

# Exile

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In 1983, in his living room on Van Buren street, where wandering Jew plants dropped their leaves against his western window, the poet Gerald Stern put this question to the students gathered around him: is there any place where, if you could never return to it, you would want to die? As one of Stern's young, romantic graduate students, I blurted out "Jerusalem." Others said Paris, the Greek islands; I think someone muttered something about home. When I said Jerusalem then, I think I also meant love, that I would want to die if I could never return to the man I loved, who, at the time, lived in Jerusalem.

Over the decade and more that followed that conversation, my travels would take me into the lives of Ethiopian Jews, who after decades of longing for Jerusalem had finally reached their dream. Watching Ethiopian children become Israelis, teaching the teenagers English, sharing *enjara* as part of their family, and studying their lives brought me to Jerusalem numerous times between the years of 1984 and 1998. I thought a lot, during these visits, about exile and about what it meant for my Ethiopian friends to return to a homeland that didn't always feel like home. Before each departure, as I watched the golden light fade against Jerusalem stone, I knew these journeys were a luxury. Yet, even in these moments, I changed Gerald Stern's words from "die" to "suffer greatly." I would have suffered but would not have wanted to die if I could not return to Jerusalem.

In the middle of the Intifada, in 1989, I reunited with a Palestinian friend from Jerusalem who was living in Chicago, and who for political reasons could not return to Jerusalem, his home. I felt his pain as I prepared for my return and packed his unsealed letters and gifts for our mutual American poet friend in Jerusalem. I understood in a more profound way than ever before what a privilege it was to return, year after year, to my spiritual home. And I

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## Losing the Motherland

understood, too, a different kind of suffering.

This past summer, my husband Steve and I pushed our daughter Sarina in her stroller over the harsh stone of Jerusalem streets, carried her through the narrow passages of

the Old City, and gave her name at the Wall. As I watched Sarina dance in her father's arms in the men's section of the *kotel*, from where I stood with so many generations of Jewish women, I knew I would be sad if I could not return to this place. But I would no longer equate suffering with not being able to return to a physical place. And thoughts of dying I could now only imagine having if, for some reason, I could never return to my daughter.

My fourteen-year journey in and out of the lives of Ethiopian Jews, back and forth from Chicago to Jerusalem, from one homeland to another, had turned into a book. And on this trip, I felt that I had everything I needed; the journey had come full circle. As I said goodbye to Osnat, an Ethiopian former student who I had watched grow from a shy thirteen-year-old into a bold young woman, and who, throughout this visit, carried my daughter along the sea and sang to her in Hebrew, there were no tears: I knew I had the security of return.

The tears came instead, this time, upon my return to America. My mother's illness, diagnosed as a non-threatening form of scleroderma, had entered her pulmonary system in the short time we'd been away; she was in critical care. As she lay in her hospital bed in Evanston, her mind as sharp as ever, I read her Sholom Aleichem stories, remembering the lilt in her voice when she read to me as a child. This time I listened to the sound of her lungs struggling to take in more air.

Three weeks later, as I was trying to find a babysitter one morning so I could return to the hospital, my father called with the words, "She died." I fell on the floor in sobs larger and deeper than any pain I'd ever known. When I couldn't get up from my knees to comfort my daughter, who was crying from her crib, I understood for the first time what exile really means: how it feels to never be able to return again to the most essential place, to the giver of life, the source, mother, home. □