

## Jerusalem to Eilat ... Cycling through the Breaking Heart of Israel

By Aaron Gilbert

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I was lost in my own head in late September of 2023. The colors of Fall and the blue sunny skies of New England were mostly invisible to me as I went deeper into what charitably could be called introspection, but more honestly was probably morose self-centeredness.

What reason did I have to be this way? Well, pretty much none. Soon, however, my mood would change to anger and fear when I read about the atrocities committed against Israel.

Before the Hamas atrocity against Israel, I guess if you had asked me my feelings about Israel and its connection with the world, I would have said something like, “it’s time for a new paradigm” Both Israel and American Jews have to get a new perspective. This is not 1948, this is not 1973. Israel is no longer under constant threat of annihilation nor “surrounded by powerful enemies”

What did I see? I saw a cold, but abiding peace with Egypt and Jordan, normalized relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan and peace within reach with Saudi Arabia. To the north was Syria which had been brought to its knees by civil war. Israel was an economic powerhouse, a technological wonder and had one of the most powerful and advanced militaries in the world as well as enormous and enduring support from the United States which (with only a few highly annoying exceptions) enjoyed strong bi-partisan support.

Of course, I realized that with Iran and the ever-expanding flavors of Islamic organizations out there, terrorism remained a meaningful threat as well as catastrophic terrorism. But this didn’t strike me as much different than what the

United States faced as well. I guess, I, like millions of Jews before me, was tired of being singled out and threatened in a unique and terrible way and was more than ready to have Israel become a nice regular place like Holland or somewhere.

And then October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, happened. As I was still trying to conceive the details of the events as they came in, my mother said,

“Oh this is terrible, now there is going to be so much anti-Semitism everywhere.

My former “New Israel” mindset had not yet fully collapsed. “What are you talking about? They attacked and murdered us. From this how do you get to anti-Semitism?” I demanded.

“You watch” my mother said knowingly... And of course, she was right.

A few weeks later I was with my brother Keith. We meet often to work out at a group training studio in which a young trainer screams at you to lift more, run faster and move quicker. And all that for a very expensive price. Afterwards we go to drink coffee and try to cool down. My workout seemed to have not only enhanced my body but had shored up my ragged psyche. I felt strong either that or perhaps the caffeine had just kicked in. I suddenly wanted to do something. I wanted to show my support.

“So Keith, what would you think, I mean how would you feel about going to Israel now?”

“What now?” He answered. “You mean now, during what’s going on?”

“Yes, now. We could... I don’t know. We could cycle the whole country. We could show up and display our loyalty. So, what do you think?”

“Mnnnn, I guess that we could...”

I chose to take that as an affirmative.

Soon, I searched the internet and made contact with a potential Israeli guide, Amichai Korda, a tour guide and IDF Medic. He had asked to be contacted on his cell phone.

“So, I mean is it safe there for us? Should we come now?” I asked.

“Not right now, but I will be free in a few weeks...”

“What’s that noise? Are those gunshots? Where the hell are you?”

“Not to worry my friend. I’ll be home soon. I’ll send you an itinerary. Come ahead. It will be exciting, yes?”



*With my brother Keith looking forward to our journey.*

A few weeks later Keith and I were in a very short line to go through customs at the El Al counter in Boston. We were asked a few very basic questions by the lovely security agent. Keith and I have long since aged out of the threat demographic of crazy Nihilists, so the profiling of us now was clearly under the category of “nice middle aged American Jews” We were directed right through, and onto the plane.

I seem to be drawn to Israel in times of danger. Not because I am a thrill seeker or so brave. I am honestly neither. But rather because I am a firm believer that the message of the media can always be counted on to be wrong. Let’s be charitable and not say that they lie, but rather that they know that fear sells. And they like to sell it hard.

So, with the prevailing message being that only unhinged people would go to Israel now, I knew that I was the target market. I firmly believed that it would be safe and honestly, the fact that we wouldn't be waiting in any lines didn't hurt either.

The last time I had been in Israel was in 2004 with my ex-wife. This was during the Intifada, when they were blowing up buses all over the country. I remembered roaming the country, eating hummus and drinking wine, completely relaxed and comfortable. Only when I got back to my hotel room and turned on CNN did I get scared.

I remember going to a little nightclub in Tel-Aviv with my ex-wife. She was looking super cute with her tiny little purse smaller than the palm of your hand. As we were walking in the security guard sitting on a chair and looking bored stopped us.

"I need to check your bag," he said to her.

"Oh yes, of course, excuse me, I'm so sorry," she stammered, fumbling for her bag to present to him.

"What are you nuts?" he said, "I'm just kidding!" as he waived us both in.

This was the amazing and resilient nation of Israel under siege in 2004 and I hoped that, 20 years later, it would be the same, but I knew that this was something much worse. I worried. I wondered if this was different. My heart went out to those who were dealing with this new and potentially game changing menace

For the next week, my brother explored this incredible country. We cycled the 150 miles or so from Jerusalem to Eilat with ease. A simple but thrilling Israeli breakfast buffet with aromas of spices, whether at a five-star hotel in Jerusalem or a kibbutz in the Negev, is always one of my favorites. We of course saw the greatest hits of Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, but we also drank wine and ate goat organ meat (all Kosher) with the Moroccan restaurateur in Beersheva, beheld 600-million-year-old rock formations in Mitzpe Ramon and enjoyed fine art on display at Kibbutz Neot Smadar, in the heart of the Negev. On top of all of this, I was able to do my normal mental health protocol, which generally involves pushing my body to the limit in the pursuit of athletic glory. The buttery smooth roads of Israel, with their undulating climbs under the potent sun with hot, dry desert wind whipping past my ears. provided the perfect chance to let it rip!

Towards sunset in the desert, with my body still pulsating from the thrill of the ride and the warm breeze sweeping across the reds and browns of the Negev, all those months of heavy thoughts and debates with my father seemed to melt away with every sip of that cold beer. It struck me that while we may wrestle with complex issues, sometimes all it takes is a little adventure to remind us of the beauty in life and our shared humanity.

“Who knew cycling through Israel would be the ultimate therapy?” I laughed, feeling lighter.

Keith grinned, “Next time, let’s do a tandem bike! That way, if we get lost, we can blame each other!”

We both burst into laughter, imagining the chaos of two grown men trying to navigate the winding roads of the Negev on a tandem bike. As we watched the sun dip below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, I realized that despite the challenges, we were still here, still thriving, and still able to find joy in the little things. I couldn’t help but think maybe, just maybe, this was the new mindset I had been searching for—not just for Israel, but for life itself: embracing the complexity, celebrating the beauty, and always finding time for a good laugh.

After all Israel’s heart was still strong. Israel’s heart was not breaking. It was my mine that was breaking. My connection with Israel, as an American Jew, was powerful. Israel would live. I’m glad I came to see that for myself. Am Yisrael Chai indeed!



*Together, looking back over our expedition through the heart of Israel.*