

Wednesday, Feb. 27, 18:30

For quite a while now I've wanted to sit down and add a few notes to my miluim journal, but it seems as though I've truly returned to "normal" -- I'm busy with other things and take care of them instead of writing. But now I've sat myself down and I hope that I'm in the right frame of mind to write. Since my being released the first stage of the withdrawal has taken place, and at least five soldiers have been killed in Lebanon. One friend from the kibbutz was injured in a rather freak accident last week. The accident wasn't at all connected to hostile activities beyond the fact that he was in Lebanon. He's been in the hospital almost a week, but he'll be fine. Lebanon is always prominent in the papers and in our minds, but for the most part my experience has receded to someplace rather far back in my head, and that's the way it should be. Still, events and ideas spring to mind -- I remember details which I feel are important but which I didn't relate in the journal, or perhaps a certain idea has come to mind since my return, and I feel an urge to write about these things.

On our last morning at our outpost (Feb. 4), as I was leaving for our last foot patrol, our last vehicular patrol was also on its way out. The urge hit me and I ran to the kitchen, picked up a bag of rice and threw handfuls at my comrades on the armored personnel carriers -- hail the conquering heroes. If two and a half years ago our arrival could be welcomed in that way, it seemed to me that we could make note of our departure in the same manner.

I wrote occasionally about my contact with the population of the territory we occupied, but it seems to me as though these people come out as little more than a backdrop to my activities. In many ways this is truly the case. I don't speak their language and was hardly able to communicate with them. I certainly didn't welcome the type of communication made possible by a list of terms on a green sheet of paper the army prepared for us -- "open the baggage", "don't move", "what's in there" and the like. Sometimes, on a foot patrol, walking by a group of people, the lack of contact was truly uncomfortable and disconcerting. I didn't know whether to nod my head as some sign of recognition or simply to pass by as quickly as possible. It was clear that the "natives" weren't welcoming us or expressing much love. Still, sometimes a bit of contact was established (beyond the contact of having the gun in your hand and asking questions which demanded an answer -- quite a few of us did speak Arabic). The first time I was in Arzai (Friday, Jan. 11, along with Miki) we stopped to rest at a house on the outskirts of town -- three of us on the roof, via the steps, two below. The woman of the house was at home and sat on the porch smoking a cigarette as we viewed the area and looked at our map in order to make sure that we were where we'd intended to be. She, a woman of perhaps 25, truly looked through us. We asked her a couple of questions about the village and she more or less played dumb. On the other hand, perhaps a week and a half later, on an afternoon foot patrol, we got to a spot where two of us had been one or two nights before and had smelled the strong smell of mint. We wanted to pick some so while three of us waited in an orange grove, I and one other soldier went looking for the mint. We didn't find any. We were by a house with an elderly woman on the porch, and we decided to ask her in our almost non-existent Arabic where the mint was. When she finally understood what we wanted she took us to her garden and picked much more than we needed and gave it to us. She undoubtedly did this partially out of fear, but there was another element in her actions -- a sort of standing outside of the roles of conquered and conqueror and becoming only an elderly woman being friendly to a couple of youthful strangers.

On one of our last morning patrols we trudged in the mud of what at one time had been a field (and probably is on the way to becoming one once again). The field led to a small house and then beyond it. Ordinarily we'd passed before or behind the house, but this time the route I took led me directly via the porch. As I walked with very muddy boots past the front door a young woman was standing at the opening. I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows, wearing a rather depressed expression, trying to say in sign language that I didn't know what I was doing there either. She broke into a wide smile and almost started laughing and I did the same and I passed by. Perhaps that same morning or a couple of days before, at a spot somewhat further north, we got caught in a sudden, and very strong, cloudburst, and we ran for cover. We reached a house and with hardly a second thought crowded inside. There we found an entire family, also doing close to nothing besides keeping dry from the rain. For about five minutes we, with our loaded guns, stood around with these undoubtedly frightened but somehow also blasé people. They apparently instinctively understood that we wanted no more than to keep dry and thus a certain mutual understanding was reached.

But. With most of the people with whom I had "contact" no contact was established. The overriding reactions were indifference and hate, mixed with fear, but a fear that was less apparent, less immediately felt than the indifference and the hate. The "locals" often have to wait for long periods of time at roadblocks. Many truckers carry with them small gas units for

preparing coffee (as do many Israeli truckers). These are of course good for times like waiting for someone to load your truck before you start driving, but we joked that they carried them especially for the roadblocks. Often on patrol (usually at the Litani roadblock) we would pass them and they'd be relaxedly drinking coffee with a sort of "ho-hum, this will also pass" attitude.

I was often able almost to feel the mouths of my fellow soldiers watering from their seeing so many new Mercedes and other similar cars on the road. Cars in Israel are very heavily taxed, and Lebanon is well known for being a more or less tax-free haven (or heaven). Thus people who live in houses which seem to be little more than bricks and stucco, with even that falling apart, many have expensive cars parked right beside the house. And the average Israeli soldier is jealous. Not all the cars are new. Perhaps they appear in equal numbers of new and clean ones and those which seem to be falling apart, are missing at least one important part, and seem to be held together by an act of god's mercy. I remember at one point rather early during our stay having the feeling that Lebanese cars were required by law to have no more than one headlight.

Actually, one gets the feeling that in Lebanon very little, if anything, is required by law. A large percentage of cars have no license plates. Sometimes the drivers appear to be kids no more than thirteen years old, and the cars are often packed so fully that a fraternity would be jealous. There definitely don't seem to be any traffic laws, or anyone to enforce them. Air-horns, the type that let our semi-musical phrases when honked, are quite popular in Lebanon and we would hear them frequently. Our mechanic, whom outside of his trade wouldn't be considered the brightest of fellows, wanted very much to purchase such a horn since they're illegal in Israel. He even came with us on a foot patrol so that he could try and buy one, but though we joked a good deal about the idea, we kept him from doing so. Business transactions with the local population were forbidden, and most of us had no problem at all keeping this rule.

At our outpost we had a Beduin "scout" who's usual job was reading footprints when necessary to find out where something suspicious was headed. We've worked a lot in the past with such scouts and some of them are very capable and professional, and enjoyable to work with. This one was a kid, perhaps 20, who seemed most concerned with always looking his best. When we were muddy and dirty he somehow was always clean, with his shoes shined. (When someone kidded with him on our last day and scuffed up his shoes he truly almost cried.) More than anything else he enjoyed standing at the roadblock, often taking cigarettes or pitas from the local population, always explaining afterwards that he understood their mentality and that they were happy to give him whatever he asked for. I wasn't the only person who complained and Noar tried to stop him from doing this (or from standing at the roadblock on Shabbat when it was unnecessary since it was only against Israeli army traffic which didn't travel on Shabbat) but we didn't succeed much. We had the feeling that the day wasn't far off when someone would give him a booby-trapped cigarette, or worse throw a grenade at him which would injure us as well, but he finished his stay safe and whole.

During the first couple of weeks of our stay we occasionally received "help" at the roadblock from Israeli trained Lebanese soldiers. I complained a number of times -- if they were capable of doing my job then I could go home, and if they weren't, I didn't want them around. Their standards weren't mine and even though Israel is fully identified with them I didn't want myself personally to be identified in that way. My complaints didn't seem to help, but these occasional troops disappeared after a while. My guess is that they were less on assignment to be at the roadblock than that they simply enjoyed the job and the opportunity to take free cigarettes and the like.

One other element about the conditions of law or government in Lebanon deserves mention. We were stationed on the coastal road. This road connects most of the major cities in Lebanon, from Tyre to Sidon, to Damour (not much of a major city) to Beirut. Even taking into account the ongoing wars that Lebanon has been plagued with, nothing seems to be able to explain the terrible condition this road is in. Much of the time (or way) it resembles the worst backroads in Israel. There's barely one lane in each direction with almost never a dividing line. (Further north, near Beirut, I recall that the road was in better shape, though the drivers weren't much more disciplined.) The road is filled with holes and occasional ineffective patches of asphalt which are attempts at repaving. There are close to no road signs. The Lebanese travel this road as though they're on a roller-coaster ride. The distance from Rosh HaNikra to our outpost was less than forty kilometers. In Israel that's hardly a half hour ride on the coastal road. The ride took us around an hour and a half. Had we travelled at the speed that the road permitted us (without regard to security, as opposed to safety, precautions) we could hardly have travelled the distance in less than an hour.

One of the stories in the papers about Miki carried the headline "Every soldier under his command was willing to follow him through fire and water". (Israel is a country in which every soldier killed receives front page coverage.) I still have that article, and it still makes me feel uncomfortable. Miki functioned as a corporal in our plugah, and more specifically in our makhlakah. We were almost always in the same armored personnel carrier or worked together during exercises. With all due respect, being one of the soldiers who was most with him during his years of miluim, it just ain't so. Of course it really doesn't matter that much, but for me there's something even unfair in remembering him as a good soldier since for Miki himself, from the time he came to the plugah he more or less lost interest in things military. A person can be a good person without being gung-ho on the army, and we'll still mourn his death. On Friday, Jan. 11, we were on a patrol together (to Arzai -- Miki was in command) I had to argue with him about the best route to take back, and about exactly where we were, and prove it on the map. On Shabbat, Jan. 12, when we had our rock thrown at us and then spent time stopping traffic at the same spot where Miki and Sefi were killed two days later, I once again argued with him about the route back and where we were on the map. Both times I was right. That night, after returning, I sat down with Sefi to tell him that I felt that Miki was too disinterested -- that he didn't relate seriously enough to the fact that we were in Lebanon where each little error can cost us dearly, including not knowing exactly where we were on the map. On Monday, Jan. 14, I thought that I might find time to write about these feelings (I'd returned from the patrol in a rather excited mood) but I put them far back in my mind when the explosion occurred. I was close to Miki because we'd been together through so many adventures. Had he returned from these miluim we doubtless would have joked next year about almost getting lost, even though at the time it was a most serious issue for me. Being more or less neighbors we often travelled home together from miluim, and I remember that our first leave from near Damour we took together and hitched rides together until Tel Aviv. Without the army, without the danger and the immediacy, these wouldn't be enough to make him much of a friend. But when you add together at least a month over seven or eight years, you realize that you've truly lived with a person and gotten to know him.

Sefi was a new plugah commander, previously second in command, whom we were getting used to while he was getting used to the job. Where we were in Lebanon wasn't the right place for getting the feel for the plugah or the job. Eli and I felt very critical of him in the first few days -- his briefings weren't organized well and he would reconsider decisions when it was important to stand by them for the sake of authority. I hadn't had close contact with him before and was just beginning to really get to know him. He had the positive quality of being very conscientious and in the those first few days I offered to help out a bit -- taking inventory on what we'd inherited in our outpost and similar small tasks so that he could become oriented more quickly and via this we had the chance to talk a bit. When I complained to him about Miki he was a good listener and also responded well -- he was aware of the shortcomings of some of his sergeants and corporals and had to send them out on patrols so that they could renew their skills.

The terrace at which Miki and Sefi were killed was the site of a similar explosion about two weeks earlier. One of the reasons we were there was to see what a terrace that had a bomb hidden in it looked like. We knew of a tendency to place bombs in the same place, and thus both times necessary precautions were taken approaching the site. The second time these precautions didn't help.

Shortly after we had been accompanied out of Arzai on Shabbat, Jan. 12 by the children of the village, we heard some shooting from the neighboring village, El Khareib. Sefi had brought us close to Arzai in a command car, and on his way back (with four other soldiers) had passed through El Khareib and apparently also met with unfriendly kids. (I'm really not sure of the details.) Whereas the patrol I was on argued about how to deal with our unfriendly welcome and in the end responded by doing nothing, the group with Sefi responded by shooting in the air. One theory has it that the bomb was placed in the terrace in response to that shooting. Of course someone else can argue that the bomb was placed there because the patrol I was on hadn't responded strongly enough. When I spoke with Sefi that evening he at first thought I wanted to talk about our response to the "rock throwing". I told him then that there was little point in our talking about that -- I had a political perspective which determined what I thought the correct response should be.

At the beginning of this week Israel took some reprisal type actions against some Lebanese villages. Even though troops had already withdrawn from the area, a couple of houses were destroyed in A-Z'reirah. Most probably these were houses of people whom intelligence reports suggested were implicated in the placing of the bomb which killed Miki and Sefi. As we were about



to leave Lebanon on our last day there we were told that that morning the leader of the ring of terrorists which had placed the bomb had been caught, and if this is truly the case there's good reason to believe that the houses destroyed really had some connection to the bombing. I'm sure that most of the members of my plugah are pleased with that act. I hardly feel any connection to it. If the purpose is to halt further hostile activities against the army, I doubt that anything short of a full withdrawal will help. If the purpose is revenge then it may be that something's wrong with me, but I simply don't see the point.

When the news carries a report on an attack on Israeli troops, the report invariably ends with a phrase that might be translated "Israeli troops carried out search missions". These "search missions" are an integral part of our training for service in Lebanon. If we're attacked, especially if a transport is attacked by either gunfire or any sort of bomb, we're taught to immediately open fire in every direction (unless we're sure of the direction of the attack) and immediately afterwards to start search missions. The problem is that if it's a bomb the chances of finding someone are close to nil, and if someone has opened fire on us from even a few hundred meters chances aren't much better that we'll reach him before he runs away and blends into his surroundings. But the phrase is a nice one. It gives the impression that we're actively involved in our own security and taking the necessary measures. But the truth is that we're fighting a guerrilla war, and in most instances these searches are little more than wild goose chases, or ghost chases -- try and catch the wind.

Friday, March 1, 17:00

Last night, close to midnight, I finished typing up these notes. With a sigh of relief and a general feeling of satisfaction at having finally finished the job, I crawled into bed intending to hear the news before turning my radio off and going to sleep. But the music that was on before the news brought back one more recollection which I felt an urge to relate in these pages. I jumped out of bed, scribbled a note to myself, and climbed back into bed.

In the summer of 1983, on the eastern front, we had more than all the luxuries of home (and they're reported on in my journal of those miluim). Our videotape unit was in almost constant use, either with tapes supplied by the army or tapes which people brought from home -- a good percentage of those being blue. One of these had pretensions of being an "art" film with a classical sound track. Miki liked the music very much and figured that I'd probably know what it was. I did -- the adagio by Albinoni, a very popular and well known piece. He said that he'd look for the record and buy himself a copy. At our next miluim -- exercises in the negev last summer, I asked him if he'd found the record and with a certain sense of pride he reported that he had.