

Finding compassion in a trying land

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[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) The first bureaucratic triumph upon our arrival in [Jerusalem](#) came at the Ministry of Interior, when a surly woman peeled off our newly minted residency visas and pressed them into our passports.

“We are prisoners of thanks,” my husband and I said, mustering an antiquated Hebrew phrase of gratitude.

“Bye,” she replied, with all the feeling of a desert rock.

Giving thanks in the Middle East is not for the faint of heart. The quest for power, pride, and salvation that has ravaged Jerusalem throughout history seems to seep into the most banal areas of modern life, from driving to grocery shopping. Whether because of history or theology, resentment or fear, many in Jerusalem live with the sharp edges pointing out. Unseemly traits arise—as do opportunities to overcome them.

If you’re not careful, you begin to forget where the soft part of your heart is.

That was particularly true during this summer’s war between Israel and Gaza. I didn’t know any of the more than 2,100 Palestinians and 72 Israelis who were killed. But war tugs at everyone’s soul.

I cringed at the Israeli refrain: “They choose death; we choose life.” Meanwhile, my Palestinian friends were convinced that Israelis simply love killing children.

[It’s my job](#) to see beyond such polarized narratives, to understand the nuances, however trampled by the masses. My striving for that ideal has sometimes brought strife to my adoptive families, as I have made friends and been welcomed into their homes. Still, mutual affection has prevailed during even the most testing times.

One night during the war, as I was backing out of the driveway of a Palestinian family’s home, the youngest son ran after me yelling, “Waaaaaaaait!”

Through the open car window, he handed me a drawing, panting. It pictured not the soldiers and rockets he'd shown me earlier, but me and my family back in America. I had blond pigtails and was swinging on a tree.

The next day I got a call from an Israeli friend, who often checked in during the war, pointing out at length the nefarious nature of Hamas and the righteousness of Israel. This time it was different. "We just want you to know that no matter what you write, you are like a daughter to us, and your husband like a son-in-law, and you will always be welcome in our home," he said. That was all.

Such experiences, whether because of the tempestuous backdrop or on their own merits, shine resplendent and instill an enduring love for this place and its people.

Life here is not unlike the Roman *tribulum* of yore, a threshing board with spikes to separate the wheat from the chaff. Even as I chafe at the tribulation, from battling bureaucracy to covering war, I know it is removing the chaff from my character. But those who call this land home have endured infinitely more tribulation than I, making the wheat of their characters extra beautiful.

Days after the Gaza war ended I visited a family whose home had just been destroyed for the second time in two years. We crunched our way across a floor strewn with mangled pots, chunks of gleaming floor tiles, and red polka-dot cupcake liners to the hole where an Israeli rocket had punched through the floor after flying through the back picture windows.

Then we stepped into the garden. It was untouched. As we stood under a trellis, the family picked grapes and offered them to me and my interpreter. Figs followed. We savored the sweet taste; they pointed out the rosebush where one of the daughters loved to come on cease-fire days and pluck a blossom of hope.

As we turned in the dust to head back to our old yellow Mercedes station wagon, the matriarch reached out to give me something: It was a rose. Her only one.