

An insanity of two homelands

By Benny Ziffer

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I took a trip to Istanbul this week to wake up from the temporary insanity we've been cast into by the various regional bullies, not to mention the professional panic-mongers funded by them. "What is the origin of this name?" asked the security officer at Ben-Gurion International Airport, pointing with unconcealed suspicion at my name, Ziffer. There is nothing easier for the state than to decide that some of your characteristics don't entirely fit the norm, forcing you to apologize.

Behind me in line stood a person with the last name of Chisik. One of the defenders in the 1920 battle of Tel Hai was a woman named Chisik; he, too, had to face an interrogation. In Turkey, around a decade ago, a book called "Effendi" became a best-seller. Its author tries to prove that all sorts of Turkish surnames indicate distant Jewish ancestry; that is, a foreign affiliation.

Chisik is a professor from Haifa who now teaches communications and computers at Kadir Has University in Istanbul. The university was founded in the 1990s on the banks of the Bosphorus in a restored building that served as a tobacco factory during the Ottoman era. The language of instruction is English. Chisik, who frequently travels back and forth between Turkey and Israel, said the little crisis in relations between us and them was born of the political and economic calculations of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Turkish prime minister figures that if he stiffens his position on Israel, he will win the affections of Iran and the favors of its natural gas pipeline.

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But the Israeli academician concluded that this thinking was not serious when he watched a Turkish student demonstration against Israel's bombing of Gaza. It was one of those demonstrations broadcast in Israel as proof of the severe rift between the two countries. The young people looked half asleep and totally unenthusiastic as they carried their posters.

Of course, it's always possible to find a shouter or two and film them burning a flag. Totally asleep, in the fullest sense of the word, were two burly fellows curled up inside their coats in a protest shack opposite Galatasaray High School in the busy Istiklal Avenue pedestrian mall. Posters on the shack and black-and-red stickers urged passersby not to remain silent for the sake of "Filistin." There were also bank-account numbers for donations: one number for donations in euros, another for donations in dollars and a third for Turkish liras.

All day long I walked up and down the street, and the shack was closed. When they opened it was after 4 P.M. The guy who slept with his head on the table held a receipts booklet. His companion snored on a white plastic chair with his head thrown back. Suddenly, he woke up and looked at me in surprise. He shook his sleeping

companion. I apologized.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm from Haaretz, a gazete in Israel," I stuttered.

"Israel - shalom, shalom," they replied. "Boom, boom, boom, no good. Euro, dollar, lira, good."

Two armed policemen were posted outside the cardboard shack to keep order, which in any case hadn't been disturbed. Apart from me, nobody went inside.

At the Robinson Crusoe bookstore, a prominent place was given to a book about Israeli artist Michal Rovner, and to a 2009 calendar published by the organization that helps preserve the memory of national poet Nizam Hikmet. Hikmet died in exile in the 1960s; his poems were banned because he was a communist - and therefore an enemy of the people.

A tale of two anti-Semitismisms

Today, Friday, February 6, is marked on the calendar as the day on which, in 1937, it was decided Turkey would be a secular country. When T. Carmi translated a selection of Hikmet's poetry into Hebrew, from his exile in Moscow, Hikmet wrote an enthusiastic preface, explaining how much he loved Israel and how happy he was to have been translated into Hebrew. He had much less love for the bourgeois, capitalist Jews. I would imagine that if he were alive today, he would have reacted to Israel's bombing of Gaza at least as strongly as Erdogan has. He wrote the poem "Angina Pectoris" about a visit to a doctor who tells him that his heart is sick with worry about people suffering everywhere.

Denis Ojalvo, a member of the foreign relations committee of Turkey's Jewish community, analyzed the situation for me with ancient wisdom and in fine Hebrew: He explained how until the end of the 1940s anti-Semitism in Turkey attacked the stereotypical wealthy Jew who exploited the people, so it came from the left. Gradually this was replaced by religious hatred of the Jews.

Ojalvo is also a grandson of Joseph Njogo, the pioneering director of the Mikveh Israel Agricultural School, so you could say he is feeling the pain of two homelands. He loves Istanbul and knows every stone there. He is a graduate of the international relations department at Galatasaray University, where to this day the language of instruction is French. There, in the cafeteria of the ancient university where the Bosphorus laps the terrace, he elaborated on the Jewish community's pain.

A person who summed up this pain, and huge consternation, is psychologist Leyla Navaro, in a recent article in the Turkish newspaper Radikal. The headline was "Being a Jew in Turkey - 500 Years of Solitude."

"Why, after 500 years," writes Navaro, "am I still regarded as a guest in this land that I was born and grew up in, in which I fulfill my responsibilities as a citizen and to whose development I have contributed? Shall I walk with my head down? Am I a

candidate for being threatened? And should I accept this situation?"

The day after the article came out Turkey's president phoned her to commiserate. In her piece, Navaro transformed her Jewish concerns into a metaphor for the general concerns felt today by every secular Turk. They are also the concerns of educated Turks who are not Jewish; fears about the winds of reaction blowing more strongly in their country.

Salgan Serdaroglu is one of the people concerned. She isn't Jewish. She is a lecturer on international relations, speaks French as her mother tongue and is a member of the established Turkish aristocracy. Serdaroglu insists that Erdogan must leave diplomacy to the diplomats if he does not want the world to think Turkey ridiculous. In Erdogan's recent statements at Davos, he clearly distanced Turkey from Europe, though Serdaroglu hates to say that Turkey must get closer to Europe. As far as she is concerned, Turkey is Europe. A part of Europe.

Looking at her, in her office that resembles part of a palace - high-ceilinged, wood-paneled and adorned with antique paintings - it's impossible not to be convinced of this. The Bosphorus flows right under her window, on its opposite bank lies Asia.

A former Haaretz colleague now working at Channel 10, Sharon Gal, was sent here to file a quick story on the Turkish-Israeli mess. He phoned me from somewhere. He had just found a Jew crying near a synagogue. By the time my taxi had plowed through the traffic jams, the Jew was gone. Instead we rode together to Levi Et Lokantasi, Istanbul's only kosher restaurant, in the Old City. A Jew named Mordo Ben Bassat, who wears a skullcap, is a kashrut supervisor. The rest - the owner and the cook - are Muslims. They have never argued about religion. They have been there for 50 years. It's hard for Sharon to conjure up a story on them for his report. After all, a story about a wonderful friendship can't be considered a news item.

Unbridled control

The story about the wonderful friendship is no less valid than the story about the rift, and the two stories are interwoven. The person who knows how to explain this best of all is a historian I have always wanted to meet. Rifat Bali is considered the definitive expert, the "pope" of everything regarding the image of the Jew in the eyes of the Turks and in the eyes of the Jews themselves.

Bali has collected all the posters put up in Istanbul during Israel's military operation in Gaza. It is important to know, he says, that such posters receive the approval of the authorities before they can be put up. On one poster is a photograph of a tiny bloodstained shoe, and above it the words: "This is not written in your Torah," along with a quotation from Isaiah 61:8: "For I the Lord love judgment, I hate robbery with iniquity."

Bali also relates how by order of the Education Ministry all schoolchildren in Turkey were required to rise for a minute of silence in memory of those killed in Gaza. There is a certain innovation in this, he says. All the rest is a sequel to a long story, and it's the topic of his most recent book: "A Scapegoat For All Seasons: The Donmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey" (The Isis Press, Istanbul, 2008).

Bali went through every document and newspaper, new or old, recorded television and radio interviews and made findings that are sometimes chilling about the Turks' profound belief in the Jews' unbridled control of the world. Including, and especially in, Turkey.

Turkey, if you ask the Turks, is the second Israel. The explanation goes like this. After Turkey's sultan, Abdul Hamid, refused Theodor Herzl's request to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, the Jews decided to take revenge on the regime by encouraging the Young Turk movement to overthrow the government. Most of that movement's members, as everyone knows (a claim which of course has no basis), were crypto-Jews and converts to Islam. Ataturk, another purported crypto-Jew, finished the work by declaring the Turkish Republic secular, to the convenience of his Jewish brethren. And since then the country had been governed by the same elite crypto-Jewish clique. So goes the conspiracy theory.

Bali is more serene than ever: Soon the noise will die down, and not because the average Turk will become less anti-Semitic. The noise will die down until the next outbreak, which will seem to be, because of people's short memories, a new, surprising and unexpected phenomenon, exactly like the current outbreak. And the noise will die down, in his opinion, with the approach of the annual date when the Armenian community in the United States pressures Congress to vote for recognizing the Armenian genocide. This is a red line Turkey cannot afford to cross - to be in the same league as the Nazis.

In part, Bali explains, the problem is linguistic. There are no separate words in Turkish for genocide and holocaust. Thus far, as everyone knows, the American Jewish lobby has automatically thwarted the anti-Turkish effort. Yet this effort, from a different perspective, reinforces the stereotype about how the Jews rule the world.

In the evening the streets and alleys fill to bursting with people. The motor of the ferry that crosses the Bosphorus between Europe and Asia huffs and grinds, and as always, the gulls follow it, performing all sorts of aerobatics. On the Asian side, in the Kadikoy neighborhood, my mother's house is still there. Some distance from it stands the Rex Cinema.

The apartment that holds the secrets of my childhood is now a computer gaming club called Sihir. As I stood there, two fashionable young people, a boy and a girl, went in; you could hear cheerful sounds from the inside. I'm not going to spoil this with my Jewish tales. I went down a flight of stairs and took a seat in the Guitar Cafe that opened in the apartment of my downstairs neighbor, Belkis Hanim, a childless Belgian woman who converted to Islam and had a fat cat I was afraid of.