

IN JOSAPHAT'S VALLEY

BY

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"I will gather together all nations and bring them down into Josaphat's Valley, and I will plead with them there for my people, and for my inheritance Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations."

—Joel 3:2

The man who shot the Arab last week is eating a tuna sandwich. He's not a man, properly—maybe twenty-years-old, and of the guys in our unit—a company of Israeli Border Police conscripts, stationed inside the West Bank—he's most definably a boy. Boris shouts a lot, argues profoundly, talks with his hands, pounds on the door, and can't do anything without an incredible amount of aggression, such as unplugging the cord from a toaster.

Earlier today, while manning a checkpoint, he began flirting with a co-serving female soldier, and she must have been so repulsed by him that she didn't mind talking to him.

He was smoking profusely, continually taunting her, and slapping her shoulder—what women often refer to as "being an asshole" in men who are muscular. Boris is not muscular. He has a small, sagging paunch—unusual for men on the line—and hair in odd places, including his ears. His nose bridges inward, lending him a stereotypically Jewish appearance. He looks like a falcon.

Most people on this base know better than to take Boris seriously. He's routinely referred to as "son-of-a-bitch," "whore," and a variety of swearwords in Russian, which the Israelis, for him, somehow know. Currently, he's chewing a mouthful

of tuna, lounging on his bunk in the Beit Mochelle Outpost, a towering, sandbag-studded building that sits high above the town of Abu Dis, inside the Occupied Territories. The Golden Dome shimmers below, beyond an endless warren of poured cement homes commonly known as East Jerusalem. It's just before dark on this, a Saturday, January 17, 2009. I myself am a reservist in the army, as well as American-born, and I've been attached to the base for about a month.

Three weeks ago, a war broke out in Gaza, about 60km southeast of here, after Hamas and other militants refused to stop lobbing shells into Israel. The Israeli Army responded with a ground-based incursion that has since been entitled "Cast Lead." Our company is not in it directly; we've been providing support, quelling protests that have flared throughout the West Bank, particularly in and around East Jerusalem.

Last week, at one of these protests, a patrol from our company opened fire at close range, using rubber-coated bullets, or *gummim* in Hebrew. One of the Arab demonstrators was hit in the head and, according to the rumors, later died in the hospital. No one knows

for certain who shot him, though the prime suspect, by all accounts, seems to be Boris.

"Do you know if these can kill?" I ask him, holding a couple of gummim, trying to gauge his response.

"Yes, they can kill."

"And these were what were used to shoot the Arab last week?"

"Which Arab?"

"You know, the one who died?"

He gives a vexed stare, hesitates a few seconds before speaking. "Which Arab?"

"The Arab who died. You know, the one who was shot in the head?" Everyone on the base has been discussing it.

No, he implies by tilting his head and arching his black, furry brow.

"You know, gummim in the head." I point to my forehead.

"Ah yes," Boris says. "No, he is not dead yet. And yes, it is what you have here."

"But I heard the Arab died?"

"No, he is in hospital. Not in good condition."

"You know what happened to him, then?"

"Of course I know. I saw it happen."

"You were there at the time?"

"Yes," Boris says. "We shot him."

"You were the one who shot him?"

"Yes."

It's not clear if he's lying. Something suggests that he isn't, however: the artfulness of his gestures, combined with the fact that he plausibly doesn't know the Arab has died, as if no one has bothered to tell him. "I heard he was dead, though."

"Who?"

"The Arab."

"No. He is not dead."

Later that evening, as we're sweeping up the floor of our room, a tiny, white cell that three of us share, I ask him how he feels about killing.

"It's our job," he responds. "It's why we are here."

He doesn't bat an eye as he says it. He has that calm self-possession that cowboys often muster in movies, though it's rarely seen in actual soldiers.

Boris is considered something of a lone wolf on this base. He's on a first-name basis with the Captain, whom the other men fear, and regularly jokes with him at briefings while other men stare on in silence.

And Boris, despite his boyish demeanor, has a certain confidence to him, a certain assuredness to his role, such that no one would question his faith behind the trigger.

"You know, there are a lot of places to go in the army. And many of them are difficult," he explains. "They do some more training. But the Border Police units, they have it the hardest, because they're not in an open setting, not in the desert. They fight among buildings."

"This is harder?"

"It's harder psychologically," he says, and he points to his head.

Upon drafting, most 18-year-olds in Israel are given their choice of places to serve. While the bulk of them enter the military, a select few filter into the Border Police, which has always had a reputation for attracting new immigrants, as well as seedier elements and thugs.

Any quick search on the internet will reveal a medley of videos documenting the unit's brutality.

In one now-notorious incident, which was captured on film in 2008, several Border Policemen detained a young Palestinian and forced him to repeatedly slap his own face while reciting their unofficial anthem, which translates loosely as: "One hummus, one beans, I love you, the

Border Police.”

Other instances of prisoner abuse have been amply documented by human rights groups, including Israeli organizations like B’Tselem. In one 2002 incident, for which several troopers stood trial, a detained Palestinian was killed after being thrown from a moving vehicle. In another, in 2004, a 13-year-old boy was tied to the hood of a Jeep for use as a human shield. More broadly, the unit has always commanded something between respect and horror within Israeli society.

While the unit’s task has generally been construed as defending Israel’s borders—our base in fact straddles the Green Line, the 1967 stalemate line demarcating the West Bank from Israel proper—the unit’s role has evolved over the years from law enforcement to counter-terror. In fact, most of the commanders hail from army units, and the equipment is largely the same, as is most of the training.

Like most bases in Israel, ours is both strategically and historically situated, in this case, along the Jerusalem seam line. A two-story, cement-beam wall, part of Israel’s “Security Barrier,” runs adjacent to the base’s perimeter, and beyond

the sloped hill sits Josaphat’s Valley, where, according to Jewish eschatology, the final battle between Israel and the gentiles will transpire. There, says the Bible, “all the nations will be gathered,” and mankind will be ultimately judged.

Certainly, the nation-gathering has started. Of the 64 men on our base, the bulk are Mizrahim (Middle Eastern Jews) or arrivals from ex-Soviet states. Boris is both. He came from Dagestan at age seven, and he’s proud of his Kavkazi (Caucasus-region) heritage. He also shares a bunk with a friend of his, a younger Ethiopian trooper, whom he openly describes as a “nigger”—although it’s unclear whether that means the same thing in his native tongue.

At the checkpoint earlier, while flirting with the female soldier, Boris counted on his hand for her all the languages he could speak: Hebrew, French, German, Russian, and English. When she tried speaking to him in French, though, he didn’t answer. Strangely, Boris’ mattress is unadorned. It features a single grey blanket, which appears to be his sole personal possession, apart from his Discman and clothes, which are neatly stowed away in his locker. His weapon, an M16A1, is also free from the

embellishments that other men normally apply—no shiny handguard, new buttstock, grooved pistol grip or light. He's been serving on the line for a year and four months, and he doesn't seem to mind it, unlike the others, who more or less dread this existence. He also doesn't mind standing guard at the checkpoints, since he rarely bothers with the Arabs—will not stop to chat with them, as others do—and prefers the lone company of soldiers, particularly females.

Tonight, as he stumbles in from guard, he begins rearranging his boots by his bed, along with his rifle and clips, meticulously lining them up. "Order, order, first thing is order. Who made this mess?" he exclaims.

Later, when he's asked what he wants to do after the army, he sticks his lighter in his Pall Malls, hikes up his pants, and says, "Travel. You know vacation. France and then Greece. Plus, definitely Rome." After that, he'll see what work comes his way, but he's looking for something in security.

"Nothing small-time," he says. "The big stuff. I'll do a course or two"—he picks his balls as he says this, brushes his nose—"and get something that's forty sheks an

hour, not twenty-four. Something important," he says, "like a dance bar. You know 'dance bar' in English?"

He's also interested in psychology, and he says he'd like to get a degree in that, if security doesn't pan out.

"Why psychology?"

He doesn't understand the question.

"I don't like math, can't do it," he says. "But anyone can do psychology if they just sit down and read the book. You have to sit on your ass for a long time, but if you're determined enough, if you have enough will, you can do it. This is the key to life," he explains as he hangs up his fatigues. He's changed into a thin pair of shorts, which have a floral, red pattern and don't do a lot for his waist. Suddenly, he swats at a moth, which he somehow captures mid-air, and crushes the bug with his boot.

Soon, a Russian named Alexei strolls in, cowed in a black, hooded sweatshirt emblazoned with the unit's insignia—a skull and grim reaper. The two steal away for a smoke. Then Boris comes back, picking his eye, scratching his stomach. He picks up his phone and dials up his mother, with whom

he's been talking regularly—at least twice a day—since the Gaza War started. They discuss the rockets that are falling and he assures her, once again, that he's fine.

Earlier tonight, I was chatting with one of the reservists, a former artillery officer and 60-year-old Canadian émigré. Like me, he had volunteered for the reserves and was assigned to the Border Police, since its units are greatly understaffed. "Do you know what the main difference is between soldiers and officers?" he asked. "Soldiers can never be trusted." Of course, when he heard about the Arab who had purportedly died, he raced over to the Control Room and checked the patrol sheets, determining where he had been the night of the protest and whether he might have fired. He hadn't, it turned out, though he didn't seem terribly relieved.

The others on this base have all speculated a bit as to who might have shot the Arab, rehearsing their stories. Most guys deny it—except Boris, of course, who's plainly out to take credit.

The next night, while waiting for dinner, I ask Boris what kind of girl he wants to marry. He says a Kavkazi.

"Why?"

"Because they're not bitches," he explains. "Pure in the head. How you say...virgin?"

He says he doesn't like blonde girls, because they "have nothing upstairs" and "only want money."

"What about an Ethiopian girl?"

"No way. They're good for fucking"—he pounds his fist back and forth—"but if I marry one, what would I say to my mother? Understand, Ethiopians and Kavkazim, they don't get along well." He looks up for a second. "And what would I tell people when they see my son? He's half-white, like a Choco [an Israeli chocolate milk drink]? I do not need that." He scratches his head and sets his gun down on a bed.

"What about an Arab? A Palestinian girl?"

"I would kill her," he answers. "Because that's my job." He ambles to his locker.

"What about a Christian?"

"I would have to convert her." He starts pounding his fist again.

Later, he says he likes Latino girls, because they have "big asses," and while he thinks Swedish girls are pretty, they're also

sharmutot—Arabic for “whores.” Later, when asked if he had a Bar Mitzvah, he says that there were six-hundred people in attendance, mostly friends and family. “All the Kavkazim,” he explains. He also likes discussing the mafia and which Special Forces he admires (Russian, American, and Israeli).

Suddenly, the First Sergeant stomps in and tells Boris to go clean the weightroom after eating. When the First Sergeant leaves, though, Boris explains that there will be two Ethiopians with him.

“They’ll wash the floors and do mopping.” He rubs his hands together briskly then claps. “Kavkazim don’t do this,” he says. “Kavkazim do not do cleaning.” Then he starts playing a game on his cellphone, something with ringing explosions.

The men of Beit Mochelle face a predicament common to men serving in occupational forces: the war is continual with them, yet never predictable or concentrated. Throughout the past month, at least two dozen attacks have been staged in and around the Beit Mochelle outpost, mostly with firebombs and small incendiary devices. None of the troops have been injured. One night, however, at around two a.m.,

while a vaporous rain skitters down, I’m standing guard at a lookout on the roof, facing down the base’s main gates. An unfinished building, comprised of tall slabs of cement and littered with trash, stands across the street from us. Since Arabs have tried to take refuge in it previously while mounting attacks, the ground floors have been sealed with barbed wire.

Nevertheless, part of my job at this post is to regularly shine an overhead search beam inside of the building’s eight floors, searching for any intruders. Having never been a terribly diligent soldier, I drift in and out of sleep, when I’m suddenly awoken by an explosion of gunshots. The noise is incredibly loud, and it sputters from the gates down below, where two more men are on guard. The radio gargles something incoherent, and soon there is echoing silence. The night is pure black.

I’m crouching on the floor, feeling my own heartbeat, watching my breath cloud the glass, when the radio announces there has been a shooting attack. Dozens of troopers run out from the barracks, some clad in boxer shorts, cradling guns, and mount the steel ladders of the roof or crawl into nests behind

guardblocks. Thirty minutes later, by which point the mist has turned to full rain and the air has become shiveringly cold (even though everyone's sweating), the radio control room explains that a small car drove up south of our base and opened fire on a neighboring post. Reportedly, an Arab stepped out, produced a Kalashnikov, and fired off a full magazine at close range at two sentries.

Amazingly, neither was hit, and the Arabs drove off in the car.

A search party's launched, though they turn up nothing. A few neighboring homes are searched, though, as usual, nothing is discovered, and the attackers return to the warren from which they ascended. It's just before dawn, and a blue-orange light settles in behind the cliffs of Jahalin.

Evidently, these kinds of attacks are frequent on the base. None of the men appear scared, at least not openly. Inside the base, Boris is sweeping a floor. As I come back, soaked in a poncho, he offers me tea and a smoke.

The next night, our company is set to conduct an arrest inside the town of Jahalin, a small Arab village located east of our base. We set out in four Sufim, armored green Jeeps,

16 men in all, winding through the night's dripping streets. The tall buildings are silent, their green shutters raised, though a few rocks begin to clank on our roof. The Jeeps take a circuitous path to get there, as usual, in an effort to vary our route.

Twenty minutes later, as we're feeling slightly sick, our Jeep grumbles to a halt by a building.

"Out-out-out" shouts a sergeant. We descend.

Branching off into groups, eight men storm the front staircase of a building, entering the two-story home. Four more guard the Jeep and the streetside, while my patrol scrambles around to the back.

We crouch inside a dark alley, pointing our guns all around, panting and sweating; we've arrived at a small metal gate. The Sergeant removes a pair of cutters and goes to work snipping a lock. There's screaming in the building beside us. Above us, between the twin roofs, a silent moon hovers. It's cold.

We scurry into a backyard and quickly scour the lawn, darting between some shrub lemon trees, watching for anything that moves. The Sergeant, who's been serving for eight years, having chosen to sign on for extra, appears utterly

professional—fearless and calm—as he scampers through a garden, radioing troops in the house. His main concern is friendly-fire, though it isn't lost on him that several thousand Arabs are wide awake and fully attuned to our presence.

Finally, the radio signals that the suspect's been seized, and we scuttle back to the front. Inside the main courtyard, two Arabs are perched on the steps, screaming at us in Arabic. I point my gun at one's head. He continues shouting "*kus uhtak*"—your sister's cunt—while his relative is thrown in our truck. We drive away. The prisoner wears a cloth on his head, a band of striped flannelette, which covers his eyes. He's silent as we move, bounding through the hills to the north.

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at a police station inside Ma'ale Adumim, a Jewish settlement northeast of Jerusalem, inside the West Bank. A few water towers scrape the pink sky, and our patrol group waits beside the limestone-brick station, seated on a bench. The prisoner's led down to a picnic table. His hands are tied with a bind, and he bobs back and forth, shaking, while a couple blow smoke past his forehead. One, a Russian named Slava, asks me if they get a

lot of snow in Los Angeles, where I've told him I'm from.

Nobody taunts or slaps the prisoner, as sometimes happens on our base; the men simply want to go back and get sleep. Most have been doing six-six shifts for the past twenty days—that is, six hours of guarding, six hours of rest, interspersed with shifts for arrests, ambushes, patrols, and rote cleaning.

Most look forward to arrests, since they offer excitement and a break from routine. Tonight, though, everyone's groggy. Talk has centered around an officer from the Kfir Brigade who was killed down in Gaza, a Russian, whom several troops knew.

As we wait around for a major to arrive, who will apparently question the prisoner, he asks if he can go to the bathroom. Another man and I offer to take him, leading him out by the hands and through the sliding glass doors of the police station. The station has an automatic polisher for shoes and a grimy glass fish tank that glows. The clerk is half-awake. "In there." She points to the bathroom.

Inside the stall, we unbutton the prisoner's black jeans and slide them down to his waist. This is one

of the less glamorous parts of serving. He's wearing green "Superman" briefs. He says he can't go, though, not while he's blinded. We decide to remove the white cloth from his eyes. As we slide it down, we can see that this prisoner is fourteen, or younger. The kid's never shaved. Slowly, his blue eyes adjust to the light, furiously blinking. We can see that he has cried and is scared, though he's no longer shaking.

It isn't clear what the kid's done.

Half-an-hour later, he's led off for questioning, and we never see him again.

Throughout the course of the month, thousands will be arrested, and over thirteen-hundred will be killed, the bulk of them in Gaza. Our company claims two of these casualties. One, who hurls a firebomb at a foot patrol next to our base, is hit with a shot in the gut and bleeds to death painfully while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. The other, the unarmed protester, is said to have been killed, although by whom and just how are unclear. His death is not reported in the papers, though the rumors continue to abound.

Back at the Beit Mochelle Outpost, the night before my

departure from the base and return to life as a civilian, Boris is cleaning the floors inside of a double-wide trailer, which functions as our company mess. He's picking up cabbage from the floor, and when I tell him that I haven't eaten yet, having come back late from guard, he shovels out a plate of spaghetti and tells me to sit and enjoy.

We're alone in this trailer, and beyond us, a space heater hums. It's just after ten, and the moon is aglow in the sky. It's not clear if he feels any remorse—if anyone does—or what will soon come of this land.

A few minutes later, Boris looks up from the end of the room, a mop in his hand, a smoke dangling off of his lips. "You okay?" he asks me.

"I'm fine."