



THE WALLS BETWEEN US

Notes from the Holy Land



MATTHEW SMALL

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by Matthew Small



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Matthew Small is a fiction writer and freelance journalist, currently living and writing in the limestone city of Bath in south west England.



Matthew has travelled through many parts of the world exploring different cultures and societies across five continents. In 2012

Matthew embarked on a trip to the Holy Land to further his political understanding of the area, which is documented in his debut book *The Wall Between Us*.

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Preface

Everybody has a story to tell. This is what I learned while attempting to further my understanding of the ongoing Israel and Palestine conflict. Unfortunately, these stories predominantly reverberate around suffering, hatred and lasting injustice. In short, they are painful to hear. And after having left these fertile and volatile lands, after hearing these tales and seeing humanity being lost to fear and distrust, what hope can one retain that peace will ever be mastered between these two deeply scarred neighbours?

Over the course of these reflections, I will do my best to capture my experience of a month spent in Israel and Palestine. It will recall my time spent in Jerusalem; of joining a group of Europeans and Israelis as we travelled into the West Bank to harvest olives with Palestinian farmers, incorporating meditation into non-violent activism; it will retell a meeting with a settler who lives in the controversial settlement of Shilo; and recapture encounters with different organisations which are determinedly trying to plough both lands for a sustainable future, whilst drawing on my own diary entries and my search for answers as to why this wall between us exists.

I am not an expert in this conflict; I am a writer who tries to find reason through writing.

In truth, and after two weeks spent listening to stories, I had almost come to the decision that I couldn't comment about this conflict. The history is too complex, the wounds too deep, and the helplessness I unknowingly wrote my way into was constricting. Who am I, an outsider, to think that I can do anything to help this situation?

However, this was soon changed by one little boy: Isam. I had joined him and his family in his father's olive groves in the rich soils surrounding the Palestinian town of Deir Istiya. By midday, the hot sun was beginning to take its toll, and in a moment of respite I took to collecting fallen olives in a plastic bucket, seeking shelter in the shade of the trees. Isam left the group and came to help me. Together, we sifted through the dry, crumbling soil, retrieving the bruised, purple olives. He suddenly looked up and gave birth to a few words that have inspired all that is to follow: "You give me the life in Palestine," he said, faltering over his English. "Talk the world!" he added. I was taken aback, unable to respond to this boy who had already returned to searching for more olives. "Talk the world," he said again, now pinching the source of his family's livelihood between his fingers. I was speechless. There was nothing I could say, no hope I could offer him. And in the patter of olives falling into the bottom of the bucket, the moment soon

passed, and the harvest continued.

I cannot talk to the world; I do not have a strong enough voice. But of the few who I can talk to, you few who have taken it upon yourselves to share in these words, my only wish is that you too talk about the pressing need for peace to be again brought to the forefront of both Israel's and Palestine's interests. Presently, there is no political will for peace in Israel, or a strong united will for peace in Palestine. In fact, I would say that there is no real want by politicians to entertain the idea of peace. But in the will of the majority of people I spoke to, both Israelis and Palestinians, there was a real lust for peace. I fear that both are being gravely let down by their political leadership.

I do not want to cast judgement about who is right and who is wrong, the situation goes beyond this. But at the same time, I will not suppress my feelings and reactions to the things I saw. Sitting here now, with the November chill whispering through my window and the winter sunshine light and playful outside my family home in the New Forest, the memories I hold onto from my trip to the Holy Land already seem distant. Did I really depart from the intoxicating and soothing spirit of Tel Aviv just yesterday? Still, today, I know that both sides suffer, Israeli children and Palestinian children suffer, and that is why I have titled this book,

The Wall Between Us. We are all children of this one Earth; even if we can't see the concrete or the barbed wire fences, we are still impacted by their existence – our humanity is one, after all.

My hope is to share with you that even in the midst of conflict, bridges can be formed and relationships encountered – the seeds of peace can still be nurtured.

The Holy City

In his hefty biography, *Jerusalem*, Simon Sebag Montefiore embarks on what appears to be an impossible mission, bringing the complex story of the Holy City to life. I stumbled over the scale of his endeavour as I passed under Damascus Gate, first entering into the Old City of East Jerusalem with darkness sheltering in the narrow stone streets and my backpack heavy with excitement. My month in the Holy Land had begun, and where better to begin than in the Holy City itself, where Heaven and Earth are said to meet.

I could feel its immense history seeping out of the ancient architecture. The dark alleyways housed a sombre silence with the shops all barred shut as the night continued to veil the slip of a starless sky above. I hurried on, looking back and forth in search of my hostel, passing a group of Arab men sitting on low plastic chairs sharing a *shisha* pipe, smoking silently together.

The complex, turbulent and often bloody past of Jerusalem called on Montefiore to write a book of no less than 600 pages. I will write only, while conscious of my brevity, that the Old City is home to the holiest sites of the three Abrahamic religions: the Temple Mount with the Western Wall for Jews, the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque

for Muslims, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for Christians.

Since the 6th century BC, Jews have hungered over the return to the “Promised Land”, after their Diaspora began with the destruction of Solomon’s First Temple on the Temple Mount, in 587 BC. After an armed Jewish uprising in 70 AD, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple that Herod had built over the foundations of Solomon’s. Jews were no longer able to worship freely at the foot of the Temple Mount, where according to the Torah the “Divine Presence” eternally rests, until the end of the Six Day War in 1967.

The birth of the Zionist movement, with the ideology of Jews returning to their “historical and biblical” homeland, had not made much progress until the turn of the 20th century. The fall of the Ottoman Empire saw the land of Palestine under the rule of a British mandate, governing over the people and territory until “such time that they are able to stand alone”. The mandate was presupposed by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, stating that: “His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil

and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

What the British did not expect was the commitment and longing of the early Zionists to self-determination. The atrocities that befell European Jews during the Second World War, with many countries closing their borders to the fleeing and desperate Holocaust survivors, caused a steady mass migration of Jews to land on the shores of Palestine. After armed conflicts with the Arab population, and using force against the British, the Zionists triumphantly declared, on May 14th 1948, the existence of the independent State of Israel, with West Jerusalem as its capital.

However, this triumph was a tragedy for the Palestinians, with an estimated 700,000 fleeing or expelled from their homes after the day of *Nakba*, meaning catastrophe, which is still commemorated each year on May 15th. Today, many millions of these refugees and their descendants still live in exile, unable to return to the ancestral land of their childhood. The enduring Israel/Palestine conflict was born, with sixty years of bloodshed, violence and loss now suffered by both sides, without an end in sight.

In 1948, the State of Israel was set within the Green Line, named for the green ink

used to draw the borders on the map, but the Six Day War also gave Israel control of what is today's West Bank from Jordan, and the Gaza Strip from Egypt. Israel commenced a militarised occupation of these lands. The war also saw the annexation of East Jerusalem, bringing the Old City and its holy sites under Israeli authority, allowing Jews to again return to their "Holy of Holies".

Stopping with my thoughts, I turned to look back at the three men inhaling the flavoured smoke deep into their lungs. Coming down the street behind me, two Israeli soldiers strolled slowly past the smokers, carrying big black guns before them and wearing big black boots on their feet. They appeared young and out of place in their green army uniforms amongst the quiet streets, but I was to learn that guns and holiness go together in Jerusalem.

It was the nature of the occupation that was to be the focus of my time in both Israel and Palestine – I wanted to know what occupation looks like, feels like, and whether or not it is justifiable. But above all, I wanted to know why it persists.

A new wind rushed past me as I continued on my way, lifting the rubbish that speckled the dark stone into the dry Middle-Eastern air. Church bells rang out, echoing off the silence. I soon arrived at the Via Dolorosa; the street made famous by Jesus' final

steps, weighed down by the heavy cross of his crucifixion. I wondered if having Christ pass this way was going to make my bed in the dormitory more expensive. I stopped before two large deeply-knotted wooden doors, and the entrance to The Austrian Hospice. I pressed on the buzzer, already tasting the cool beer that I knew waited within. My journey to the Holy City was over, but Jerusalem by night was a songbird compared to the feverish devotion and crowded streets of the daylight hours to come. My real journey had not even begun.

The Holy City, Religion and a Viennese Coffee

The Austrian Hospice, situated in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, is a speck of tranquillity in a sandstorm of religious fever, crowded streets and the cries of Arab market-traders. Completed in 1858, the hospice opened as a pilgrim's house, accommodating the rising number of pilgrims seeking to pay homage to Jerusalem's holy sites. During the war years, it served as a hospital, and only returned to its original purpose in the 1980s. I had not considered myself to be a pilgrim, but in their exhibition, *In Search of the Lord God*, the hospice regards a pilgrimage as nourishing the soul "in all the insight and solace that we can gain". Now I liked the sound of that.

So the first day of my *pilgrimage* began by tiptoeing out of the basement dormitory, pursued by the ruptured snoring of a fellow guest – still going strong in the early morning. Rubbing the lack of sleep from my eyes, I cursed him inwardly as I stumbled into the bright light of a new day, with Jerusalem flaunting her stone beauty before me. I stood in the centre of the rooftop, alone and turning to capture it all: The Dome of the Rock on my left mirrored the rising sun in its golden roof; on my right, the bells of the Church of the

Holy Sepulchre were ringing melodically, and behind me a house rising above all others was adorned in four blue and white Israeli flags, drooping in the still air.

In the Old City of Jerusalem you will find Jews, Muslims and Christians all living and worshipping inside of the great stone wall that once acted as the city's defences. Looking far into the view before me, I wondered where the problem was – why can't people just live together in harmony? Actually, I was starting to chew over my first questions about the occupation. Is it motivated by religion, the quest for land, or enforced in the name of security? I would have to get off this rooftop. I could at least try to get my head around one of these potential causes: religion. I was in the Holy City after all. But before all else, I promptly skipped back down the stairs and straight towards the hospice's café, in anticipation and need of my first Viennese coffee.

7th October

Sitting on a very old stone step outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the air is ridden with church bells and the scatter of conversations off the white-stone square, largely coming from the group of tourists before me. I've walked through the Old City for around an hour; each street I took to reach the

Temple Mount I was turned back by the IDF (Israel Defense Forces). I think it's a religious holiday and therefore restricted to tourists. I did make it to the observation point for the Western Wall. It's quite a sight - the large courtyard before it was filled by Jewish worshippers, and waves of devotions were breaking over the wall itself. Then you come to the Holy Sepulchre, which is not so energised. Tourists are allowed into the church while the different denominations give services, and it's a hive of camera flashes and prostrations over The Stone of Anointing, on which Jesus' body was said to have been prepared for burial. It's funny to be somewhere so close to where Christ is revered and regarded to be felt most. I feel him very little here, and don't see his teachings in the core of this church. It's all devotion and no action.

What Jerusalem is very good at, if not drawing up the question of God, is to make one feel very hungry. I had found little in the sense of occupation so far, and of course wouldn't have expected to either, apart from the armed soldiers seeming to appear at most street corners. So I closed my notebook, still watching the hordes of tourists and pilgrims entering and leaving

the church, before standing up from my step and fighting my way back to the Via Dolorosa and Abu Shukri's hummus restaurant that, like the passing on of a great mythical story, had been highly recommended.

Refuelled by a large bowl of hummus, and weighed down slightly by two white pita breads and a handful of falafel, I was ready to step outside the Old City; how does West Jerusalem compare? Passing back through Damascus Gate by daylight, in a slow train of sweaty people, you immediately arrive at the East Jerusalem Bus Station, with destinations such as Bethlehem and Ramallah displayed on the stands. I walked by, watching the number 21 bus to Bethlehem depart, heading for the West Bank and, despite all the media portrayals, a still-mysterious place. Somewhat distracted, I mounted the new city tram and headed for the Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem.

A good piece of advice for anyone visiting Israel is to make a note of the dates of religious holidays. Unlike in England, with Christianity's insistence on Sunday being the "day of rest" taken with a pinch of salt in order for capitalism to dominate each and every day of the week, in Judaism and Islam, Friday is the Holy Day. So from a little before sundown on Friday and lasting until sundown on Saturday, practising Jews will not partake in any creative act, be it work,

play, or simply driving. This is the *Sabbath*.

“What do you mean, *closed*?” I said to the man in the little glass booth at the entrance to Yad Vashem. “It’s Sunday, the *Sabbath* ended last night,” I protested, uncertain why everything seemed closed to me, like the Temple Mount I had also failed to see. “*Sukkot*,” I was told bluntly before being directed away.

In my naivety I hadn’t even realised that we were entering into one of the biggest festivals in the Jewish year, *Sukkot*, the remembrance of God protecting the Israelites in the desert. I soon discovered that this meant the tram back to Damascus Gate was also out of service, and my pace quickened as I headed towards the nearest bus stop, hoping they were still running. This was when I met a Jewish man from Illinois, waiting at the bus stop, who also gave me my first insight into Judaism.

He was a rotund man with an American accent and manner that made him seem more like a tourist than a practising Jew coming to share in the *Sukkot* celebrations with his family that lived in Jerusalem. Still, we boarded the bus and struck up conversation.

“You’re from England?” he asked, as we began to speed down the hill towards the centre of the New City. “Yes,” I said, watching the blur of Jerusalem passing by outside the window with the shops beginning to close despite it still being early afternoon. “And

what do you do?" he added. "I study religion," I said, still finding it strange to admit to people that I'm an aspiring writer who seeks to find an understanding of life through stories. He then promptly told me that, "You could never understand Judaism, unless you are living it!"

This caused me some discomfort, because from my understanding you can't really 'live Judaism'. You are born Jewish, or in rare cases pass the difficult procedure of converting to Judaism. I looked back out of the window, pondering his point that it is a living religion, a faith that enters every sphere of an individual's existence. Something told me that these insights would be useful when I made it to the West Bank, and confronted by the religious Jewish settlements that I had read so much about.

"What's that man doing with the horn?" I asked, pointing outside as the bus slowed at a junction with an orthodox Jew sounding a horn down the pavement. "He's telling the shops that it's time to close," the man from Illinois replied. "He can do that?" I added, watching the orthodox Jew now shouting as some of the shops were slow to let down their shutters. "If they want to hold onto their *kosher* licences then they will have to shut."

The term *kosher* is used to refer to food that conforms to the *Kashut* (Jewish dietary law), but it also appears to be used for abiding by the Torah, like the shops shutting

for the commencement of *Sukkot*. I said goodbye to my friend from Illinois as we disembarked at Jaffa Street, the main high street that runs through West Jerusalem. It's very cosmopolitan, with shops you'd find in London, Paris, Sydney or all around the world for that matter.

I was amazed how quiet the city had become, religion had brought it to a standstill. There were no trams passing by and only a stirring silence strengthened as the sun dipped behind the fresh concrete buildings. I ambled back to the Old City, with an American accent still whispering in my mind, *You could never understand Judaism, unless you are living it.*

Some hours later, and still full from my rich hummus lunch, I indulged in a Goldstar dark lager dinner, an Israeli beer that tasted distinctly holy after walking around in the balmy heat of Jerusalem for a day. I settled on the terrace outside the Austrian Hospice, overlooking the Via Dolorosa, with five IDF soldiers resting amongst the shadows in the street below. I watched them laughing and joking together, wondering if they had just come out of college to continue their education in the army, which is mandatory for all Israel's children. What did they think about having to stand there into the night, watching the orthodox Jews pass them by on their way to the Wall, celebrating *Sukkot*, or the table of Arab men watching them from

the restaurant opposite the hospice, or being photographed by the tourists who perhaps had never seen so many guns before? What education were they getting? What was their purpose for being there – security?

I sipped at my beer, watching these seemingly teenage soldiers, with their weapons held so naturally in their hands. My day in Jerusalem was at its end, and tomorrow would lead me to the birth place of Christ and into an ongoing occupation. My pilgrimage was destined for Bethlehem, and all the insights that this would bring. I swallowed the last of my beer, thinking about the hospice's definition of a pilgrim: "In their search for truth and authenticity every individual is called upon to examine God's calling in their own life."

How do we begin to look for the truth? Is it hidden from us, or do we hide it from ourselves? I left my vantage point with the call to prayer now ringing out of the speakers on top of a nearby mosque. I headed down to the basement and my bed, my ears already alert for the slight ripple of a snore.