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MAGAZINE DESK

E-Mail From An Anxious State

By DANIEL GORDIS (NYT) 5161 words

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In July 1998, Daniel Gordis, a rabbi and dean of the rabbinical school at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, moved with his wife, Beth, and their three children (Talia, then 11; Avi, 8; Micha, 5) to Jerusalem for a one-year fellowship at the Mandel Foundation. Shortly after arriving, he began sending out periodic e-mail messages about life in Israel to friends and family, some of whom forwarded them to others (including an editor at this magazine). A few months after the Gordises landed in Israel, they decided to stay permanently. Below are excerpts from more than 30,000 words of e-mail. The final entry was written after Gordis heard about the attack on the World Trade Center, an event that unexpectedly brought his two worlds together.

October 1998: Hi everyone. I think that the major impact of the past few weeks has been that our kids, especially the older ones, are getting a pretty clear glimpse of how different life is here. Rosh Hashanah was a clear example. During our 10-minute walk to shul in the morning, we passed at least six other services in progress. Everywhere, people were dressed in their finest. We could hear shofars being sounded from every direction. Life itself was Rosh Hashanah.

I think Tali and Avi realized how great it was to daven with several hundred people, all of whom knew Hebrew and understood exactly what we were saying. With Yom Kippur just around the corner, our wishes to everyone for a year of all good things, but mostly peace.

Gmar chatimah tovah, D, B and the kids

November 1998: Hi again! Hope that everyone's Yom Kippur was meaningful and pleasant. Things here continue to be fascinating. Today is Thanksgiving. We decided not to celebrate it. It would only make our kids homesick. The father of a friend of our youngest son, Micha, stayed for dinner this evening. He talked a lot -- about being a refusnik for 12 years, about how the Soviets desecrated his mother's grave when he applied to leave, about what it's like to do 30 days of reserve service body-

frisking Arabs for arms and explosives at traffic checkpoints, only to come back to work at a construction site (he's a road construction engineer) and have coffee and draw maps with the very same people (Arabs do most of the construction here) he'd body searched a few days earlier. Over some good wine, he talked about how crazy it all makes him, but how after 12 years of waiting in Kiev, there's still never a moment that he's not grateful to be here.

Seems to me we ended up having a Thanksgiving dinner anyway. On to Hanukkah. Love from all of us. We'll write again soon.

January 1999: Hi everyone! After a great deal of consideration, a good bit of anguish and a lot of excitement, we've decided to try to make a go of it here in Israel.

In a lot of ways, as strange as moving to the Middle East sounds to most people, this feels very natural to us, and in some ways, the next logical step in our (almost) 40-something lives. When we went out for dinner for Beth's birthday in September, we were in a restaurant with a variety of couples: an Ethiopian couple, an Israeli couple, us and selected others from all over the place. Beth remarked that the whole country was a modern-day miracle and then asked, "If you have a chance to live your life as part of a miracle, how do you walk away from that?"

My parents made aliyah in 1969, and though we only stayed for a couple of years, it was enough to get my whole family speaking Hebrew reasonably fluently and, perhaps more important, to make me feel that I belong here, fit in here better than I do in the States.

Beth, too, has a long history with the land of Israel. She came for a year as a high-school junior and hoped to return to live in Israel after graduating from college, but life took its twists and turns. So, 24 years later, we're back and ready to pick up where she left off.

We really think that this is a great place for our kids. We especially love the way Israel, and Israeli society, have allowed our older kids to blossom. They are independent here in ways that they could never be in the U.S. Tali and Avi both navigate their way to school on the public bus, and can go shopping, buy pizza or just visit a friend. We let both of them walk alone at night to their youth-group meetings; Tali had a sleepover with her youth group and came home at 5:30 a.m., let herself into the apartment and went to sleep! It never occurred to us to wait up for her or to ask her to wake us when she got in. It's just that there's really nothing to worry about. We couldn't buy that kind of security in L.A.

Probably no Jewish parents relish the fact that their kids will have to go to the army; but the fact that the whole army scene may soon be diminishing in importance with peace so clearly on the horizon certainly makes this issue less central than it might have been a few years ago.

July 2000: Hi everyone! As it's been more than a year since our most recent update, it

seems that some sort of communique is in order. The kids and Beth (now going by her Hebrew name, Elisheva) have done really well this year.

Here, the miraculous seems to happen completely without warning. Several months ago, our daughter, Tali, had Shabbat dinner at a friend's house. When she returned home she casually mentioned that she thought someone famous had been at the dinner, too. It turned out to be Natan Sharansky, who was there with his daughter, who is Tali's age. I remembered the days that we were out parading with signs "Free Sharansky." If anyone had told me back then that approximately 20 years later his daughter and my daughter would both be Israeli citizens and would be nonchalantly having Shabbat dinner together and playing Monopoly, I would have said he was crazy.

At the same time, there's an ongoing painful side to life here. On May 14, the internationally recognized date of Israel's independence, you may recall that huge riots broke out in the territories. Shots were fired, and there were casualties on both sides.

I think that most people are afraid that Camp David 2000 is going to fail. If there's no agreement, Arafat will declare a state at some point, and Israel is not likely to stand by and watch (for reasons I don't personally understand). But more important, the Palestinian populace is (understandably) out of patience, and they're likely to return to the streets. But unlike the situation in the intifada in the 1980's, this time they're armed with a lot more than stones.

October 2000: Hello to all. A quick note, before Yom Kippur begins in the "city of peace," to wish everyone well. Things are tense, but physically, West Jerusalem is at peace [following rioting that took place after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount at the end of September].

We did assume that the Israel we'd come to would be more or less at peace, and we now realize that we may be in for some rough days, weeks or even a few months. But even with all the tension, we're not ambivalent about being here. We're here because we believe that Jews need a country of their own, and we know that it's a history of sticking it out here when the going got tough that has kept the state going. We're very safe, and frankly, I'd much rather be here during all this than watching it from afar. I always felt in the States during these episodes that I belonged here, and in a strange way, I feel blessed to be able to be here for this, whatever it may bring.

Love from all the Gordis clan.

December 2000: It's time to say a quick hello, and to send wishes for a joyous Hanukkah or merry Christmas. The most pressing part of life here over the last two months has been the matzav (the Hebrew word for "situation," the euphemism that the entire country uses to refer to the catastrophe in which we find ourselves). A bit more than a month ago, when things were really out of control, I told Elisheva that if she wanted to take the kids back to the States for a while, I'd be supportive of that, and

she looked at me like I was completely nuts. (Not an unusual way for her to look at me, of course.) She's the one who always wanted to be here, and in some ways is the most passionate about staying. (She's become a bit rabidly right wing politically for my taste [!], but is really enjoying herself.)

About two weeks ago, we took our fellows from the Mandel School to Ein Harod in the Galilee to meet some Israeli Arabs to hear their perspective. We met with a principal of an Arab school, financed by the Israeli government and governed by the Ministry of Education, as are all Israeli schools whether they're for Jews or Arabs. (Some are mixed, but they're few and far between.) This principal, who proved to be a politically moderate Israeli Arab, told us that his high-school students, all Muslim, have to take at least two units of Hebrew but are not permitted to study the Koran as part of the regular school day. They are required to study Bialik, Tchernichovsky and the rest of the classic Zionist poets, but Darwish, the Palestinian national poet, is not allowed. He told us that when he took his students to a Jewish high school in Haifa for a day of interaction, the Jewish students wanted to talk about the Palestinian charter, which they'd studied in social studies (called citizenship here). His students, the Arabs, were dumbfounded, because their school was not allowed to teach the charter, and they didn't know anything about it.

As we sat and listened to this guy, who clearly said that he wants peace, coexistence, etc., the right-wingers among the fellows were noticeably silent. The ridiculously small-minded way which we both carry out the occupation and treat Israeli Arabs (Israeli citizens, like this principal) is simply undeniable. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the Orthodox Israeli philosopher who argued in July 1967 that we should retreat right away and give back everything we'd captured the previous month because an extended occupation would rot the soul of the country, was clearly right.

But the leftists were in for more of a shock. We went to the Galilee to meet with representatives of three of the largest, most mainstream Arab Israeli political parties. Despite minor differences among them, they all shared the following: (a) they do not acknowledge any difference between themselves and the Palestinians and now want to be called Israeli Palestinians, not Israeli Arabs; (b) they insist that their "brothers" be given a state with East Jerusalem as its capital; (c) they insist on the right of return for the refugees (a huge political issue here that gets little play in the West, probably because everyone knows that it will never happen); (d) they insist that if the state genuinely wants to respect them as citizens, then the national anthem and its references to 2,000 years of Jewish yearning for Zion has to go. So far, no real surprises.

At a certain point in the conversation, one of the fellows raised his hand and basically said: "What you're demanding actually makes perfect sense from your point of view. But from our perspective, from the perspective of people whose parents or grandparents came here from across the world to build the one place on earth where Jews would be able to live in a Jewish state with Jewish values at its core -- what can you say to reassure us that the Jewishness of the state won't disappear if you're given what you want?"

The most articulate of the three speakers, the leader of a major Arab party represented in the Knesset, responded more or less as follows: "Your question shows that you don't really understand the Middle East. The Middle East is a Muslim part of the world, and this country will ultimately be Muslim, too. It may happen next year, or in 50 years, or in a hundred years. But it's going to happen. The sooner you accept the inevitable, the sooner the region will know peace, and then we can all get on with life."

Here were several dozen rabidly left-wing Israeli intellectuals, confronted for the first time with the realization that even these Israeli citizens want something radically different from what these left-wing Jews are willing to contemplate. In addition, their whole intellectual arsenal has been crafted to battle against the stranglehold that they believe Orthodoxy has on private life, so much so that they paid no attention to what they wanted to preserve in the Jewish state.

February 2001: It's Monday morning, the day before elections, and a kind of eerie calm prevails.

Last month, seeking to gain some relief from the crisis, and wanting to see something that reflected a well-entrenched democratic tradition, we decided to watch the Bush inauguration. The kids actually liked the pomp and circumstance. But Elisheva and I found the opening prayer and the benediction incredibly Christian. Many of our friends here and back in the U.S. wrote that they were appalled by the blatantly Christian character of the ceremony. I wasn't appalled at all. The U.S., as great a place as it is to live (and by virtually all measurable standards, it's a much better place to live than Israel), is simply a Christian country. Why shouldn't they be allowed to mention Jesus? I now realize, more and more, that the inauguration encapsulated why we're here in the first place. America never felt like home, and Israel always has. Aliyah was not so much a decision as a willingness to give in to some gravitation-like force.

Last week, I was walking home from work at the end of the day (at least one advantage of having left the sprawl of Los Angeles) and stopped at a light. Also waiting at the light, in the middle lane, was a car with four young, well-dressed Palestinian women. In keeping with unspoken Israeli etiquette, they didn't look at me, and I didn't pay them much attention, either. Meanwhile, another car pulled up next to them in the left lane. This car had four Jewish kids in it, all in their late teens or early 20's -- two men and two women -- wearing army uniforms. Something apparently rolled under one of the seats of their car, and laughing hysterically, they were trying to pull it out but couldn't. So, they all opened their doors, and stood outside the car, presumably to bend down and find whatever it was. As they got out, their M-16's slung over their shoulders, laughing good-naturedly, I noticed that the four Palestinian women looked terror-stricken to see four armed soldiers suddenly standing next to their car. I saw four kids, barely older than my daughter, having a grand old time about some joke, while these women saw the enemy, the occupying soldiers, unpredictable danger. Walking home, I realized the mess we're in, and how desperate we all are to disentangle, to separate from each other.

That's what's tempting about voting for Barak in the election tomorrow. That's why even (many) people who will vote for Sharon will regret that they couldn't vote for Barak. People want peace, at best, and a bloodless separation if peace isn't possible.

Unfortunately, tomorrow we have to decide whether to be the first Jews in history to willingly give up the Temple Mount (voting for Barak) or the first generation of Israelis to say no to peace (Sharon). Really, when you come down to it, when we walk into the polls tomorrow, the question is which dream are we willing to betray.

March 2001: Hi everyone. I got an e-mail the other day from a human rights organization I used to be a bit involved with, asking for people to travel together to a small Palestinian village on the other side of the green line that's been completely cut off by the large trenches that the Israeli Defense Forces have dug. The people in the village can't get access to medical care, can't get to school, etc. The e-mail said that this is no way to treat a civilian population, and Jewish values demand that we do something. So bring your shovels and we'll fill in the trenches.

A line at the end of the e-mail said that this "should be" pretty safe.

But, it noted, there is some danger. The whole thing struck me as noble but absurd. We'd spend an entire day filling in a trench or two that the I.D.F. bulldozer would open up again in an hour. And we'd have to do it in fear of being shot at by the people we were trying to help. No, thanks.

When we first got here, I did lots of stuff like going to Palestinian villages to meet with people whose homes had been bulldozed by the army, collecting money to get them materials to rebuild, etc. Now, two years later, I still care about the things that I cared about when I went to those villages in 1999. The closing off of villages causes untold pain and suffering for the Palestinians. But I also know that if those trenches are filled, someone will get out and try to hurt us. The army's clamping down -- quietly, but very firmly -- and we're all breathing easier.

Well, on to Pesach.

April 2001: Hi all. These days, the kids no longer ask about peace. I think they know the answer. They've gotten used to the sounds of tank shelling at night, of not being allowed to take buses, of seeing the face of the latest dead soldier on the front page. Nor do they ask if this will get worked out before they have to go to the army. They know the answer to that too.

Tali's had a rather acidic digging-her-heels-in-the-sand response. A pretty open-minded kid for the most part, she consistently indicates her profound distaste for the programs her school does with a group of ninth-grade girls from a local Arab school. "I don't have anything to talk to them about," she says, "and they can't stand us. So why bother?"

Our liberal tendencies are to give her a gentle lecture about how you build relationships, how talking is critical, how this is the only way to move forward. But

she's right. They really can't stand us, and -- though she won't say it -- the daily Israeli death toll makes her not able to stand them.

May 2001: I was working in Tel Aviv this week. One evening, I had a beer with a friend at one of those trendy Tel Aviv pubs. He's in his mid-30's and had just gotten back from Milu'im (his annual stint of reserve duty). He said it was the hardest Milu'im he'd ever done. Usually, he said, they run around, shoot a bit and basically have a good time. This time they took part in vigorous war games. Tanks, A.P.C.'s, helicopters, planes, the works. The task was to "retake the Golan" after three days of Syrian control.

This friend of mine, who made aliyah almost 20 years ago, came from England, did the army, college, graduate school, got married and has four kids, is extremely politically active -- the works. And, he's leaving. Not for good, he says, but for three to five years, because he just can't take the intensity anymore. For me, that revelation was much more distressing than any other part of our conversation, because he'd always struck me as one of the die-hards. He says he still is -- he just wants a break. I think he's much more representative of the larger picture than we commonly suspect.

Yesterday, we took our fellows to Rabin Square, the spot where the prime minister was murdered. It's a pretty stark monument, and a depressing place. It literally always makes me cry. But as we talked about Rabin, it was clear that the sense of tragedy that used to accompany any mention of his name has dissipated. We used to think that with his death, the peace process also died. But now, most of us believe he was wrong. Noble, but wrong. Arafat probably wouldn't have behaved any differently at the end with Rabin than with Barak. He wouldn't have signed. And he would probably have resorted to violence, because that's what he does. And in the meantime, because of Oslo and the rest, the Palestinians are armed, organized, legitimate. And they're killing us.

The Palestinians are ready for massive armed confrontation, and we're not. This is an ugly, dirty war, and we're being just ugly and dirty enough to bring down the world's wrath on us, but not nearly ugly and dirty enough to win it. To win it, we'd have to wipe them out, and though we could, we won't. This is going to go on for a long time, and like my friend in the pub, people are tired of it.

Even the right-wingers and the left-wingers among the fellows and among our friends basically don't argue anymore. We all know the truth. There's no peace to be had. They want us out of here. So we can either pack our bags and go back to the States and Europe, or we can prepare to fight it out for the foreseeable future. Some of us will leave, some will stay. (That's not a hint, by the way. We're staying.) Some of us will die and some will live. Some of them will live, and some will die. And in the end, there will still be millions of Palestinians left who think that the building I live in belongs to them, and they'll never sign anything that doesn't give them the right to this street. And we'll never sign anything that does.

On the bus back from Tel Aviv yesterday, it suddenly struck me that it's really

possible that this country won't make it. No one here wants to fight forever, but no one thinks that the Palestinians will compromise on anything. They've been told by their own leaders over and over again that it's all theirs, and they're willing to fight for it. It was the first time that I could seriously envision the whole enterprise just falling apart, little by little: people leaving, no one coming (certainly not from places where Jews are welcomed), the world turning against us, the backbiting that arises out of the frustration and rage getting worse, the war of attrition going on endlessly; and in the end our signing a deal that we shouldn't.

I wondered if I should share that thought with Elisheva, and decided against it. She's depressed enough as it is (unlike my euphoric tenor!). But last night, right after dinner, as she was reading the paper and I was unpacking from Tel Aviv, she looked up and said, "Did it ever occur to you that this whole country could be one big failed experiment?" So much for not burdening her with my worries. . . .

Shabbat shalom and chag same'ach. Here, we'll do our best.

July 2001: A couple of months ago the Mandel School invited a writer to talk about his book on Stalin's "secret" pogroms. He brought along three of the adult daughters of Jewish intellectuals Stalin had executed in the 1950's. As they told their stories, we could hear outside the windows of the seminar room the pounding of tank shells, firing at something we couldn't identify. Everyone was aware of it. But we were also aware of how much has changed. As these elderly women told of the disappearance and murder of their fathers, I couldn't help noting that this time around we don't have to be passive. We have the capacity to react, to protect ourselves, to make sure that history doesn't repeat itself.

August 2001: The day before I was heading to the States for a long-overdue vacation, the bomb went off at the pizza parlor in the middle of Jerusalem. That night the city was in a kind of subdued shock. The war's come home. This isn't about the territories, we all know. It's about our right to be here -- in any part of this place. This isn't about settlers, or the expansion of settlements, but about the fundamental right of the Jews to have one little place on earth that they can call their own. That's why the intersection of King George and Jaffa streets was the perfect place for the attack. It's Times Square, or Michigan Avenue. The ultimate statement that there is no square inch of the country that's not a battleground.

Interestingly, people weren't as hysterical as I would have expected. The restaurants were full, people laughing and enjoying each other's company as if nothing much had happened. What are we supposed to believe now? That hearing the sounds of ambulances racing across the city, sirens blaring, is normal? That it's just part of life when going to have a slice of pizza for lunch means that you might be blown to bits? And what, I ask myself, should we instruct Tali, our not-yet-15-year-old daughter, who's on a plane winging her way back to Israel? She's going to stay here by herself for a couple of weeks until we get back. Should we tell her she can't go downtown? No pizza on Emek Refa'im, the major street near our house? No buses? No going out of the house? Just order everything in and be a prisoner in your own home?

I fly to New York, meet Elisheva and the kids and drive up the Taconic Parkway. No military checkpoints. No Arab villages on the side of the road where your antennae have to be more sensitive. Farms that look as if they've known only peace and predictability for hundreds of years.

What happened to our country, that place full of hope, that place that always felt happy and so replete with promise? How did we get where we are? With nowhere to turn, nothing to do?

Because that, of course, is where we are. None of the options are any good. Every Israeli has had this conversation hundreds of times. We could unleash a full-scale war, and probably win, but win what? Recapture the land we've given back since Oslo? And then what? Just to be back where we were before the peace process began?

Or we can continue this way -- they kill us, and we kill them. A low level of loss, to be sure, but how long can the country take this? How long until sane Israelis who have the money say to themselves that this just isn't a normal place to live, a fair place to raise kids? Is it possible that we'll lose this war -- and this place -- not because we get attacked and overrun, but because too many of us are going to get too tired of being scared, exhausted, pursued?

We know that peace isn't around the corner. We've learned how deep runs the hatred. And we're all stuck in this together, with no place to go. That, of course, is the real point. There's no other place to go. Israel, with all its agony, is home. It's the only spot on the planet that we have a shot at calling our own, so we can't walk away from it. And that, it strikes me, is why it will somehow work out in the end. Because it simply has to.

Sept 11, 2001: It's been two hours since the World Trade Center disaster. We're glued to the TV. The big kids are silent, taking in the images. Micha eventually wanders in, and we explain what's happened. To our surprise, he watches for a few moments and then bursts into tears. He says he's crying because when he was in New York two weeks ago, he wanted to go to the top of the World Trade Center, but we said we didn't have time. Now, he says, he'll never get to go.

But we know it's not really that. For him, New York City -- walking in Central Park, ice skating at Chelsea Piers -- was the place where he was safe from all this. Now he knows there's really no escape. He's only 8 years old, and he has nowhere to run to.

"Is Uncle Elie O.K.?" Avi wonders. We've been trying all day to call the States, but there's no getting through. We assure him that Uncle Elie is fine. "But how can you be sure he didn't go down there for a meeting?" he asks. We can't, of course. Avi goes to sleep on the verge of tears, and it strikes me, now we're experiencing what our family experiences every time there's a suicide bombing in Israel. And in the States, they're now living with the feelings that we know so well: the panic, the confusion, the fear, the fury. New Yorkers, tragically, will learn what it's like to live on edge all the time.

Nervousness each time the subway stops. Take the tunnel? Or is the bridge a better idea? Should we go out to dinner or stay at home? The questions that change an entire way of life, questions that Americans will now, like us, begin to ask each day.

I'm ready for the holidays, for the beginning of a new year. Of course, last Rosh Hashanah was the beginning of all this horror. I look out the window at the beauty of this city even in the dark of night, a city that's survived attack and siege for thousands of years. Maybe, just maybe, next year will be better.

Photos: Unpeaceful coexistence: Hebron, West Bank. (Top Left: Laurent Van Der StockT/Gamma; Top Right: Larry Towell/Magnum Photos, Inset Maya Finer); Left: Palestinians try to draw Israeli soldiers to their village in Beit Omar. Right: A Jewish settlement outside Jerusalem. (Left: Larry Towell/Magnum Photos. Right: Laurent Van Der StockT/ Gamma); Left: An Israeli soldier in Hebron. Right: Stones thrown by Palestinian protesters in Ramallah, where the aftermath is constant. (Left: Laurent Van Der StockT/Gamma; Right: Larry Towell/Magnum Photos)

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