

Ibrahim and Dvorah: A Jerusalem Story by **Richelle Shem-Tov**

Jerusalem, 1990

On a pleasant sunny afternoon on a busy street in the Old City of Jerusalem, a dark-skinned young man, a boy really, was racing towards one of the gates that led out of the quarter. Close behind him, was a throng of people, mostly men and boys, with hate and anger in their eyes, shouting with threatening rage at the fleeing boy. They were almost upon him as he fell to the ground. Terror filled his heart. He felt the blows of their kicking and beating; he was sure he would not survive. He lay cringing, protecting his head with his arms. Suddenly, he noticed a young woman pushing her way hastily through the crowd coming towards him. She was dressed in the fashion of religious Orthodox women, her head covered with a scarf. Her pale face and blue eyes showed pain and horror. Without prior thought, she knelt down and lay across his body. He was completely taken aback, as were all who witnessed this scene. Briefly, he became aware of her soft body on his.

“To kill him you must first kill me,” she cried to the enraged mob: The crowd moved back – stunned into silence. One called out: “He is a terrorist; he has stabbed one of ours.” “He is a human being,” she muttered, almost in tears. Only a few minutes passed before a policeman appeared, pulling her up before taking the shaking boy to the police van.

Earlier that day, this youth, a Palestinian from a refugee camp in the West Bank had stood nervously watching by the wall of a narrow market street within the city walls. He was waiting for a uniformed person to appear, any uniformed person – whether military man or policeman – anyone representing the rulers of this land who, decades before, had dispossessed his family and his people. His whole being was filled with determination to inflict harm, to punish, to take revenge. Both fear and rage engulfed him. He held a knife hidden in a deep pocket, but on seeing the police officer he became afraid and hesitated. Was this horrific deed he was about to commit, justified? Was it right to kill? Might he himself pay too high a price? Then the officer shouted rudely at an old vendor in the market. Overcome once more with hatred, the boy ran towards the policeman, stabbing him blindly, superficially wounding him in the chest. He dropped the knife as he fled from the scene of the crime.

1978 Dvorah –

In an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York City, a little girl with curly red hair, wearing a long-sleeved blouse and skirt, was playing and skipping with other young children on the pavement at the bottom of the stairs leading to her family home. Some of these children were her siblings from a large family with eight children. They spoke mainly Yiddish at home, although she learned both English and Hebrew at her school for Jewish girls. Her mother worked from home, taking in sewing and mending, but mostly cooked, cleaned and took care of the family. She had little time for individual care and attention; this latter task was left to an elder sister. Her father studied at a yeshiva in the evenings and during the day worked in a general store. Each afternoon, he made it his business to take two of the children with him to work in order to teach them the business, the ways of the outside world and, above all, to get close to each of his children.

From their grandparents who lived nearby, the children learned about “the Old Country” in Eastern Europe, the Holocaust and the Holy Land.

1978 Ibrahim

In a refugee camp in the West Bank of Palestine, under Israeli Military control, a young school boy was playing football in the run-down streets of the camp which had stood in this very place for three decades. Though their home was small and could hardly accommodate all eight children, they were not hungry for food as his father worked in construction across the Green Line in Israel and his mother taught at the UN school. Their living conditions were pitiful but better than those of many of their neighbours. He learned from his parents and grandparents that his family had owned property and a large orchard near the sea before they fled during the Nakba of 1948 (Israel’s War of Independence). His father still dreamed of returning to his old home. His mother had long abandoned all such hope. Only he and two sisters still attended school; others had found employment, some after leaving the refugee camp; and one sister had married and departed for America. The boy was born and grew up in this overcrowded abysmal place but knew no other world.

1988 Dvorah

A Jewish Orthodox neighbourhood on the outskirts of the Old City of Jerusalem:

Her red curls were now cut close and were almost always covered by a scarf or wig. She lived in a tiny flat in crowded quarters, together with her young husband, a scholar at a Yeshiva. She tended an infant born two months previously. They lived on a meager income – from their parents and state subsidies. She had come to Jerusalem a year before to meet and marry this man who was from a good family, gentle, intelligent and kind, and whom she would learn to love. She always knew that this would be her future and she accepted it without question. She hoped, however, that someday she would be able to teach at a school for Jewish Orthodox girls. She was bright, friendly and high-school educated, liked reading and was well aware of the complexity of the world she lived in. However, she knew her place and shied away from any political or public activity.

1988 Ibrahim

In the Palestinian refugee camp, the lad had grown into a teenager. An elder brother, who had dropped out of school early on, was heavily involved with the Palestinian resistance organization, and frequently participated in demonstrations, some of which were violent. He and his comrades often clashed with Jewish settlers and Israeli soldiers. Sometimes the latter would burst into their home during the night in search of his brother, causing terror amongst his parents and siblings. Having heard the tragic narrative of the family again and again, as well as that of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, Ibrahim had harbored a deep desire to participate in the ongoing struggle. His mother, however, who was determined to keep him out of trouble, demanded that he keep a low profile and complete his high-school studies. She hoped and prayed that he would one day join his sister in America.

1990 Ibrahim

The Refugee Camp:

He did indeed complete his studies, one of the few boys who had remained at the UNRWA high school in the camp, and was awaiting his visa to the United States. He felt frustration, resentment and guilt that he had sat at school all those years while his brother was out nightly, fighting for liberation. And then everything changed. His brother was shot dead in a confrontation with Israeli soldiers and his body brought home. He was filled with sorrow, rage and desire for revenge. Without informing his already broken-hearted family, he found his way into Jerusalem.

1990 Dvorah and Ibrahim

Jerusalem

That sunny afternoon Dvorah had left her baby with a neighbor in order to do some shopping. When nearing one of the gates of the Old City, she came across an angry mob which was on the verge of lynching a man. The youth – for she saw now that he was a little more than a boy – had already fallen to the ground. She ran forward, covered him with her body and saved his life.

Dvorah saw him being taken away. Never again did she see that dark, bewildered face, but never did she forget it. Likewise, Ibrahim never saw Dvorah's face again nor did he ever forget it. None who had seen it or heard of it, irrespective of their religious, national or political leaning, could ever forget that incredible act of courage and compassion.

A note from the author: I well remember this incident which happened many years ago, but well after the Six Day War. An Orthodox Jewish woman protected an Arab man, suspected of terrorism, from an angry mob in Jerusalem by covering him with her body. I do not know their names or anything about them. My story is entirely fictional but is based on that event and is dedicated to that heroic woman.

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