

DAVID SUISSA

Israel Is My Grandfather Kissing Asphalt



DON'T BE FOOLED or limited by the news from Israel. Some of the stories are amazing; some are disheartening. We know about the amazing: innovation nation, villa in the jungle, multicultural miracle, vibrant and resilient society. And God knows we know about the disheartening: divided nation, dysfunctional politics, intractable conflicts, UN piñata, unending terror. We're accustomed to the whiplash: Turn here for amazing, turn there for disheartening. But what about Yamine Bitton — where do we turn for him? Yamine is neither here nor there. He never comes up in our Twitter feed. He has no Facebook account. Reporters never call him.

Yamine Bitton was my grandfather, a successful tea merchant from Casablanca. Of his 11 children, all but one moved to Israel. (The ex-

ception, my mother, moved to Canada.) The two oldest sons moved first in 1947 to fight in the War of Independence. Several years later, on a Saturday night in 1955, right after Yamine recited *Havdalah*, the sons were back to smuggle their parents and remaining siblings to Israel. When Yamine landed in Israel, as the family lore goes, he kissed the ground and said he'd never leave. He was home.

In one way, this unconditional devotion makes little sense. Yamine's family struggled in one of those development towns where Jews from Arab lands were placed. A tiny house is tiny enough without seven children still at home. For the tea pasha of Casablanca, aliyah meant a significant downgrade in both status and lifestyle. But my grandfather was a pious man. Three times a day, he would recite verses like this in his prayers:

And to Jerusalem your city may you return....Blessed are you, builder of Jerusalem....May our eyes behold your return to Zion....Blessed are you, who restores his presence to Zion....Bring us to Zion your city in glad song, and to Jerusalem, home of your sanctuary in eternal joy....For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem....

My grandfather's devotion, then, made all the sense in the world. He kissed the ground of Israel because he had prayed all his life for that opportunity. It's not hard to see how this intense spiritual yearning alleviated the physical hardships and loss of status he encountered in Israel. Maybe that's why I never heard stories of my grandfather complaining. Feeling at home, after all, carries a status all its own.

My friend the writer Yossi Klein Halevi, disheartened by the turmoil in Israel, said something recently that stuck with me. No matter how bad things get, he told me, "we still need something to hold

on to.” We need something that will help us carry on. For me, that something is not the amazing side of Israel with its innovation and vibrancy and creativity, much as I admire it. What I hold on to in times of distress is the image of my grandfather bending down to kiss the asphalt in Israel and saying he would never leave.

There is a deep humility in bending down to kiss the ground, a recognition of our frailty. The image of our ancestors holding hands in a long chain through the centuries, praying to return to their biblical homeland, is larger than any of us. In the face of the ugly fights in the Knesset, the acrimony on the streets, the dogma disguised as policy, the fraying of social bonds, this is what I cling to: the miracle my grandfather experienced as a member of the generation that made it over the Zionist finish line.

Yossi’s call to find something to hold on to is poignant. For all too many Diaspora Jews, if they can’t stand what’s going on in Israel, there’s a natural urge to give up and move on. Holding on to our Zionist connection during such stressful and upsetting times takes more than just activism or reminding ourselves about Start-Up Nation or how Israeli innovation helps repair the world. Activism is important, and it feeds our appetite for action; accomplishments are important, and they feed our minds and egos. But to maintain an unconditional attachment to the Zionist project requires something that feeds our souls. My grandfather bending down to kiss the ancient ground of Israel and saying he’ll never leave touches my soul.

It feeds me the way my mother’s love for me feeds my soul, or the way my love for my children feeds my soul, or the way Jews never abandoning a 1,900-year dream feeds my soul. It feeds me in a way that makes me want to emulate my ancestors and never give up on the Zionist miracle.

This feeling doesn’t show up in our Twitter feed. It doesn’t come and go, like a news story, amazing or disheartening. It’s there on the

good days and it's there on the dark days and, yes, even on Israel's birthday. And like the image of my grandfather bending down to kiss holy ground, it's with me everywhere I go. *

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