

Israel or the Diaspora?

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Between Right and Right, by A.B. Yehoshua. Doubleday & Co. New York, 1981.

Letters to Yitz, by Eliezer D. Jaffe, Herzl Press, New York, 1981. 81 pp., paperback, \$4.50.

I read two books from Israel recently that make much the same point, but one makes it in theoretical terms, the other in human terms. One put me off, the other moved me deeply.

The first book was A.B. Yehoshua's *Between Right and Right*. The thesis of this book is that the Diaspora has no justification. He argues that it is a neurosis of the Jewish people that keeps them living in an abnormal situation when they could live in Israel instead. He offers a complicated psychoanalytic explanation for this neurosis, something about a Father God and a Mother Land, and the fear of offending the Father by mating with the Mother, which is too Freudian for my simple mind. The book left me cold. There

is something so unsympathetic about a book deriding the validity of our way of life in toto written in our language by one who visits here frequently, and who ought to understand us and not reject us so harshly. Despite the title, there is no sense that the author felt that this was a conflict between two rights at all.

This same issue of whether a Jew belongs here or in Israel is treated in human terms in Eliezer Jaffe's beautiful book, *Letters to Yitz*. Eliezer (née Lester) Jaffe is the product of a fine Jewish family in the Midwest, a family that gave its children an intensive Jewish education, an attachment to tradition, and a love of the Land of Israel. Jaffe went on aliyah and now serves as a member of the faculty of the School of Social Work at the Hebrew University. Over the years he has kept in close touch with his family in the States, especially with his older brother, and now he has collected some of the letters to and from this brother. It is a fascinating document, for it reveals as clearly as any sociological study or statistical survey

could what happens to a Jewish family here and in Israel.

Yitz's family, who stayed here, is, by all criteria, a deeply Jewish one. Yitz is observant, philanthropic, deeply involved in the Jewish community; his children grow up in the Zionist youth movement and go to study in yeshivot in Israel. Yitz's greatest moment comes when he visits Israel at last, and his dream is to someday settle there.

Yet there is a world of difference between his Israel and his brother's. For Yitz, Israel is a dream, a task, a responsibility; for Eliezer, it is a reality.

The letter that makes the difference clearest is the one in which Eliezer recounts to his brother what it felt like to be on the other side of the Suez during the Yom Kippur War, living in fear and in danger, and then finding a busload of UJA people on a mission, coming to visit, to take pictures, to ask questions, and to move on. There is ambivalence in Eliezer's reaction to the experience. On the one hand, he feels appreciation that they came. Who else cares enough about what is happening to the Jews of Israel but American Jews? But on the other hand there is resentment that they stayed a while, took their pictures, collected their souvenirs, offered their congratulations — and left. He feels used, as if he were a bit player on some movie set, or a prop in a tourist attraction, when he sees the bus drive away.

There is ambivalence on the American Jewish side of the relationship as well. Yitz proudly writes to his brother that his synagogue has burned its mortgage. He recalls nostalgically how their father sold off the old synagogue when the neighborhood changed and put part of the proceeds into a fund for building a new synagogue at home and part into building a Youth Center in Jerusalem. "That's the problem of us modern Zionists — we have roots in both worlds. I sometimes envy people who don't have this conflict, but I am not one of them. I really do plan on selling the shop one day and moving to Israel. Now that Miriam has also been there with me, it's less abstract and can be dealt with practically by both of us." But meantime he buys a summer place in the States —

one that can be sold, of course, when the time comes.

The time doesn't come, for Yitz is murdered in a robbery in his warehouse before he can realize his dream of retiring to Israel. Of the 51 years of his life, only 51 days were actually spent in Israel. And as his brother writes in the last letter of this book, that is such a shame, such a waste.

The book ends on an awesomely powerful and passionate note as a broken-hearted brother laments the years they were separated, the years when they could have shared so much, the years when they could have helped build the land together. Jaffe tells how he made his way back to the yeshiva he studied at in New York a quarter of a century before, to remember and to weep, and then boarded the plane back to Israel, the land that is for him in every sense now — home.

I think of Golda Meir's last visit to America just before she died, of how she met with her old friends from Labor Zionist days, and of how they compared notes on what they had done with their lives. She had grand-

children to show for her life, who lived on a kibbutz, who lived near a border, who lived in danger. And they had grandchildren to show for their lives, who lived in cities, who crossed borders only on vacations, but who were not sure they would have a Jewish future.

Yehoshua's book puts me off because it treats me clinically and calls me neurotic, and makes all kind of psychoanalytic judgments about my repressions and drives that I cannot comprehend. Jaffe's book draws me near, for he treats me not as a case but as a brother, whose partnership he needs and whose kinship he seeks. The first book is slick and urbane but unconvincing. The second is straightforward and uncomplicated. It consists of words that come from the heart, and in the last few searing pages, of words that come from the gut. Anyone who reads it will be drawn to it — and to the Land of Israel — many times. ■

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