

Learning Again, Learning Anew

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Welcome Back

When I meet Neta, I meet her neighborhood of Nachlaot. The young woman subletting her apartment to me for the summer is a beautiful university student with excellent English and a thick Israeli accent, with “r”s so dense she sometimes sounds French. She wears jeans and a sleeveless top, and as she leads me to her apartment around the corner from a charedi [ultra-Orthodox] synagogue, I realize I know nothing about this area of Jerusalem.

Neta’s tiny loft is a perfect fit for me and my friend Camille. I confirm that, yes, we will be taking the apartment for the next two months, and Neta calls her landlady, Michal, on the phone. As they talk logistics, I hear Neta’s side of the conversation in fast-paced Hebrew.

“Should she come to you today to sign the contract and give you the checks?”

A pause, as Michal replies on the other end. Neta looks me up and down.

“She’s fine, she’s wearing a skirt that covers her knees – these girls observe shabbat and kashrut, it’s fine.”

I give Neta a puzzled look, and she chuckles.

Michal’s home, Neta tells me, is in Ramat Eshkol – an area I know, and know to be a mostly charedi community. Michal is checking to ensure that I am dressed appropriately to travel there today. I kick myself internally – if I had known Michal lived there, I would have dressed more conscientiously. I have clothes designated for these situations, for covering up and blending in, as most Jerusalem tourists and residents know to have.

“What you’re wearing is fine!” Neta assures me.

“It’s okay,” I reply, “but I should have worn longer sleeves.”

Neta gestures to her own outfit.

“It’s really okay,” she says, “as long as you’re not wearing something like this.”

This is my second day here, and the situation throws me right back into the uncomfortable rhythm of life in Israel. Having spent a gap year in Jerusalem before starting university, this place is full of memories, stories, and habits I once learned and have since forgotten. Over the next two months, I will relearn the habit of planning my dress based on the neighborhoods I’ll be visiting. I will relearn some colloquial Hebrew. I will relearn how to fake an Israeli accent in the market on a Friday afternoon. I will relearn how not to cry on the #418 from Beit Shemesh to Jerusalem, as I make my way past male passengers to the back of the bus, where charedi women sit in silence and invisibility. Over the course of my internship with the Yerushalmit Movement, I will relearn so many intricacies of navigating this place, but I will *learn* much more for the first time.

A Crash Course in Dialogue

My time in Jerusalem is always framed by the fact that, in more ways than one, it is always a return. It is the city where I spent one of the most formative years of my life, and around which so much of my heritage revolves. I am an insider there in that I am a Jew, an observant Jew, a Hebrew-speaking observant Jew...a Hebrew-speaking observant Ashkenazi Jew. There are certainly other facets of my identity that factor in, but these – religious identity, religious practice, language, and ethnicity – are some of the most significant. I also have the insider knowledge of having lived in Jewish communities for my entire life, and of having lived in Jerusalem, if only for a short while.

In other, often more relevant ways, I am an outsider. My American-ness is primary. I lack the salient insider knowledge of those who grow up and truly, immersively live in this uniquely complicated region and society.

As an intern with the Yerushalmit Movement, I can speak Hebrew well enough to interact with fellow

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employees, plan and execute events, and participate minimally in staff meetings. Discussions are framed by the mission of this grassroots organization: developing a vibrant, pluralistic, and inclusive Jerusalem. This means breaking down barriers between communities based on religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and more.

I spend most staff meetings listening as closely as possible to staff members: Shira, Ya'ara, Boaz, Nir, and Sarah. Sarah is the only non-native – she moved to Israel from California years ago, and is, mercifully, my supervisor. Regardless, I am visibly, audibly, palpably American in a way that she no longer is.

My level of religious observance is also unique in their context. I am the only employee who fasts on Shiva Asar B'tammuz, a so-called “minor” fast day. I politely decline the spread of food offered at a large meeting occurring that day.

One of the Movement's hallmark initiatives is the Meeting Place project. Sarah calls this series of Thursday night dialogue circles, held in the bustling town center of Jerusalem, her “baby.”

The Meeting Place project began in 2015. That summer, at the Jerusalem Pride Parade, 16-year-old Shira Banki was murdered. A charedi man went on a rampage at the parade, stabbing Shira and wounding five others in his attack. The man, Yishai Schlissel, had just been released from his ten-year prison sentence for committing the same act at the 2005 Pride Parade, where he stabbed three parade participants.¹

The LGBTQ+ community of Jerusalem needed to mourn. And the charedi community of Jerusalem needed to pay respects. Partnering with the Banki

family, the Yerushalmit Movement hosted a public *shiva* in Zion Square, in the center of Jerusalem. Night after night, Jerusalem residents of all backgrounds showed up in the square to mourn, to talk, and to heal. At a time when the distance between groups might have prevailed, Zion Square became their meeting place.²

The Yerushalmit Movement kept the dialogue going, establishing Zion Square as a weekly meeting place for individuals to discuss some of the most pressing issues in Israeli society: gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other facets of identity; politics, religion, and their inevitable intersections.

With the help of other organizations and initiatives, the square remains a crucial space for LGBTQ+ community organizing and action. The Meeting Place dialogue circles often feature a bright Israeli Pride flag – its rainbow stripes emblazoned with a white Star of David. The combination of the circle, the Yerushalmit Movement's signs, and the flag attract quite a bit of attention from passersby.

My first week attending a Meeting Place, I arrive in the fabled Zion Square ten minutes before 9:00 p.m., when the dialogue circle is meant to begin.

I see nothing.

Untrue. I see quite a lot. This is “the heart of Jerusalem,” after all. On a Thursday night, the new glittery market fair takes up the majority of the square, with energetic local craftspeople selling jewelry and art from their brightly lit booths. A band to the side of the square plays a mixture of Israeli music and covers of American pop. Meanwhile, a visibly religious couple performs on the

other side – a bearded man strumming his guitar, a woman emphatically swaying as she plays her violin, her skirt flowing to the ground and her hair covered in a matching scarf. People mill about the market, listening and looking and watching, sometimes purchasing. The Light Rail train runs along Yaffo Street at the bottom of the square: count 10 minutes or so, and the bells ring, pedestrians scatter off the tracks, and the silver train rushes past with deep rumbling and a gust of wind.

But I see no one from the Yerushalmit Movement. I frantically call and text Sarah, worried I may have misunderstood the place or time of our weekly event. After about 20 minutes, she replies, directing me behind the market, right alongside the train tracks. I circle the market and finally find her, with the flag's broom-handle pole resting on her shoulder.

She stands alongside several people I learn are regulars – friends of the Yerushalmit Movement, friends of Sarah – who are consistently present at these Zion Square dialogue circles. They chat in pairs as a journalist snaps photos of Sarah laying woven mats on the ground. The night is too windy to unfurl the organization's lengthy sign designating this as the Meeting Place, so we resign to leaving it aside. After another 10 minutes of straightening things out and shifting our camp at the request of some salespeople from the market, we sit down.

Dina is there – a woman with whom I have been corresponding via email to translate some of the organization's promotional material into English. She, along with her husband Dani, is a friend and committed volunteer for the Yerushalmit Movement. She and Sarah have a quick and quiet conversation:

we have not planned the dialogue circle as thoroughly as I'm told we usually do. This past week, after all, we hosted our annual Jerusalem Day Family March, which monopolized our time and attention.

But Dina improvises. We talk about the nature of a Jewish state – what it means to be a religious state, what it means to have a Chief Rabbinate with enforceable power. Dina is engaging and thought-provoking, attentively reading the group, skipping the most obvious questions to ask the more difficult questions ones [i.e. "What do you *like* about the Rabbinate?"]. The people in the square come alive, they open up, they argue, they speak their minds. She pushes them to do so, and they respond.

Meanwhile, Sarah moves in and out of the circle, all the while proudly carrying the Jewish LGBTQ+ pride flag. This, she tells me, determines what happens next. When she does not bring the flag, the group has peaceful, engaged, seated dialogue. When she brings it, we attract more attention – aggressive, homophobic attention. After about half an hour of the dialogue circle, I notice Sarah having a somewhat heated discussion with a small crowd of young men. A few of us rise to listen, and it quickly becomes clear that they have engaged her because she is carrying the flag. They interrogate her about the sinful nature of "her behavior," using slurs, hurling verses of the Torah at her as incriminating evidence.

For Sarah, a trained professional in non-violent communication, and a religious lesbian activist, this is routine. She patiently responds to their accusations and questions, asking them questions in return. Humanizing herself to them as an actual, real-life, gay human being.

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The young men grow more rowdy and amused as Sarah remains collected and clever. As her conversation continues, I notice more popping up around us. Dina and Dani and other Yerushalmit Movement regulars are spontaneously engaging with other individuals and groups. Their interlocutors are of all different kinds: secular, religious, ultra-Orthodox, etc. Each conversation has unique content, dynamic, and tone.

I wander through the crowd of conversations. I watch, listen, and try to understand the fast-paced, high-energy debates, covering moral, religious, and philosophical subject matter. Most are heated from both ends: an angry accuser, and an equally angry defendant. The anger I understand: the individuals in the square spar along the lines of some of their most fundamental beliefs. Slurs and insults fly from their mouths along with furious spit.

I sympathize most with the anger of Yerushalmit Movement members and those on "our side." When faced with violent, overt bigotry, how can anyone help but immediately convey the profound damage those words inflict?

In my experience expressing myself as a woman and feminist within Orthodox Judaism, I know that instinct all too well.

Sarah, Dina, and Dani, meanwhile, conduct their interactions like the skilled non-violent communicators they are. With all the accusations and abuses flung at them, they remain in control – not only of themselves, but of the tone and content of their discussion. They challenge ideas, not by labeling them as they are – homophobic, sexist, racist – but by providing a face to demonstrate what ideas can *do*. They show pain and understanding and ultimately shed a humanized light on the causes their interlocutors so deeply fear.

Dalia, Sarah's partner and a professional psychologist, is always there with us in Zion Square as well. The two of us assume the roles of assistants to Sarah and observers of the square. I spend much of our Thursday nights with her, standing back and analyzing interactions together. With her insight and encouragement, I begin to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what really goes on in Zion Square every Thursday night. I find myself tapping into things I have learned experientially – as an Orthodox Jew, a woman, a feminist – and academically – in sociology, gender studies, Judaic studies. Dalia shares not only her

analytical, psychological lens, but also her insider knowledge of the dynamics in action and the populations involved. With her, I learn who the people in the square are and why they are here.

Each Thursday night, I study the square. And each Thursday night, the ways Sarah, Dina, and Dani, conduct themselves stick with me the most – their patience and empathy and carefully composed demeanor.

A few weeks later, at a conference for organizations working towards pluralism in Jerusalem, Sarah and I sit across from each other eating our lunch. I broach the subject: "How do you do it? And why?"

Sarah explains her logic with patience but frankness: Start a conversation by labeling someone a bigot, and you lose them immediately. To them, you are an irrational villain; they, a victim of wrongful accusation. All you accomplish is asserting that you are right and the other is wrong. In dialogue, she insists, your goal cannot be to change your interlocutor's mind. It cannot even be to establish mutual understanding, but only mutual empathy and respect. *You* [Sarah points at me enthusiastically] must take on that task: to initiate those goals and establish the dynamic necessary accomplish them. *You* must approach the person with empathy and respect – reach to meet them where they are, rather than trying to drag them over to you.

"So, you put forth all this effort to empathize with this person shouting abuse at you for who you are and what you believe. Don't you feel like you're compromising on your values?"

Sarah responds with an idea I have heard before but struggled to put

into practice: You demonstrate true confidence in your values when you are challenged directly and you *don't* aggressively defend them – especially when your goal is not to be "right", but to engage in productive dialogue, to humanize yourself and the people you are expected to represent in a particular interaction. You must empathize with the person across from you, mediate your emotional reactions while mentally holding your ground, knowing you stand firmly in your position.

"But, how is that mutual on both ends of the conversation? Where is the compromise?"

Sarah surprises me with a slow smile. "It's not! There is none! And isn't that great?"

I furrow my brow in confusion.

She explains: "Only *one* person in the conversation needs to be trained in non-violent communication for this to work. Only *one* person needs to be consciously making an effort. It's amazing!"

Week after week, I ask more questions. I participate in weekly dialogue circles for the rest of the summer, and I think about these ideas constantly. I discuss them again and again, with Sarah, with Dalia, with Dina, with other Yerushalmit Movement members, and with at least four friends outside of the Movement. Toward the end of the summer, I begin to understand.

Sarah chooses to assume all responsibility for making a conversation productive, peaceful, and empathetic. She is the target of abuse, but still willingly shoulders the burden of trying to create a point of connection between herself and the other person. For

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her, it is a privilege to take on all that responsibility, when she can move forward expecting nothing in return from her interlocutor – nothing but for them to bring themselves and their ideas to the table. With this framework, she says to her conversation partner, through her behavior: “Let’s both speak; let’s both listen. I will work to empathize with you and your thoughts, while I simultaneously work to demonstrate my own humanity to you. I will do all the mental and emotional labor to try to make this conversation substantive and constructive, to try to make you respect me as a human being. I will do that by offering you that same gesture in full force. All you need to do is speak and then listen.”

I eventually tell Sarah that I honestly feel incapable of that immersive kind of empathy, that totally unbalanced engagement with someone who has no respect for me. It seems so far out of reach, a lofty plane of pure acceptance and patience. It seems monastic. She replies that, of course, it takes significant training and practice. Over the summer, I continue to learn as I observe and absorb, from Sarah and from others, in Zion Square dialogue sessions and beyond. I try to put these strategies into practice when I have the opportunity – to hone my skills.

A few weeks after that first dialogue circle, I spend the weekend in Tzfat. An old, northern city, Tzfat is known for its population of Jews who cherish the spiritual, mystical aspects of Jewish faith and practice. I find myself, as I so often do, in a conversation about feminism, with an Orthodox man who is sure that feminism is an evil, secular invention compelling women to hate men and shirk religious obligation. A month prior, those words would have made my chest tighten. Now, instead, I

tell him I can understand that, and that it makes sense. It’s true. I *can*, and it *does*. Instead of making an argument, I find myself telling stories of my experiences, asking him to imagine himself in my situation, and then asking him about his own experiences and feelings. I muster the patience to humanize myself to another person. It’s a task that, from one standpoint, seems degrading and unreasonable. But the fact is, in Zion Square many young men, for the very first time, speak to a gay woman, and they learn she is human. In Tzfat, at least one young man for the first time meets a woman who calls herself feminist, and he learns she is human. And all I have to do is take on all the responsibility for creating mutual respect, empathizing fully while holding tightly onto my beliefs and identity, expecting nothing in return. And isn’t that great?

Pharaoh’s Daughters, Underground

It is 8:30 p.m. on a Wednesday night when I arrive at the Mashu-Mashu studio. That is to say, at 8:30 p.m I find myself standing outside a massive white brick box beside an empty children’s playground. I am here for my second time. My first trip here, two weeks ago, I got lost several times on my way over. This time, with the help of Google Maps, I navigate my way through residential streets of Kiryat Yovel to get to this particular brick box: an old community *miklat* – bomb shelter – converted into a home for the social change theater Mashu-Mashu. The Yerushalmit Movement partners with the organization for their project, “Women Changing Jerusalem.”

In Hebrew, it is called “*Meurevet Yerushalmit*” – “Involved Jerusalem,” in the feminine. I learn later that this is the name of a traditional Israeli

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dish, translated literally as “Jerusalem Mixture,” but in the feminine form. Chagit from the Yerushalmit Movement and Mirit from Mashu-Mashu run this project together, bringing ultra-Orthodox and secular Jewish women together – in a unique “mixture.”

Kiryat Yovel is a uniquely religiously diverse neighborhood, but, like much of Israel, highly segregated. There are not only barriers between the charedi and secular communities, but active tension and disdain in both directions. It is a microcosm of socioreligious tension across the country. Women Changing Jerusalem aims to bring individuals from these communities together for dialogue and community building – to dismantle norms of division and disrespect. And women, as Chagit and

And women, as Chagit and Mirit are quick to point out, are ideal bridge builders: they have unique experiences of marginalization in the context of their respective communities, as well as specialized perspectives on the needs of their families and communities.

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The project began in its first iteration in the summer of 2015. After just a few weeks, the charedi women discovered that there were Reform women in the group, and quickly abandoned the project. Reform Judaism as a formal religious movement poses a moral and existential threat to charedi society in a way that secular Jewish life does not.

Chagit and Mirit are reviving the project this summer. Their plan is to have three introductory meetings over the summer, open for women to move in and out of the group, then to start in earnest with a stable cohort in the fall. They do worry that the denominational tensions will arise yet again, but they are hopeful.

I have never been to Kiryat Yovel before this summer. Nor do I understand the pun in the project's name until it is explained to me. I also get both Chagit and Mirit's names wrong when I first time meet them. The denominational tensions in the group are unique to Israeli society. Add the factor of having to literally go underground for this group's meetings, and the whole affair is entirely disorienting. I am here for our second meeting, but for the first meeting, two weeks prior, I arrived late, lost, and confused. Chagit and Mirit are unfailingly kind and thrilled to have me, but I still feel out of place.

When I arrive for our 9:00 p.m. meeting Chagit and Mirit are not yet there. [I see a pattern in the Yerushalmit Movement's approach to punctuality – another Israeli phenomenon I must relearn.] Using the key Mirit gave me, I nervously unlock and open the heavy cellar door. I turn on the lights and head down the bomb shelter stairs to the surprising, out-of-place studio below: bright lights, wooden floors, light green paint, colorful furniture, and kitschy art hanging from the ceiling and walls. I begin to set up chairs and soon Chagit and Mirit arrive. We exchange greetings and quickly review what we have planned for the meeting.

As participants arrive, I hear tense words exchanged, but we move quickly into the survey so we can get to the substance of the meeting as soon as possible. I learn later the topic of the hushed conversation: our group has been condemned in the ultra-Orthodox community's newspaper. Ultra-Orthodox women – some of whom were part of the project's first cohort – know there are Reform women present yet again, and they are unhappy. One woman who was present at the first meeting does not show up.

A week ago, we asked each woman to bring in an "identity item" to share with the group. We go around the circle, allowing them to re-introduce themselves and tell us about their items. Women share photos, household items, sentimental objects, their own writing, others' writing with which they strongly identify, and more.

Rachel, a woman who identifies with the Reform movement, as her identity item reads a passage from a book [by an Israeli author] of historical fiction rooted in biblical narrative. In this passage, the author recounts the story from Exodus in which Pharaoh's daughter rescues the abandoned baby Moses from the Nile River and takes him into her care. Pharaoh's daughter, the author concludes, is therefore as much to credit for the Exodus from Egypt as Moses himself. She, a non-Jewish woman, has an extremely significant role in the salvation of the Jewish people. In this way, the author argues, she is a vehicle and partner of God in the Exodus story.

I look around the circle and see ultra-Orthodox women shaking their heads and muttering under their breath. They know very well that this interpretation actually draws on some traditional rabbinic sources, but to emphasize human effort alongside divine intervention, and to assign that interpretation so heavily to the daughter of Pharaoh? To them, this is heretical. The tension is palpable, but the next woman thankfully takes the reins smoothly and moves into talking about her own identity item.

Over the course of the week, after several heated discussions and passive-aggressive emails between ultra-Orthodox women and Chagit and Mirit, meetings are canceled indefinitely. The

third summer meeting does not happen, though regular meetings do in fact begin in earnest in the fall as planned. On my last phone call with Chagit, she is clearly dejected: Who is this group going to help if so many ultra-Orthodox women refuse to even be present in the room? What does this say about the future of our Jewish community? Are some gaps simply unbridgeable?

I try to instill some hope in her: Perhaps this particular gap is too wide to build one giant bridge all at once. Perhaps a series of steps are necessary. Perhaps those steps are baby steps. The group must go on, regardless of how few ultra-Orthodox women are present.

And it does. They continue to meet regularly, with some diminished attendance, but with the same energy and aspirations. Meanwhile, back in America, I continue to receive every email and message, every update on the timing and location of their meetings. With each notification I breathe a sigh of relief, happy to know that the project goes on, grateful for Chagit and Mirit's efforts. They gather women into the *miklat* of the Mashu-Mashu studio and into community, hoping against hope to effect change. Like Pharaoh's daughter doing her small part in a grand narrative of redemption, they draw them in from the Nile with outstretched hands.

Spaces

In initial meetings about the Women Changing Jerusalem project, I am asked how I perceive my role in the initiative.

I answer that with Chagit and Mirit as professional facilitators for the group, I want to help them do their job. Not to contribute too many of my own ideas, but to encourage women to engage and to share with one another.

And, as someone invested in similar work in my own communities, I hope to learn about the origins and creators of substantive pluralistic spaces. And I do.

Chagit and Mirit show me, along with Sarah and the others from the Yerushalmit Movement, what these creators are made of. They are not invested merely in theory; they are invested in practice. They are individuals who actually *need* the spaces and services they themselves put in place. They rely on these projects for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities.

In Barbara Christian's "A Race for Theory," the renowned theorist critiques the academic institutionalization of Black feminist thought. Christian writes: "I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*."³

Christian did not write as intellectual exercise. Chagit and Mirit do not gather women into the Mashu-Mashu studio because pluralism is an appealing idea. Sarah does not stare bigotry in the face in Zion Square because it is interesting. They do it to save their own lives.

Now, in America and at my university, I am in a place where I can challenge myself to connect these ideas in a more concrete way to the work I do now and the work I hope to do in the future. Some days, my time spent with the Yerushalmit Movement feels so potently relevant, and some days I can forget it entirely. But ultimately gratitude for the experience prevails.

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When I began my work with the Yerushalmit Movement, I did not realize how relevant the experience would be. I did not make the now-obvious connection between Women Changing Jerusalem and the Jewish feminist group that my peers and I have launched. I had no way of anticipating how essential the skills from Zion Square would be in developing programming to engage our Jewish community in conversations about race and racism. The list goes on. With each

My mind often returns to Wednesday nights in the Mashu-Mashu studio, and to Thursday nights in Zion Square, and I am reminded of how much I did not and still do not know: about this work, about the people involved, and about every person I encounter.

new project I remember the activists I grew to know and admire this summer, the dedication they give to their work, the Barbara Christian-esque investment they represent.

During my two months in Jerusalem, I relearned the skills necessary for navigating the complicated realities that line the city's streets. And I learned, for the first time, of the people endeavoring to change some of those realities, the revolutionary spaces they are creating, and the personal investment that drives them.

My mind often returns to Wednesday nights in the Mashu-Mashu studio, and to Thursday nights in Zion Square, and I am reminded of how much I did not and still do not know: about this work, about the people involved, and about every person I encounter. The Yerushalmit Movement granted me the awareness of that expansive space for learning and for growth. That space is not just interesting or useful. It is essential. Life-saving.

Notes

1. Kuvoich, Yaniv. "16-year-old Stabbed in Jerusalem Pride Parade Succumbs to Wounds." *Haaretz*, Aug 2, 2015. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.669161>.
2. Dolak, Kevin. "How a Brutal Murder Is Changing Jerusalem's LGBT Community." *Vice*, Aug 11, 2015. <https://news.vice.com/article/how-a-brutal-murder-is-changing-jerusalems-lgbt-community>.
3. Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 6, 1987, pp. 51-63.