

*I prefer the naturalness of the East.*

*I feel uncomfortable with the whole idea of redemptive suffering. I don't want someone to suffer for me.*

It was Succoth. Amos' friends Reuven and Esthe had invited us over for Shabbat. We sat in the succa at the back of the house somewhere in the hills outside Jerusalem. The wind rustled in the palm roof and the odd stray piece of tinsel twirled through the wooden eaves. I had instructed my children; Sam, Peter and Ruth, to be polite, to listen, to try and learn something. They sat huddled in coats at the table looking hungrily at the bowls of delicious food steaming into the cold evening air.

The Sabbath candles flickered in the centre of the table. Esthe had already lit them at dusk to draw in the Sabbath. Reuven sang the Hebrew blessings of Kiddush over the wine. He sipped it and passed it round. He broke the thick doughy bread and dunked it into salt and passed it to each one of us. Reuven told the children Succoth was a good reminder that the world can change very quickly, bricks and water can be swept away. The succa is a reminder of the fragility of our lives, of how it was in the desert when the Jewish people journeyed from Egypt into the land of Israel, when they built temporary shelters, of how they needed to trust God when nothing was certain around them.

Reuven sat at the end of the table. His richly coloured kipar nestled into the back of his bush of black Moroccan hair. His dark eyes danced across the Sabbath table. Amos had just told him that I was catholic and there was a moment of uncomfortable silence. More than ever the weight of history hung in the space between us. *I prefer the naturalness of the East* he said. His face seemed to turn in on itself for a moment. He was obviously thinking. Then he said slowly and carefully;

*I feel uncomfortable with the whole idea of redemptive suffering.*

My thoughts jumped at the recognition. I began to say in lots of ways I feel the same, I prefer the naturalness of the east, that I also worry about the image of the cross, the general unease around the body. That although my Christian faith had provided a poise or sanctuary in difficult times and a sense of Jesus being with me, it was also ripe for an overburdening guilt which wasn't always healthy. I wanted to tell him that it had been here in Israel with Jewish people that I have begun to understand the man Jesus. However a child fell and banged his knee and the moment was lost.

Although a massive and obvious generalization, I understood when Reuven said he preferred the naturalness of the east. Perhaps it would be preferable to say I hope for a spirituality which allows me to be fully human or whole. This is not to deny the struggle within myself. I do not want to be ruled by my desires, pride, greed or vanity, but I do not want to feel overly guilty either. I am searching for balance.

The church is in crisis. There are not enough priests. Repeated sex scandals hit the headlines. I love the church but I struggle with it on the subject of the body. I don't think it is healthy. I am not advocating a glorified promiscuity, on the contrary, but I do think we'd all be a lot healthier if we were happier in our skins. Somewhere along the way, particularly amongst Europeans, we seem to have inherited an imbalance, a distrust of the body, a rift between body and soul. This has been written about many times so I won't say too much about it here. All I want to say is that from my own experience I have been helped by being in Israel.

It is the balance of body and spirit I witness at the Sabbath table, which draws me. Our hedonistic culture seems to me to be a culture hugely out of balance and the current frenzy of consumerism indicative of it.

The food was beginning to clear from the plates and the children were visibly relaxing. Three cats wound their scraggy Jerusalem bodies around Sam and Peter's legs. *Abba Abba may we leave the table.* Reuven's and Esthe's son Offer was getting restless. He was a Harry Potter fanatic and delighted to have English children to play Quidditch with. Sam and Peter had just turned fourteen and were not really interested in re-enacting a game of hockey on make believe broomsticks but they grinned sheepishly from the sofa whilst Offer charged about yelping at his own goals. Our youngest daughter Ruth had made friends with Offers' little three year old cousin. She followed him around clucking and cooing and sneaking in cuddles when ever she could.

*So Lucy what made you come to Israel in the beginning and why do you keep coming back?* Esthe asked me as she pulled in the plates from the edges of the table. Amos had obviously told her we had been friends for a long time. It was good to have a chance to tell my story.

My love affair with Israel began in the October of 1981 when I went to work on a kibbutz in the north of Israel, where Amos grew up. My mother had been at a school in North London and had forged strong friendships with a number of Jewish girls. It was her idea. My socialist instincts also drew me to the idealism of kibbutz life.

I absolutely loved it. I formed friendships that have been the bedrock of my adult life. I learnt to milk cows and get up early in the morning. I got to love eating chopped tomato, cucumber and olives for breakfast and I fell in love with the people and the land. I particularly loved the desert and the feeling of wilderness enriched by so much biblical history. I loved the beauty and intensity of being in Jerusalem. I enjoyed the straightforwardness of the people. Although I appreciate the British qualities of understatement, I also found it liberating to be amongst people who are more used to freely expressing themselves.

Although particularly during my first visit I was happy most of the time, it wasn't only about being happy. Nobody would say Israel is an easy place. The reality of being around people in a war zone, many of whom were personally affected by loss, all of whom had had to serve time in the army, was unsettling. Many of my Jewish friends, especially in the last five years, have misgivings about the way Palestinians are treated by Israel. As Reuven indicated at the table, a deep insecurity prevails.

Up until 1948 when the modern state of Israel was formally established, Jews had always been in exile. They had been persecuted wherever they lived. Their prayers reflected a longing for home. Within six hours of the state of Israel being formally announced and the ensuing celebrations in the street, the new Israel was under attack and bombs were aimed into the streets of Jerusalem. As the situation in Israel grows more difficult and complex those initial short lived celebrations when the modern state of Israel was first implemented fade mercilessly.

On the kibbutz I was amongst people who were survivors of Auschwitz. This was deeply shocking to me. I saw the tattoos on the older people's arms including Amos' mother. She was the only survivor of her family and herself only a child of six or seven. Occasionally I would hear screaming at night as people relived the horror of the camps.

At the time of my first visits to Israel I wasn't practicing my religion, however I was attached to Catholicism more deeply than I realized. It was a devastating revelation to discover the role of the church in the history of anti-Semitism which made the genocide carried out by Hitler the terrifying reality it became. I was starkly reminded this weekend at a conference that two thirds of European Jewry was destroyed; six million of the nine million European Jews were wiped out.

So being in Israel wasn't easy but it was compelling. An acquaintance once rather unkindly suggested it may have been because of an intensity associated with being in a war zone which gave Israel some kind of drama. However I was in parts of what was Yugoslavia shortly before the war in the Balkans and although that was certainly tense there was nothing which made me want to stay. I couldn't wait to get out.

There was some quality about the Israeli people and perhaps the land itself, which was irresistible. Despite the conflict people wanted to talk about God. I felt at home in a way I've never felt anywhere else. This was in sharp contrast with my experience as an undergraduate in London where any mention of God was met with ridicule.

Amos piped up at this point *Lucy's friend Ayella, she converted to Judaism and has been living here ever since. Really they both said together with obvious surprise in their faces. Why does anybody volunteer to be Jewish?* Nilli asked. *Ab! she fell in love with a Jewish man* she answered herself *No actually, it wasn't that* I quickly responded;

Ayella was another one of the English volunteers and had become very a close friend. She had begun to keep the Sabbath and holidays. She had decided she wanted to live in Israel and to become Jewish. Like me she had felt at home amongst the Jewish people in a way she never had in England. She was Italian by birth and had had a difficult childhood spent mostly in children's homes and with a variety of foster parents. She had a fiery straightforwardness about her character, which caused her problems in England but was far more typical in Israel. Perhaps partly because her schooling was haphazard and unorthodox she had an originality and depth of intelligence which was fascinating to me. She had a large generous spirit and most striking of all, she had a courage which was inspirational.

It was an orthodox conversion in the heart of Jerusalem and therefore extremely strict. She struggled with the rules, not being able to turn on and off lights, tear paper, cook, smoke, drive or answer the phone. I struggled watching her but when the siren went off on the Friday evening after the bustle and preparation of the day, a peace settled over her home which seemed an answer to it all.

Like this evening, her table always looked beautiful. Ayella laid it with a white tablecloth and there were always flowers, usually yellow Carmen roses. Every time she sang the Hebrew blessings and we passed round the bread and wine I was moved. Time seemed to stop. The hours would drift through the Friday evening over into Saturday, when we tended to walk in

the deserted streets of Jerusalem or in the hills on the outskirts until the first stars appeared in the sky and the Sabbath was over. As Esthe said *we are forced to rest and enjoy ourselves: if we weren't forced we wouldn't do it*. For any religious, time to exist, time for contemplation, time to stop and stare, are as essential as any notion of service.

*And what about you Lucy, did you consider converting as well?* Reuven asked me from the kitchen as he piled up plates into one of the sinks. It was a kosher kitchen, which meant one side of the kitchen was used for the preparation of meat and the other, dairy.

I followed him and Esthe into the kitchen and made gestures towards my husband, Brian. Like Ayella I was deeply drawn to Judaism, but I had more attachments in England than she did. *He is part of the reason* I said taking hold of Brian's arm. Also although I didn't say it then, I also could not bring myself to denounce Christ. Jesus was the face of God for me. He was too deeply embedded in my psyche, too much of a guide and a friend. It is difficult to talk directly about Jesus to Jews. However the irony is I understood Him better through being in Israel and seeing Him in the context of a Jewish tradition. I could imagine Him more vividly. He became more real.

Something in Reuven and Esthe seemed to relax. Although they found it difficult to understand why my friend had chosen to convert to Judaism, they were obviously moved at the same time. They had come to expect hostility from Europeans especially the British and French. They could see we were friends of Israel. I told them about the Sisters of Zion.

It was a great relief to discover there are other Christians who share the same attachment to Israel and the Jewish people. There are zealous Christian Zionists but like any zealots they make me uneasy. In the last few years, I have become an associate of the Sisters of Zion who aren't zealots but appreciate the Jewish roots of their faith and seek to educate Christians in this. They also work to build understanding between Christians and Jews and more recently Muslims and do share in this love of Israel that is so close to my heart.

At the end of our holiday after a glorious week in Eilat where we were snorkelling and diving in the Red Sea and a couple of nights on a Moshav by the Dead Sea, we returned to Jerusalem. I took my family to visit the sisters in Ecce Homo at the second station of the cross on the Via Dolorosa - *the way of sorrows* - in the Old City. They are placed in the heart of the Muslim quarter. School had just finished and the children were flooding out of the gates to go home. I asked one of them if they knew where Ecce Homo was. "Ah! you mean the sisters" he said with a huge grin and pointed us in the right direction. I find enormous consolation from the fact the sisters are there employing Arab Christians and Muslims in the heart of the old city but with this devotion to the Jewish presence in Israel. They are involved in work for justice and peace all over the world and do not forget the suffering of the Arab people. Also there is no hidden agenda of hoping for converts. Whilst they themselves are devout Christians they recognize the covenant between God and the Jewish and Muslim people and deeply respect it. They believe that God leads people in different ways. Already this opens the path to dialogue. There is nothing to prove, only to seek to understand and be friends and to enrich each other on the mutual journeying towards God.

With lots of instructions about where things went in the Kosher kitchen, Brian and I helped clear away. Esthe asked me if I worked. When I told her I worked in a hospice she went very

quiet. Later she said *that means you must have hope*. When I asked her what she meant she said *something which allows you to believe in the person inside the suffering*.

It is true I do have hope and I thank my Christian faith for this, for the capacity to see beyond the suffering, to believe in the enduring power of the spirit even through times of great distress and even death.

In response to Reuven saying *I don't want someone to suffer for me*, I understand his response, in that too much emphasis on *someone suffering for me* can be destructive and leave us overburdened with guilt. However suffering does seem to be a natural consequence of loving. As my mother said recently when we were discussing this article *who doesn't suffer for the people they love?*. She recently had her second diagnosis of cancer in the last five years and was trying to protect me from being overly anxious about her. Worrying about her is part of our connection, I told her, I feel the distress she feels because I care about her. In this light the cross makes sense, a cross I am increasingly aware of as I watch my own children grow up and struggle through the world. It is because we love so much that we carry the pain of others. Jesus had a huge capacity to feel the pain of others because of the great love he experienced for people.

The notion of sacrifice is closely interwoven with this. We make sacrifices for the people we love because when we truly love, we put other people before ourselves, in other words we sacrifice our own needs for the sake of others. Every good parent knows what it is to sacrifice sleep, time, money and social events for example for the sake of their children.

This expression of a deep sacrificial love is at the heart of the gospels and the symbol of the cross. Jesus is the embodiment of an incredible love which is at the heart of God, a love that cherishes the humanity in each one of us. It is a love that ultimately is more powerful and miraculous than even death itself if we can be open enough to receive it and allow it to transform our lives.

However this belief is not easy to maintain, Jesus himself despaired on the cross and was mocked and humiliated for showing himself to be so vulnerable. This is the struggle of faith. There is a fragility in daring to believe as well as a power.

Reuven called the children back to the table *Who wants ice cream?* There was a rush as the children bundled back into their chairs and waited eagerly for their brimming bowls full of strawberry ice cream. *Delicious!!* Peter exclaimed loudly forgetting himself and everyone laughed.

We sat for a long time over coffee listening to the children's jokes and compared tales of school and absurd and funny teachers until Amos pointed to his watch and said it was time we should be going. We thanked Reuven and Esthe for a lovely evening and said should they ever be in the U.K they should be sure to come and visit us. We piled into Amos' van and took the long drive down through the Jerusalem mountains into Tel Aviv where the heat rose suddenly.

To return to the issues surrounding Israel and the Jews, perhaps in the footsteps of Pope John Paul, we could begin to say sorry for the terrible misdeeds of the past and the part the

church had to play. Perhaps Christians could help the peace process by choosing to try to understand people on both sides rather than subsuming the relentless criticism of much of the British media. It may be a chance to show that love, not suffering, is the greatest legacy of Christ.

Engaging with Jews and Moslems could also sew the seeds of our own healing. It may help Christians to be aware of their roots which are in Israel and amongst the Jewish people and finally shed the stifling Puritanism which as far as I can see has very little to do with Jesus and has been a negative influence in the church for far too long.