

Wailing with Grandma

Henry Alan Paper

I wasn't up to telling the truth, so I simply told them "the Middle East," implying a general tour that would, inevitably, include Israel. I wanted to give the impression of embarking on my own cosmopolitan travels—and "Middle East" sounded, if anything, more glamorous, more adventurous than their "Italy," "Spain" or even "Monte Carlo."

Not that my friends would have put me down, exactly, for mentioning Israel. But three years after my arrival, I still caught them grinning from the far side of their privilege, and sometimes heard, from behind their Pepsodent smiles, that fake "a-a-a-J-Jew-w" sneeze in class, or the question about whether my father (who, in fact, liked nothing better than to live out of The Sharper Image catalog) could get it wholesale.

Since I was a million miles away on a preppy campus in a New Hampshire town filled with white-bread students and granite-faced farmers, I had no choice but to try to be one of the students. Although sometimes I felt like the last Jew on Masada.

But at least I didn't have to tell them of my assignment, which was to shepherd my grandmother around Jerusalem while my parents gave American Fellowship lectures on the Holocaust at Hebrew University. My parents, who didn't realize the holocaust of my own situation at school, said the trip would be a blessing for my grandmother, a favor to them, and an education for me.

My grandmother, worn out from the trip to the airport, was already asleep on the plane before it took off, her pale lips an 'o' of trembling rebuke against the world.

Leaning forward, I asked my parents—quietly, and for the millionth time—why she couldn't just drive herself in Jerusalem. I mean, she *had* a license.

"Have you ever seen your grandmother drive?" asked my father. "Imagine it in a totally strange country with traffic worse than LA, drivers worse than in Boston and road signs in three languages."

My mother gave my father a look, then turned to me: "It *is* a different country, David. Besides, your father and I thought it would be *good* for you to see Jerusalem with your Grandma. You are two of the main reasons we're taking this trip."

Right: my parents liked nothing better than their five-figure speaking engagements with all the perks and publicity. Yet this trip was for us.

"Look, David, it's not just the museums and religious tours and such," said my father. "You two could check out the restaurants, hang out at the cafes."

"Grandma doesn't hang out," I said.

"I know you and Grandma like the movies," said my mother. "There are plenty of movies in Jerusalem, most of them in English."

"Grandma saw *The Sound of Music* and thought it was too violent," I said.

"Now, you know that's an exaggeration."

When I was just a kid, I remember my grandmother, as old then as she was now, leaning over and constantly shaking her head at the TV, saying over and over "Nu Nu," while giving the evil eye to Batman and Robin.

"But Grandma," I would say, "it's *Nick at Night*, it's old TV, it's not violent."

But she would continue to cluck and groan till one of my parents, unable to stand the distraction any longer, would toss me a look and change the channel to Oprah. Later my mother would explain that Grandma had lost people in the Holocaust—and that therefore *any* violence on TV bothered her.

I think the Holocaust was something Batman and Robin would have understood. And they would have taken care of it. There was no excuse for putting down the wrong people.

"Here," my mother said, handing me a *Frommer's Guide to Jerusalem*, "see what looks good to you, and what you think Grandma would like as well."

I couldn't imagine what my grandmother would like, except

slapping my hands and pinching my cheeks.

My grandmother was small and tough, her withered face like an aerial map of Death Valley, her hair like Medusa's, her shoes like Frankenstein's. Whether she was going to the corner for some schmaltz or halfway around the world to see Jerusalem, she could always be counted on to wear the same dress—the blue-gray one that matched her hair.

I leaned forward, figuring I'd play a sympathy card. "Can I have a glass of wine?"

My parents, sipping martinis, said I could have a Pepsi.

Even after the meal, we still had twelve hours to go. After gazing through the clouds and peering down the aisle, hoping the stewardesses would see through my youthful appearance and take me home, and then gazing at the clouds again, I figured, well, what the heck, I may as well take a look at the guidebook.

I read nearly the whole thing. Then, as my grandmother was awakening and starting to ask everyone where her kosher meal was, I went to sleep.

Sometimes in life, timing is all.

We landed a short distance from the terminal, in a flat dry treeless land. The peach light seemed to be coming off the desert floor. My father helped my grandmother down the ladder. I carried her knitting bag.

My parents left to arrange for two cars—one for them, one for my grandmother and me. My grandmother and I wound up waiting by the luggage carousel for our bags to come around. All about us surged Israeli men in white short sleeves, their wives in long print skirts, loudly greeting their American relations; men with Arab headdresses trailed by silent veiled wives; and bushy-faced black-suited neo-orthodox standing with dutiful wives behind baby carriages as their other children ran and played. My grandmother and I, as though on two separate islands, gazed at the commotion. I continued holding her knitting bag since its loose shape refused to sit on the floor.

With our luggage, including knitting bag, piled on a cart, we all stood next to the Hertz Quonset hut in the open airfield waiting for our cars to be brought around. We might have been in LA or New York—except the sky was so fiercely

blue. While my parents hacked away at their electronic organizers, I turned to my grandmother. "So, what do you say to a movie this afternoon, Grandma?"

Her narrowing eyes followed luggage carts and scurrying families as she shook her steely gray head. "We see the Old City. The Holocaust Memorial. There should be something in your head besides movies. Life is not a cartoon."

In truth, I hadn't watched cartoons in years, and she probably knew this. But her voice, sharp like a metal rasp, never missed an opportunity to whittle me down to size. My mother always said it was simply her manner, that she was really the salt of the earth.

I looked at her hair, which in a certain light was the color of salt, and thought: the Old City. The Holocaust. The Dead Sea.

Fortunately, my mother and grandmother drove out of the airport together in one of the cars. On the way to the hotel, I asked my father why my grandmother was so keen to come to Jerusalem in the first place. Did she have relatives here? Was she a Zionist? Was her husband in the old days, my grandfather whom I had never met, a Zionist? Did *he* have any family here?

My father shook his head to all of this, and then got onto a story I had heard a million times before, about how, as soon as my grandmother had come to this country, all alone in the world and owning nothing but the dress on her back (which, I believe, she still wore to this day), she met and married my grandfather, a part-time haberdasher and full-time racetrack tout who stayed out all night—and sometimes for days at a time. On the eve of their second anniversary he was killed by a runaway horse-drawn cart (an irony that never escaped my father). He left no money, and wanted no funeral; in accordance with his will, he had his ashes scattered on Monmouth Racetrack across the state line in New Jersey. "I don't think your grandfather was particularly interested in Israel," my father finished up. "And he wasn't religious. His only devotion was to the trifecta; his idea of a pilgrimage was to Saratoga every August."

We rode in silence for a while. Then my father said, "I know this is not the easiest assignment in the world, and Lord knows Grandma's not the easiest person. I don't think I've actually had a conversation with her in years. But you'll just have to put up with it." We rode on. "I'll tell you what. You do a good job and when we get back, I'll get you something. Maybe something from The Sharper Image catalog."

In our room, I ran through every channel on the hotel's cable network: I knew this was going to be my best entertainment option. There was news and movies in three languages, soccer, entertainment and gossip, kids shows where the puppets wore yarmulkes, quiz shows just like in the '60's, Israeli and American music videos, even skateboarding and body surfing. I developed a new respect for Israel.

It was clearly a highly developed country that knew what the people needed: a hundred and twenty channels! I chose *Die Hard*, with Bruce Willis' voice dubbed an octave higher in Hebrew.

My grandmother emerged from the bathroom and complained about the TV. My mother said why don't the two of you go out right now and acquaint yourselves with the city.

The attendant brought the car around and opened the front passenger door for my grandmother. I got in behind the wheel. "Where to, Grandma?"

My grandmother had no hesitation. "Yad Vashem. The Holocaust Memorial in the Old City. And don't get lost."

I said nothing, but knew from the guidebook that the Holocaust Memorial wasn't in the Old City. It was way over on the other side of town. But I didn't want to argue, and didn't want to go to a Holocaust Memorial. So I just headed for the Old City like she said.

My grandmother tended to be a silent, brooding person. But trying to negotiate the congested lanes of traffic brought out what might pass as her conversational side: namely, repeated commands to stay in the lane, avoid trucks and stop at all the lights, not drive too fast, or too slow, or forget to signal, or go the wrong way down one-way streets, or tailgate or swerve, and, finally, to park near the gates because her legs hurt and she didn't want to walk very far.

I found a space and, with my grandmother's persistent monitoring, parallel parked.

There were beads of sweat on my brow.

"Hold onto me, I don't like these people," my grandmother said as we pressed through the gates of the Old City in a sea of pickpockets, old people in ancient shabby suits, herds of tour groups, pious women in black, beggars with faces as yellow and craggy as the surrounding hills, the entire current reflecting the

gleams of crucifixes, Jewish stars, and video cameras. It was like a huge theme park with the look of "Lawrence of Arabia." The thick walls and towers, crenellated and high, seemed capable of withstanding hordes of barbarians—it was clear those who conquered Jerusalem must have paid a heavy price. Ours was eight shekels, with an extra five for the museum in the tower.

My grandmother stopped to catch her breath.

"This is the Tower of David, Grandma. Though it has nothing to do with David; it was built much later by King Herod in Jesus' time. This gate we went through is bigger than all the others. It was built in World War I to allow Kaiser Wilhelm to get his carriages into the city. If you want, we could go to the museum in the tower, there's supposed to be some photos from the War of Independence."

"No violence. We go to the Wailing Wall."

Wailing, I thought. Of course.

Making our way through the dark arches of the Old City, we came to a long roofed promenade and, at the end, a stone well down which tourists were peering. A sign on the pillar said it was an archeological shaft whose varicolored core revealed the strata of former cities, one built on top of the other. We waited until the tourists had left and, with my grandmother still clinging to my arm, I peered down the "well." I felt like a stone dropping through Jerusalem's history.

"These are all the cities that Jerusalem is built upon, Grandma," I finally said. "That yellow is from the Middle Ages; and that pink, four layers down, is when Jesus walked the streets."

"And so?"

"It's interesting, Grandma, it's history."

"You know history? You do not know history. Never in a thousand years do you know history."

"But it's in the guidebook. I read it in the guidebook."

"You know nothing."

I couldn't believe this. I had read all this stuff throughout the long plane ride. Yet she knew everything. She leaned over and stared down the well.

"And which, pray tell, is the layer of Nazi atrocities?" she asked.

We came onto a blinding plaza, and a broad wall where mostly black-suited Jews were swarming like ants. At a section of wall to the right, separated by a

low stone divider, were the women, some holding infants or small children, a few praying against the Wall.

My grandmother looked around in confusion. "Do you want to sit down on the benches here, Grandma?" I asked.

With her back to the Wall, she sat down, then pulled the black purse hooked on her arm toward her, opened it, and in a tiny spiral notebook, began to write, her stern lips moving.

I imagined my grandmother listing humanity's infractions.

But she was not a note-taker, not a particularly methodical or organized person. She was spontaneous. Shooting her criticisms from the hip, drilling opinions like rifle shots, scattering curses and recriminations like buckshot.

Her eyes closed for a moment. And then she pushed herself up, blinking into the sun.

"Grandma, what's the matter, are you all right?"

She looked at me like I was a stranger asking for alms. She waved me off with her fist clutching the tiny square of paper.

"What were you writing, Grandma, what's on the paper?"

"Not for you."

"Tell me."

"Nu. Nu?"

"Grandma?"

She turned and started moving toward the Wall.

"Wait," I said, "you can't go there, that's the men's Wall. You have to go over there by the women." She looked at me as though I had just said the most stupid thing, then turned in that direction.

My grandmother made her way across the plaza toward the women's Wall, not looking at the baby carriages, the children playing, the knots of women holding other children. And then she was against the Wall. She appeared smaller than I had ever seen her. After a minute, her hand reached up, searching for a crack between the stones in which to place the note.

When she came back I asked her what she had written in the note, but she waved my question away.

But my anger had been building; now I felt like one of those barbarians ready to crash through the walls. In my whole life, all my grandmoth-

er had said to me was, "No Hogan Nazis," or, "Turn down the TV," or "Don't fill your head with cartoons." Now she had a chance to say something really interesting to me, and she wasn't interested.

"Grandma, you gotta listen to me. You and I, we're in this together. I'm the one who's giving you this tour. I'm the one who brought you here, and I'm with you now. So, tell me."

"You wouldn't understand. You know nothing."

"Well, I'm asking you to tell me. What wouldn't I understand? What's so secretive you won't tell me?"

She stonily shook her head.

"What can't I know?" I insisted. "What's the goddamn big deal?" I was like the violence on TV. I wouldn't let up. "I mean, did you murder someone, is that what you were writing in the note, a confession?"

"*I'm* no murderer!" she suddenly yelled, setting murderous eyes on me.

"Well that makes two of us!"

She turned, tight-lipped, and stared past me.

"They are the murderers," she finally said, softly. "They killed your great uncle, my brother, if you must know. Solly, your great uncle, whom you never knew. My brother—in Poland—who gave me all the money he had. 'Go to America,' he said. 'It is a wonderful country. You will find work there, and you can send me back money, and save for yourself, so we can go to Israel together where I know people—there is a farm, a kibbutz. We will go to Israel,' he said, 'and be free.'

"But instead I met your grandfather—he had no money—he was no good—and he gambled, he strolled through the courtyards like a courtier in his new suit. A very good dresser, he was, your grandfather, and an excellent way with the ladies, but a poor provider. Solly, he wanted to go to Israel, he saved all his money to go to Israel, but instead he gave it to me so I could go to America. And I had no money to send back to him. And the Nazis came for him. And that was the end."

We were walking slowly away from the Wall. She added: "In the note I say I am sorry. But I am here now. I say I am sorry. I am sorry."

The plaza retreated behind us till it was a distant white noise. She was still clutching my arm, which I no longer felt. In fact, I no longer saw the cobblestones, the Hasidim, all the tourists passing by. Finally I said, "Thank

you, Grandma. I'm glad you told me. I'm sorry, really I am. My Great Uncle Solly sounds like he was a great man, a nice man. I would have liked to have met him."

She looked at me hard. "You know nothing," she said. "Absolutely nothing."

We returned to the hotel to find my parents standing in front of the mirrors in their formal attire. Their speeches were on the bed.

I sat down and began flipping the channels, scanning all the way up and down the dial until I found a martial arts movie that offered nonstop mayhem and dismemberment: great action sequences my grandmother, especially, would have hated.

After a while, my father, putting the finishing touches on his tie, said, "Where's your grandmother?"

"Taking a nap, I guess," I said. Limbs flew to separate sides of the screen.

I heard my mother open the door to my grandmother's adjoining room. "She's not here," she said.

"David," my father turned to me, "where did you put the car keys?"

"On the table, by the door." Then I looked. They weren't there.

"Oh no," said my mother quietly.

"Well where the hell could she be?" my father exploded.

"I don't *know*," I said, turning to my parents.

"I'll call down to the front desk," said my mother, trying to be calm.

"Well, where do you think she *might* have gone?"

I thought hard a minute. I could hear the cries and grunts of martial arts action in the background. "I don't know if this is it, but a couple of times she said she wanted to go to Yad Vashem. But we didn't have time, and it was too far across town."

"They haven't seen her at the desk or in the lobby," said my mother, gripping the phone.

"We don't have time for this," said my father. He reached into his pocket and handed me some keys. "Look, see if she's in the lobby, or outside, and then, on the off-chance she's actually taken the car, see if you can head her off." He wrote something on a piece of paper, handed it to me. "Head toward Yad Vashem. Call us on the car phone as soon as you get there. We'll wait here

in case she shows up. Let's hope she just went for a walk around the block."

My mother said, "Maybe we should postpone the lectures?"

My father's face tightened. He glanced at his watch. "Everyone's already arrived by this time. We can't just cancel after coming all this way. If David finds her, we'll leave for the dinner right away. If not, we'll call the police."

As I closed the door behind me, he shouted: "And don't get lost!"

I asked at the front desk, the newsstand, and the gift shop for my grandmother. I described her as wearing a dull blue-gray dress matching her hair. "Kid," said the newsstand guy, "you know how many ladies we got here that fit that description?"

Outside, one of the attendants told me that my grandmother had indeed just taken the car, after asking for directions to Yad Vashem. I asked him to quickly bring up my father's car, got the same directions, and asked him to tell my parents where I was going. As I waited, I wondered if—with no money in my pocket—I could be forgiven for not leaving a tip.

In a few minutes I was dodging traffic on King David in a car bigger than my homeroom, searching for those erratic ripples in the traffic pattern that would suggest my grandmother's driving habits. I imagined her going the wrong way down a one-way street, running red lights, having an accident, winding up in East Jerusalem with terrorists. I saw her limbs flying to different parts of the screen.

I made a left onto Yafo Street and took it all the way to Herzl Boulevard. And then it occurred to me: she was terrible at following directions; in which case I might never find her, my parents would miss their precious engagement, and I might just as well keep on going myself to some far-off kibbutz where I would work anonymously into my adult years, working for some good greater than myself, working to forget my past. Maybe meeting a young Israeli girl impressed by my modesty and diligence, who would work by my side, and eventually do other things with me as well. I didn't know what I was doing. I was only seventeen.

Suddenly my lane began to slow down, slowing to a crawl, just like in LA. For a while we were almost stopped. Then cars began to pull out into the fast lane. I hesitated, saw my chance. But I wasn't equipped for the fast lane. Against horns and squeals of tire, I pulled out, and began accelerating past cars on my right. Ahead, I could see the fast lane spreading out and

moving back into the right lane, in front of the one car that had been holding everything up, a car that was still going twenty-five. I raced ahead, entertaining notions of bulldozing it off the road, just like Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*. But as I began to pull alongside, I saw that I couldn't. For there was my grandmother, hunched over the wheel, arms akimbo, hair flying like a mad scientist's caught in the electrocuting coils of an experiment.

"Grandma!" I shouted. I drew abreast, waving frantically across the broad expanse of my front seat. I was sure she saw me, but she refused to turn her head. Although, in fairness, I knew she couldn't see more than two feet in front of her. I leaned on the horn, which immediately became swallowed by the cacophony of other horns behind me as my grandmother and I held up both lanes of traffic. Not knowing what else to do, I crossed the lane and got in front of her, slowing to her speed so as not to lose her, while absorbing the angry glares of drivers who now cut in front of us.

I peered ahead for the sign to Yad Vashem. There it was. I signaled, and turned off Herzl, like one long exhalation. Soon we would both be at the memorial, and I would call my parents on the car phone—once I figured out how to use it.

Then I looked through the rear view window. My grandmother wasn't there. She hadn't gotten off the road.

My grandmother had disappeared! And I was now swerving in two lanes of traffic—among billboards, buildings, buses, and pedestrians, a Hasid trying to cross the street who watched me with terrified eyes.

Somehow I turned around and got back on Herzl. And as I did the air suddenly became alive with sirens, causing me, though my seat belt was on, to nearly go through the roof. What was this, I thought—air raid, earthquake, explosion? What was I supposed to do? The sirens were all around me, like pent-up screams let loose. Cars began to slow down, and to stop, as a smaller siren emerged from behind, an ambulance with blinking lights racing up the bus lane past me. Suddenly it occurred to me why my grandmother hadn't made the right turn for Yad Vashem—something had happened to her! A heart attack, perhaps, or an accident, or both. And the ambulance was racing toward her. Had I intimidated her with my ranting and waving? Had I added my confusion to hers? My hands shook on the big wheel. I resolved to pull into the bus lane and follow the ambulance, but I was now boxed in with the other stopped cars, the pervasive sirens pounding frightening random

thoughts into my brain. I had wanted to save her, but had done just the opposite. I would never see her again, my parents wouldn't ever want to see me again. My grandmother had told me all about her brother, about how, by not sending him money, she had caused his death, and I would never learn more. Had I caused her death—by chasing her, by waving my arms? I realized I would never know. I realized I would never know her.

I finally got out of the car, and stood there. And then I began to run. I ran like in a dream, following the yellow traffic line between lanes of cars, dodging open doors and drivers, my tom-tomming heart accompanying the continuing sirens. I shakily peered ahead for the ambulance, which had disappeared down the boulevard. I thought, if I got there soon enough, I might still save her. I heard someone holding a child by the hand and saying, "Yom Ha-Shoah." And then I remembered the guidebook. Yom Ha-Shoah. The national day of mourning for the Holocaust. Work-stoppage. Sirens. On this day, for three minutes, across streets, cities, towns, and farms: the wailing of a nation pierced by the needle of grief.

I slowed. Everywhere along the road people were standing by their cars. There ahead, standing by her car, was my grandmother. I slowed to a walk, dizzy and out of breath. It all seemed like a movie, like a scene on another planet. My grandmother's face, as I approached, was calm and purposeful, in contrast to her hair, which seemed on fire. I blurted out, "Grandma, I thought I'd lost you," and we embraced. "I thought you were going to the Holocaust Memorial." "Today is all a Holocaust Memorial," she said. "All of Israel a Holocaust Memorial." And we stood silently, facing the long clogged boulevard, her hand firmly on my arm, as the sirens continued to wail.

From somewhere down the line, a car phone rang. I thought of my parents trying to call, desperate to hear.

"Afterwards," my grandmother said, "we go to a kibbutz."

Henry Alan Paper's stories have been published in numerous magazines, including Portland Monthly, Response, The Sun, and Jewish Currents. He lives in Hamden, CT, with his wife, Lynn, and German shephard, Bogart. His two daughters, Djana and Jodi, are the most magnificent papers he's produced.