

WEEKEND

Time for a brave Israeli odyssey

Over centuries the Jewish people has amassed myriad tales of desert life, of wandering and destruction, but rarely about the sea. On the existential merits of a maritime mythology that has yet to be revealed

Uriel Abulof

If being Israeli means taking a hotel room in Jerusalem and then heading down to the front desk to complain there's no sea view, then being a Jerusalemite means going to Tel Aviv and complaining there's no mountain air. I belong to the second category, born and bred – yet for 15 years now I've taught at Tel Aviv University, and sometimes, on enchanted nights, mountain air or not, I go down to listen to the murmur of heart and wave.

Living like this, between two cities, invites musings, unsolved riddles and a few rhetorical questions. Here's one: What covers nearly three-quarters of our planet's surface and yet is almost entirely missing from the Jewish story? The answer, of course, is the sea. The Jewish people has no tale of a great, stirring voyage – in both senses of the word. We have no Odysseus.

True, before the Jewish nation was born, the sea was present at the Creation of the world – in the “beginning” of birth out of formless chaos, and later in the rebirth of humanity out of the Great Flood.

Once the nation did emerge, the sea became the embodiment of the abyss, of chaos, of God's violent force of nature – dreadful and dread-inspiring. It thus surfaces at the founding moment of the nation's birth, at the exodus from slavery to freedom: there the sea was meant not for sailing but for crossing; passage was overland because only dry land is safe. So, too, thought Jonah who tried so hard to flee a prophetic summons into a terrifying churn of waves, toward near-drowning and being swallowed up into the belly of a great fish.

Maybe it wasn't that we didn't want the sea, but that we were never allowed to enjoy it? For the sea is a present absentee not only in terms of the mythology of the Jewish people but in its geopolitics too. After all, though the Israelites lived close to the Mediterranean, they never knew lasting, secure control over the coastal strip; the seafaring neighbors – chiefly the Philistines and Phoenicians – were simply too powerful.

And today? What a turnaround! Modern Israel is largely a coastal society: Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ashdod, Netanya, Herzliya, Ashkelon, Rishon Letzion, Bat Yam, Hadera, Nahariya. Most Israelis live not far from the sea. Were it not for the traffic – and with a halfway-

normal public transit system (let's not hold our breath) – many of them could drink in the scent of the salty waves without feeling they'd embarked on some intercontinental expedition.

This is an enormous novelty in Jewish history. For the first time in thousands of years, the people's face is turned not only toward the mountain and God, but also toward the sea – and perhaps toward the world at large. That opens a possible door to a new mythology and a braver undertaking: an Israeli odyssey.

And yet, nearly 150 after the birth of Zionism – almost 80 of them in a sovereign state – we have rarely dared to set out on the great voyage of our lives, let alone to tell it. The stories of the *ma'apilim* (clandestine immigrant

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ships) of the pre-state years come closest, and even they are devoted not to the experience of the sea but to the inferno of one land (Europe) and the promise of another: Israel, where early Zionists, as Prof. Kobi Cohen-Hattab reveals, sought the sea, partly in lingo, pledging to “conquer the Hebrew Sea.” More appropriation than adventurous expedition, perhaps. And, in recent generations, the sea again seems like a missing term in our shared story.

Curious that in the seafaring tongues, storytelling itself is maritime: To “spin a yarn” is a sailor's phrase. Ours stays ashore. It seems that now, as then, Jewish culture guards itself against “weigh anchor” and gives itself over to “Go forth”: not sailing but walking; not sea, but desert and mountain.

Perhaps because the sea is never entirely ours, never quite under our control – certainly never ours alone?

At times it seems that we, the Jews of Israel, are stuck at that stage of the local game where children jump from “sea” to “land” with one small twist to the plot: We refuse to leap into the water, and we dread all those scheming to throw us into it. Even the recent Israeli film that tells the story of a Palestinian boy trying to reach the seashore for the first time in his life sends a shudder through the Israeli government.

But perhaps the reason for our avoidance of a story of a maritime journey runs deeper, is more symbolic. The sea is an invitation to a frightening self-exposure – and not only for reasons of modesty. Being a compulsive pedestrian, I should know. I spent three years as a junior intelligence officer in the Israel Navy and passed nearly all of them like Jonah – in the belly of a concrete leviathan, deep inside military headquarters. But on the rare occasions I joined the sailors at sea, I could grasp at least one meaning of setting sail: Unlike walking, sailing is a voyage that rocks you. It is the surrender of the illusion of solid ground. The waves see to it that you never feel entirely safe, as though living atop a perpetual earthquake that might suddenly surge and pull the ground out from under you. To sail is to live in doubt, in uncertainty.

The sea's upheaval is physical and cognitive at once. It is no crossroads where the routes carry you along and the choice is therefore already made; it is a dangerous temptation to leave everything open. The sea instructs: “It ain't necessarily so.” Sometimes it calls out: “It could be otherwise.” And sometimes it whispers: “Anything goes.” And along with the wonder at all those possibilities comes the dread before the uncertainty, the perils that swell in proportion to the promise. The sea is an invitation to courage – and sometimes to recklessness.

Coastal cities – port cities, above all – stand at the threshold of this temptation: They are the gateway to a future open and yet frightening alike. Almost like the door of The Law before which Kafka's “man from the country” waits, the question of coastal cities – the gates of the sea – is not only whether one may pass through them to reach it, but why we stand at them and wait.

A coastal city is defined by how it faces the sea beside it. Some cities answer the sea, opening to the tremor of the waves materially and spiritually. Such are democratic Athens, cosmopolitan Alexandria, the Amsterdam



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of the early Enlightenment, and today perhaps Izmir, San Francisco, Tel Aviv. Other cities exploit the freedom of the sea for the power of rulers – and at times for the people's welfare, but not for human freedom. Such are Venice, Genoa, imperial London, Singapore.

Still other port cities repress the sea. There is a port, but no horizon. Albert Camus, who at times saw in the Mediterranean an almost metaphysical source of redemption and revolt, described Oran in “The Plague”: “The town itself, one must admit, is ugly ... [it is] built in such a way that it turns its back on the bay, so that one cannot see the sea from it, and one must always go in search of it.”

It is instructive to compare pairs of major cities – one set on the coast, the other deep inland – within the same country. In most cases, the former tends to be the more open. Think Athens/Sparta, Amsterdam/The Hague, Alexandria/Cairo, Izmir/Konya, Shanghai/Beijing, Buenos Aires/Córdoba and, of course, Tel Aviv/Jerusalem. But geography is not destiny. There are inland cities that enjoyed a sea of possibilities, or at least a flow of people, ideas and goods. Think Paris, Berlin, Kyoto, ancient Baghdad – even Jerusalem, yearning toward the sublime. The question, then, is not only whether there is a sea, but whether one sees a horizon.

And what of Israel – where the mythological lack of a sea has become an existential one? Is it a society that lives beside the sea, or a society that is at last ready for an odyssey?

A brave odyssey must include a journey of discovery toward the self – a deep, unsettling, unclothing acquaintance with who we are. For we

will never be able to “be ourselves,” let alone “love ourselves” (still less love our neighbor) – if we do not “know ourselves.” And this is perhaps a knowing in the biblical sense but turned inward: an intimacy of soul, out of which we might give birth to ourselves anew.

If we set out on this stirring voyage, we will discover, like Odysseus, a string of trials and perhaps monsters too – some outside us, some deep within. After all, the name “Israel” itself means to wrestle with God – with angels, and with our own demons. If Israel seeks an odyssey of its own, it must be not only a journey of inquiry into who we were, but a reckoning with who we have become, and a true vision of who we are capable of becoming – for the odyssey is not merely a journey home: It is a journey in which home, and the person returning to it, are themselves transformed.

The change is generational, too. We were the Wilderness generation: a people of walking, of survival, of waiting. We were also the Flood generation: Holocaust, destruction, trauma – and now the Al-Aqsa Flood (as Palestinians refer to the massacre of October 7) as well. In recent years we are becoming, more and more, the generation of the Split: a society of tribes, of camps, of fractures. But perhaps the Split can still be turned into the Sail. Not a people torn into camps, but a setting-out together into uncertainty. To those who seek this, the sea hints: “Take your instruments of navigation – a map to know where you are, a legend to make sense of what you see, and a compass to decide where to go; and better not to set out alone.”

Such a shared voyage, almost needless to say, is not merely a romantic metaphor. It is also a political ques-

tion: who holds the helm, who sets the course, how one keeps sailing even when no one can promise land – and who is entitled to say the captain has lost his bearings. It is striking that one of the first modern laboratories of genuine democracy – and perhaps the most intriguing – was, of all things, the pirate ship, which rejected imperial hierarchy in favor of a different political order, one in which the sailors all made decisions together. Perhaps it was precisely because the ship is not safe land that it became, in itself, an invitation to a fascinating political experiment (and more on that another time).

And here, far from the Caribbean isles, beneath Mediterranean skies, in a land flowing with milk, honey – and blood – the people is a weight and a way: a story still waiting to be written, a heavy responsibility for a shared fate, and a movement together toward an unknown future. If we Israelis – Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, right and left – can summon the wisdom to set out on our odyssey, we will need courage in abundance as we look into the abyss and onto the horizon alike, only to find the latter more frightening still. The abyss spreads terror, but it is at least stable, and therefore “safer.” The horizon, by contrast, dizzies and frustrates, because it recedes the closer you draw to it. That is why it is so hard, and so important, not to turn our back on it – to look at it with hope, and to weigh anchor.

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The Eshels: Naama, 44, Amit, 49, and Yaar, 5, live on Kibbutz Kfar Hahoresh; arriving from Santiago, Chile

Hi, where are you returning from? Naama: From Chile. We went for a vacation and to photograph animals. You've got an international wildlife photographer here.

Yaar: We went for the puma. It was a journey in pursuit of the puma?

Amit: The puma was the thing, but we went to lots of places and looked for other animals on the way. We didn't find everything we looked for, but we did manage to find some of them.

Yaar, what did you hope for most? Yaar: For there to be snow. Not a puma?

Yaar: Also. And for a kodkod – a kind of wildcat. And a pudu.

What's a pudu? Yaar: The smallest deer in the world. Amit: It's about the size of a dog. So it can be raised at home.

Yaar: No, it's a wild animal.

Yaar, how do you know so much about animals?

Yaar: From Daddy, he's a wildlife photographer.

What is it like to go on a trip when Dad is a wildlife photographer?

Amit: It's great fun. This is the first time we've gone on a trip like this as a family. I travel and guide groups all year, but this time we chose Chile together – partly because of a very special island called Chiloé, where there are three kinds of animals that live only there: the kodkod, a small and very elusive wildcat, which we didn't find; the fox that Darwin himself discovered, gray and very sweet, which we also didn't find; and the pudu, the tiny deer, which we did find.

Were you frustrated?

Amit: Yes. I almost canceled the return flight and added another six days



in order to go back and try again. When you set out to photograph in the wild, you have to take into account that you won't see everything you hope to see, certainly not the more elusive animals. On the other hand, we make great efforts to see them. We get up at dawn and wander around all day. That's part of the fun.

What happens when you don't find what you're looking for?

Amit: It gives you a reason to return. Was the puma a disappointment?

Amit: We were actually very successful with that – not one puma but three: a mother and two cubs. One day in Patagonia we saw them right by the

roadside. It was amazing.

What were they doing? Amit: The mother had caught a guanaco.

Yaar: That's a kind of camel. Amit: Something between a camel and a llama. They were there eating it, about 15 meters from the road.

Pumas aren't dangerous?

Amit: In general, yes. It is a predator and it could hurt us if it wanted to. But we don't really interest it as prey; they have enough food.

Naama: They have the way, but not the will.

Amit: Animals, even those that look scary to us, just want to live in their

world and not be disturbed.

Yaar, were you afraid of the puma?

Yaar: No way!

Amit, how did you get into wildlife photography?

Amit: The love of nature was always there, but before that I pursued all kinds of other directions. I studied graphic design and animation, I worked in advertising, and I didn't like that world. I tried to decide what I really wanted to do. I really love dogs, so I started to create jewelry with canine images. From there things just evolved and led to wild animals.

Naama: I'm a goldsmith and we built the business together. We closed it a

year ago, it was quite something.

Amit: Today I'm a full-time wildlife photographer. I photograph and lead groups to the most remote and craziest places in the world.

What's the most remote and craziest place you've been to?

Amit: The far, far north in Canada, in order to see the Arctic wolves. It's a vast area, around the side of Britain, and it's estimated that there are all told something 200 Arctic wolves. It's an animal that has hardly ever been photographed in the wild.

And you managed to do it?

Amit: Yes, three years ago. I was one of [the first] 50 people in history who photographed them. The photos received a great deal of recognition around the world and won prizes.

Why is the Arctic wolf so hard to photograph?

Amit: First of all, there's the environment itself. It's a very extreme region. In the winter it can go down to minus-50 Celsius [minus-58 F.], and it's dark for half the year. It's a region that's very sparse when it comes to animals, because life there is very hard. The wolves themselves are spread out in a really huge area. You need lots and lots of patience.

Is it possible that in places like that there are animals whose existence we don't even know about?

Amit: Actually that is less the case there, because the area is very open and the biodiversity is relatively limited there. The chance of finding unknown species is greater in jungles and in dense regions where there is a lot more life and many more places to hide.

What's the next animal on your schedule?

Amit: In another month I'm scheduled to go to Nepal, in the hope of seeing the snow tiger.

Yaar: And the clouded leopard!

What's clouded about it?

Amit: It has spots that look a little like clouds. It's a beautiful leopard and extremely hard to find. The odds are that we won't see it. It's even harder

to see than the snow tiger.

What do you do while you're waiting for hours for the clouded leopard to come out of its hiding place?

Amit: You have to be very, very focused. Especially with such animals – they don't offer many opportunities. You have an opportunity lasting half a second and you have to be sharp.

Half a second out of seven hours?

Amit: Half a second out of two weeks! It's very difficult to maintain your concentration and be prepared, but you have to be ready at any moment. It's a bit different with every animal, but you definitely need to take into account that things happen when we're not ready. With the clouded leopard I estimate in advance that the odds [of seeing it] are very low. But maybe we'll see other species along the way. A red panda, say.

Is there a way to prepare for this?

Amit: You study the animal. See how it behaves, see what season you have the best chances to see it, which hours of the day it's active. There are places where you have to be very quiet, or even wear camouflage clothing. And there are animals that prefer to see you, so you don't take them by surprise. The idea is to project that we are not threatening them and to preserve their personal space.

Naama: Amit does a great deal of research before each trip.

Amit: I always try to arrange trips where there are good chances of seeing several species, along with one that, if we succeed, will be a big deal. If not, at least we saw other things on the way.

Is that also what happened with the puma?

Amit: Yes. The timing was good: There was snow and you could see tracks, and few people were wandering about. We went to escape the heat in Israel. When there is less going on around them, they come out more.

Yaar, what was it like when you got to see the puma and her cubs?

Yaar: Really great. We even saw that red fox.