

Contrasting lives

LETTERS TO YITZ, Edited by Eliezer D. Jaffe. New York, Herzl Press. 83 pp. \$5.00

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THIS SMALL, moving book takes the form of letters between two brothers, one in Jerusalem, the other in Cleveland. Eliezer Jaffe, an American immigrant to Israel, is a professor of social work at the Hebrew University, and the younger of the two men, while the elder Arthur Jaffe, addressed throughout the book as Yitz, was a successful businessman and important member of the Jewish community in Cleveland, Ohio. Coming from a warm, close family of five children, these brothers were particularly attached to each other.

As a young man Yitz had been on the verge of coming to live in Israel but had put it off for a while. Once he had married and settled in Cleveland, immigration became a dream more and more remote and hard to realize. Eliezer did make *aliya*, and built a family and fine career in Israel.

But the story that initially emerges from the correspondence is the well-known tale of the children of Jewish immigrant children "making it" in America. The colloquial, upbeat tone of these letters further testifies to the characteristically American nature of these two men — even if one lives in Israel and the other comes to a tragic end in a decadent America where violence obliterates the innocent world in which the brothers grew up. But theirs was an Americanism with a difference. For success did not mean assimilation. Rather, it allowed for greater scope in serving the Jewish people. The commitment of the Jaffes had its roots in the traditional Jewish family in which they grew up. Eliezer writes in his Introduction:

"If our father Henry was the classic empathizing, permissive, outgoing personality, our mother Sarah was the disciplinarian, no-nonsense educator, homemaker and protective mother. She was determined that her children would succeed in America and made sure we got four extra hours of Hebrew study each day in the Talmud Torah school after public school let out...

"Mom's religious upbringing was fundamentalist. She had a 'personal contract' with God: she would raise her children as believing, committed Jews, keep a Jewish home and be genuinely charitable, and God, for His part, would watch over the family. The arrangement worked fairly well, even when her brother Alex... and her sister Dora were killed in a tragic head-on automobile accident which left Mom and Pa miraculously untouched in the death car. Over the years, when things were difficult, Mom would go sit near Alex and Dora's graves at the Lansing Road Jewish cemetery and 'ask' them to intervene with God for the family, for the children, for the Jews. Her independence and pride were invincible. Until Pa died. She began to accept the idea, although with much difficulty, that Jewishness and religious belief are a way of life, not a guarantee of life."

IN ADDITION to being religious the family was also actively Zionist. The Jaffe home was the focus of religious Zionist youth activities in Cleveland. Although the book is a personal narrative and does not attempt to present a complete picture of Jewish youth movement life in America, the following description suggests the warmth and camaraderie of that world.

"As a boy, I remember people from all over the country, and especially from Palestine and later Israel, and from the Hashomer Hadati and Bnai Akiva Zionist youth movements, 'passing

through' or 'sleeping over,' but always 'eating over.' I remember waking up in the morning surrounded by two sleeping guests who had arrived at some time long after midnight."

Here was an alternative lifestyle to the prevailing one of the Forties and Fifties long before the term "alternative lifestyle" was invented.

In the main body of the correspondence we follow the contrasting lives of the two brothers. We witness Yitz's expanding business, his deep involvement with the Jewish community, his concern for Israel, and his visit to Israel after '67. He emerges as a warm, perceptive, hospitable human being. In discussing the hospitality for which his own home was well-known, he writes:

Hachnoset orchim is not a gimmick to get Jews to share their wealth but an ingenious way of getting Jews involved with each other and protective of each other. It's knowing that you don't exist only for yourself or your immediate family but for Jewish life in general, for *clal Yisrael*.

A vivid example of this hospitality is the incident when Yitz brings home from the synagogue five sailors of the Israeli merchant marine one Succot eve. His wife Miriam graciously received them, and following dinner they sat for many hours "munching nuts and telling stories. The automatic Shabbos clock had by then turned off most of the lights, and we were all enjoying a very peaceful, cozy atmosphere and friendly camaraderie. Around 2 a.m. two cabs showed up and the boys said their good-byes, leaving us waving to them on the front porch, very grateful to have had such a marvellous experience."

WHILE IN the Diaspora commitment to the Jewish people expresses itself on the community and family level, in Israel it also expresses itself on the larger national scale. For Eliezer Jaffe, the brother in Israel, it meant leaving academia for two years to become Director of Social Services of the Jerusalem

Municipality in an attempt to effect what he felt were important social policies. Later it would mean working for Zahavi, the Organization for the Rights of Large Families.

Deep involvement in Israeli social problems, as well as the lifestyle he creates with his Israeli wife and children, slowly transform Eliezer from an American Jew into an Israeli. Most of all, the dangers he shares with Israelis carry him away from the strivings of the American Jew. When Eliezer returns from a Sabbatical to participate in the Six Day War, or writes about the friends who have fallen in the Yom Kippur War, we are no longer witnessing two brothers equally sharing their people's burden. Rather, their choices, one to stay in America and the other to come to Israel, create qualitative differences. The brothers' lives are not just variations on a theme but they become different themes altogether. Yet, the family in America are as involved in Israel as a family outside the country could be. Moreover, they aspire to come to Israel. They buy an apartment here, and their children plan to come. And Yitz and his wife Miriam worry about the dangers the country faces. They, of course, express concern about the welfare of Eliezer and his family in times of heightened terrorist activity in Jerusalem.

Ultimately, there is a bitter and unforeseen irony in this. For on Wednesday, November 1, 1978, Eliezer receives a call from Cleveland that, while working late in his company warehouse, Yitz has been robbed and killed.

The senseless murder of the warm-hearted Yitz, whom we feel we have come to know through his letters, throws its shadow over everything we have read. Death brings its bitter perspective.

ELIEZER COUNTERS Yitz's death with his own articulated values, that which he sees as giving meaning to life altogether. He is deeply bitter at the idiotic waste, at this senseless murder. He is bitter

that his brother did not live closer to him, that his talents were not used for Israel. He is angry that, like his brother, so many young people in the Diaspora who want to go to Israel "let their lives float away from them until they are so deeply anchored in making a living, running local institutions and trying to enrich local Jewish life that, in the end they are thoroughly embedded in Diaspora life." Eliezer observes, "In the short run, we have to decide on priorities about what to do with our lives because in the long run we will all be dead."

Eliezer writes a last letter to Yitz after his death. "Remember how Mom used to talk to herself by the graves of her sister and brother. Well, I know why she did it. But since your grave is far away from my home in Jerusalem, I write instead." He goes on to relate how everyone is faring, and takes an editor's licence (as he does throughout the letters) to fill in and complete what is needed to make a complete story out of the letters.

Yitz's death confronts the younger brother with the loss and pain of adulthood. One never fully realizes that youth has passed until some such terrible confrontation, until those closest to us are visited by failure and illness and death. Religion cannot help to explain the terrible tragedy for Eliezer. Judaism is for him "a way of life," not a "guarantee of life."

Eliezer Jaffe has brought these letters together to work through the quality of his brother's life. "So many good people like you pass away," he writes in his last letter to Yitz, "leaving only a tombstone for later generations to guess who they were and who loved them. I really couldn't let you go without filling in just a little portion of the middle of the stone."

Readers will be grateful that Eliezer Jaffe has seen fit to do so, for in many ways the letters tell us much about ourselves.