

Room for a view

A trip to the mall

What a ridiculous figure I must have cut: a middle-aged, balding doctor, dressed for work in my sports jacket, tie and cuffed pants with the family's five gas-mask kits slung over my shoulder. I was on my way to our local shopping mall (the only one in Jerusalem, in fact) to look after my health. For the short and the long term.

My first stop was the pharmacy, to fill a prescription for the bowel prep for my upcoming (q 50 years) flexible sigmoidoscopy. A hedge against the long-term risk of colon cancer. As for the short term, I moved to my next station in the mall: the gas mask distribution centre.

Although the West may have forgotten Saddam Hussein, he is still a well-recognized threat in Israel. There is good evidence, despite the best efforts of the UN inspectors (who have been off the job for two years, anyway) that Hussein still has a clutch of missiles ready to drop nerve gas and other biological weapons on our heads. (No matter that only a kilometre away from our neighbourhood live thousands of Arabs who would also suffer from such a terrorist act.) With this danger in mind, the Home Front of the army asks us, both Jews and Arabs, to periodically update our gas-mask kits — which contain, among other things, an atropine syringe for use against nerve gas.

Given the upsurge of violence in Israel and the territories, it is hard to deny the possibility that the whole region might spiral downward into war, making the upgrading of the family gas masks all too relevant. Hence my trip to the mall.

A sound and light show has been played over our houses for 15 of the last 21 January evenings. Somewhere around 7:30, just in time to make the evening news at 8:00, the machine guns begin to shoot from Beit Jala, a suburb of Bethlehem, toward Gilo, a suburb of Jerusalem. When I am foolish enough to venture onto the front lawn, I can even observe the tracers. Just last night, one of the bullets found its mark in the neck of an Israeli woman standing at her window.

Shortly after our neighbours shoot at us, the Israeli army fires back, trying with mixed success to quell the gunfire. The sounds of this fighting are very close, echoing off the stony hills of Jerusalem.

It's amazing how one gets used to such things. At first, the noises and flashes were terrifying. After a few nights my terror was supplanted by a sickening feeling in the pit of the stomach, especially when I tried, unsuccessfully, to convince my



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small children that the bullets would not reach our house.

It is clear that both sides are suffering. From my side, I know that most Israelis yearn for peace, and that only a negotiated settlement will put an end to the fighting. In the meantime, I wait, hope and pray for talks to resume: as Winston Churchill once said, "To 'jaw jaw' is better than to 'war-war.'" And I contemplate the question that people ask me: Will the fighting drive me back to Canada? I have always loved my native land *a mari usque ad mare*, but the Jews have waited to return to their native homeland for 2000 years. I think I will stick around to do my part, hoping that the gas masks and atropine syringes will stay in their cartons and that two peoples will learn, one day, to share this small patch of land in peace. I'll undergo my colon cancer screening test, and I'll keep the gas masks handy. Just to keep all the possibilities covered.

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