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A Tale of Two Zoos

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Commentary

A tale of two zoos

The Biblical Zoo, West Jerusalem, Israel

“Ima”, my daughter calls, “Why doesn’t this man let us in?” I look to see if this naïve question posed by a three-year-old will bring some movement to the security guard’s expressionless face. Nothing.

“We have to wait until the person who invited us here lets us in”, I explain to my daughter in an attempt to hide my own impatience. We have just arrived for a summer vacation in Israel a couple of days ago and already I can’t stand the tiresome insistence on ‘security’. How easy it is to forget these inconveniences when one lives elsewhere. At least we’re not standing in the regular line, I think to myself, glancing at the people who are waiting to pay for this pleasure. After what seems like forever in the baking sun of a June afternoon in Jerusalem, the guard nods his head ever so slightly.

I have just finished writing an academic book about zoos in North America and now I’m here, in Jerusalem, about a mile away from the neighborhood where I grew up, to conduct ethnographic research about zoos in Israel. I want to understand how Israeli nationalism is expressed through animals in captivity and I’m hoping an afternoon at the Jerusalem Zoo can help me piece it together.

The land behind the zoo’s gates is a refreshing green amidst the dry heat of an Israeli summer. In front of us, an artificial lake stretches into the shade and black-handed spider monkeys leap across the water, playing tag. A group of young art students have spread their canvases on the grass beside us and soon my daughter is painting with them. I turn to examine the people around us: an ultraorthodox man with long side-curls shouts instructions to a bunch of leaping boys; several feet away, a few Palestinian children lean on the fence that surrounds the lake, staring at the monkeys.

In part, this is what the zoo offers: the animal as common denominator. Despite my wariness of poster-perfect multiculturalism, as a Jerusalemite I can’t help but recognize the power of this scene. I myself grew up just a few hundred feet from a Palestinian village—yet I never met a Palestinian. But here at the Biblical Zoo, ultraorthodox children from Jerusalem’s Jewish enclaves play side-by-side with Palestinians from the city’s villages. I try to recall another cultural institution that offers such intimate mingling grounds for these two populations, each of them a minority in the dominant Jewish secularism of contemporary Israel. Nothing comes to mind. While the Jerusalem Theatre and the Israeli Museum don’t display overt signs that exclude Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, less visible cues keep them out: a security guard saying “hello” in Hebrew and waiting to hear someone’s accent in reply is enough to keep Palestinians away from many of the city’s public spaces that have become predominately, if not exclusively, Jewish.

“Coexistence is much too big of a word for me”, Shai Doron, the Director of the Biblical Zoo, tells me. Shai has agreed to answer some questions I have about the zoo as a space of ethnic coexistence for three populations within Jerusalem that rarely meet: secular Jewish Israelis, ultraorthodox Jews from West Jerusalem, and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. “I’d much rather speak about the Zoo as a neutral space. There’s something in animals, something in wildlife, that appeals to everyone—that isn’t controversial. Teddy understood this.”

Shai refers to the legendary mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek. Although he couldn't have cared less about animals, Kollek recognized the Zoo's potential for peace making. Back then, the zoo was a small institution tucked away in Romema, a religious neighborhood near the center of town. Kollek promoted the idea of moving the Zoo to a larger location and upgrading it to a state-of-the-art tourist site that would appeal to secular and religious Jewish and Palestinian families alike. The Tisch family of New York agreed to pay \$5 million toward the \$30 million cost of the relocation project; the Jerusalem municipality, the Israel Ministry of Tourism, the Jerusalem Foundation, and other private sponsors also contributed. The zoo closed its site in Romema and reopened in the Malha valley, four miles southwest of the city's center, in 1993.

Shai searches through his files for a quote from Teddy Kollek that would adequately express the former mayor's engagement with the zoo and finally finds it in an old newspaper article. "In a complicated city, within a complex society", he reads, "the Jerusalem Zoo is a very powerful vehicle for building bridges of human understanding."

But the zoo's real pride is even more unique: it's the only Biblical Zoo in the world. It was originally designed not only to hold biblical animals, but also to revive animal scenes from the bible. The phrase 'the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb', for example, was performed here to the letter. Dr Shmulik Yedvab, General Curator of the Biblical Zoo, tells me that, if at certain times they didn't have any wolves, they would bring in a leopard instead, and if they didn't have lambs, they would bring goats. "Of course, they ate each other up, eventually", Dr Yedvab tells me, adding that this was one of the more exciting features of the exhibit: "These scenes were part of the deal at the old time."

Today, the zoo's biblical revivalist mission is buried beneath an ethic of environmental conservation, in which a focus on Israel's indigenous species connects the biblical to the ecological. "We don't need to send our zoologists, our keepers, and our researchers and visitors way back to the rainforest in Brazil", says Shai. "We just tell them: go ten miles from here to try to preserve the habitat used by the fallow deer."

In the 1960s, Israeli general Avraham Yoffe assembled experts to determine which modern-day animals corresponded to those mentioned in the bible, with the goal of reintroducing them to Israel. The Persian fallow deer stands about 3 feet tall at the shoulder, with a tawny coat, white spots, and flattened antlers. It is named in the book of Deuteronomy as one of the hoofed animals the Hebrews were allowed to eat. The fallow deer's reintroduction is the crowning achievement of an ambitious program that has also returned biblical onagers, oryxes, and ostriches to Israel's wild.

The last of the fallow deer in Israel were believed to have been hunted to extinction in the early 1900s and the species was thought to be extinct worldwide until the late 1950s, when the deer were rediscovered in Iran. As Iran was hurtling toward Islamic revolution in 1978, an Israeli zoologist landed at Tehran's Airport, carrying a blow-dart gun disguised as a cane and secret orders from General Yoffe. His mission: to capture four Persian fallow deer and deliver them to Israel before the Shah's government collapsed. The deer were loaded onto the last El Al flight out of Tehran, packed between mountains of carpets and valuables that fleeing Iranian Jews and Israelis were taking with them. From these four deer, Israel Nature and Parks Authority started a captive breeding program in northern Israel; the Biblical Zoo joined the fallow deer conservation effort in 1997, when the first individuals were brought to the zoo's "Bible-Land preserve" exhibit. Today, the Biblical Zoo holds the largest captive herd of Persian fallow deer in the world.

The reintroduction of critically endangered animals from zoos 'back' into their wild habitats has been a trendy enterprise for zoos worldwide. But at the Jerusalem Zoo, the notion of resurrecting the biblical landscape through releasing ostensibly biblical animals into the

contemporary landscape lends the project religious and nationalist significance. For Shai and others, the project helps smooth the transition between the two archetypes of Hebrew nationhood: the biblical people on the one hand, and their modern Zionist descendants on the other. It also rings with echoes of Noah and his ark. “Noah’s ark is the best icon for wildlife conservation”, Shai says. “Noah was the first vet ever, the first animal keeper ever. He was the first conservationist ever.”

In the course of my long conversation with Shai, I learn about another project the zoo is undertaking—one that isn’t mentioned in any of the zoo’s public materials: the introduction of Israeli animals into Palestine. Shai explains to me that, since the 1990s, the Israelis have been supplying Palestine’s Qalqilya Zoo with animals, advanced medical and veterinary equipment—otherwise unavailable in the territories—and management advice. I am intrigued: how is this relationship possible, given the area’s violence and history of political turmoil? But before I get any further, I’m given a curious warning: “You’re treading on thin ice”, he says, reluctant to speak any more about this collaboration. “Be very careful, or you might mess everything up.”

Qalqilya Zoo, Qalqilya, Palestine

Because I am Israeli, and I am traveling with another Israeli in an Israeli car, the soldier takes a quick look at us and waves us through. Legally, we’re prohibited from entering into what the Oslo Accords has designated as Area ‘A’ of the West Bank: a large sign instructs in bright red, “Stop! You are entering ‘A’ Territories. Entrance is strictly forbidden to Israelis. Offenders will be prosecuted. You are entering at your own risk!” In a cage in the seat behind me is a coati—*kawati* in Arabic—a member of the raccoon family. I’m traveling with Dr Motke, an Israeli veterinarian said to be the father of Israeli vets and a real *mensch*. Together, we’re bringing the kawati to the Qalqilya Zoo, the only municipal zoo in the West Bank—and although we didn’t get prior authorization to cross the border, having the animal here feels like a security, a solid reason to venture out to such alien territories. Still, Dr Motke warns that it might be difficult to get back; we could be arrested. I swallow and breathe.

Qalqilya is a farming city situated on the western edge of the West Bank, on the border with Israel. Since 2005 the Israeli-West Bank barrier—known to many as ‘The Separation Wall’—has encircled Qalqilya from all but one narrow entrance. The Israeli military controls and inspects all movement in and out of the city—which means that absolutely everything that crosses the border (legally, at least) requires permission from Israel. Palestinian residents are prohibited from entering Israel unless they acquire a special permit, which is extremely hard to get.

I last visited here almost eight years ago, before the wall was built. Qalqilya was a depressing scene then, and I am expecting more of the same. I certainly don’t expect to see flowers and fancy commercial billboards adorning the streets of one of the poorest of Palestinian towns, famous around the world for its suffering from the Israeli occupation. Dr Motke notices my expression. “They pretend to be miserable, when in fact they make good money from the business of occupation”, he tells me. I need to remind myself that I am only thirty some miles from Jerusalem—it feels as if I’ve landed on a different planet.

The most direct route from Jerusalem to Qalqilya is to cut through the hilly terrain of Palestine north of Jerusalem and then to turn west somewhere before Nablus. But direct routes are not common here. Israel’s severe restrictions on Palestinians’ movement in the West Bank are enforced by a system of fixed checkpoints, surprise flying checkpoints, roads on which Palestinians are forbidden to travel, and gates and other physical obstructions along the Separation Barrier. Dr Motke, experienced in traveling this terrain, instructs me to drive around the territories on Israeli-only roads and to meet him on the western border with Palestine, just north east of Tel Aviv.

The Qalqilya Zoo was the brainchild of a former Qalqilya mayor who came to be poorly regarded by most Palestinians because of his suspected collaboration with Israel. When it opened in 1986, however, the zoo was referred to as “a jewel in the crown of Palestinian national institutions” and a symbol of Palestinian–Israeli coexistence. The zoo’s management consulted from the very beginning with a team of Israeli zookeepers—Dr Motke among them—who still actively assist Qalqilya in its everyday operations. “Without the Zoo as a respectable place to visit”, says Dr Motke, “they would have practically nothing.”

Another member of the Israeli team, head veterinarian for the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem Dr Nily Avni-Magen, explains the reason behind her zoo’s involvement. “We want to help them”, she says. “They cannot come to visit our Zoo because of the politics. So we as a zoo can move beyond the politics to provide them with a place they can go to have fun and to spend a nice time, away from the streets.”

But there’s more to Qalqilya’s relationship with the Biblical Zoo than niceties about peace making: Qalqilya depends fully on Israel for its influx of new animals. Since the 1970s, conservation-focused legislation and treaties have made it difficult or impossible to take animals from the wild. In Europe a network of animal programs connects accredited zoos across countries: each animal species in the zoo is managed through a program, a studbook, and a collaborative database. A central committee matches pairs of animals to breed, recommending animal transfers between zoos, if necessary. Accredited zoos like the Biblical Zoo cannot send their collectively managed animals to nonaccredited zoos—animals in the system must stay in the system. Qalqilya is unaccredited. As a result, the only way for the zoo to acquire a managed animal—those endangered, threatened, and especially charismatic zoo animals—is to be given one by Israel with special approval by the Europeans. Nonmanaged animals are much easier to give as gifts.

The kawati on the seat near me is one such gift, and it’s destined for a home in Qalqilya Zoo. Ten minutes after we cross the border we pass through the town’s market, where, despite the heat, blankets of all shapes and colors are displayed. School children in blue uniforms walk the streets. A surprised zoo guard, embarrassed to have been caught sleeping, lets us through a pair of old gates adorned with tarnished golden lions.

Dr Sami, Dr Motke’s contact and colleague at the zoo, awaits us at the entrance. He looks excited. It’s not every day that Dr Motke visits the zoo, and the kawati on the seat behind me makes it a celebratory event. I cannot help but smile as they hug. These two men look like they’re taken out of a caricature book, really. Dr Motke, with his incredible moustache and kibbutz pants buckled above his waistline, and Dr Sami, unshaved, sloppy, and already sweating in long black pants—each of them heavy-bodied and sturdy in their own way. They seem somewhat uncomfortable with the intimate rituals of this encounter and relieved to move on to taking care of the animals, a process with which they are clearly more familiar. As Dr Motke removes the kawati from the passenger seat, zoo personnel gather around. Dr Motke instructs them how to introduce a female kawati to the male: “Build a separate cage”, he tells the group, “and let them get used to each other before you actually let them share the space.”

Most, if not all, of the animals in the zoo’s collection are hand-me-downs from Israeli zoos. Ruti the Giraffe, Dubi the Hippo—the Qalqilya Zoo’s star inhabitants have Hebrew names that serve as constant reminders of their Israeli origins. “Usually, the animals that get here are the least popular ones”, Dr Motke tells me. The first giraffe brought here from the Jerusalem Zoo, for example, had weird feet that, in Dr Motke’s words, made it look funny. “What’s wrong with this animal?” I ask about the kawati, my fellow traveler across the border. “It caused too much trouble for the Safari”, Dr Motke tells me. “But although they were relieved to get rid of it, they wanted the Palestinians to pay for the animal.”

Support from Israeli zoos usually comes with strings attached: a strict code of animal care standards applies to any facility wishing to obtain animals from these zoos. Dr Yedwab tells me proudly that when looking for a new home for their animals, the Biblical Zoo personnel make sure their animals receive top care. Sending animals to the Qalqilya Zoo, the Jerusalemites tell me, requires that the Palestinians introduce significant improvements to their exhibits. And this, of course, requires close monitoring by the Israelis—a relationship that is less about gifting than a kind of mentorship.

Dr Sami speaks casually about the Israeli zoos' attitude toward his zoo. He believes that the Israeli motto is, "If you are good and we love you we will give you everything."

I wonder: what if the zoo isn't good?

When Dr Motke excuses himself and ducks out of the room to use the bathroom, Dr Sami leans forward in his chair and lowers his voice. "The Israelis can't supply us with everything", he says. "For example, they can't give us large animals like giraffes and elephants, and these animals are really important for our collection."

Recently, the Palestinians have been trying to gain membership with the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria—an arrangement that would allow them to deal directly with European zoos and to rely less on Israeli gifts. For now, though, even the attempt to join the European zoo association is mediated by the Israelis. Pulling some strings, the Israelis convinced a European inspector to pay an informal visit to Qalqilya. Now, the Europeans are considering sending out a more formal inspection group. The Palestinians are thrilled.

I wonder how on earth one manages to run a zoo amidst so many years of extreme political uncertainty, when even in peaceful times transporting a kawati proves so challenging. As we sip strong black coffee from tiny cups in an administrative office, Dr Sami and Dr Motke jointly reflect back on the Intifada years. "These were periods of strict closures", Dr Motke tells me. "The Israeli administration said that this is not the time for animals; I understood this, so we didn't transport animals then."

There are plenty of Intifada stories, and they lead to one another like prayer beads on the chain that Dr Sami moves ritually between his thumb and index finger. "Before the Intifada, we had an Israeli here for a meeting and he forgot his bag. His bag was in my house for a year and a half", Dr Sami says. "It was not easy to come to the zoo because in front of the zoo there were two tanks. We had to close the zoo and we used only one gate in the back. There was a curfew. Even that wasn't allowed."

One day, Dr Sami got stuck at the zoo during a curfew announcement. He called his wife to say that he didn't know when the curfew would be lifted and he could come home. Hungry and tired, the captive zoo staff tested the Israelis by sending out the oldest person in the staff. They might take pity on an old person, they thought, and let him go home. "He went out, and the military caught him and asked him to remove all his clothes", Dr Sami tells me. "He removed all, [remaining] just with underwear, and then he sat on the road. So we stayed at the zoo."

While the zoo's human caregivers were frequently locked out, the animals were locked in. Food, especially meat, was hard to come by. "If we would usually be able to give them ten kilograms of meat", Dr Sami says, "we were now only able to give them four, the bare minimum for their survival."

Before ending his story, Dr Sami explains why both men work together through political turmoil. "We do not care if we are enemies in war. We work only for one thing: to save these animals."

After I'd arrived back to the United States from Israel, I came across a piece in *The New York Times* describing an art fair held in Germany in 2007, in which an Austrian artist had displayed a stuffed giraffe from Qalqilya. The *Times* article called the stuffed giraffe "a war victim, and a symbol of our time", and suggested that the giraffe is "a casualty of an Israeli army attack on the militant organization Hamas." A boycott of Israeli art ensued. Zookeepers in Israel were unhappy, to say the least, with the reconstruction of their generous gift to the Qalqilya Zoo into a symbol of negligence and cruelty; they saw it as a betrayal of trust.

I remember seeing this giraffe in Qalqilya. It stood at the center of the zoo's natural history museum—a dark cave, lit with green neon and furnished with a clutter of animal and plant bodies, anatomy spread sheets, and large yellow signs in Arabic. The giraffe had staring ping-pong eyes and stood with a stuffed baby giraffe at its side. It had returned from Germany and bore a small, Palestinian-made, plaque telling the story of its death.

"During the second Intifada, which began in 2000, the Qalqilya Zoo was constantly under closure", the zoo's Director, Saed Khater, told me. "For eighteen months, an Israeli tank stood immediately outside the Zoo's gate, aiming at the school that was situated just behind the zoo's giraffe enclosure. Brownie, a male giraffe purchased from South Africa, died after running into a pole while trying to escape the sound of the Israeli gunfire. Traumatized by his death, Ruti, his pregnant partner, miscarried her baby and died ten days later."

The Israeli zookeepers I met were good people with genuinely good intentions. None of this—the violence, the death, the militarism—was their fault. Still, before arriving at Qalqilya I remember thinking, "Why, in the midst of occupation, would Israeli zoos bother helping to initiate a Palestinian zoo? And once this zoo was finally established in Palestine, why would they go to the trouble of supplying it with animals, equipment, and constant advice?"

The Biblical Zoo's official disposition toward the subject of Israeli occupation of Palestine seems to be this: it happens elsewhere and by someone else. It should not be confused with the multicultural education and awareness promoted by this zoo. But it seems to me that the Biblical Zoo is *deeply* entangled in Israel's occupation: the Israelis have the animals, the professional means, and the education; they create and enforce the proper conservation standards and control the meaning of care for zoo animals; and while they give, take, and educate, the Israeli gaze penetrates beyond the Palestinian border. As scholar Nadia El-Haj has written, albeit in a different context, the zoo too helps "to realize an intrinsically Jewish space, continuously substantiating the land's own identity and purpose as having been and *needing to be* the Jewish national home."

Following the boycott of Israeli art at the German art fair, Israeli zoos ceased all communications with and support of their Palestinian counterpart—including a complete stop in all animal transportations. When Dr Motke, the Israeli veterinarian, got tired of what he framed as the "childish behavior" on both sides, he orchestrated a traditional forgiveness event—a *sulha*, in Arabic. At the *sulha*, Dr Motke persuaded the Palestinian zookeepers to blame their politicians for using the giraffe to advance ideological agendas. What exactly happened behind the closed doors of this event remains a mystery. "They apologized, we accepted, and now we are friends again", Dr Motke concludes. Still, though, the Israelis have refused to provide Qalqilya with a live giraffe.

After what seem like neverending farewell statements followed by several rounds of still-embarrassed hugs and quick kisses, we head out. On the seat behind me, the kawati's cage sits empty, a quiet reminder of why we visited here in the first place. The Qalqilya staff wave goodbye as we drive out the gates, behind a haze of heat that lingers over the zoo's concrete and cages. As we cross the border back to Israel, I ask Dr Motke about the giraffe's death.

I know what the giraffe really died from”, he said, his eyes on the dry horizon. “I was there in the autopsy. But let the Palestinians make up their stories. They don’t really care about the animals.”

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