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Ana min al yahoud - I'm one of the Jews

By Almog Behar Translated by Vivian Eden

1.

At that time, my tongue twisted around and with the arrival of the month of Tammuz the Arabic accent got stuck in my mouth, deep down in my throat. Just like that, as I was walking down the street, the Arabic accent of Grandfather Anwar of blessed memory came back to me and no matter how hard I tried to extricate it from myself and throw it away in one of the public trash cans I could not do it. I tried and tried to soften the glottal `ayyin, the way my mother had in her childhood, because of the teacher and the looks from the other children, but strangers passing by just rooted me to the spot; I tried to soften the pharyngeal fricative het and pronounce it gutturally, I tried to make the tsaddi sound less like an "s" and I tried to get rid of that glottal Iraqi quf and pronounce it like "k," but the effort failed. And policemen started to head assertively towards me on the streets of Jerusalem, pointing at me and my black beard with a threatening finger, whispering among themselves in their vehicles, stopping me and inquiring as to my name and my identity. And for every passing policeman on the street I would want to stop walking and pull out my identity card and point out the nationality line and tell them, as if I were revealing a secret that would absolve me of tremendous guilt: "Ana min al yahoud, I'm a Jew."

But suddenly my identity card started to vanish precisely when I was very much in need of it. And thus, every evening and every morning the police would arrest me without anything in my wallet that would agree to protect me. Then at home I would find the identity card rolled up between two NIS 20 bills, or in my pocket outside my wallet I

would find my driver's license as though I had taken it out for some reason, or in my knapsack among the papers my military reserve service card would appear as though I had forgotten it there unintentionally. But when the policemen stopped in front of me I couldn't find any document at all that would tell them about my past and my future. And then I would start to make phone calls, telling the policeman, look, it's only since yesterday that my accent has been Arab like this, heavy like this, and it isn't even Palestinian, it's Iraqi, and you don't look to me like you spoke Yiddish in your parents' home yourself, maybe you learned it somewhere outside, maybe your own grandfather had an accent like mine and listen, I'm calling friends, my friends, listen to what a beautiful accent they have, Hebrew as Hebrew should be spoken, without any accent, and if these are my friends, then who am I.

But all of a sudden my Ashkenazi friends weren't answering me at all, they wouldn't hear the plea of my ringing and only in the evening or the next day would they call me back, ask what I wanted and refuse to identify my voice. And I'd remain standing there facing the policemen all alone and start to call my friends whose parents were from Aleppo or Tripoli or Tunisia saying maybe their Hebrew is not perfect, it isn't so pure, but nevertheless it's better than mine. And they'd answer right away, not hesitating at the sound of the ringing, and suddenly they too had such a heavy Arab accent and they'd be listening to some meandering oud in the background or some persistent qanoun, and they'd greet me with "ahlan bik" and call me "ya habibi" and ask me "ashlonek" and take their leave of me with "salamatek" and what could the policemen do, how could they believe me, after all of my friends had abandoned me, that I was an Israelite and not an Ishmaelite. And then they'd check me slowly, rummaging in my clothes, going over my body with metal detectors, stripping me of words and thoughts in their thorough silence, searching deep in the layers of my skin for a grudge, seeking an explosive belt, an explosive belt in my heart, eager to defuse any suspicious object. And when the policemen presented themselves to me in pairs, the one would say to his companion a few minutes into their examination, look, he's circumcised, he really is a Jew, this Arab, and the other one would say, an Arab is also circumcised, and explosive belts don't care about circumcision, and they would continue their search. And really, during the time when I left my body to them explosive belts began to be born on my heart, swelling and refusing to be defused, thundering and thundering. But as they were not made of steel or gunpowder they succeeded in evading the mechanical detectors.

In the end, when the policemen had left me alone, I would continue on my way from the beautiful Belgian Consulate building and the circle at the top of Jabotinsky Street and walk down Marcus Street to the Jerusalem Theater. There I would wait to see some American film plentifully endowed with Oscars, but suddenly there was no theater at the end of the street, and suddenly it wasn't Marcus Street, it was a street with an Arabic name, and the house had gone back to being Arab, and so did the Belgian Consulate, and the people in the yards, family by family, were Arabs, not only construction workers, not only street cleaners and renovators.

2.

And I would start to walk the streets of Katamon and the streets of Talbieh and the streets of Baqa and instead of seeing the wealthy Jerusalemites who had gathered there in the spacious homes, and instead of reading there on the street signs "Kovshei Katamon" and "Yordei Hasira," I'd once again see the wealthy Palestinians, and they were the way they had been before the 1948 war, as if there had never been a 1948 war. I see them and they are strolling in the yards among the fruit trees and picking fruit as though the newspapers had not told them that the trees would wither, that the land would be filled with refugees. And it was as though time had gone through another history, a different history, and I remembered that I had asked my mother why we talked history so much, enough history, we've had enough of history, because this history binds me, leaving nothing inside me, and also nothing inside you.

And really, we have become so fixed in our history, and extinguished, but here for a moment history has followed a different trajectory. And I would walk through the wealthy Palestinians' streets, and I thought that perhaps they would speak to me respectfully, not like the policemen. I hoped that I would be able to tell them how much I had read about the writer and educator Khalil al Sakakini, and how much I wanted to make friends with his grandchildren, and I would walk among them, approaching their yards and I do not succeed in mingling with them because all I have at my disposal is Hebrew with an Arabic accent and my Arabic, which doesn't come from my home but from the army, is suddenly mute, strangled from my throat, cursing itself without uttering a word, hanging in the suffocating air of the refuges of my soul, hiding from family members behind the shutters of Hebrew. And all the time, when I tried to speak to them in the small, halting vocabulary of the Arabic I knew, what came out was Hebrew with an Arabic accent, until they thought that I was ridiculing them, and had my accent not been so Iraqi, had it not been for that, they would have been certain that I was making fun of them.

But like that, with the accent, they were confused, they thought I was making fun of the Iraqis, the Saddam Husseins, or maybe some old Iraqi who had kept his accent but forgotten his language. And I didn't make friends there even though I wanted to, and I remembered how I had once heard an uncle of mine say of those Arabs of the wealthy neighborhoods of Jerusalem, they are effendis, they wear Western suits and tarboushes on their heads, and I heard the word effendi at that time with a kind of scorn, even though now I can remember that he hadn't said it that way and I had heard the scorn as though I were some Palmachnik in sandals and shorts who scorns the Arab landowners and praises his own holy socialism and that of all the Zionists. They are effendis, my uncle told me, and he meant it respectfully, but I had lost their language and they didn't know my language and between us remained the distance of the police forces and the generations.

On my way back home, only the bus drivers were accepting of my accent, knowing that it is impossible to expect what the accent of a passenger who boards a bus in Jerusalem might be. And my heart did not know I had returned to my heart, he didn't know, and my fears didn't know they had all returned to me, they did not know.

3.

And thus my voice was replaced by my grandfather's voice, and suddenly those streets that had become so accustomed to his death and his disappearance and his absence from them began to hear his voice again. And suddenly that beautiful voice, which had been entirely in my past, started coming out of me and not as a beggar and not asking for crumbs, but truly my voice, my voice strong and clear. And the streets of Jerusalem that had grown accustomed to my silence, to our silence, had a very hard time with the speech, and would silence the voice, gradually telling it careful, telling me careful, telling me I am alien telling me my silences are enough. And despite my fear, and even though this voice was foreign from the distance of two generations of forgetting, I spoke all my words in that accent, because there was speech in me that wanted to come out and the words would change on me as they came out of the depths of my throat. And a stranger who didn't know me would have thought that I was a loyal grandson, and would not have known how much I had piled non-memory on memory over the years, and would not have guessed how much my memory had blurred and how many times, how many, many times, I had not made the connection to my grandfather on my lips.

And when I returned home from that first walk in the streets with my new accent and the policeman's searches of my body, my life's companion wondered about my voice, and as she spoke to me and advised me to stop she was infected by my transformation and her lips connected to a jumble of her father's Yemenite Arabic accent and her mother's Istambouli Ladino accent. And a few days later, she began coming home from work with reports that there was anxiety going around the different departments and a small plague was spreading among the people at her office and the old accents that were hoped to have vanished are coming out again. And a small item in the margins of one of the major newspapers revealed that the security authorities are keeping track of who has been infected by whom with the forbidden accents, and there is already concern that the country will be filled with Arabs, many, many Arabs, and therefore they have decided to reinforce the radio with announcers whose Hebrew is so pure that we will feel alien in our speech. And shortly thereafter, my life's companion was explaining to me in an unsteady voice, one moment veering north to the Straits of the Bosphorus and one minute veering south towards the Gulf of Aden, that this dybbuk was also haunting Ashkenazim. For them, the change would develop more slowly, she prophesized, because their children were convinced that their parents' accent and their grandparents' accent had originally been American, and they have less concrete memories of their old speech. But in a little while the Polish and the Hungarian and the Rumanian and the German and the Ukrainian accents will be heard again in the streets, and this is what is most feared by those who are responsible for public security, their fear being that they will no longer be able to find announcers to send to the armies of the radio and teachers will not be found to instruct our children in the secret of the correct accent.

And despite her prophecies of a huge wave of change, my parents stood staunchly against me and against the plague, remembering the years of effort they had invested to acquire their clean accent, and they began to hint strongly to me to cease and desist, reminding

me of my plans to study. And they would ask me earnestly what could I do, how I could cover up my longings, my longings so suddenly in this voice that is so foreign to me, and I am so sorry and regretful that it is coming out of me, but I can't, I can't stop it just like that in a single moment, because there is no barrier inside me and no brakes. If you persist in this speech that keeps coming out of you, you will distance yourself from the scholarships, said my father, and he was very, very right, if you don't come back to our plain speech, what will become of you, said my mother, and she was very, very right. In all my interviews all the professors and the women professors were very surprised at my accent, trying to find a different speech in me, something more like university speech, more academic, even though the words were almost the same words, perhaps a bit more broken. How will you go on if you speak like this, they said plaintively, and they are very concerned about my future, and neither my heart's ruined tranquillity nor my heart's broken stones nor my heart's sharp corners could help lift the decree from me. But during those days of their worry my ears were not opened to hearing them, and my language became deaf and their accent became alien to me and distant, and I took pleasure as cycles of the moon went by and my life companion's prophecies were being fulfilled and the streets of Jerusalem were changing and my own parents were alone in their non-transformation. And I revealed to her ear that I had started to write my stories in Arabic letters, and soon the important departments would be shocked again. And some days later she came home to tell me that the department heads had laughed and said, let him write like that. Let him write stories that only he can read, his parents or his children will not read them and our children will not fall into the danger and, if he applies, we will give him all the government prizes for Arabic literature without having read a word in his books.

And of course the department heads were right, and my wife began to prophesize the future in Ladino proverbs, telling me this proverb my mother had used and though I don't remember how she said it in her language, I do remember the accent. This is the last visit of health before death, she would whisper and then begin to explain, these are death throes and not the resurrection and in the highest of the departments they already know, they've decided that it is possible to relax, they will assign job slots for correct Hebrew speech and everyone will think back to the source of his income, earning his living and his family's penury, and then regular Hebrew will return as if there had never been a plague.

4.

And my heart began to give indications in my voices, saying this is my voice and this is not my voice, this is a lamed coming out of my mouth and this is an alien quf, alien to my heart. And I would slow down the pace of my thoughts, in order to think, to think about my thoughts and not only about my thoughts, but I had no time and I would scatter words to the wind like the sea salt that certainly no one is scattering into the sea. And my grandfather would speak to me, asking me in my voice whether there is any end to this story, and why is this history of mine mixed up with yours, how I have come to trouble

your life, I am the generation of the desert and how have you arisen to renew me. You are the generation for which we waited so that there would be no difference between its past and the past of its teachers, because our past was already very painful and we remained in the desert for the birds of prey to eat us for your sake, so that you would not remember me, so that you would not be hurting like me and how is it that your teeth are again biting into my words and where, the districts of Jerusalem are different, there are no teahouses, there is no Tigris River flowing through the city for pity's sake, but I did not meet my death in Jerusalem, nor in the city of my birth, but rather in the desert between them, a great desert of silence. Build extensions in your heart, my grandson, he would say to me, make many departments, and lodge me in one of the hidden departments, and live in the rest of them. Or move into the silence department, because the change that you thought is occurring is too simple, and what is going to change if a different accent is spoken? Will I live again, will you live my new life? Enough of the streets for you, go to your parents, my accent will not convince them, they know it and have already raised the flags of many revolts. Perhaps silence will put the present's fear of the past and of the future into their hearts. And why don't you show them your story, perhaps that way they will wake up, said my grandfather from the dead, almost making me swear an oath.

And I started to measure my silences, this is a day's silence, this is a week's silence, this is a month's silence, well-framed inside the walls of my house, and no mouth opens and no window opens and the scenes of the profane do not come in, but there is nothing sacred either, and nothing is subtracted and nothing is added. And everything is the voice of my silences, my silences are many, many silenced words, and I am not being, and I am not becoming, and there is no end to the story and there is no before there was the story, there is no beginning. And I was silent for more and more time, until my parents would say speak, if you don't speak how will you get a scholarship, how will you continue your studies and what will you do with your life, and where are your smiles and where have they gone into hiding, speak, speak in any accent because the fear of silence has descended upon us.

5.

There is no Tigris flowing through Jerusalem, and its murmur does not silence the borders that rise up against us, the borders that separate myself from myself. I am not here not there, not East not West, not my voice now and not the voices of my past, and what will happen in the end. I walk through the streets mute and also somewhat deaf. This time only my appearance worries the police, my thick beard and my stubbornness not to utter a word. Again the month of Tammuz is waning in me and despite the heat I wrap myself in coats to cover up the explosives belt of my heart. And thus out of the policemen's devotion to duty I am brought to the jail and my parents come after me, to see their son and where he is being taken.

I stay silent in front of my parents, and how they will respond, I stay silent in front of my parents and give them all my stories that I had concealed from them, hinting here I have written about you, Mother, and here about you, Father. Here I have written poems of opposition to Hebrew in Hebrew. I give them many more signs, because I have no other

language to write in, out of so much shame you have not bequeathed me anything. And these times prohibit me poetry and force me to sing, and while they are crowding in on me, crowds and crowds, crowding in on you too, and the language that has become my language is commanding me to pour my soul in it, to be an empty flute for its gusts, until together we produce a sound, and together we would become nay - an arab flute, we would be disguised as a different language, an absent language. And this really is the same story, recurring over and over again, how many stories do I have, Mother, Father, how many stories does a person have? Each time he tries to tell the story in different words, each time he tries to resolve the unsolved story a bit differently, and aren't you identifying your own story here, nevertheless your silence has told me a little. Look, now I've tried to write the story in the Arabic accent, but what has come of it. Look where we are meeting. Take them, read my story, Mother Father, read all my stories that I have hidden from you for many years, you too are the same exile, the same silence, the same alienation between heart and body and between thought and speech, perhaps you will know how the plot will be resolved.

And the first speech my parents uttered was a denial, Father said this is not our son and this is not the beard we have raised, said Mother, and where, we don't have this accent, they said in chorus to the officials, he had nowhere to inherit this accent from, not from the nuclear family, his grandfather Anwar died before he was born, our son wasn't there.

And the second speech they uttered was the implication that if thou doest not well we shall go home from the jail disappointed in the cycle of generations and if thou doest well and drop the stories, this story, this speech and this silence and speak to us in our language, we will stay here with you until you are judged fit to go free, until all of us together are judged.

And my parents did not know that I had returned to their heart, they did not know, and they did not know that all of their fears had returned to me, they did not know.

Adar Bet, 5765, Jerusalem

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