

Off The Pulpit

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Both Normal and Strange

Here is the secret that Israelis know: life in Israel is both more normal and less normal than the world assumes.



Let's start with more normal. Walking on the streets of Jerusalem — or Beer Sheva, or Eilat, or Tel-Aviv, or Haifa — one feels safe. Each time I visit, people ask if I'm worried. When I answer that I feel no more nervous here than on the streets of LA or NY or Miami, people think I'm exaggerating. But it is absolutely true. Life in Israel feels, well, like life.

At the same time, Israeli existence is less normal than people think. The streets may be safe but the corridors of history are perilous. This tiny nation is surrounded by implacable enemies, armed with ideology and weaponry and money. The United States, with Canada, Mexico and two oceans, or Europe, where after centuries of fighting the enmity is reduced to a vague cultural dislike, cannot imagine what it is to tread water in a sea of hostility.

Part of no group of nations, in a region that is melting down, Israel still has a life expectancy and happiness level that exceeds most of the developed nations of the world. Sound like a paradox? Welcome to Israel.