

three

Lent

I

At first I'd taken Sister Johanna for a simple person, and only gradually did I realize how wrong I was and how pleased she would be by my mistake. While her fellow sisters were cloistered in silence, secluded even from one another, Johanna's job was to mediate between the convent and the outside world. Johanna tended to guests who came on retreat and addressed groups of noisy, friendly, secular Israelis who came for a quick look around and invariably asked the same practical Jewish questions about how the nuns earned a living and why they didn't marry, and then loudly berated each other for disturbing the silence as they walked through the halls. I wondered whether Johanna had been appointed to those duties because she was unsuited for more profound spiritual work. She was thin and slightly hunched in her hooded white robe, which didn't convey mystery but anonymity, precisely its purpose. She avoided overt piety, and her apparently untroubled personality seemed to me too cheerful, unspiritual. Yet years of struggle had gone into whitening away a brooding self-preoccupation. And as she chatted with visitors about the weather and the flowers, and laughed at the mistakes in her adequate Hebrew, another part of her was silently invoking God's presence and praying for alleviation of the problems that visitors, Jews and Muslims as well as Christians, brought to Johanna for the sisters' intercession.

Johanna was in her mid-forties when we met, and I didn't know then that she had lived almost half her life in silence. During that time, she had spoken with her fellow nuns only once a week, on Sunday afternoons, when they left the walled enclosure and strolled through the olive groves around the convent. Sometimes she would awaken in the predawn with a prayer, as though continuing a prayer she'd been reciting all night. Throughout the day she repeated an exercise she'd learned from Maria Teresa, the mother superior, silently chanting the words of the "Jesus Prayer," borrowed by the Catholic sisters from the Orthodox tradition. Using a breathing technique, she would inhale the words "Lord Jesus, son of God," then exhale the words "have mercy on me." After a while the chant became automatic, like breath itself. Inhaling Jesus, exhaling mercy.

The sisters made pottery to help support the convent. But to encourage detachment, no cup or vase was entirely done by any sister; instead, one woman shaped the clay, another drew the outline of a pattern, a third painted, and a fourth fired the final result. Johanna, who had been an artist before entering the convent, learned to renounce not just the artistic product but the artistic process itself. Like singing in the chapel: Twice a day they assembled there, each sister in her cubicle, invisible to each other and joining only their voices in ethereal harmony. It didn't matter if the gallery was empty or filled with guests; they immortalized their song by offering it to no one but God.

When Maria Teresa asked Johanna to exchange seclusion for work in reception, Johanna tried to accept without regret. Silence and speech were really no different: You could be garrulous in silence and silent in speech; it depended only on stilling the mind's outward groping. Even the repetitive talks she gave to Israeli groups, which she'd resented at first as rote, became another form of prayer, conveying something of the harmony of this house to the anxious people of Israel, for whose peace and safety Johanna and the sisters constantly prayed.

She grew up in Brussels. Her father had suffered severe head injuries in an army-related accident, yet the family never discussed his condition. The most important matters, Johanna realized early on, belonged to silence. One day, at age eight, she told her sisters that when she grew up she would be a nun. They reacted with incomprehension; the family was secular and never went to church. From then on, Johanna kept the decision to herself, another vital matter consigned to silence. Even as a teenager, when she briefly decided that she no longer believed in God ("God was so important to me that I had to vehemently reject Him") and the notion of becoming a nun horrified her ("Those pale old women in black; eh!"), she knew she was fated to enter a convent.

In her early twenties she joined a Catholic-sponsored communal house whose residents included both "normal" and retarded people. They lived together in the same rooms and worked together in a pottery shop. The idea was to integrate the retarded into ordinary life. Instead, Johanna found herself wanting to be integrated into their world. She wanted to be like them: simple, transparent, without ego and self-consciousness. *What defines a human being? she asked herself. Is it the body and the intelligence or the soul?* These people didn't have fine bodies or minds, but they were beautiful souls, grateful for the least kindness. They seemed to achieve what Johanna had tried to do as an artist, to penetrate the surface of things to their essence. When the messiah came, she believed, those who would be revealed as his closest friends were precisely those who'd mattered least in our material world.

Yet a part of her resisted the humiliation of total identification with the retarded. She couldn't overcome the sense of "us" and "them"; losing that final distinction was as terrifying as death. And she couldn't allow herself to forget what a good person she was for sacrificing a normal life to live with "them."

One day, a wealthy woman, a potential donor, visited the house. Johanna was tinkering in the community's workshop. The woman,

mistaking her for one of the retarded residents, said in the exaggerated way the normal speak to the mentally handicapped, "Aren't you a darling! And look how nicely you're working!" Johanna's first instinct was to correct the woman; instead, she bowed her head and said nothing. At that moment, she surrendered to silence.

The community housed a chapel, where the Host was on permanent display. Johanna began spending increasing time alone there. Her mind kept returning to the title of a book written by the community's founder, *Your Silence Is Calling Me*. The title referred to the silence of the retarded, but for Johanna that phrase now took on a different meaning: Jesus' silent suffering for humanity.

Johanna joined Sister Maria Teresa's order, entered silence, and moved to the convent in Israel. She emerged twenty years later with a merciless clarity about herself. But without morbidity; she lost the novice seeker's grim determination, which is merely a more subtle form of self-infatuation. She didn't make peace with her imperfections but no longer raged against them, accepting herself as a hopelessly flawed being. She was still capable of being judgmental and caught herself in unkind thoughts. But only by admitting your own imperfections could you appreciate God's perfection, become the imperfect child, safe in the Father's perfect love. She thought often of John the Baptist, who spoke of being a child in the desert. Uncomplicated, guileless, pared to essence. Just like the retarded, unbound by convention and with nothing to lose. Through silence, Johanna had in effect become one of them: useless to society, a broken vessel for God's perfection.

"Johanna, how do you give your life to God?"

We were sitting in the convent's reception room, adorned only with an icon of Mary, whose round black eyes seemed to take in the world's darkness.

Johanna said, "You don't give your life to God once. You do it every minute, in the choices you make."

"How do you work on yourself all the time?"

"You try to work on yourself," she replied, laughing. "Wearing yourself down a little more each time." She rubbed her hand against the wood table, smoothing it.

"How many times have I said to myself as a nun, 'Enough! I can't do this anymore.' Those moments help make you small. And if you overcome those moments, your smallness opens a new way."

"What does it mean to make yourself small?"

"The way to God is the way of smallness. To be a child. Even Jesus had to start as a child. Whoever asks God for humility will for sure get his request. And then watch out." She laughed. "Our effort is to cut the ground from under our feet. And even a little of the feet too. It's frightening. But you get such a feeling of inner freedom that you're ready to go through it again. You can get rebuked in every possible way. In community, there's always someone to say, 'Who do you think you are?' Even if not in words. We have so many corners of pride; it's the innermost sin. David said it in Psalms; don't you know it?"

"I'm very small in Judaism," I said.

She leaned forward and seemed to laugh with her whole body.

"The secret of God isn't just for the spiritual greats. It's for all of us. Even for the retarded. To be little gives an opening to God."

"What has been your hardest spiritual struggle, Johanna?"

"Overcoming sentimental love. The difficulty is to love truly, without discrimination. To love like Him. Totally and unequivocally, beyond the likes and dislikes of the personality. Jesus' message was love without borders. Telling the person next to him on the cross that he would be first to heaven. If you close your heart to even one person, it's not yet divine love. In the world, you are always making a border in the heart. You don't even see it. In the convent, you must see the border. It's easy to confuse sentimentality for true love. There

is too much sentimentalism in the church. I heard a cassette from another order about Christmas; it was so emotional."

She slapped herself on the mouth. "I need another twenty years of silence," she said and laughed.

"It happens little by little," she continued. "God isn't in the clouds. How you prepare food, how you pray, how ready you are to ask for forgiveness. How do I sweep? Do I round the corners or am I thorough? That's love. I know that I don't yet love that way. For many years I thought I did. But my sins helped me see that I was fooling myself. If we see ourselves honestly, we begin to see God."

She spoke so vigorously, and her eyes widened with such delight, that I didn't realize she was actually speaking softly.

I was going to ask her if we could meditate together when she said, "Maybe we'll have silence now."

I closed my eyes. The four Hebrew letters of the divine Name swelled across my forehead and swallowed the space before me. A clock was ticking; the silence thickened and I stopped hearing any sound. My throat constricted, squeezing the desire for voice. The Name condensed to a point of light, pulling me in.

I opened my eyes. Johanna's head had fallen forward, impelled by the force of silence. She opened her eyes and looked in my direction but didn't see me. Perfectly still. Emptied. Then she focused, noticed me, and smiled. We sat a little longer in silence.

When she finally spoke, her voice startled me. It was so thin, so inadequate to the powerful presence that had overtaken her in meditation. I would have been less surprised had she roared. It was, I realized, merely a borrowed voice with which to interact with the world; her real voice was silence.

"That's what I wanted to say," she said, and I thought she meant: The silence is what I wanted to say.

"It's the silence of this place that pulls," I said, finding speech painful.

"Your silence is calling me." The more you search for God, the

more He drifts away, the more delicate He becomes. He doesn't want us to catch Him in our hand and say, 'This is God.' I don't know if you can see God in this world and live. But this sense of His delicateness is already a kind of dying. To live in the desert, to be worn down all the time, become more and more refined. The prayer of monks and nuns is so simple. It's one word: Father, Father."

The highest form of prayer, she seemed to be saying, wasn't to petition or even to praise but simply to acknowledge God's presence.

"Johanna, are you sure God is present?"

She spread her arms wide and smiled.

I will call it simply "the convent." No name, no locale. The sisters request anonymity, absent to all but God.

Thirty sisters lived here in absolute silence. Of all the monastic communities I'd begun to visit, this was the most relentless, the least forgiving of imperfection. Life revolved around prayer, self-examination, and the constant invoking of God's presence, without distraction. The convent was a laboratory of the soul, a halfway house between this world and the next. The sisters seemed to live in the body only formally. Physical needs were reduced to the minimum, so that when death came it would be in some sense redundant.

Yet to describe the convent as "otherworldly" was to distort its purpose. The withdrawal into silence was tactical, and its goal was ultimately fuller engagement with the world by creating a cadre of loving protectors for humanity. The sisters didn't hide from the world's misfortunes but embraced them. Maria Teresa, the mother superior, monitored the news like an intelligence service of a great power for which events in the most remote corners had strategic implications. Every Sunday, when they came together for their

At Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial, they were preparing for the wreath-laying ceremony. It was Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, and Israelis gathered from around the country on this Jerusalem hilltop surrounded by pine forest. There were representatives of *landsmanshaften* groups from vanished European communities, the army, the police bomb squad, the national airline, the post office. A determined little man in a beret carried a wreath from a ghetto fighters' group, spiritual grandfather of the young people here wearing the uniforms of Jewish rebirth: paratroopers in red berets, Golani infantrymen in brown berets, women soldiers in short olive-colored skirts, and police in Israeli blue and white. Like the Hindu practice of meditating in graveyards, this was Israel's annual ritual of death recollection. But unlike the Hindu mystics, the Jews weren't here to become ethereal but to affirm their return to concreteness. For survivors, the true mystical experience of the Holocaust was the nation's resurrection. And so the post office workers and the national airline representatives and especially the soldiers were as much the point of this gathering as the martyrs they had come to commemorate. On this day, the dead and the living honored each other.

I was waiting for the monks and nuns of the Beatitudes. They came every year, bearing a wreath. Today, though, Gabrielle wouldn't be among them. She was leading a group of pilgrims in the desert, teaching them about Judaism, one of the few reasons she would consider legitimate for not coming here on this day.

Although the community members had never been harassed at Yad Vashem, they were surely vulnerable. They didn't know whether they'd be received with indifference or silent gratitude or made to feel like intruders, relatives of a murderer at the funeral of his victim. At any time, a survivor might get unhinged and lash out at these unwitting symbols of historic Christian crimes. In fact, it was a meas-

ure of how much the Catholic Church had changed that the main arguments left between the Jews and the Vatican concerned the past, like Christian guilt for the Holocaust and the canonization of Edith Stein. For survivors, of course, those were the most emotional issues, and it took courage for the young people of the Beatitudes to appear in habit at Yad Vashem.

They were coming to be with my people; I had come to be with them. Probably nothing would happen, but I didn't want to leave their goodwill exposed without a Jewish escort. Still, it wouldn't be easy for me. By appearing with monks and nuns in this place and on this day, I was violating the Jewish need to gather in private and recall our sense of aloneness. I was challenging the child of survivors within me on his most tender ground, where intimacy with Christianity was unthinkable.

The Beatitudes' van arrived. Miriam and Rachel led the half-dozen sisters and brothers from Hungary, Austria, Zaire. Their white robes flapped like flags in the wind. Oddly but tellingly, I'd never quite noted until now the wooden crosses that hung on their chests. For a cowardly moment I wished they'd come incognito. Then I made a point of kissing each of them, including those I didn't know, perhaps to refute that unworthy impulse; I also hoped to ease their discomfort and to signal Israelis who might be watching that these were friends.

"I wasn't sure if I should come in habit," Miriam confided to me. "I know that people don't want to be reminded of the church on this day. In past years I sensed that some survivors didn't want us here. But I felt it was important for the church to be present in some way. It's not easy to be here, but it's also not easy not to be here. If I'm hurting anyone, I'm sorry."

We headed toward the plaza where the ceremony was being held. Rachel carried the wreath that bore only the community's name, conceding the futility of consoling words. The monks and nuns huddled close and looked at the ground, avoiding eye contact with

passersby. People stared, but they were more curious, it seemed to me, than hostile.

We walked through the "Avenue of the Righteous," a grove of carob trees, each tree accompanied by a little plaque bearing the name of a gentile who had rescued Jews in the war. Choosing fruit trees for this place had been a wonderful idea, and it seemed to me that my ability to be here with monks and nuns was the fruit of those rescuers who had helped Jews to avoid despairing of the human race. When I was a boy, we had a bitter saying in Brooklyn: If you want to know how many good gentiles exist, count the trees on the Avenue of the Righteous. At the time, there weren't many. But as survivors established themselves and recalled the generosity of their rescuers, the trees had multiplied, and now there were thousands. Even that proliferation didn't tell the whole story. For every rescuer, there were at least several accomplices who either actively helped or aided with their silence. And many thousands of rescuers went unrecognized. My father had hidden in the Transylvanian woods and was kept alive by an elderly forest keeper who brought him food when he could. My father had intended to contact the man—or his family, since the old man himself was almost certainly dead—and plant a tree here in his honor. But my father had died before he could manage it.

I said to Miriam, "I feel you're here representing the rescuers. You belong to the same spiritual denomination."

"I think we're here in place of all those who could have helped then but turned away," she replied. I was trying to comfort her, help her feel she belonged. But she had come to stand here in grief and shame and wasn't going to make it easy on herself.

We entered the stone plaza. An honor guard of paratroopers stood beside six iron cauldrons filled with oil and awaiting lighting. However cynical Israelis had become toward Zionist rituals, here it was still possible to feel the old thrill at the mere sight of Jews in uniform and recall what it was like when we didn't have our own soldiers in color-coded berets.

An elderly woman approached us. "Excuse me," she said, "but may I ask you a question?"

Her face had the stunned expression I knew from survivors; it recalled that moment when, as a teenage girl, she'd first encountered Auschwitz.

"Are you related to them?" she asked, pointing to the Beatitudes. She meant: What could we possibly have in common?

"We're related through the soul," I replied, wary.

"I'm a secular person," she continued, "but when I saw someone with a *kipah* kissing nuns and monks, I thought, It must be the time of redemption." She smiled, embarrassed, and quickly left us.

Miriam said to me, "More and more I realize that love means just being present."

I led the brothers and sisters to a row of folding chairs; I was their host in the house of mourning. As we waited for the ceremony to begin, they sat in silent prayer.

Miriam said, "Today is my anniversary. Exactly eleven years ago, on Yom Hashoah, I came to Israel."

"What does that mean to you?" I asked.

"Maybe that my personal renewal has something to do with the renewal of the Jewish people. Gabrielle always used to tell me that I have a special relationship with the Jewish people, and I always denied it. When I first came I knew nothing about the Jews. I barely realized that the Holocaust had anything to do with Jews. I suppose I knew that Jesus was Jewish, but that fact meant nothing to me. And here I am, eleven years later. I feel it's my birthday."

It had never been easy for Miriam in Israel, and she often wondered whether she'd ever feel at home here. She'd been hit in the head with a stone in Meah Shearim, spat on and cursed as a missionary. Her kerchief had been ripped off her head by Jewish children and then by Muslim children. Miriam tried to accept the humiliations as a gift, a way to purify her love from the need for reciprocity. Freeing her love from emotional whim, from dependency on attraction and

aversion, was the struggle of her monastic life. As an aspiring actress in Montreal, she had equated emotional expression with personal fulfillment. She had loved the volatile camaraderie of the theater, the attention of the stage. Becoming a nun required negating a lifetime of instincts, seeking anonymity instead of fame, self-criticism instead of applause.

She said, "We don't fit in anywhere. For Jews, we're missionaries; for Muslims, we're Zionists. A Palestinian Christian accused me of not being sensitive to his people's suffering. I know I should be open to everyone in equal measure, but I can't do it. I stand with the Jewish people. Sometimes I say to God, 'Why do you expect me to be an instrument of peace?' And the answer I sense is, 'Your suffering over your failures is what I need.'"

"Why is suffering necessary, Miriam?"

"The saints of every religion say the same thing: that suffering is a gift from God that enhances and purifies the soul."

"Can you say that here?"

"No," she said, without hesitation. "Free will brought the Holocaust, not God's will. It's not my place to tell the victims that their suffering was useful. But someone who suffers and doesn't fall into bitterness, his heart opens. I knew a monk who was dying of cancer. He said, 'The only right that suffering gives you is the right to love.'"

On the other side of me sat Father Issaie, a Beatitudes priest with a sharp face and pointed beard. His body was still, almost rigid, hands folded on his lap. I asked, "What do you say about the meaning of suffering, Issaie?" He replied carefully, "Suffering can purify. But there is some suffering that is so great that the only decent response is no response." He looked straight ahead and resumed his posture of silence.

An announcer asked us to stand, and a few moments later the memorial siren sounded, hoarse rather than shrill. Two sirens intertwined, like a braided havdalah candle used in the ceremony ending Shabbat, separating sacred from profane time. I imagined myself a

point of light in an endless field of light, each point point another soul. Knesset Yisrael, the assembly of heavenly Israel. I sensed my smallness but also my secure place in the familiar vastness, which formed a single body of light. I felt loved and embraced: Israel above protecting Israel below.

Afterward I asked Issaie what he had been thinking about while the siren was sounding. He replied, "I said to God, 'Seigneur, here I am, among my brothers and sisters.'"

since you went with me into the tomb and put your hand into mine, I have considered you one of my own. I think of you all the time. All my students, Muslim or Jew, are in my heart."

I was overwhelmed. A sheykh in Nuseirat was praying for me, protecting me. "*Allahu akbar*," I said, in gratitude. "*Allahu akbar*," the men solemnly repeated.

Ibrahim said, "The sheykh's heart is like an ocean."

"And we are fish in it," I added.

Everyone laughed, including Abdul-Rahim.

The friendly disputation between Froman and the sheykh's disciples resumed. Muslim challenges, conciliatory replies, tense moments, laughter. I stopped following the arguments; even the voices seemed to recede. Instead I felt drawn back into the dance, imagining our words merging into a single exhalation, "*Ah-llah*." As if I could dispel this world of fragmentation and remain, just a little longer, in the oneness of God.

EPILOGUE

And then the madness came. Gaza and the West Bank turned into battlefields; travel in the Palestinian-controlled territories became a life-and-death danger for Israelis; and my forays into Islam abruptly ceased. Except for brief and awkward phone calls, I lost my connection to the Palestinians with whom I'd celebrated and prayed. Access to some of the Christian communities I'd grown close to—like the Beatitudes in Bethlehem—also was blocked. Inevitably, the sensation of transcending this fragmented reality receded. I had stood at the entrance and glimpsed the garden, but that was all.

The violence penetrated my daily life. There were shooting attacks on Israeli cars on the edge of my neighborhood, French Hill; a neighbor's son was killed in an ambush on a West Bank road. Two boys from Tekoah—Rabbi Menachem Froman's settlement, whose children Sheykh Ibrahim had blessed—went wandering in the desert caves below their homes and were stoned to death and mutilated so badly their faces were unrecognizable; my oldest son, Gavriel, knew one of them from baseball camp. A suicide bomber blew himself up in French Hill, as a bus passed not far from the nursery school of my youngest son, Shahar; though several passengers were wounded, only the terrorist was killed.

Thanks to my journey into the faiths of my neighbors, my grief could no longer be confined to one side of the border. Sheykh Abdul-

Rahim's grandson—one of the boys I'd met in the Nuseirat mosque, who had played a game with me of repeatedly saying "Shalom" and then running away, giggling—was shot in the head during a confrontation between Palestinian rioters and Israeli soldiers in Gaza. He emerged from a coma and is on his way to recovery. Even the Galilee, where decency between Arabs and Jews seemed possible, is no longer immune. Arab Israelis joined the Intifada riots in early October 2000, and Israeli police shot dead thirteen Arab citizens. The rioting approached the edge of Father Yaakov Willebrands's hilltop retreat of Lavra Natofa; Hararit, the little village of meditators bordering Lavra Natofa, was briefly under siege. In the nearby village of Arrabe—where I'd bought olive oil for the Shabbat meal with our Muslim friends, the Joulanis—a seventeen-year-old boy named Asel Asleh, an activist in Arab-Jewish coexistence, was killed by police while apparently trying to calm passions. Since those events, the alienation between Israel's Arabs and Jews has deepened. Arabs see the police killings as proof that the Jewish state considers them enemies rather than citizens; Jews regard the readiness of Arab Israelis to join in Palestinian violence as proof that they aren't a loyal minority but part of a hostile regional majority.

Despite the growing despair, Eliyahu McLean has continued his brave attempts at opening hearts. Every Friday he and a half dozen friends, Muslims and Jews, gather at a lookout in Jerusalem's Old City, opposite the Al Aqsa Mosque, and pray for peace. Yet even he has had to concede the danger of traveling through the Palestinian territories, and his contacts among Muslims are now largely restricted to Israeli Arabs.

Sheykh Ibrahim was forced back into anonymity by the Palestinian Authority. He was summoned to the headquarters of one of Yasser Arafat's security services and warned that his life was in danger from "Hamas extremists." For your own protection, an officer told him, we advise you to stop fraternizing with Jews. Ibrahim took the hint and disappeared from the interfaith circuit.

I phoned him on the night of the French Hill suicide bombing, desperate for a reminder of a benevolent Islam. The voice that greeted me was thin and remote; he sounded like a man on his death-bed. For Ibrahim, confinement to village life was indeed a kind of death sentence.

"Welcome, my brother," he said in English, avoiding Hebrew, perhaps out of fear. "I miss you, my brother. You are safe? I pray to my God every night to stop the fire and help us to make forgiveness."

There was no laughter in his voice; he no longer repeated phrases for emphasis, delighting in his own exuberance.

"This is the time of the fanatics," he continued. "I am crying all the night, but the angels last week they promised me, 'Don't worry, the peace is coming.' The angels tell me that the future is for us, the peacemakers."

"*Inshallah*," I said.

"Thank you, my brother. See you again."

But I couldn't imagine when that might be.

At difficult moments—when I am overwhelmed with fear for my children's safety and rage at the Palestinian leadership for rejecting compromise and despair at the Middle East for turning the Jewish homecoming into another form of exile—I try to recall what I learned from my teachers, the monastics and sheykhs of the Holy Land. I remind myself of Sister Johanna's warning against building barriers in the heart and excluding even one person from our love. And Father Yaakov Willebrands's insistence on relating to human beings as evolving souls destined for perfection. And Sheykh Abdul-Rahim's contempt for death and Sheykh Ishak Idriss Sakouta's steadiness that evoked the Divine Presence.

When I become too immersed in the political work of a journalist, I sometimes hear the admonition of Sheykh Ibrahim: "There are enough politicians in the land of the prophets. But where are the

prophets in the land of the prophets?" I tell myself that it is precisely in times like these that the beautiful teachings of faith become either real or mere sentiment. More than ever, the goal of a spiritual life in the Holy Land is to live with an open heart at the center of unbearable tension. Still, I regularly disappoint myself, unable to exorcise, except for brief interludes, the jinns of fear and rage. The best that I can say is that I'm struggling, and that maintaining a painful awareness of the gap between what I've been taught and my inability to embody those teachings defines my spiritual life.

The one enduring transformation that I carry with me from my journey is that I learned to venerate—to love—Christianity and Islam. I learned to feel at home in a church, even on Good Friday, and in a mosque, even in Nuseirat. The cross and the minaret have become for me cherished symbols of God's presence, reminders that He speaks to us in multiple languages—that He speaks to us at all. Even if much of Arab Islam has descended into the kind of Jewish hatred for which Christianity is now trying to atone, I insist on revering Islam and its fearless heart. The fanatics will not deprive me of that victory.

This year, shortly before Easter, I took my two oldest children, Moriah and Gavriel, to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. They'd never been there, and I wanted them, as citizens of Jerusalem, to experience that sacred place as part of their patrimony. The massive building was nearly deserted; few tourists or pilgrims were coming to Israel. We entered the little stone structure in the center of the great domed hall that Christians believe was the scene of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. As we stood before the marble slab covered with candles and icons and flowers, I told my children that, while we don't accept Christian theological claims, we should venerate a holy place sanctified by the prayers and expectations of pilgrims. I wanted them to understand that, even as this land showed its hardest face, we can still receive inspiration from another tradition's experience of God's presence.

It is late morning. I am sitting at my desk, looking toward the desert expanse outside my window. Somewhere in the blurred distance is Nebi Musa, the Muslim shrine to the Prophet Moses where Sheykh Ibrahim and I prayed together. I am suddenly aware of the muezzin, summoning me from the next hill. I get on my knees, press my forehead to the floor, immobile with surrender.

Jerusalem
Shavuot, Pentecost, Mawlid an-Nabi (the Prophet's Birthday)
June 2001