

Mark Sussman

Birthright, Parts One and Two

February 2009

<http://www.jewcy.com/post/birthright>

http://www.jewcy.com/post/birthright_part_ii

I.

Pre-Gaming

"If it is now asked, 'Do we presently live in an enlightened age?' the answer is, 'No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment.' As matters now stand, a great deal is still lacking in order for men as a whole to be, or even to put themselves into a position to be able without external guidance to apply understanding confidently to religious issues. But we do have clear indications that the way is now being opened for men to proceed freely in this direction and that the obstacles to general enlightenment--to their release from their self-imposed immaturity--are gradually diminishing. In this regard, this age is the age of enlightenment, the century of Frederick." - Immanuel Kant, 1784

My brother and I wake up to the news that 155 Palestinians are dead in Gaza, killed by Israeli missiles after a barrage of Hamas rockets had fallen on Israeli cities. We finish packing anyway and head to JFK with the assumption that the trip will be canceled, that Israel is only days away from another war. We show up four hours early, as instructed. There are a number of groups milling about, and it takes a few minutes to find ours. I left most of the planning to my brother, and didn't even really bother checking on the details once the trip was set. As we approach the group and group leader NP's hat and flowing beard rise monolithic above the group of early-twenties-ish heads. Their faces shaved and cheerful bordering on euphoric, they grab name tags from him as he describes a record-producer friend of his (a real catch) to a tall, eminently marriageable blond. I panic. What do I know about the people who were to shepherd me through Israel? You hear horror stories. Interminable red-faced Zionist harangues, thinly-veiled meat-markets and marriage-orgies, cult-like protein deprivation, and so on. I'm a casual atheist raised Jewish and I have visions of an extremely awkward 10 days of Masada re-enactments, forced bar mitzvahs, and the great M.D./J.D. hunt. Looking at the name tags, I see Goldstein, Wasserman, and so on, and then I remember that Hebrew school was yet another circle of middle school's Inferno, and that was the last time I had to be social with this many Jews. There are flashbacks. I'm in my mid-20's, working on a doctorate in American literature, teaching at a very respectable college, and yet now I am now withdrawn, cynical, beleaguered, stand-offish, ugly, ignorant; I am the under-developed skeletal soul that I spent a decade outgrowing. I give my name, take my tag, and drag my ugly duffel bag to ticketing.

Birthright (Taglit in Hebrew) is a no-brainer. A (more or less) free trip to Israel offered to every Jew between the ages of 18 and 26, courtesy of a few rich American Zionists and the Israeli Government, it's designed to connect young Jews to Israel. Who wouldn't take a free trip, replete with free hotels and meals, to another country? This temptation is the founding assumption: even non-believers, even those

who lack sympathy with Israel, will find it hard to turn down the offer. Birthright itself is actually an umbrella encompassing several varieties of trip run by several varieties of facilitators. All of them take Zionism as their central tenet, but some are more religious than others. As I stand next to my brother in the ticketing line, I finally wonder about the precise mechanics that led him, a more religious Jew than I, to choose this trip out of the many offered, whether or not this is a discreet ploy on his part to stir up whatever cooling embers of belief I have left. It's a long line and I'm looking at him sideways the whole way.

We pass through security and head to the gate. I drift in to the comforts and rituals of pre-flight: listlessly half-reading a novel, compulsively buying and eating overpriced snacks, chewing half a pack of gum. I glance around and it's easy to see that, at 25 years, I must be one of the oldest on the trip. There's a kind of giddiness that permeates these kids - they're social, wandering up to each other, making introductions, exchanging the names of colleges, ages, and so on. Some of them are holding beers, and a couple are double-fisting, pre-gaming for what they assume will be a barely-remembered pub-crawl through the Holy Land. Nobody talks about the New York Times headlines staring out from the gift shops.

There are at least 100 people wearing Birthright name tags at the terminal. Those that haven't congealed into groups of fours and fives sit paired-off around the terminal. My eyes occasionally meet those of a few of the scattered fellow restless. We look away quickly, but they're not reading their novels either. A pair of very young-looking girls wearing University of Virginia sweatshirts talk to each other quietly as their heads swivel, and I imagine they see what I see: the first hour of a frat party about to go airborne. I don't approach them because I value reticence and skepticism in these situations - if we congeal, blend in and eventually begin the irregular orbits of these other groups, we risk falling into nondifferentiation. We risk the slipstream of sociability that smooths over rankles, lowers hackles: we risk acquiescence. This is surely what they want from us, and I imagine we sit silent and separate knowing that our near-total ignorance of each other is an ace-in-the-hole we can play if we want to.

Eventually they ask us to gather into the groups designated by the number on our name tag. I haven't put mine on. I dig it out of my carry-on, find my group, and my brother and I sit down with about 35 others in group 18. We look around at the faces that we're to spend the next 10 days with. A name game commences, the first of two we'll experience on our trip. We're to go around the group, say our name, where we're from, and our "favorite piece of furniture." Where I'm "from" is a tricky question and I answer it according to my mood. I tell them I live in New York and elicit audible admiration by choosing "hammock" (full disclosure: not actually my preferred furniture). After the name game ends we're handed The Rules. There aren't that many and only three strike me as having any consequences, but their implications are manifold:

1. No drinking alcohol anywhere other than the two bars and the winery we will visit as a group. You may not purchase alcohol anywhere outside the hotels. You may not get "drunk." "Drunk" is defined as any degree of consumption that results in vomiting, inappropriate behavior, or that prevents you from participating fully in group activities. Anybody who violates these conditions will be sent home immediately at their own expense.
2. You must stay with the group at all times. Anybody who intentionally wanders from the group or goes off on their own at any time will be sent home immediately at their own expense.
3. You must wear your name tag at all times.

As the bearded NP and fellow guide CM flesh out the implications of these rules and the reasoning behind them, the contours of the coming week begin to emerge. I'm nervous at this point: visions of meandering walks through Tel Aviv are replaced by field trip protocols, buddy checks, and the reawakening of teen rebellion. Not that I'm pro-vomit, but we are, after all, adults, and the return of the impulse to sneer in the face of a camp counselor is a reminder of the essential pettiness of that gesture. And while the logistics of leading a group of foreigners through a country on the brink of war certainly demands vigilance, at the least, the name tag is a bit humiliating.

I half-heartedly introduce myself to a few people in the vicinity, and totter around the airport until we board the plane. After a 10 hour flight, another orientation (the first of innumerable times we're encouraged to stand in a circle, jump up and down, and hug people who are, at that point, total enigmas, save for their preferred furniture), and then a long bus ride from Tel Aviv to a hotel in the Golan Heights where we will stay for several days. We're reminded about the name tags. I stuff mine deeper into my bag, and I have to remind myself that I am in Israel because it looks like the Arizona desert where I grew up. I am in Israel and I am going to see some shit. I hated being a child. I couldn't wait to grow up. I spend my first night in Israel staring at the ceiling.

The Lion

"There is absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test." - Charles Sanders Peirce, 1878

After a night spent staring at the ceiling, we get up early and head to breakfast. Some circle the food suspiciously - most of it is clearly identifiable: hard-boiled eggs, bell peppers, cottage cheese, salad, French Toast, etc. A few bowls of yogurty-looking material turn out not to be yogurt at all, but something else entirely. A few people, like myself, linger around the food because we dread having to find somewhere to sit. It's the first day of school, after all, and one defines oneself by the company one keeps. The best strategy is to get an empty spot and wait for people to congregate around you either by choice or necessity, but that's no longer an option. I take a chance and sit next to a few nice-looking people who turn out to be from New York. We talk about a lot of New Yorky things.

We're about ready to head to the bus and embark for Tzefat, one of Israel's holy cities, but, again, we're corralled into a circle in the hotel lobby and told by one of our well-meaning Israeli guides to play a name game. This one is "I Never," which is usually a kind of sexual party game, but here its shorn of its titillating overtones (I volunteer that I've never been to Hawaii). Eventually it's over.

The drive to Tzefat is heartening. As the bus winds its way up into the city (the highest in the region), we're told that it is the center for the study of Kabbalah, and that this will be one of the focuses of our visit there. The city is built almost uniformly of the same off-white stone, and besides the striking visual effect, it makes wandering through the city a disorienting experience. Because Tzefat is basically built on the side of a mountain, it's easy to get a basic orientation, but once you try to retrace your steps, the winding alleyways and streets have a habit of leading you back to your starting point.

Tzefat is also home to an artist community of sorts. The relationship between Kabbalah and the artists seems pretty close, and we get a glimpse of it while visiting Avraham, who is basically an American hippy from Michigan who found Kabbalah through the writings of Aryeh Kaplan while in college. We're taken to Avraham, it seems, because, whether or not he actually gets high, he's a stoner. Instantly recognizable as the type who will wander into a house party and extemporize on the virtues of yoga or Reiki or Rumi or Phish to anyone willing to listen, Avraham is there to pitch Kabbalah to us. Most of

this pitch consists of repeating how "amazingly, totally awesomely awesome" (verbatim, by the way) Kabbalah is, and of how it will totally change your perceptions about everything. The evidence is before our eyes, apparently. Just hours after our guides warn us of the shallowness of the recent celebrity Kabbalah craze, we're confronted with somebody who pushes Kabbalah like hits of ecstasy. No doubt he means well, but I can't help but feel that what's on display here is a familiar blip in an extremely unfamiliar place. His Americanness and his particular genre of personality is on display for us, a vexed mirror that shows us traces of our culture in an ancient city thousands of miles away. Avraham's speech patterns, his broad smile and his way of ending every other sentence with "man," signal his alignment with one of our most cherished mass-cultural forms. Kabbalah does not come to us through Madonna's plastic spiritualism; rather it comes by way of Arlo Guthrie and Cheech and Chong. We depart from his studio and visit a series of cramped, ornately decorated synagogues, their art and pillars completely alien and terrifying.

By the time we leave the synagogues, it's raining. Tzefat is a spectacular place to be rained on, and so I'm a bit dismayed when we're pulled into a Chabad-run hostel in order to play another name game. This one lasts for well over an hour and takes the well-known form of "My name is [name] and I'm bringing [name of item that begins with the first letter of your name] to the picnic." I bring marmalade and, again, minds are blown. But really it's like hell, and I say so. After which I'm reminded that Jews don't believe in hell. And yet I feel I must be in hell. The Kabbalah has much to say about this.

We're eventually released back into the rain to eat. I have some amazing falafel and an even more amazing cigarette. We're to be back on the bus in about a half hour to head up to a kibbutz on the Lebanon border. Someone forgets something back at the hostel and a few of us volunteer to go back and get it. This is when I get somewhat profoundly lost. Lacking all sense of direction in even the most familiar places, the mise en abyme of Tzefat's alleys sends me into a tailspin. We're able to get someone to show us where the hostel is, but finding the bus is problematic. In these circumstances, though, I begin to realize that getting lost is the only avenue to independence. Eventually, some kindly strangers point us sort of in the right direction and we clomp down a massive stone staircase to the bus. A guide meets us halfway and reminds us not to run, presumably because water makes things slippery.

We head up to the kibbutz and we're shown the series of barbed-wire fences that mark the border with Lebanon. The kibbutz occupies an important tactical position - it has the high ground that looks down over Lebanon, which allowed IDF troops to repel Hezbollah soldiers as they attempted to breach the border during the 2006 war. Apparently not a single one made it across. The dining hall of the kibbutz bears the scars of this tactical position - the building's facade is covered in divets made by shrapnel from the rockets that fell during the war. There is a hole in one of the front doors.

Once inside the building, we're introduced to Aryeh ("lion" in Hebrew), who helps run the kibbutz. Aryeh was born in America and decided to make Aliyah in the 60's rather than "waste [his] life" in the States any longer. He's been through four wars, and it shows. His face is deeply lined and never quite falls to neutral - he either speaks animatedly or stares with roving, wide-eyed intensity. He tells us that they plan to leave the facade unrepaired as a reminder of the war and what it cost to maintain the kibbutz. Aryeh's a bit schizophrenic - he swings from full-throated, bright-eyed laughter to contemptuous sneer in a matter of seconds. He is also possessed of an unparalleled Zionist fervor. Most of what he says amounts to invectives against the world media for what he (and many people we speak to) perceives as entrenched anti-Israeli bias. "Read your history" he tells us, and launches into a detailed explanation of why only Jews have the right to control Israel, of how the world is saturated with anti-Semitism, and, implicitly, why we ought to abandon our superficial, petty lives in the States and move to Israel. Any Arabs you meet, even in the states, he says, are not, will not ever really be,

your friends. They have agendas and they are tricky people, he warns.

Aryeh's arguments are impressive insofar as they trace continuities in ancient wars over the holy land up through the present day, insofar as they rationalize all of Israel's action against the Palestinian people as a necessary and commensurate retaliation against outrageous acts of aggression, and insofar as they are able to reframe the broader political landscape of the Middle East within an essentially messianic teleology. But everything he says is contingent on an undergirding Zionism - if one is a Zionist, then Aryeh's explanations provide a neat causal chain that leads to the present political situation. If one is not, then he has nothing to say. He is literally unable to think about the notion of moral complicity, of what the disparity between Israeli and Palestinian death tolls look like to someone who bears a certain skepticism towards the Zionist metanarrative. When someone asks him to try to think about the situation from Palestinian's perspective, he blurts out "Why should I?" He wields an aphasic's resistance to abstraction in service of the motherland. It's no surprise that this refusal to think hypothetically becomes a key tactic in many of the Zionist arguments we hear on our trip, and it's no surprise that nothing I heard on my trip is helping me think through a Palestinian death toll that, as of this writing, has just cracked 1,000. Without belief, all of these arguments come to nothing.

Wet and cold, we shuffle out of the dining hall and toward the bus. My brother takes a picture of one of the kibbutz's residents, who asks him to delete it: "Last time that happened, I ended up on YouTube and almost lost my Green Card." We head back to the hotel for a bit before our dinner and "night out" in nearby Tiberias.

At the restaurant we're plunked down at a table and an incongruous series of dishes appears before us: spaghetti, hummus, fried fish, salad, orange juice, pizza, eggplant, and so on. Gradually people drift to the bar at the back of the restaurant and lines of people stream back wielding shots.

Dinner lasts about a half hour and we're walked over to Big Ben, the first bar we'll visit on the trip. Big Ben is located in the middle of a strip mall. It's a long, narrow affair modeled after the American version of an English pub. It's also incredibly loud. "In Da Club" is pumping and the guides try to get people to step onto the dance platform and sing karaoke. My brother and I wander to a side room that's a bit quieter and settle down at a table with a handful of other people from the group. It turns out that many of these people will become friends of a sort as the trip goes on, a small group of draft dodgers. The uncanniness of the setting seems to amp up the pints of Goldstar that I'm gulping, but I retain brief snippets of conversation. Gossip, Heidegger's Nazism (a party favorite), Rate My Professor, Bushwick, Chicago, whether or not we're being indoctrinated (too early to tell), the nonchalant way one of our guides dances while holding his gun. Eventually we're led back to the bus. We only have to pull over once for vomiting: not bad. So much for Rule #1. As we curl around the Sea of Galilee, I think about Aryeh again. If there is a time to contemplate the emptiness of American life it is now. We would carry that emptiness with us in a travel size tube, I suppose, if it weren't available for purchase. Aryeh and Big Ben become part of Birthright's dialectical logic: thesis (Aryeh), antithesis (Big Ben), synthesis (late-night half-drunken outlining of the Dialectics of Birthright). A half-coherent murmur drifts up from the back of the bus. Forced to find a position between the impending Gaza invasion's moral aporia and a night at Big Ben, I choose the bulwark of a temporary, recalcitrant silence.

II.

Rhythm Nation

The spectacle, considered as the reigning society's method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a false consciousness of time. - Guy Debord, 1967

As Israel rolls on, it becomes apparent that our days and nights are not days and nights at all. Time is marked by a series of repetitions, little rituals embedded in bus rides and conversations that churn out a rhythm underneath the relentless drive through ruins, speakers, sights, and the unfathomable oldness of the place. Traditional divisions of hours and minutes fall by the wayside. We are the unconscionably modern led by the hand to find the source of our modernity and our connection to the ancient. The procession of millenia is yet another rhythm, a macro-rhythm, that finds resonance in the daily putterings of ugly Americans pushing sleeplessly through history.

We get daily updates about Gaza and the death toll mounts. Some soldiers join us. Their friends are getting sent into Gaza - they may be going soon too. At a bar off of Ben Yehuda Street, I talk to one of them and she explains that "everyone wants peace, but ..." This is the standard syntax for every "Israel wants peace" explanation that I hear on our trip. Coming from a soldier, this "but" is understandable, built into the uniform. When we're corralled into a conference room at the Hyatt Regency in Jerusalem we get an extension of this syntax from a reptilian "spokesperson" - it's not quite clear whether or not he actually works for the Israeli government or just does this for kicks. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate how cold-blooded terrorists are treated humanely by the IDF, how they're fed and cared for, and sometimes even released in exchange for captured Israeli soldiers. He attempts to describe the hopeless deadlock of Gaza and the West Bank. Yet all of his rationalizations of Israel's retaliatory policies explicitly refuse to account for the increasingly disparate body counts. On this point, every single speaker, every single guide remains obstinate. Again, for those of us who will have no truck with the messianic undergirdings of Taglit's mission, hundreds upon hundreds of dead Palestinian civilians are not collateral damage; they are the moral clot that prevents would-be recruits from considering Israel as a true homeland. Taglit's inability to address the devastation of Gaza, its unwillingness to engage the concerns of skeptics in a way that respects the seriousness of those concerns, represents the trip's most profound and frustrating failure. I cannot help but feel that the root of this failure lays in the trip's infantilization of its participants, as though the need for physical orientation in a foreign country required a concomitant moral breakdown.

* * *

The relentless alternation of sub rosa political arguments, stunning vistas, and extended bus rides begins to wear on you. Some of us are showing our age - some by demonstrating the ways in which they are really and truly in college. For one of my cohorts, college means drinking too much and vomiting on the ruins of a 1,500-year-old synagogue the next morning. This is a kind of vomit that you can't perform in the States. In an atmosphere where we're encouraged to contemplate the nexus of the past and the present embodied by Jewish religion and tradition, where we're constantly presented with parallels between the ancient and the modern, the secular and the mystical, vomiting on the remains of a Jewish settlement is a profane communion with the long-dead whose practices, borne of necessity and subsequently ritualized and passed down, bring us tourists to the temporal and cultural moment where such a vomit is not only possible, but perhaps preordained, teleologically necessary.

* * *

In the course of the rest of the trip, I learn that I am old, utterly expendable flotsam. I spend time floating between loosely formed groups, never quite settling down, even among the few people that I genuinely like. Someone comments that in the photos I look like I just wandered into the frame, a stranger drifting through the group. I'm an oddly spectral presence: bald, I look older than my age, which is already about as old as it can be before you're no longer allowed to cash in your birthright. I wear only two or three shirts over the course of the trip, and in the photographs their timeless regularity makes me appear as a ghost, a glitch.

During the rest of our trip we see botanical gardens. We visit Mount Herzl, see a documentary on the Valley of Tears, ride jeeps up a mountain and stand on a cliff with a literally awesome view of the Sea of Galilee. I float in the Dead Sea, the first natural body of water I've touched in over a decade. We go to Masada and I try to explain the connection between Ezekiel 37 and Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" to a guide (I don't do a very good job). I express reservations about the dehistoricization and political misuse of Masada. We go to a horrible dance club in Tel Aviv (I get into the spirit of things by drinking a Red Bull and vodka and doing several shots of tequila), and my brother and a friend and I bounce from the hotel to wander around the desolate streets at 4 a.m. We get drunk in the desert on New Year's Eve and ride camels the next morning. I stumble upon an ideal breakfast, which I now recreate (minus the pickled herring) nearly every morning. This is what you tell your family when you get back from Birthright: a litany of the high points.

But the heights of the high points are always determined by the depths of the low points. Our trip hits bottom on our first night in Jerusalem, where we are compelled to attend the Taglit Mega Event. We're told this event is a big deal, that many important people will be there, that much coordination, planning, and money has gone into it. We're told it's going to be quite a scene.

We arrive at the Mega Event and it is indeed quite a scene. People from who all knows how many different Birthright trips, thousands of people, are milling about the place. There are plenty of food vendors and booths to sign up to become an organ donor. As we walk up the stairs leading to the food concourse, a drum circle sucks up the dreadlocked and Jew-froed contingents. They beat out a tattoo ushering us into the heart of darkness.

My brother and a few friends and myself buy some food and wander around. More and more people are pouring in all the time. After a couple of hours we're wondering what it is we're supposed to do. We sign up to become organ donors. As we slouch and people watch, sucking on sodas and eating gummy worms out of a cellophane bag, it dawns on us that the particular form of ennui we're experiencing is familiar. We're surrounded by things to buy but we have no interest in purchasing anything. We're surrounded by throngs of people and we justify our resentment by inventing despicable personalities for them. There are tiles and a kind of diffused parody of natural light. We are effectively stranded inside of an ad hoc mall.

Eventually the doors to the auditorium open and the crowd floods into it. We're told to find our group, and we locate them near the front of the stage. Music is pulsing through the PA and people are dancing feverishly in the aisles, waving Israeli flags, singing, and simply yelling. The place is packed, and while some of our group halfheartedly sways to the music, most look confused. For over an hour we sit surrounded by sweating masses screaming for no discernable reason. They're just trying to build energy before the show. Our group leaders try to get us on our feet, but a combination of exhaustion and

bewilderment prevents any real enthusiasm from building in our section.

The lights go down and a group of dancers appears on the stage. Fire spews from the apron and we're treated to a bit of miniature Vegas-style spectacle. We're told that our trip marks the passage of the 200,000th Taglit participant through Israel. During the course of the evening there are appearances from Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt (the founders of Taglit), Shimon Peres (current President of Israel), Rami Kleinstein (apparently an enormous Israeli pop star), a group of pseudo-rappers performing a God-awful cover of "One Love," and many, many shout-outs to the many, many countries represented by the writhing hordes behind me. One of our group leaders has a handful of tiny Israeli flags sticking out of his beard and, despite the overwhelming noise from the crowd and the stage, people in our group keep falling asleep.

There's an element of hysterical black humor to the event. The deeply disturbing irony of Jewish-Israeli political spectacle, of the ratcheting-up of nationalist sentiment via dazzling displays of charisma and physical prowess, and of the vein-popping enthusiasm of our guides at first elicits laughter and then a kind of dull acceptance. Against the backdrop of the Gaza invasion, the Mega Event shifts from ironic and misguided to grotesque and frightening. While Rami is blandly covering Maroon 5's already bland "This Love," a guide asks me if I'm excited about seeing Israel's biggest pop star. I tell him it's interesting, but I'd rather see more of the country. He asks me why I won't stand up. I try to mumble out something about political spectacle, about deep historical ironies, and so on. But I am exhausted. I can't articulate a thing. I slump down and wait for it to be over.

When we're finally let out, there's a dance party waiting for us, replete with smoke and strobe lights. I wander anesthetized through the crowd, find the front steps, and sit on them, waiting for the bus to show up. As more people arrive to sit and wait, all in the group speak to each other on the same terms - almost without exception, we agree that the Mega Event is, at best, a waste of time. At worst, it feels like the perverse expression of a terror buried deep at the heart of Israel's politics. We climb off the bus and walk back to the hotel. Tomorrow is the Sabbath.

Wail

"Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as the infinite. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion." - Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 1944

On Friday in the late afternoon we get back on the bus and go to the Klotel. The driver drops us off and this is the last we will see of him until the next day. We walk through the narrow alleys of the old city and climb up to a rooftop. We're told that we will have a brief Shabbat service. We look towards the Western Wall as the sun goes down and the women light candles. We're all silently entranced by the glare on the Dome of the Rock. Through the lighthearted and (on my part) rote recitation, a genuine feeling of ease infiltrates the rituals. Prayers punctuated by jokes, moments of unburdened silence, speculations concerning the quirks of the architecture drift through a vague atmosphere, a feeling that we're seeing something we're supposed to see. A concatenation of myth and blood seems to radiate from the city itself. We linger on the rooftop after the service and a few people ask guide NP some historical questions. The answers oscillate from the recitation of historical fact to quiet semi-rants about the day when "we" finally tear down the Dome and put "those totalitarian bastards" in their place. The first person plural makes me shift in my shoes.

Eventually we climb back down the staircase and make our way towards the wall itself. Men go to the left and women to the right. On Shabbat, the Wall is packed. People stand shoulder to shoulder. Some pray, some simply stand and chat. Many are standing with their noses against the wall, eyes clenched, and screaming. Others daven furiously, their bodies shaking, fists clenched or gripping their prayerbooks. A couple of us fall behind the group. "I don't even know where we're going!" "Look for the guy with the beard and the hat." Eventually we find them. Our group meets up with another Taglit group and NP, yelling over the prayers, tells us that we're about to cause a scene, something that our particular trip is known for. We get in a circle (yes!) and the service begins. I mumble along, but mostly exchange glances with a friend. Then something begins to build in the group and the clapping begins. The circle begins to rotate, arms link or grip shoulders, and the group picks up speed. My friend and I edge our way out of the circle where we see a few scattered outliers.

The dancing continues and the group condenses from a circle into a spinning mass of people. Arms waggle, whip, and grab at the outliers, incorporating them into the mass, which seems to hover over the ground, shaking and rocking and screaming. To our right there is a young boy asleep, laying across two chairs, his sidelocks drooping over his face. His father and brother stand nearby, staring at the hovering cluster. As I'm contemplating the boy's stillness in the midst of holy chaos, a hand grabs my shoulder and pulls me in. I expect a gentle introduction into the mass, but I'm really yanked and then I've got my arms interlocked with other arms. There's no tactful way to extricate myself, so I circle, hover, expand, contract, mouth the words. The cluster metastasizes the group's bro-ish energy, fusing the experience of the wall with a particular form of masculinity that is anything but holy. Suddenly my religious scruples drop away, and I'm horrified to find myself at a frat party without the consolation of keg beer. Under normal circumstances, so the theory goes, a woman mediates the homosocial bond between men. Here there is only God.

* * *

We reconvene outside of the pit area. The women come back. I ask what it looked like on their side of the wall. "Just people praying." There is really no gender divide as far as the bulk of the trip goes. CM, one of our guides, repeatedly incurs the wrath of the women on the trip by attempting to explain why women "aren't" (read: "are") dirty, why women should try to find a husband as quickly as possible, and why the production of babies is your duty. Most of this is simply ignored, but there is a growing resentment. After we return from the Klotel, she tells us that she was engaged to her husband after only three dates, and then runs a seminar about Judaism and dating. I'm told that attendance is sparse.

* * *

We're told that, since our bus driver observes the Sabbath, we're going to have to walk back to the hotel. Under normal circumstances this would only take about an hour, but since the IDF has barricaded various parts of the city, it's now closer to two. We walk directly from the wall to a strip mall and sit down on some stairs. We pray over wine and one of the most delicious pastries I've ever tasted, and then begin the trip to the hotel. After about thirty minutes, the group stops. We're about to pass through one of the most religious neighborhoods in Jerusalem, and we're told that, for our safety, the women must walk behind the men. There's some grumbling, but less than I expect. We're told that it's customary to say "Shabbat Shalom" as we pass by the neighborhood's residents, but that if anybody yells at us, we shouldn't respond. If anybody throws anything, we should follow the guide's lead. They don't like noise, they don't like large groups of people, and they don't like Americans. We enter the neighborhood, and it's instantly familiar. Though the graffiti is in Hebrew rather than English, this

neighborhood looks more like my neighborhood than anywhere we visit. The broken windows, overflowing dumpsters, and half-stolen bicycles that line the street make me perversely homesick. The form of quiet that we pass through is the quiet of uncertainty. A few people walk by us. We nod and greet them. Nobody throws rocks.

After the trip, an old friend who went on the trip years ago tells me that his group was actually chased out of the same neighborhood when the men and women merged before officially exiting the area. We experience no such thing. The admixture of deep religiosity and death saturates Jerusalem's narrative no less for us than it does for history. If only by way of rumor and intimation, one knows that we're on violent ground. When the guides give us a geography lesson every day on the bus, we're told of our physical relation to Gaza. In the Bedouin camp where we spend New Year's Eve, with the sound of military exercises echoing in the background, we're told exactly how many kilometers separate us and Hamas's rockets. These sorts of updates paradoxically remind us that we safe, but the constant reminders that we are safe remind us that there are reasons for the reminders.

* * *

By the time we head for the airport many of us have entered a totally unique state of exhaustion. My speech is completely incoherent. I can utter only the bare facts: "I am tired," "I have an iPod," "The plane will take off in a few minutes," "This line is long." Any interpretive faculty is long-gone. As soon as I take my seat on the airplane, I am unconscious. A primal instinct for food awakens me as the dinner and breakfast carts roll by, but as soon as I am done I fall back into catatonia. About nine hours into the flight I wake up for good. I am sitting in the middle of the center section of the airplane. A friend is sitting in the aisle seat to my right. I look over groggily in time to see the woman sitting across from him vomit directly into the aisle. A bit splatters onto his pants. Nobody says anything. Nobody cleans it up. He wakes a few minutes later and looks at me. "Did someone just vomit on me?" "No."

The next few weeks are spent recounting the trip to friends and relatives. The story varies depending on who I'm speaking to. Articulating what makes a Birthright trip (or at least my Birthright trip) so vexing and strange involves gaining distance from your place at the center of what an essentially rhetorical experience. You are there as a potential recruit, and in that sense you're not quite a "tourist." The trip's conspicuous attempts to keep us away from any non-Taglit-affiliated Israelis marks the fact that (putting aside any obviously untenable notions of an "authentic," singular "Israel") what we see is a kind of immersive slide show, with the tensions and violence of the real lingering on the periphery. These tensions peek through at key moments - when they do appear, they take the form of a dreamlike pleasure, an awareness of the frame itself. The pleasure of the frame is not the only form of pleasure available, but it encompasses all of the others.