair. Perhaps she was waiting for my reaction or maybe she was worried about these revelations, about how they reflected on her.