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## Letter From Tel Aviv: The View From the Bubble

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## Letter from Tel Aviv

## The view from the bubble

BY SHARI MOTRO

THE COVER OF LAST WEEK'S Time Out Tel Aviv was a local variation on Saul Steinberg's famous New Yorker cover "View of the World from 9th Avenue." Allenby Street is in the foreground, followed by Rothschild Boulevard, Shenkin Street, Kadishman's three-dot sculpture, the Yarkon River, and beyond it, all crammed in together: Baghdad, Tehran, Haifa, Tiberias, Acre, Beirut, a battleship, jet planes, missiles, explosions.

This is where I am for the summer, in the heart of what people here call "the Tel Aviv bubble." Tel Avivians, like New Yorkers, think the world revolves around them. They party and they network and they make money and they support the arts. They're proud of their lefty credentials (against the occupation, for gay rights, for saving the environment) and of their gallows humor, and they look down on the religious in Jerusalem and the nerds in Haifa.

I'm here, and I'm ashamed, because there's a war going on and I'm having a nice time. I spend my days doing research and writing. In the evenings I do yoga and eat out with friends and family.

When I left Israel at 18, I told myself I'd never come back. Israel was oppressive, both personally and politically; I wanted nothing to do with it. I spent years freezing on the East Coast of the US trying to forget it, trying to pretend it wasn't at the core of who I am. Then sometime around my 30th birthday I gave in. I realized that loving it and hating it is OK.

So now I come back twice a year, and the truth is that this summer is not all that different from my last visit, over Christmas break. The bubble's cafes are full, regardless of the horrors in the north, or in the south, or just an hour's drive east in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, my inbox is flooded with worried messages from friends and colleagues in the States. "I am sure you and your family might feel differently, but we would not mind one little bit if you came back early," writes one of my colleagues at the University of Richmond, and I don't know how to begin to explain that I don't feel scared at all. I feel relieved to be here. The war seems so much farther away here than it would if I were watching it from Richmond—farther from me, farther from my family, farther from reality. Watching it from the outside would have made me crazy, the way I was in New York during the Second Intifada.

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Rockets are falling on Haifa. Haifa! Just 45 minutes by train from the Tel Aviv suburb I grew up in, where my parents and sister still live. Family snapshots of the dead fill the pages of the paper. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, keeps warning of more "surprises," and the experts agree that Hezbollah is capable of hitting much deeper into the country. Why do I feel immune?

My inbox also contains a forward of a forward of a forward. "Israeli atrocities," the subject line reads. The message includes photos of the corpses of Lebanese children, their skin charred, their clothing ripped off by a blast.

The pictures anger my Israeli friends. We have our own horrific pictures, they say. We didn't start this. If anyone's to blame it's Hezbollah and the Lebanese government. This isn't Gaza, this isn't the Palestinians, whom we've squeezed for so long that you can legitimately say, like Ehud Barak did, that if you were in their shoes you might become a terrorist, too. This is different. Hundreds of missiles are being launched from a sovereign state, disabling a quarter of the country. What are we

supposed to do?

I don't know what we should do, but I can't get the images out of my head. I feel implicated.

So I go to the antiwar rally, which starts at the square where Yitzhak Rabin was killed after another peace rally I participated in a decade ago. I bump into a guy I sat next to in high school. He has a sweet, open face. He's become a teacher in Jaffa working to integrate the story of the Nakba, the Palestinian narrative of "the catastrophe" of 1948, into Israeli public school education. This isn't the Israel I see every day, the Israel I left.

The next day I go to the beach. The light is beautiful. The jellyfish have moved north. Their numbers had already dwindled last week, but their venom lingered in the water. Now that they're gone, the sea is filled with bathers again. A pair of helicopters flies south, back from Lebanon I imagine. I feel guilty, guilty about the innocents that are being killed in my name, and at the same time, even if their missions may be wrong-headed, guilty about the pilots who are risking their lives in my name.

Everybody here has déjà vu of a different war—for some it's 1973, for others it's 1982. For me it's 1991. I was a teenager then, and the glee of



The cover of the last week's Time Out Tel Aviv, which adapted Saul Steinberg's famous New Yorker cover, "View of the World from 9th Avenue."

missing school and the hyper-awareness of being alive in the present were so much more real, so much less abstract than the danger. During the first Scud attack, sitting with my gas mask in our sealed room and listening to the dull rumbles outside, not only was I not scared, I was excited. I'd made a bet with my sister that Saddam would attack that night, and then he did. I won. I remember running to our shelter smiling.

I wasn't scared then, and I'm not scared now. I'm only scared for a split second every couple of days. I hardly even notice it. An ambulance passes and I stop to listen and make sure that it's just one and not many. I walk through the crowded market, a favorite spot for suicide bombers, and I think: This is really stupid, I should get out of here, but I keep shopping anyway, looking for good cherries. Planes wake me up in the middle of the night. I can't distinguish the commercial flights from the F-16s. It's not even a fully formed thought, but something in my body wonders whether the war has reached us, too. And then I fall back asleep.