

A Cheap Holiday in Other People's Misery (catching up with Mordechai Vanunu in Israel)

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By Rev. David B. Smith

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One of my favourite pieces of music is the Sex Pistols' classic 'Holidays in the Sun' – a song that begins with the line, 'a cheap holiday in other people's misery'. This would have made a fitting epitaph for my holiday in Israel, except that the \$3000 air ticket meant that it wasn't exactly cheap.

I went to Israel full of apprehension. Just knowing what we all know of the backdrop of paranoia and pain that hangs over that land is enough to make anybody apprehensive, but I also went carrying a dark secret – that I was a friend of Mordechai Vanunu's, and I was nervous about the reaction I'd get should this truth suddenly become public.

My friend Morde was completing an 18-year prison sentence for doing something that most people in this country consider heroic. Morde told the world about a secret stash of WMD's ('weapons of mass destruction') that are being developed in an underground factory in the Negev desert. Most people I know think he did the world an enormous favour, but most people in his own country wish Morde had kept his mouth shut. Indeed, most Israelis regard him as a traitor!

In order to try to understand this attitude towards my friend, I tried talking to local people about their attitude to nuclear weapons. The response I received was alarming! "They're only there as our last resort" one articulate young journalist said to me. "Just in case we get completely overrun." "Well ... what

happens then?" I asked. "Well", he said, "then we destroy everybody!"

Tragically, this was not an isolated example. Almost every time I sought an opinion from taxi-drivers, cafe workers or hostel staff concerning Israel's nuclear capacity, the word 'Armageddon' would come up. And these apologists seemed quite accepting of the fact that in order to strike this decisive blow against their neighbours, they might indeed need to take the rest of the planet with them!

Thankfully not every Israeli took this position. Indeed, the 'Free Vanunu' campaign itself had a strong local contingent of

active peace campaigners.

These local activists were some of the most impressive people I met during my stay in Israel. Even in Australia they would have been impressive – mainly young, idealistic University students, with a commitment to world peace and global disarmament – impressive but not extraordinary in our context. In this context though, growing up in an environment so overshadowed by violence and fear, these brave young souls stood out like shining lights.

The violent side of Israeli culture was never more tangible to me than it was on the day of Morde's release. I had traveled many thousands of miles to be reunited with my friend on the day that he walked free. In my dreams I had imagined our reunion countless times. Morde would walk through those gates with his belongings in one hand, and me and a few friends and family would be there to embrace him and lead him away. I didn't really realise until I reached the prison just how far from reality my imaginary depiction of that scene would prove to be.

There were hundreds of us at the prison, and the vast majority were not Morde's friends. As the time of his release drew near, I tried to move towards the prison gate where I had always imagined myself standing as Morde walked out. I soon found myself squeezed into the middle of an angry mob.

It was certainly one of the nastiest experiences of my life. The whole mass of men seemed to seethe with aggression, and each individual was competing to claw his way to the front, for what exact purpose was not entirely clear. Thankfully I could not understand the chants that were being sung to the tune of 'here

we go, here we go, here we go', but I was told later that the words for 'death' and 'traitor' had been central to all the mantras that were chanted that day.

On reflection I now think that it was a good thing that by the time Morde came through those prison gates the police had packed us together so tightly that I wasn't able to move a limb. What prevented me from running out to embrace Morde also prevented my neighbours from reaching him with more sinister intent.

Thankfully the car with my friend in it got away with no more than a dented panel and a shower of eggs. One antagonist did manage to mount his motorbike in time to catch the car, but after slamming into the side of the vehicle he lost his mount, and the 'free man' was able to proceed in peace.

Back at the gaol things then started to unravel. With their anger unresolved, the mob started to vent their aggression on other

targets. I found myself swept up in this like a wave breaking over my head. One second I was walking towards my bus. The next moment I was surrounded by a mob led by an angry rabbi, screaming at the top of his voice. 'Go home' was the only phrase I could understand. Equally unambiguous though were the rough hands that were being placed on my body, the kicks that were landing on my legs, and the spittle that was accumulating on my face.

I didn't see any path of escape in this situation, so I placed my hands together in a position of prayer and bowed my head, working on the hitherto successful strategy that if you refuse to fight back, guys are generally very reluctant to beat you up. It worked. A man grabbed me from behind with both hands and hauled me out of the centre of the mob. I made it back to my bus without further incident.

All of this would have been water off a duck's back had Morde and I then been able to board a plane and fly back to Australia. Unfortunately the authorities had ruled that this 'free' man should not be allowed to leave the country, nor go anywhere near a border or a foreign embassy, nor have any contact with 'foreigners'. The 'foreigner' restriction was aimed at the foreign press. Even so, technically, I wasn't allowed to spend extensive time with my old friend without risking seeing him re-arrested!

We were reunited briefly on the evening of that same day of his release. Unfortunately I cried so much that I really didn't get the chance to tell him all of the things that I had prepared for that moment. All I can hope for now is that one-day we will catch up properly – perhaps over a few beers back here in the land of Oz. I know that Morde would like that.

Getting Morde out of Israel is indeed the next big challenge for the Vanunu campaign. I don't know how hard this will prove to be. I do know that I had a bloody hard time getting out myself. In my case it wasn't that they didn't want me out (they held off the departure of the plane until I got on board). They just seemed determined to let me know that they didn't want me back.

I had been warned by the other peace activists of intimidation tactics employed by airport staff. Ironically, I initially made it through all four security checkpoints without being stopped. It was only as I proceeded to the final gate that a young man in a suit caught up with me and said, "Excuse me sir, but can I see your passport." He then told me that there had been a 'problem' and that he would need to retain my passport until the 'problem' had been resolved. I was then shuffled into a small room to begin a three-hour process of interrogation, body searching and luggage

examination.

In the end the verdict was that I was free to go and that there was nothing suspect about the contents of my bags, but that the bags themselves were suspect and that none of them could be taken on board as hand luggage. This meant that I could carry with me my camera, but not in my camera case, my laptop, but not my laptop case, my video camera, but not the bag with the shoulder strap that I lugged it around in, my toothbrush and paste, but not my toiletries bag, and even my Palm-pilot portable keyboard, but not the little vinyl dust-jacket that I kept it in. I could take what I liked, so long as I carried it in my arms.

It was just a game, though they managed to keep straight faces throughout the whole ordeal. For my part I refused to get on board without the bulk of my carry-on items. In the end they agreed to give me a large cardboard box to put them in.

And so my cheap holiday in other people's misery came to an end. But now the real work begins. For I returned home, but I left my friend inside the confines of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem,

where the good bishop has offered him sanctuary.

Morde can't leave the Cathedral grounds. He has at least two reporters on every exit, taking shifts to cover his movements 24-hours per day. If Morde tries to walk out into the street, he'll be immediately surrounded and identified, and given the number of locals that would count it as a point of pride to be responsible for his death, Morde's life in the open probably wouldn't last more than a few minutes.

I'd like to see my friend back here in Australia. I wonder if the Australian government has the courage to offer him citizenship?

DBS. April 2004

'Fighting' Father Dave Smith – Parish Priest, community worker, professional fighter, father of three. Dave is the only Australian in Holy Orders to turn pro boxer to help fund his work. He is Parish Priest in Dulwich Hill, Sydney, and has received numerous awards for his work with young people. Get a free preview of his book, 'Sex, the Ring & the Eucharist' when you sign up for Dave's newsletter at www.fatherdave.org

Mysterious Tel Aviv Lifestyle 2004

By Liron Rose

Israel. What do you think when your first hear this word? Right, like most people you imagine what you probably saw on CNN or NBC. Blown up buses, Suicide Bombers, Military Operations, Outright Violence - all over the place.

The only thing that probably cannot be imagined unless experienced first hand is - Day to day living. Hmm...what does that mean? People like us just living their lives? Do people go out? Absolutely. Yes, in spite of all security issues, most people just seem to carry on with their lives, with their families, with their jobs.

Some figures: The average salary is in Israel about \$US1800 per month, and the average monthly rent is \$US600 for a 2-bedroom flat in a decent Tel Aviv Suburb. Yes, quite a few people don't make that kind of money and cannot afford a \$600 flat, but others, somehow, seem to make much more, and spend more too. Cars are taxed heavily – over half of their price is "sales tax" but, you see many brand new \$50K European luxury models and new SUVs, some people seem to be able to pay for these.

People love to go out here. Hit a local popular bar. Imported beers don't come cheap at \$5 a bottle, and cocktails are more like \$8–\$9. There are scores of state-of-the-art well designed, well-stocked bars. This summer, many of them were packed even on weekdays.

Mostly a young well-dressed local crowd. Numerous restaurants and coffee shops - ditto.

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Tourists, absent for the good part of the last 3 years, could also be spotted on the Beach Promenade.

Tel Aviv, Israel 2004. The place has many faces.

Liron Rose (MBA) has been in the Internet Marketing scene since 1999. He served as the Business Development Manager of Suntrader Interactive, a full service interactive agency based in Canada, and as the Online Marketing Manager for Zootec Innovations, a start-up company in the gaming arena.

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