

BORDERS, from page 1

to the left, front and back of me. I send a few text messages to friends waiting for me in Tel Aviv to let them know I'll be late again, not disguising the blame for this madness I can't help but extend to them. I shift my weight to my left leg, hold it there until my foot aches and then shift it back. Another twenty minutes evaporate in the summer heat and still not a single step forward. I glance to my right and see a man holding his son, a 5-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, in an area of broken fences and strewn razor wire. His wheelchair is temporarily abandoned at the entrance to this mess, no way to get it through even the humanitarian line. This man won't succumb to the humiliation of being denied passage. The air is stifling; no one can move. The crowd begins pushing against itself in all directions. Panic starts to set in.

I can't do it any longer. I can't even stand to button the cuffs of my sleeves for my obsessive intolerance of restriction. My head is swimming. I need to get out. In a moment of thoughtless escapism, I leap the short concrete barrier to my right and land in front of the man and his son. A soldier sprints toward me, cursing and demanding that I get back into line. I reply with a barrage of my own, how dare you make this man wait, how can you not see what you're doing here, anger driven by desperation if not reason. He thrusts his rifle upward and buries the muzzle in my chest, shoving me backward. I persist, close the distance between us to expose his empty threats to kill me, climb awkwardly over the twisted metal and rubbish at my feet. He swings awkwardly to punch me but his gear and the impossible angle abscond with the fury of his attempt.

I stand now in front of him less firm, less sure of myself. My courage wanes as I realize I have no plan. No one is standing at the ready to save me from this moment of daring foolishness. He reaches out and takes hold of my shirt, pulling me toward him, now determined to take me into custody. Frantic, I pull myself free of his grasp and he stumbles on the uneven pile beneath us. Above, an Israeli sniper begins yelling at me in Arabic. With a menacing echo, he snaps back the lever, clicks a round into the chamber and shoulders his weapon, sighting me through a glinting scope. The Palestinians behind me begin tugging urgently at my clothes. "He thinks you're Arab," they warn. "Go back. He's going to shoot you." I'm stubborn, embarrassed, at a loss. Eventually, I concede and slink away. The line has still not moved and I've managed only to further delay that possibility.

All major Palestinian cities have checkpoints just like this one. Nablus has six. No man, woman, child or tomato gets in or out without first cooking to soup in the sweltering heat. Nablus used to be the center of Palestinian industry and development. Its factories, markets and universities beckoned to the best and brightest throughout Palestine. Now it's an open-air prison, cut off from the rest of the West Bank and from the rest of the world.

I sulk back through rows of idle taxis. I'm dialing my phone to tell my friends I won't be able to join them today when I hear a driver shouting, "Around the checkpoint!" It takes half an hour to fill this particular taxi, as most passengers aren't willing to risk what he's offered. We finally set to it, drop off of the road and creep slowly over loose soil and rocks through an olive orchard not more than fifty yards from the checkpoint. We go around it, all 10 passengers staring warily at the sniper towers, proffering nervous advice and wagering our odds. I feel obligated to step out, to escort the struggling minivan on foot with my American passport held high, but fear keeps me pinned where I sit. Two minutes later, we're laughing, clapping the driver on the back and happily handing over the inflated fare. We've made it to the far side of Huwarra Checkpoint.

This, of course, is only the first phase of a much longer journey. To get to Tel Aviv, I'll

pass through another three checkpoints that, to varying degrees, are much like the one at Huwarra. By the time I finally arrive, I'm typically in such a state of shock and anger that it's a wonder my friends remain interested to share my company at all. The trip from Nablus to Tel Aviv is physically, mentally and emotionally traumatic. It is a five-hour separation of distance and ideology that leaves me in a general state of disarray for an entire day. My friends throw their arms around my diminished frame and insist on buying me dinner.

This seaside restaurant looks out over the Mediterranean, illuminated in color by festive strands of lights. Families stroll down the upscale boardwalk, buying cotton candy and carnival souvenirs for delighted kids gliding on roller skates. I could eat a week in Nablus for the cost of a single entrée here. Singles flirt recklessly, oblivious to my resentment. This could be Friday night in any American college town, a moment of fun without consequence. A waiter patiently translates the menu from Hebrew as I meekly sip an Israeli beer, Judas with his silver. I'm eyeballing a young man across the room on weekend leave from the army. He's here to meet an attractive young woman, his T-shirt, shorts and sandals accessorized boldly by the M-16 still slung over his back.



I've been living in Nablus on and off since 2002. I've experienced a tremendous amount of brutality and desperation. I've felt fear and isolation. The utterly disparate realities between Nablus and Tel Aviv make transitioning from one to the other a monumental struggle that doesn't seem to be getting any easier. I still struggle to utter the name Israel, instead calling it '48, a reference to the year 750,000 Palestinians fled the violence of Israel's creation. It does nothing to assuage the guilt of wandering this land with the impunity my Palestinian friends are denied.

In a lot of ways, things were simpler before, when I never crossed over, when Israeli tanks roared through my adopted city firing with abandon, when 'them' was defined by the low altitude thunder of Israeli warplanes. I was content to let these borders reinforce my young, unchallenged ideologies. I'd come to Balata Refugee Camp and pitch my tent, so to speak, lose twenty pounds at three-month intervals, my pale, sunken face testament to the classic case of post traumatic stress disorder fomenting within. Israeli soldiers came each night and burned my new identity into me. I was separate, and in that solitary sense, I was safe. At least then I knew where to stand.

Second only to Gaza, which for most Israelis may as well be a disquieted suburb of Tehran, Nablus is the scariest place imaginable. When young Israeli soldiers see foreigners emerging from the city with their heads intact, their suspicions typically give way to honest puzzlement. But to dismiss such fear as mere xenophobia wrought by propaganda wouldn't be entirely fair. The truth is, residents of Nablus ask me if I feel safe walking the streets of this city as often as Israelis do. There was violence here. Young men killed Israeli soldiers in the narrow alleys of the camp and the dark tunnels of the old city; some strapped bombs to their bodies and detonated themselves in the markets and nightclubs of Israel. Men from rival Palestinian political parties fought for control with guns. Families turned on one another and Nablus bled. In one way or another, the reputation of this place grew organically.

My friend Mohammad, a Palestinian refugee from Jordan now living in Balata Camp, saw this identity much as I did. "When I moved to Nablus in 1999," he says, "I felt the most powerful people were from the camp. The leadership outside of Palestine saw the refugees and felt here was a people with nothing. They were an army for the revolution, people who would be willing to give their lives and disregard the consequences. Not because they were criminals, but because they had become

aggressive, they didn't have the freedom to worry about the consequences. It's about dignity. The people were pushed until they began to push back. The clash was unavoidable."

I've recently moved out of the camp. My posh apartment has a sink where warm water flows directly from the tap. My walls bear no bullet holes. My windows are not shattered. The army does not position itself beneath my window each night as it launches raids to assassinate fighters. Life here, it seems, is everything life in the camp wasn't. Such can be said of my connection to it as well.

These days, my borders aren't as defined as they used to seem. I make the trip to Tel Aviv often and have great relationships there. I've seen that there is indeed more to Israel than the racism and violence of its soldiers. On a Friday morning in Israel, I sip coffee on the southern side of Tel Aviv in the Palestinian town of Yafa. My Israeli friend Lior has spent time in Ramallah and Jenin. She takes an active role in learning about the situation faced by Palestinians. "I absolutely want to go to Nablus... I know that I live in a kind of bubble here. But as an observer, what's the point? I want to do something. I'm not a tourist; I'm Israeli. I can't ignore the reality."

I press her. I want to know what makes Nablus different and what specifically prevents her from visiting. "I don't know why I haven't been there. For one thing, it's illegal. Then there are the checkpoints. It's harder to get in, isn't it? Maybe it's more dangerous." She's searching, and I suddenly realize that I sound like an interrogator. I'm fishing for something she can't give me, and the bottom line is, she's genuinely unsure of why she hasn't been to Nablus. As for me, the 'us' and 'them' continue to slip through my fingers.

The sleepless nights of the camp have been replaced with a new kind of insecurity as I float between communities, unable to find my place in any of them. Perhaps I needed the awed disbelief of people hearing that I, a white, Irish-Catholic American with a business degree had called Balata Refugee Camp my home.

Mohammad says that I've become a refugee. "You look around and you don't know your connection to the place you are in. You feel it is not your right, that these things do not belong to you." He might be right. The longer I'm here, the more my illusions fall away, leaving only questions in their wake. My borrowed identity, however unlikely, was once reassuring. Now I'm drifting. Neither the 'us' nor 'them' seems to include a 'me'.

I sat down with Ala'a Joudullah, a self-described 'son of the city', to explore how such divisions have worked to shape identities in Nablus. From the shaded patio of Café Hamouz, the Nablus vista spreads itself lazily across the valley. When we sat here together less than a year ago, Ala'a was at least thirty pounds heavier. He's traded his trademark slacks, pressed shirts and stiff polished shoes for a t-shirt, jeans and hip sneakers. Only his long black hair remains slicked back in signature do. He's an eloquent, calculating poet prone to contradiction and animated exaggeration - a seasoned tale spinner.



"The city has always been unpredictable," Ala'a tells me. When the Israeli military launched widespread operations throughout Nablus in the spring of 2002, it took care to systematically destroy nearly every element of self-governance Yasser Arafat's nascent Palestinian Authority had thus far managed to build. Roads and plumbing systems were torn to shreds. The police headquarters and prisons were bombed. Even the traffic lights went dark. The city became a place without law, with armed militias filling the void left by Israel's destruction of the Palestinian security forces. "A year ago," Ala'a says, "I wouldn't dare walk in the old city at night, even though I am from there. At any moment, a battlefield could materialize

between the wanted and the Israeli soldiers."

In 2005, the United States succeeded in forcing the Palestinian Authority to hold fresh elections, an extension of its push to promote western-style democracy in a new Middle East. Palestinians voiced their frustrations and voted into power the Islamic movement Hamas, a party proscribed by the United States as a terrorist organization. The world responded harshly. Through a deadly military campaign, backing by the US State Department and an international economic blockade throughout the spring of 2007, Israel managed to collapse the elected government of the West Bank and drive the remnants of the Hamas movement underground. In its place, Israel and the US installed the unelected emergency government that now assumes the offices of the Palestinian Authority across the West Bank. Politicians returned to their peace process lip service, Palestinian police came back to Nablus and the traffic lights began predictably switching from red to green. Status quo was restored.

Ala'a says the biggest problem in Nablus is that no one is really committed to fixing it. Half the people love the new Palestinian Authority, with police everywhere, directing traffic and then redirecting it, while the other half miss the simpler days when conflicts were solved with cash on the barrelhead.

"As for me, I'm waiting for my boat. I want to get out of here," he admits. "Human beings deserve the chance to live, but this is no life at all. I wake up every morning and pray that God will keep things the way they are. When change comes to Nablus, things only get worse."

It can be difficult to take root while in a constant state of flux and uncertainty. The search for the other side can more often be about deciding which side we're on now. Consider Israel's latest construct, a five-meter high concrete monstrosity, snaking its way through the West Bank, picking and choosing with careful discretion who to include, who to keep out. Its electrified razor wire and sniper towers are manifestations of that simple need. This is the effect of fear, of prejudice, of racism: we need separateness. We rely on borders to know and understand ourselves, to belong to the idea of who we want to be by proclaiming mightily who we are not.

As for borders, Ala'a scoffs. "What borders? There are no borders. Even at Huwarra, you're dealing with something imaginary. Today, I'm under 35 and I'm forbidden to pass, tomorrow, some 18 year old soldier is in a good mood and it's 'Bon Voyage' with a smile."

"Before the Intifada, Israelis came here to shop. You don't travel to a foreign country to buy vegetables. If a Palestinian gets caught in Tel Aviv without the proper permits, they grab him, maybe beat him a little, force him to sign a paper that says if he's caught again, it'll cost 5000 shekels. But it's hard to take seriously. They say, 'You can't be here. By the way, there's a big hole in the wall over there, don't let me catch you coming through it.'"

"A year ago," Ala'a says, "I went to visit my sister in a village on the other side of the Beit Eiba checkpoint. On my way out, a female soldier stopped me, and saw that I was from Nablus. She told me it was forbidden to pass. So I went straight home, got my other ID, the one that says I'm from Ramallah, and went back to the checkpoint - an hour later. She didn't hesitate for one moment as she waved me through. Of course she recognized me, I'm the same person. I'm even wearing the same clothes! The message was pretty clear. Whoever you decide to be, it's ok. Just don't be from Nablus."