

Joanne Nihom

# BEYOND BORDERS

My life in Israel

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*All quotes and lines of verse by Joanne will be marked with a blue line as here above*



# INTRODUCTION



## *Israel*

If you look at the media attention Israel has received over recent decades, it's as if I am living in one of the great world powers. The conflict between Israel and its neighbors is a favorite topic of many. Hundreds of journalists, from all parts of the world, ensure that news from Israel reaches millions of people nearly every day. Most of the news is about the on-going tensions and the violence stemming from them.

As a result, for many people, the word "Israel" has heavy, almost frightening connotations. They say to me, "You live in a country that is at war. How can you do that? Isn't that scary?" When I reply that I live in the north, in a Jewish village surrounded by Arab and Druze villages, they picture my life as a daily struggle. But these are the villages where I do my daily shopping and have friends. Israeli society is mixed. Israelis and Palestinians, liberals and the orthodox. They encounter each other often, in all kinds of places, including hospitals, public transportation, shopping malls, universities, cultural gatherings, and some schools. And in mixed cities, like Tel Aviv and Haifa, they can be neighbors. Further, although there are often no official ties between Israel and the bordering Arab countries, exchanges of all kinds are taking place every day.

It took me a while to see, appreciate and understand, such encounters. I have lived and worked in Israel since 2005, and I now see that the conflict in the news is not the same as life on the ground. That there is no war among the people. That war is a creature of politics. And that the reality of Israel is far more complicated than any visitor can comprehend.

## *About me*

I come from a Dutch-Jewish family. For as long as I can remember, my parents have been committed to their Jewish religion and Israel, and they have passed that on to their children. I take this responsibility very seriously. My background determines the way I live my life, my religion and traditions. I am a child and grandchild of survivors of World War II. There are generations standing on my shoulders that never came back. I experienced Israel first as a child, with my parents, on vacations. Later, when my parents immigrated from the Netherlands to Israel (already in their sixties), I visited them many times a year.

Finally, in a natural transition, I moved to Israel myself in 2005. I ended up in the north, in a privatized kibbutz. A community of roughly a hundred families, housed in modest homes, surrounded by lots of green. A place where you can still hear the silence. I work here as a journalist for some Dutch institutions who are involved in Israel.

Like many whose lives straddle two countries, I have complicated emotions about them. While I lived in the Netherlands, I missed Israel. When I am in Israel, I feel a thread attaching me to the Netherlands. Israel is my home – the Netherlands is my motherland, where I was born and raised. It always feels restless somehow, not annoying, but restless. Sometimes I feel disappointed in the country where I live and I want to leave Israel. There are too many victims, for far too long. Overly complicated discussions about everyone's rights.

Yet the land and my people are so in my blood that I will never be able to get rid of them. The land pulls me and pushes me away at the same time. For me, the country is a mishmash of emotions and encounters with known and unknown strangers; their story and their history are mine as well.

I belong to a beautiful people and I live in a fantastic country. Which cause me to both love and hate and laugh and cry

## *Why this book?*

But I'm not just Jewish, and I don't just live in Israel. I'm also part of a big, wide world. This entails moral responsibilities. From an early age, I have been passionate about moral issues. A former

neighbor told me that when I was very young, I already had profound conversations with her about the world. I once told her that if only everyone together would say a prayer at the same time, there would be peace.

I might add, now, “if only everyone took time to listen, really listen, to the other side.” And that might set a few more heads nodding, in many parts of the world.

I have written this book to help people listen to all the sides involved. I have learned that it is possible to have different stories, and different truths, and still live together. Take, for example, Israel’s Independence Day. For the Jewish population it is a holiday; for the Arab residents it is one of the darkest days in their history. However, it is possible to celebrate and remember this day together, as I experienced on several occasions.

The pages that follow contain the stories of a rich variety of people I have met through my work in recent years, supplemented with my own diary fragments, experiences and findings. These are people who don’t usually make the news, but who are working in many different situations to make Israel and its surroundings, in all its complexity, work better. These are initiatives in which Israelis and Palestinians work together every day. They set an example for the world – and these are just the tip of the iceberg. I don’t have room for all the stories.

It is important for me to emphasize that I don’t have a political agenda. Since I live in Israel I feel, politically speaking, neither left nor right. Some people would say that this is itself a political statement, that I am left-wing, or a humanist, or just naïve. But life in Israel has taught me that there is no right or wrong, no yes or no, no black or white. There are many sides to every story, no matter how hard that is to accept.

I hope *Beyond Borders* crosses a line, triggers something. That it will show how challenging “right” and “wrong” are



### *Some notes:*

- The words “Israelis” and “Palestinians” are used regularly. These terms are how most of the people I interviewed named the population groups and I thought it was good to keep it that way.
- This book will be as little as possible about politics, but sometimes, to properly understand a subject, I simply can’t avoid it. As someone once said to me, “Every blade of grass in Israel is politically charged.”
- In some stories I chose to use fictitious names.
- I have long been annoyed by the fact that the media often mention the origin of the people involved in reports of an event, good or bad. I don’t think that matters, and things actually sometimes even escalate as a result. I don’t want to stigmatize any group. In this book, though, it is almost impossible to avoid. It’s important to mention the background of the person I’m interviewing, because that makes the story behind her or him clearer.

CHAPTER 1  
TOGETHER

مَا  
MA'AN

يَا  
YAH'AD



*a beginning  
my process  
unstoppable  
never ending*

In the palette of beautiful people  
it is the shades of color  
that are part of a fantastic  
but oh so complex society



# MY FATHER



“What am I going to tell my son about his grandfather?  
That he gave him his name. He once spoke the  
prophetic words to me: ‘You will get married and  
have a son named Yassin.’  
That he loved me very much and that I pass his love  
to you, my son.  
That he was a man of peace.”

– *Yasmin Gibara*

On September 27, 2004, a bullet changed the life of Palestinian Yasmin Gibara. “My father went to work, like every day. Things went wrong along the way. A settler living in the West Bank waited for him and killed him.”

Yasmin comes from a family of eight brothers and sisters and lives in Salem, near Nablus in the West Bank. She was born blind, and yet still studied, receiving her first and second degree in English and she writes poetry. She speaks calmly. I notice her clear voice. And with almost every question I ask, I can almost hear her thinking.

“My father was my friend; he was always there for me. When I heard the terrible news, I was not only heartbroken, but also incredibly angry. I left school; everything became too much for me. All I wanted was revenge and I contacted members of the Fatah movement and Hamas. I was willing to die a martyr, in honor of my father.

When my mother and her brother heard that I wanted to join one of the Palestinian freedom groups, they let me know that they did not support my decision. My uncle said, 'Listen to your father's soul. What is he saying to you?'

I answered: 'He is telling me every night that I should go back to school and study.'

It took me a while to understand that they were right, and that hatred is not a solution.


My father. He was always concerned about me. Because of my blindness. But also, because I am a woman living in Palestinian culture, where men still rule. He understood that my visual impairment meant that I would have to make an extra effort to prove myself. That studying was even more important to me than to his other children, and he encouraged me to do so.

My father's murderer was a Christian man who converted to the Jewish Faith. Originally, he was from Germany. At the time, my family asked the German government if I and my brother, who was born blind like me, could have our eyes checked in a German hospital as compensation. To date we have never received a response.

During our days of mourning after my father's death, we were visited by *The Villages Group*, a group of Israeli volunteers who are active on a small scale, but carry out large-scale work almost anonymously. They support Palestinian families like ours who have lost a relative. I didn't want to have anything to do with them. I screamed: 'You are murderers, you killed my father!' But they kept coming back, even after our time of mourning had passed, and I got into a conversation with them. Previously, I had never spoken on a friendly basis with an Israeli. I only knew them as people who hurt us. Slowly, I started to realize that there were good Israelis and that we have a lot in common. We all want to live in peace.

Till today they still help us in all kinds of ways, even after all of these years. For example, they guided us spiritually and financially during the trials of my father's murderer. And when I married, they paid my husband the dowry that should have been paid by my father. I've had several boyfriends, but when the subject of

marriage came up, they dropped out. That wasn't easy. I recently got married, 'in old age' according to our circle, to a lovely man who is fifteen years older. He is already married to another woman; I am his second wife. She and I speak regularly, and we get along well. I am now pregnant with a boy. I get strange questions about this from the people in our village. 'How are you going to do that because you will never see your son. How will you raise him?' Again and again, I explain that I will recognize my son's voice and be able to smell and touch him; that's the instinct of motherhood and that won't let me down.

I want to be independent and be able to earn my own living now that I have graduated. I teach English and Arabic via Zoom and WhatsApp. My son will be born soon. I will see to it that he grows up with Israeli children who he can become friends with. I am not going to raise him with hatred, because if I do, I will one day lose him to the world of martyrs.” 

Chickens, goats, dogs, horses. There is trash everywhere. A group of boys around the age of fourteen are waiting for the bus. They look very neat and tidy. Short hair and dressed in a school uniform, a blue polo shirt and jeans. A little order in the midst of the chaos of the village.

Early this morning I ride my old-fashioned Dutch bicycle on a journey of about forty minutes from my hometown. First through the fields, then on a stretch of the main road and then through an Arab village. It's still quiet everywhere around me. The day has only just begun.

The village is one long road, with some houses to the left and right, some seriously dilapidated. Everywhere the windows are open; there are no curtains anywhere and laundry is hanging outside to dry at almost every house. Men are sitting quietly on one porch drinking coffee together. When I cycle past, they call out good morning in Arabic. I wave cheerfully to them and call back in Hebrew: "Boker tov."

In between the houses there is a large cemetery. Some graves have artificial flowers, others look bare and abandoned. Here and there is a plastic chair next to the grave. I want to take a picture, but I might offend someone by doing that. I cycle on.

A group of traditionally-dressed women comes out of one of the houses. They wear long dresses and have their heads covered. I feel out of place with my short skirt and pledge to myself that I will wear different clothes for the next bike ride through this village. The women don't see to mind though, as they greet me kindly.

When I cycle back an hour later, I can hardly get through the village anymore, it is so busy. Once home, the phone rings. It's a friend from Sderot, a village in the south of the country, near the border with Gaza. "It has been bad here again the past few days," she says with a deep sigh. "For days there has been one air-raid siren after another. Our children are completely stressed out."

I listen to her story and think back to my bike ride this morning. What a difference from her world. And yet, we live in the same country.

# TERMINOLOGY



I use a number of terms regularly in this book. However, their meaning cannot be explained in one simple way, because it depends on where you live, what your origins are and your political views. I decided that there should be a page in the book with explanations of the various terminology I use. For example, ‘Palestine’ or ‘colonist’. How can I describe these words without them becoming politically charged and in the most neutral way possible?

To show you what I mean, I made a list of nineteen words. I asked ten random people – Israelis and Palestinians, Orthodox and Liberals – what these words mean to them and how they would describe them. I have listed their answers below, under each of my words, without identifying the people. Their descriptions don’t always agree with my point of view, and they certainly don’t all agree with each other. This shows just how complex the conflict is, for most people.

One of the people gave the same answer for all terms: “Our neighbor, our cousin.” This response was given by someone who believes in the equality of all people, regardless of their background.

## Arab

Fellow citizen who lives next door to me, but with whom I cannot communicate pleasantly and with whom I would like to have contact | Someone from an Arabic-speaking country | Our neighbor, our cousin | Most Arabs want to live in peace, but are negatively influenced by their leaders | When I think of an Arab, I think of the region in which they live | Our neighbors | Arabic-

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*According to the most generally accepted rules, one has to write 'Jews' when referring to an ethnic group, just like Palestinians and Arabs, but names of religions are not capitalized. However, since I do not wish to discriminate against anyone of any origin, even with grammatical rules, I have decided to capitalize all designations relating to any religion or ethnic group. This also applies to holidays of the various religions mentioned in this book.*

speaking community, including Muslims, Druze, Bedouins and Christians | Few Arabs are Jewish | Beautiful people | People with an Arab background who live here in peace with the Jewish people. They can be Christian or Muslim | An ethnic group.

### **Palestinian**

An enemy I would like to have as a friend so that we can understand each other | Arabs living in an area that is now Israeli-Palestinian | Our neighbor, our cousin | Invention from the period when the State of Israel was founded. Before that, Palestinians were never talked about, especially as a people | People | A people under occupation | Person named after a country of origin before Israel came into existence | The newer generations remain Palestinians, because so are their parents/grandparents | Most don't feel related to the name Israel, because to them this equates to being Jewish, while being Muslim, Druze or Christian | Refugees | Arabs who do not have an Israeli ID and live in areas under Palestinian control | A people with an Arab-ethnic background | My neighbors

### **Bedouin**

I don't know much about them, except that they live in tents and have a hard life. | Arabs living in nomadic communities who do not consider themselves Palestinian | Our neighbor, our cousin | Residents of Israel | A group of people who have unfortunately been portrayed in a negative light in recent years, because they steal a lot from agriculture and from the army and live all over

Israel without permission | Israeli citizens who are a minority in Israel | Ordinarily Arabs (Muslims) from the desert. In the south of Israel, they often live in makeshift houses made of steel sheets with asbestos roofs as bunkers. In the rest of the country, they are located in villages and small towns, where 'outsiders' rarely live. Most Bedouin boys join the army | Beautiful people | Population group in Israel that sometimes still lives in tents, but that certainly does not apply to all Bedouins | Humble Arabs who lead a simple life.

## **Muslim**

Another faith. Fanatic, not fanatic | Someone who believes in Islam | Our neighbor, our cousin | Religion that fights with fire and sword in an attempt to conquer the world. Many of the terrorists in the world have a Muslim background | Faith | Someone who belongs to a large, wide and ancient culture in the Middle East | Faithful Muslims pray five times a day, at different times, depending on the sunrise and sunset. In winter, the calls to prayer are much closer together than in summer. Ramadan, Eid, the Feast of Sacrifice and the Hajj (pilgrimage) are the most important events for a Muslim. Rarely does a Muslim join the army | A person like you or me | One who believes in Allah | A religion.

## **Christian**

Someone who believes in Jesus | Someone who believes in Christianity | Our neighbor, our cousin | A religion that has persecuted Jews over the centuries. Until recently, the Vatican did not recognize Israel as a Jewish state | Religion | Someone who belongs to a large worldwide religious group | Western, modern. Rarely does a Christian go into the Israeli army | A person like you or me | One who believes in Christ | A religion.

## **Druze**

A fellow citizen. They are good soldiers. They have a nice relationship with the Israelis |  
A group of people with a special faith derived from Islam | Our neighbor, our cousin | Residents of Israel who cooperate with the State of Israel and also serve in the military | Citizens | Israeli citizens who are a minority group in the country | An Arabic-

speaking population. Their beliefs and views differ from the Jews and Muslims. They are more attracted to the Jewish community than to the Arab community. Many Druze join the military. Non-Druze rarely live in Druze places. | A person like you and me | The religion of Druze is a special belief in Israel and other countries. In general, Druze are loyal to the country where they live | An ethnic group and religion.

## **Jew**

My background, my family, World War II and the weight on my shoulders | Someone who has Jewish ancestry and associates themselves with the Jewish people | We live together in Israel and are connected to each other | One who belongs to the Jewish people according to Jewish religious law | Religion | My people and my religion | A very diverse population due to ancestry from many different countries. Besides faith, they don't really have much in common. As in all religions, you also have various 'movements' amongst the Jews. The ultra-Orthodox Jews have a different lifestyle and views from other Jews. Both Jewish boys and girls join the army | A person like you and me | Someone who is Jewish through his or her mother or has chosen to become Jewish | An ethnic group and a religion.

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*A sensitive, precarious subject is the wall. Also called “the Israeli wall”, “Separation Wall” or the “Wall of Apartheid” by opponents. Proponents give it the term partition “fence” or “security fence”. It is a gray, looming wall that runs right through the landscape. It consistently reminds onlookers of the horrors. The wall is more than a wall. It is both a barrier and a shield. Over the years I have often talked to people about it. A tricky subject. Of course, it would be best not to have a wall at all, and I understand that the wall makes Palestinians feel like they live in prison. It’s a far from ideal situation. But the reality is also that, as long as there is no peace, unfortunately there must be a wall. So, it stands, far too present - a constant, visible, terrible reminder of the conflict.*



## Israel

It is our Jewish land and I daily dream that it can be of Arabs and Jews together | A country that was mainly founded by Jews in 1948, but is currently a mishmash of people | Our country of which I am proud of. My father was a survivor of World War II. When he heard the Israeli national anthem played, he started to cry | The land that God promised to the Jewish people | A state | My country, the country where I was born | A new land for Jews emerged after World War II. Israel is the meeting point of three continents. Previously it was called Palestine | Occupation | The most beautiful and special country that exists, where all faiths come together | Home.

## Palestine

I feel sorry for the residents who live there and I hate their leaders | An area that has long been under different rules, but where Palestinians have lived for centuries | It exists | A concept invented to give the so-called Palestinians a right to be a part of Israel | A state | One day hopefully the state for the Palestinians | The name of the country before it became Jewish Israel after World War II. Arabs of all faiths, including Jewish people, lived in Palestine. Before it was called Israel, Palestine was occupied by the British. In fact, Palestinians have long been occupied and oppressed | Occupied territory | The land of the Palestinians, where hopefully one day they can live in peace next to and together with Israel | A neighboring country.

## The West Bank

An area forbidden for Israelis | An area chosen as Palestinian territory, but which is not autonomous and shrinks over time | Part of the historic land of Israel, but most of the people who live there are Palestinians | Belongs to the liberated areas in 1967 | The State of Palestine | An area occupied by Israel | An area occupied by Israel with many Jewish settlements. A large wall has been built around the area, much like a large prison. There is strict control and the residents cannot just enter and leave the area | Portion of Palestine | So-called occupied territory | Disputed area.

## Judea and Samaria

Controversial area | Samaritans | A political name for an area for right-wing Israel. The word can already be found in the Bible. Even if you change it, the reality will remain the same | It belongs to the liberated areas | The State of Palestine | An area occupied by Israel | Biblical Heartland | It belongs to the Jewish people | So-called occupied territory | The old word for the West Bank | A historical place for the Jews.

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*Since almost every description is complicated when it comes to the West Bank, Palestine, Judea and Samaria, I prefer to call them: “The other territories”.*

## Gaza

Hothouse of misery and hatred | Overcrowded enclosed stretch of beach | Part of the problem | A densely populated region of Israel, where many organizations deemed dangerous to Israel are located and are making life impossible for innocent civilians | Refugee camp | Territory besieged by Israel | Elongated strip on the coast below Tel Aviv. Occupied territory | Big prison without hope | Area where Palestinians live in southern Israel | An area with great potential and a major challenge to solve the problems there.

## Fatah movement

Terrorists | Palestinian Liberation Party, which is seen as a terrorist organization | They were our neighbors. We made an agreement together during the Oslo Accords (1993), but it didn't go well. It is important to keep looking ahead | An organization trying to destroy Israel | Terrorism | A Palestinian self-determination organization that sometimes uses terror | PLO | Yasar Arafat | Terror movement | Puppet of Israel.

## Occupation

It makes me sad | Annexing Palestinian-owned land for the benefit of a Jewish-Israeli state | Something we have to end, it's not good/healthy for anyone | A term people use as if it means Israel oppressing and ruling over Arabs | An illegal settlement | To rule a state or people that rules over another people and that are more

or less imprisoned | Non-Israeli parts of the country that belonged to Palestine. They are now occupied by Israel and the army and settlements have been built | Israel | An occupation like the Palestinians experience it | The life of the Palestinians.

## Settler

Fanatics | A Jewish-Israeli living in Palestinian territory | A problem we need to solve | An Israeli living in settlements, in small places, such as in the Galil, Negev, Samaria and the West Bank | Occupation | One who rules and exploits a weaker person | Inhabitant of a settlement in the occupied territories | No words for | Jewish people choosing to live in the settlements | How Palestinians see us.

## Jerusalem

History, where I feel at home. A burdened city | The birthplace of my multicultural childhood | A holy city for the Jews, an important place for three global religions. We need to use our common sense to see how we can keep this city accessible to all of us | The holiest city for the Jewish people. The capital of Israel | A mess | Holy city of the Jewish people and other nations | A city of gold. Forever young, though you are old. Always very restless and with a tense atmosphere. For the Palestinians, Jerusalem is and remains their capital | A bloody city | Capital of Israel and Palestine | The holiest city in the world.

## Intifada

I still have traumas from it | Palestinian resistance to the occupation | A Palestinian uprising from the past and luckily, they were wise enough to look ahead. Hopefully we won't return to that situation. That's not good for anyone | Armed resistance by Arabs against innocent Jews | Violence | The Palestinians' struggle for freedom, sometimes by force | Resistance of the Palestinians from the occupied territories to the occupation of Israel | Revolt because the people have had enough of the occupation | Revolt aimed at exterminating the Jews | A result of despair.

## Coexistence

On my bucket list, if only it was true | Living together, no matter who you are | The most important word in this list | The living together of Jews and Arabs. The vast majority of them want to live side by side and with each other in peace | Love | The only way to live and let live | An almost impossible mission: peaceful coexistence of all peoples here in Israel | Two peoples living together in peace, without the interference of politicians | Right to exist? | What we should strive for and what already exists in many places in Israel.

One of my dear friends is Amina, an Arabic woman. We met through friends. The first time I visited her home, she welcomed me in the official room, where she and her husband only sit with visitors. There are large benches, tables and many fake flowers. There was prepared fruit and vegetables, a glass of soda, a cup of fragrant tea and at the end of the visit the traditional Arabic coffee, the gesture of mutual respect and appreciation.

I was never asked what I wanted to drink or eat. That took some getting used to, because I felt obliged to eat and drink everything they offered, including the coffee. I don't even like that black goo.

The invitations kept coming. On the fourth visit she had prepared a meal, as always in great abundance. This time I was not received in the official room, but instead we ate in the kitchen. That felt much cozier.

Now, years later, the invitations continue to come on a regular basis, and I regularly invite her to my home too. For beautiful and less beautiful events and also just like that, without any particular reason, just for fun. We have found a way to understand each other, despite the fact that we don't speak the same language. Amina doesn't take it as a rejection that I prefer tea to coffee. That I don't take sugar in it is still something she doesn't understand, but it always makes her laugh.