**Please translate the following and submit each one upon completion: השמלה הקצרה p. 42 במשפחה גדולה p. 164 Petach Devar” p. 4 “Sefer Ha Zeh” p. 10 “MiMitnadev” p. 171 “Ezo Gizanoot: p. 174 “Ema le Toar Rishon” p. 178 “MiDiploatia” p. 184 “Achreit HaDavar” (p. 184)**

**Foreword**

**Muki Tzur**

When a person steps beyond the threshold of their home, beyond the boundaries of the community in which they grew up and into adulthood, they find themselves among the many. They meet people other than themselves, with cultures of origin other than their own. They look for answers and points of departure from which they can start to form their personal and social self in the world unfolding before them and within them. They start to ask questions about their place in society, questions that touch upon both future aspirations and inherited traditions. They seek to drop anchors that will provide them with security but also hoist sails that will lead them to new horizons.

In the State of Israel, a large proportion of young people first encounter people different than themselves during their army service, although this is a rite of passage reserved mainly for Jews, in particular non-Orthodox Jews. Young people may also meet peers from all walks of life and all segments of society in places such as prisons and hospitals. More often than not, however, such institutions do not allow for a social dialogue, nor do they claim to promote such a dialogue.

This leaves public colleges, which are one of the only places to foster an encounter between all circles of society under the banner of professional learning, intellectual exchange, and educational accompaniment. Nevertheless, the question arises: does this framework lead to a dialogue or simply a confrontation of stereotypes? Or maybe both? We asked the students to serve as witnesses and to reveal to themselves and others a glimpse or two of the special encounters that take place at a college that reflects the multifaceted nature of Israeli society. Our appeal to the students was to write a kind of autobiography—the autobiography of people at the outset of their adult lives, documenting their first steps into maturity rather than the sum of the journey. It is, therefore, an enthusiastic, painful, awkward kind of autobiography. It does not trace a long road traveled but rather the imprints of childhood and youth. And while the invitation to write such documents expresses trust and an interest in the students, they are nevertheless aware of those proffering the invitation and write with them in mind. They try to broach subjects they deem important to this narrow target readership, yet, to our delight, they also reveal what is important to them. The call for submissions was phrased in a very loose manner. There was no required style or subject, no specified format of expression. It was aimed at the many. The result is a document composed of many different styles and revelatory of different issues. Some wished to take us on a psychological journey; others chose to emphasize the developing relationships within their families. Some sought to speak their minds about the dilemmas facing their village or ethnic group; others preferred to take a political stance. Some wrote in the first person; others opted for an omniscient third-person narrator presenting an ostensibly objective story. For some, this was a relatively easy task, as they had written about their chosen topic in the past or they enjoyed a rich Hebrew heritage; for others, the task was made more difficult by the fact that Hebrew is not their mother tongue or their language of learning. The editors’ job was to preserve, as much as possible, the various modes of expression while preventing the language barrier from obstructing meaning.

This book hails from the Galilee. Kinneret College is located in the Jordan Valley and is attended by students from a very wide area with very diverse cultural roots. It is inhabited by many communities with deep historical traditions. The Land of Israel, and Galilee, in particular, is both a homeland and a place of transit. It is the site of holy places and remnants of war, countless ruins and ancient roads, borders and plots of fertile land. The area where the college was established is steeped in cultural traditions that go back many generations. The most well-known of these is that of the sages of the Talmud and the Mishnah of the fourth and fifth centuries. Less well-known are the members of the Algerian resistance to the French conquest, exiled here in the nineteenth century. Other groups who have left their mark on the Galilee region include the Hassidic Jews and Sephardic and Ashkenazi resistance members who passed through it, various Christian factions and missionaries who worked here, the Arabs, Beduins, Circassians, and Druze tribes who continue to live here, as well as the kibbutz movement, the moshavniks, the villagers, and residents of the Jordan Valley and the Golan Heights.

The students of Kinneret College carry all these traditions with them. They bear scars from intercommunity confrontations and wars between countries and empires. All of them meet and mingle at the college; however, the students are not just the heirs of their cultures, not just the successors of their families’ ways of life. They are the mothers and fathers of a future in the midst of becoming, standing together before the unknown. The future calls out to them, threatens them, positions them within their tradition while forcing them to confront it. The college gives them the tools to prepare themselves, both professionally and educationally, to face the future, a task that sometimes seems impossible and engenders more conflicts than alliances. More than anything, perhaps, it leads to silences and the desire to avoid dealing with reality.

With this present undertaking, we sought to meet the challenge of the conscious encounter of the students with themselves and with their peers, to scope out the existing bridges, bolster their robustness, and encourage the formation of new ones. The editors were not necessarily in agreement with everything the students wrote. Some of the opinions expressed here go against the consensus; some of them can even be described as far-removed. Nevertheless, it was important to the editors to give the writers a free hand in expressing themselves.

Years from now, the authors of these essays may reread what they wrote and compose something different. Their perspectives will change, and this testimony from their youth will serve as a milestone marking the distance they’ve come.

Kinneret College was born roughly fifty-five years ago, in 1965, as a place of learning for older residents of the Jordan Valley wishing to take courses after work. The concept of “retirement” did not yet exist as such, and everyone continued working as long as they could; however, many were not satisfied with work alone. These would come to the college in the afternoon to study. The college established ties with Bar-Ilan University with the aim of connecting with the roots of Jewish culture. Its main fields of study were the humanities and the sciences. Over the years, its curricula and mode of operation gradually changed, and young students from all over the region began to enroll. The study program became professional-academic. It was part of the “college revolution,” when colleges began to appeal to the public at large, emphasize their local aspect, and bring different cultures together.

Continuing in that spirit, the present book is an invocation of hope. It calls out to our students to pursue and deepen their personal self-examination, just as it calls out to Israeli society to pursue and deepen its civic self-examination and build the bridges necessary for the advancement of both people and society. The editors saw fit to remind Israeli society to seek out the connections within it, to support its young people, and encourage them to break through boundaries based on solidarity and a critical view of themselves that is as free of prejudice and preconceived notions as possible. We did not censor the writers. Each of them expressed their unique point of view. Most of them do not see themselves as authors. The call for submissions was issued within the context of the sociology faculty. Any edits made to the essays were informed by our deep-seated belief in the right of the students to express their worldviews.

Professor Sybille Heilbrunn and Maria Gretzky initiated the project as part of a joint course conducted by the Department of Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Education and Community in 2018–2020 at Kinneret College. Zohar Tsur served as a teaching assistant during the course and actively participated in preparing the book for publication.

The journey leading up to the project and the insights we have gleaned from the students’ stories are discussed in the Introduction chapter.

**There is room in this book for everyone**

“As soon as I grow up, I will become an astronaut, I’ll walk on the moon and then, maybe, if I have a bit of spare time, I will swing by Mars to get a nice gift for my mom”—a sentence describing the dreams and ambitions of a Kinneret College student, which appears in one of the fascinating stories featured in this book. The student who wrote it brought us all into his world, into his fantasies. He could walk by each of us at any point without us knowing he was the author of that endlessly hopeful sentiment.

This book is a collection of stories written by a group of students at Kinneret College, stories that place hopes and dreams alongside family histories, beliefs and ideology, and the difficult journeys some of them have had to undergo in order to reach academia. Young, female Arab students, in particular, have had to face opposition from their families as well as the encounter with the unknown at the college, an encounter with the other, with the Hebrew language, and with student life away from the village, away from their parents.

**There is room in this book for everyone**. Reading the stories within it, one cannot help but wonder what links a young woman from a Muslim village with a young woman raised in a Zionist kibbutz or a Druze from the Golan Heights and the Secretary-General of the Kibbutzim Movement? What do they have in common? The answer is that their individual stories, brought together here, collectively create the patchwork of a place, a colorful mosaic of great complexity.

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict hinders the possibility of normal communal ties between all of the country’s citizens, especially between the Israeli-Arab and Jewish populations. Therefore, this book constitutes a welcome initiative to create a space for an encounter on equal terms, an encounter that so rarely happens in the daily reality of the State of Israel. It presents the stories of men and women, Arabs and Jews from different backgrounds and cultures, hailing from villages, kibbutzim, moshavim, towns, and cities.

Some of the stories, especially those of Arab women, took me back to a time, many years ago, when I was a young student at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, an eighteen-year-old girl from Kafr Yasif in the North going down to the southernmost reaches of the country and encountering, for the first time, Israeli society, the difficulties of the language barrier, and the experience of being treated as the “other” by Jewish society—the dominant majority that represents the national consensus. There are many similarities between the stories of Jewish and Arab female students, but there are also major differences. Although many years have elapsed since my time as a student, I was moved to read the stories of the struggle of Arab women who had decided to enter academia in spite of opposition from their families. Yet I also found myself identifying with the story of the Jewish student raised in a kibbutz on the values of socialism and communal living and her disappointment at the discovery that these values have all but vanished from the world. She reminded me of the socialist upbringing I myself had received at home and as a member of a youth movement, and I felt her pain at the dissipation of her dream of a better world, a world of justice, equality, and solidarity among the nations.

Ethnography presented me with a new space for dialogue and the coexistence of different narratives. It is perhaps a less threatening space than the face-to-face encounter or a preparatory stage before meeting face-to-face, the purpose of which is to get to know the people behind the story. There is great variance among the essays, and they contain statements about reality that may be hard to swallow, particularly about the two different realities experienced by Arab and Jewish women as individuals belonging to two nations living in conflict. Nevertheless, these stories also share many common elements rooted in their authors’ confrontation with a patriarchal, chauvinist society, a society that marginalizes people just as much based on physical appearance as it does based on identity and belonging.

I was also attracted to the stories of the few male students who participated in the project, mostly because they talk about their childhoods and their plans as well as the sobering experiences they had along the way, such as their army service. They recount their expectations and disappointments, the things that shaped their identities.

The ethnographic accounts collected in this book presents us with the opportunity to read and get to know the story of the Jewish or Arab other, to find out about their hearts’ desires, to identify with them, share their joys and pains, to recognize and accept the hitherto invisible layers in the lives of the people surrounding us.

Finally, it is important to remember that each author draws their story from their environment, from the past, from the collective unconscious, and the tightly woven mesh of connections between personal experience and collective-universal experience. People are, among other things, the product of historical relations, and thus, the story of one person has a lot to teach us about the political and cultural conflict and about seeing the other.

Nasrin Murkus

Born in Kafr Yasif, Nasrin Murkus is an educator and group instructor. She has developed programs in the field of education and the public and non-profit sectors. A mother of two residing in Nof HaGalil, she works as a pedagogical instructor and practical experience coordinator of the secondary school track in the Department of Education at Oranim Academic College.

**The short dress that revealed the problem**

**Giana Marzuq**

My name is Giana Marzuq, I am twenty-four years old, and I live in Kafr Ein Duma. I finished twelve years of school in my village. I grew up in a family made up of four younger siblings, a mother and father, and myself, the eldest daughter. I am single and speak four languages: a good level of Hebrew, Arabic as my mother tongue, English fluently, and Italian fluently. I am currently unemployed. Father is a handyman, Mother is a housewife, my eldest brother is studying nursing, my sister studies medical appliances, and I also have a brother who’s going into the army this year and another younger brother who’s in the seventh grade. In 2015, my father was involved in a road accident and broke his leg. He was crippled and couldn’t work. There was no money in the house and nothing to eat. I cried, I didn’t know what to do, and Mother couldn’t work because she had to stay with Father and take care of him. I decided to go out and get a job. I handed out resumes at all kinds of stores close to the village; I went to an interview at a chain that hires Jews and Arabs, even though my Hebrew wasn’t very good at the time. Slowly but surely, I got my bearings and managed to overcome the difficulties. I started working and helping my mother, my brothers and sister. None of them worked. I started saving money for school; we went through a very tough period. Relatives helped us out with money; my closest friends also gave me money, about 10,000 shekels. I thank them for it.

My parents agreed for me to study even though, or maybe because, they never got the opportunity to study. They supported me and encouraged me to enroll. I started studying at Kinneret College in 2017 in the Behavioral Sciences department. I am currently in my third year, which will be my last. At the beginning of my studies, during the first semester, something happened that stressed me out and made me feel uncomfortable. It brought on a lot of unpleasant feelings for me.

On my first day, I came to the college wearing a short dress. I drove there in my car, and my parents didn’t see me before I left; they were still sleeping. When I got back from school to the village, I went to my grandparents’ house for dinner. They saw me wearing the short dress. Right away, they called my mother and father and told them about the way I was dressed. They reproached my parents: how can they let me wear something like that to school? To a place where there are lots of male students? My parents called me and demanded that I come home. They began humiliating and punishing me because in the eyes of the villagers and in the eyes of my parents especially, it is a disgrace to go out dressed like that.

It didn’t make sense. In Arab culture, any girl who wears a short skirt is considered an “impudent girl.” That kind of girl is not fit for marriage because if she wears revealing clothing, she won’t be able to mind her children in the future. If she wears revealing clothing, she’ll control her husband. Short clothing can be worn by a woman only inside the house, not outside. Short clothing outside is indecent, it’s whorish. It’s worn by a girl with no future, a girl who should be living on the road, and anyone who talks to her should be punished. I knew I couldn’t control the situation, that I couldn’t change their minds.

I still don’t understand this culture I am in. Sometimes I feel like I am stuck in a cage! I have no possibility of venturing out of it unless I get permission! I was angry at Mother, at Father, at Grandmother and Grandfather. I told them I was twenty-one-years -ld and I had the right to make a free choice. They had no right to prevent me from wearing what I wanted. I don’t listen to and don’t care about anyone in the village. We’re in 2017, after all.

My parents yelled at me and told me to go to my room and not come out. After much shouting and humiliations, they told me they’d pull me out of school because I broke the norms of the house and of the village. But in the end, I managed to convince them that I need to study in order to achieve my goals. I can’t give up school. I promised them that it would never happen again. At first, they didn’t listen and didn’t want to talk to me. But when I spoke to them respectfully and told them how important my ambitions and my future were, they were persuaded and forgave me.

I discovered that these are the norms not just in my village but in most villages, perhaps even in most traditional countries. They look at short clothing as a phenomenon revealing the woman’s moral character. It’s a state of affairs that is spreading in all kinds of places, oppressing the identity of the Arab woman and limiting her freedom of choice.

As an Arab woman, I have no right to choose my clothing freely. I am obliged to obey the norms of my village in particular and of Arab society in general. That much was clear when my parents punished me for breaking the norms. I always had to get their approval for what I can and can’t wear. An identity that includes choice is the privilege of men alone. As far as they’re concerned, they’re the ones in control, and you have to obey every word they say. It shows in the way my parents treat my male brothers as opposed to how they treat me. They’re allowed to smoke, to use the *shisha*, to spend time outside the house late in the evening. Because men are allowed to do all the things women can’t. And that is how my identity as a free woman is nullified.

When I started studying at the college, I began to see the world from a different perspective. I saw that I could overcome those fettering norms through school, through the social ties and relationships I formed. At college, I found my identity as a woman who deserves to learn and accomplish things even though she lives in such a closed society that only cares about controlling women and oppressing them. I had faith that I could fight those norms through the goals I set myself.

In summary, I want to say to all the Arab women: wake up! Believe in yourselves, make your voices heard, don’t keep silent. Go and study. You can strengthen your identity through education. That is the key! You have the right to express your opinions. Do not give up your identity. Make your dreams come true. No one in the world can control you.

**Volunteer to professor?**

**Sibylle Heilbrunn**

I was born in Germany, where my family lives to this day. I first came to Israel in 1979 as a volunteer at Kibbutz Barkai, where I met my partner. Today we have two children and two grandchildren and live in Pardes Hanna. I currently serve as the dean of the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Kinneret Academic College.

Following my first stay at the kibbutz, I went back to Germany and resumed my studies at the University of Tübingen. When I returned to Israel in the early 1980s, I decided to continue studying sociology and humanities at Tel Aviv University. I completed my Ph.D. at Haifa University in 1999. In the last decade or so, I got to travel quite a lot and enjoy life between two worlds—constantly transitioning from Europe and Germany, on the one hand, and Israel, on the other hand. My academic activities also included a great deal of involvement in international research and educational projects. However, the recent COVID-19 crisis has made it difficult to pursue these aspects of my personal and professional life. In fact, my willingness to live in Israel—a challenging task in and of itself—was always based on the possibility of frequent travel abroad. COVID has disrupted the foundation of this “bargain,” albeit hopefully temporarily.

In light of my personal background as a non-Jewish German woman, I often ask myself why I have chosen to live here, in Israel, of all places, and serve as a kind of “representative” of the German people to its Jewish victims. In 2012, I finally decided to face this question head-on, and, together with Anita Haviv-Horiner, we embarked on a research journey tracing the feeling of national belonging among second-generation Holocaust survivors. The insights that emerged from the interviews we conducted with participants in Israel and Germany were turned into a book published in German under the title *Heimat?—Vielleicht*, (*Homeland? – Perhaps*) which attested to the human need to belong. These interviews taught us that the feeling of belonging is interwoven into the different contexts and the personal stories of the interviewees.

In recent years, my research has dealt with class issues, emphasizing the questions of background and social belonging among entrepreneurs from different groups in Israel’s social fabric. As part of this research, I have studied business entrepreneurship among kibbutz members, women, migrants, repatriates of former USSR countries, Ethiopian Jews, Palestinian Arabs, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and asylum seekers. In these studies, I have focused on the interrelation between the entrepreneurial spirit and the cultural background of the entrepreneurs, including the social structures of their culture of origin. By emphasizing the unique aspects of entrepreneurs hailing from these groups in contrast to the universal phenomenon of entrepreneurship, I seek to reveal the systemic discrimination that sometimes works against entrepreneurs belonging to certain population groups.

Overall, my work seeks to reveal the hidden connections between the entrepreneur’s social and economic advantages or disadvantages, on the one hand, and the potential for social mobility of someone belonging to a marginalized group, on the other hand. In addition, I turn a critical eye on the assumption that entrepreneurship is an engine of economic growth and the myth that success comes as a result of talent and hard work.

Over the years, I have held many academic positions. At Ruppin Academic Center, I took part in developing a designated academic program for Ethiopian repatriates that takes into account the singular challenges facing young people from to this minority group in integrating Israeli academia. This experience helped advance my understanding of the complex reality of Israeli society and the different policies and institutional treatment of immigrants from different backgrounds. Later in my career, I served in a number of administrative and academic roles at the Institute for Immigration and Social Integration, and in 2012–2014, I was made head of the MA in Immigration and Social Integration program at Ruppin Academic Center.

In 2014, driven by a sense that it was time for me to meet other groups and strata of Israeli society, I applied for the position of dean at Kinneret College. I was thrilled to get the job because I strongly believe in the important contribution public colleges make toward the creation of social mobility for first-generation college students. To my mind, the higher education system has to give all citizens the opportunity to participate in the Israeli job market in a significant and rewarding way, and so my objective is to make higher education accessible to as many people as possible.

Lately, I have been collaborating on a number of research projects whose aim is to examine the ways in which communities with different levels of collectivity have faced the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions. I believe that communities based on different models of communal life, solidarity, and mutual responsibility offer alternatives to the neoliberalism that has come to dominate the world in general and developed countries—Israel among them—in particular. As I show in my research, these communities have shown themselves better equipped to handle the wide-reaching social effects of the COVID19 pandemic.

**In terms of my personal life, the last few years have been darkened by the shadow of the death of my niece, Johanna, the eldest daughter of my sister Ulrika and her husband Phil, and the sister of Antonia. Johanna passed away suddenly, in her sleep, and without any prior warning signs on October 19, 2019, at the very young age of 24. Her death impacted our lives in many important ways; her picture graces the cover of this book. I am grateful to my colleagues who have agreed to put her photo on the cover. I believe that the stories of many, all of them different and unique, represent what I have learned from Johanna: “*Jeder tickt anders aber keiner tickt richtig*”—** **everyone ticks differently, but nobody ticks right.**

**“When have you been a victim of racism, blondie?”**

**Maria Gretzky**

In 1995, when I was three years old, my parents, who had been born and raised in Kazakhstan, immigrated to Israel as part of the “great immigration” of ex-Soviet Jews. We settled in Kiryat Yam, where I spent most of my childhood and teenage years. Neither of my parents had attended university, but my father was an avid autodidact and always encouraged me to ask questions, explore the world, and, to some extent, in the future, play my part in the “ethnic-cultural script” ascribed to repatriates of the ex-soviet republics in Israel.

At the age of fourteen, I joined the *HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed* (Working and Learning Youth) movement where I began to shape my socio-political identity. I identified myself with left-wing movements and became a political activist and educator. I had no “Russian” friends within the movement. I didn’t speak Russian and tried to distance myself as much as possible from my “Russian” identity, which I had learned to associate with a lack of belonging, right-wing and racist political leanings, low socioeconomic status, and the experience of being a foreigner within Israeli culture.

At sixteen, when I first received my national identification card, under “Ethnicity,” it read: “Muslim.” I remember being surprised and full of questions about my identity, which I had not had the occasion to ponder until then. I thought about my communist grandfather, who used to proudly declare: “In my family, we’ve got Jews, Christians, and Muslims all living together,” and about my grandmother, who had grown up in a Jewish family and was transferred to an orphanage at the age of ten to escape the Nazis. I thought about my activities in the *HaNoar* movement and my trainees, and in the end, I decided that I was Jewish because I was brought up with Jewish culture and fought for the values of Israeli society, and no bureaucratic institution could determine my identity and belonging to the society, people, and history of this country for me.

At first, I was afraid to show the new ID to friends. With time, however, I adopted a more post-modern approach to my identity and stopped worrying about it. Sometimes I felt Jewish, sometimes atheist, and sometimes Israeli. I mostly chose to adopt universal identities—those of a citizen of the world woman leftist. In a certain sense, I was even proud of that line on my ID card that read “Muslim,” not because I had any real connection to Islam, but because it was an opportunity to protest against the widespread racism and prejudice toward Muslims in Israel with my own body and formal identity.

In August 2011, I was drafted into the Israeli Defense Forces as a “lone soldier”—defined as a serviceman or woman without immediate family in Israel—as part of the Nahal program with most of my friends from the youth movement and served as a basic training instructor. The Russian speakers I got to meet in the army usually served in roles that were considered low-status by the other training instructors and program members, such as quartermastership, armory, and kitchen positions. This state of affairs confirmed my perception that “Russianness” tends to be associated with marginalization and contempt. Prejudice and discrimination against the “Russian” minority played a dual role in my life at the time: on the one hand, I sought to avoid being identified with this group based on my notion of Russian-speakers as being disadvantaged; on the other hand, despite my efforts to erase any traces of “Russianness” or belonging to this group, I was still subjected to prejudice and discrimination as a “Russian” girl who had grown up in Israeli society.

When I was released from the army, I went back to life at the commune and political action in the movement. As an immigrant and a former “lone soldier,” I knew it was a privilege that I would not be able to afford for much longer and that I had to leave the program and the movement in order to assure my financial security. At that time, I knew practically no one who had pursued higher education; yet, it was clear to me that this was what I wanted for myself and had to strive for the moment I left the movement.

I have always loved learning and saw research as a way of understanding and explaining the world, perhaps as a result of the way my father raised me or out of the intellectual curiosity developed in the course of *HaNoar* seminars. In addition, I knew that I would need a college degree to get a job in Israel, which, by this time, had become a basic prerequisite for any position. I wished to enter a practical academic studies track that would give me solid economic prospects. For a while, I thought about learning social work, a field that would allow me to undergo practical training following my degree studies. However, eventually, I chose a field that seemed both practical and socio-political, one that would satisfy my intellectual curiosity and broaden my vision of the place I call home. And thus, I chose to apply for a degree in State of Israel Studies at Kinneret Academic College.

As was the case in *HaNoar*, I was the only “Russian” in the State of Israel Studies Department, which allowed me to continue to shirk my Russian identity. I felt that the paths I had chosen (in the movement, the army, my studies) made it possible for me to escape my Russianness, to forget about the racist discrimination I had experienced in Kiryat Yam and to (at least try to) prevent such incidents from occurring in the future. The one time I had brought my Russian identity up for discussion during my undergraduate studies was during a conversation with one of my first-year lecturers. After a few classes in which he had discussed the racist attitudes of Ashkenazi Jews toward Mizrahi Jews in Israel, I approached him after class and told him that, although I do not disagree with his claims about the discriminations Mizrahi Jews experience to this day, the dichotomist Ashkenazi-Mizrahi discourse ignores other groups in Israeli society such as Arabs, Ethiopians, and Russians, who find themselves left out of the discussion. He studied me with a puzzled look and said: “You? When have you been a victim of racism, blondie? Just because everyone thinks you’re their Ukrainian whore?” I didn’t respond and never brought the issue up again.

As part of the educational visits that were included in the course curriculum, we would be asked to bring “sumptuous home-cooked dishes” for a potluck lunch. The students and the teachers would bring dishes, the names of which were unfamiliar to me. I remember the lecturer expressing enthusiasm over various dishes and conducting long discussions about them, the way they were prepared, and the “unique ingredients” that went into them while using terms and names of foods that I had never heard of before. I remember it bothering me: why do they talk so much about food on an academic campus that’s supposed to teach us about other, “more important” things? In retrospect, I realized that it was perhaps the most important thing I had learned from that teacher—what happens when your cultural and class boundaries are suddenly exposed, despite your best efforts to erase them.

Everything about my undergraduate studies seemed fascinating to me. I made the Dean’s List, and I still had enough spare time to continue my political activism, which has been an important part of my life since my time in the *HaNoar* movement. In my first year, I founded a discussion group called “*Dugri*” (Real Talk) for Jewish and Arab students; in my second year, I joined the Student Union and served as head of the Social Involvement Department; in my third year, I wrote a seminar paper about officially unrecognized Bedouin villages in Galilee. In hindsight, I suppose that I must have chosen to work on topics far removed from anything related to the ex-soviet immigrant community in Israel as a way of distancing myself from my “Russian” identity.

In the course of my studies, I got to know Professor Sibylle Heilbrunn when I took a course entitled “Social Cohesion and Solidarity in Israeli Society,” for which I also served as a teaching assistant. The encounter with Sibylle was special to me and became a turning point for my outlook on different identities in Israeli society, my own identity among them. Both the course content and the informal conversations we had during it made me think of concepts that challenge the boundaries of the hegemonic Ashkenazi identity in Israeli society and recognize the importance of giving a voice and a stage to students from the periphery who come from a variety of backgrounds. These fruitful exchanges are what gave birth to the idea of the present book.

It was when I started my Master’s degree in Sociology and Anthropology at Ben-Gurion University that I first encountered Russianness in a different context. The revelation occurred when I met my advisor, Dr. Yulia Lerner, and became friendly with Russian-speaking peers in my department. I had never had “Russian” friends before, and, therefore, when the school year began, I did not think we would manage to find a common language. Nevertheless, our repeated interactions as students in the same department revealed that we had much in common, not only socially but also in terms of our positioning in academic and research fields. These fellow students became my first “Russian friends,” and it is thanks to them that I started speaking Russian again, which became our common language. For the first time, and in the context of a graduate degree of all places, I felt that I belonged, not because I had managed to hide my Russianness/Sovietness, but because I was finally allowed to let it show.

I first came across Yulia Lerner’s name when I entered the department and started looking for a thesis advisor. To be honest, I was surprised to find a “Russian” lecturer and researcher working at a university, especially in the fields of humanities and social sciences, since I had never heard of any before. My only contact with Russian speakers in academia prior to this was with the cleaners. Our first meeting in Yulia’s office was fascinating both in terms of the contents of the conversation and the context in which it took place: outside of the familiar borders of peripherality and marginality. I remember walking out of her office and finding it hard to believe that what had felt like five minutes was, in fact, two hours. Yulia and I spoke Hebrew to each other rather than Russian; however, shortly after I started writing my thesis under her guidance, she organized a conference at the university with the participation of researchers from all over the world, many of whom spoke Russian. Even though talks at the conference were given in English, many speakers had a pronounced Russian accent, and I heard them speaking Russian among themselves during breaks. I felt strange; something about the situation didn’t feel “right” to me. I realized that this was the first time I had been exposed to the Russian language in the context of academia, spoken by researchers from whom I aimed to learn and whom I wished to emulate. The conference and the meeting with Yulia meant a great deal to me, since they made it possible for me to imagine myself pursuing a career in academia and belonging to it. Surprisingly and, to me, at least, counterintuitively, it was when I had given up attempting to erase my “Russianness” that I finally felt like I belonged, like I was recognized.

Today, I am a Ph.D. student at the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Ben-Gurion University. I study the fast-changing field of higher education and the ways in which digitalization and commercialization processes shape our knowledge culture. In this context, I also understand the importance of including researchers from diverse backgrounds in shaping and creating the processes of knowledge creation in academia.

The ostensibly personal journey traced by my biography is laced with social and cultural processes and parallels the life stories of many immigrants in Israeli society. While, on the one hand, my story demonstrates the stability of cultural and class borders, it also attests to their fluidity. Transitions between identities that are perceived as contradictory—for instance, Jewish/Muslim, “Russian”/ wannabe-Ashkenazi, first-generation university student from the periphery/academic researcher—reflect the possibility of adopting hybrid and dynamic identities that are not bound by rigid and clear-cut categories and afford varying degrees of freedom.

**Mother to a Bachelor’s Degree**

**Zohar Tsur**

I was born in Kibbutz Ein Gev in late 1975, the youngest of four in a family with deep Zionist roots residing on the banks of the Kinneret. I am a third-generation descendant of a founding member: my grandfather on my mother’s side was killed defending the kibbutz. My father came to Ein Gev as part of the Nahal program at the age of eighteen. Both my parents have been actively involved in the kibbutz for most of their lives and have served in numerous public roles over the years. My father worked in the Kibbutz Movement for many years and was even Secretary-General during the peak of the financial crisis, from which the movement emerged stronger and able to continue developing and expanding.

My father’s parents hail from Jerusalem, where they worked for the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. My grandfather was an envoy to Egypt, Greece, and Belgium, an ambassador in France, and the first Israeli ambassador in Latin America. My two grandmothers were both strong and opinionated women who came to Israel before the outbreak of World War I from the Baltic countries, each from a different background. They both served as anchors and unifying magnets for their respective sides of the family and fostered a close friendship between them.

I grew up in a collective kibbutz in the 1980s. We were not raised with any abundance, but nor did we lack for anything. Our lives revolved around educational institutions: school and the children’s house. The adult community of the kibbutz was like a blanket cocooning us and provided for all our needs. The children’s upbringing was a primary concern. We were immersed in the day-to-day political reality of the Labor Movement without really understanding what that meant, but we did understand humility, community, sensitivity, and friendship. There was a big group of us, and we maintain our bonds of friendship to this day.

After my army service, I returned to live on the kibbutz for a year, following which I traveled in South America and then stayed for an extended period in New York. I blossomed in the urban metropolis where I could enjoy anonymity, walking around the streets without the slightest chance of anyone recognizing me or knowing my family. Later, I returned to Israel and moved back and forth between Tel Aviv and my home region of the North for a while. In my late twenties, I came back to the kibbutz, first as a resident and then, at the age of thirty-two, as a full-fledged member.

Throughout my youth, until the age of almost thirty, I had worked in the tourism sector. It was only by chance that I ended up in the field of education when I was asked to replace my sister as an instructor. I stayed on for a decade, by the end of which I was running the education system in Ein Gev. I loved teaching, the contact with children and teens, the ability to make a difference in the lives of others. The job also included accompanying the teenage students on trips to Poland. I went on three of these, and, already during the first one, I felt a change starting to percolate within me. Everything I had absorbed over the years from my parents’ upbringing and my Zionist home had solidified into an Israeli, kibbutznik identity, striving toward equality, humanism, and a desire for deep and close friendships with the people who make up the puzzle of my life. I wanted to dig deeper into my work in education and, at a late age, enrolled in an undergraduate program in Education and Community at Kinneret Academic College.

At a certain point, not having a partner with whom I could start a family, I decided to have a child on my own. The decision to birth and raise a child alone, in a remote kibbutz, was not a common one at the time. I did not encounter any objections, but the members were not familiar with the process, and it aroused many questions and much curiosity. Since then, the kibbutz has been home to three other mothers who have gone through the same process. There was, in my decision, an element of disillusionment with the dream of love and life-partnership; however, the moment I had set my mind on it, I became mission driven. The medical process of donor insemination is relatively long and entails many tests to see that the mother is suitable to undergo the procedure. Throughout it, I always had friends at my side. After a few tries, I got pregnant and gave birth in early 2011. My new title—single mother. I entered the process secure in the knowledge that I would have the help and support of my family and my circle of close friends. When my eldest was born, I was serving in the public function of the kibbutz’s education coordinator. Feeling societal pressure to expand my family, two years later I decided to give my son a sibling in the same way as he had come into the world. This time the journey was much longer and more arduous, including a stillbirth and repeated attempts. However, at the end of the winding road, I gave birth to my second son, and our little family grew. Only in retrospect was I able to look at the process and at my sense of mission that was amplified with every failed attempt.

My family has grown and expanded in the kibbutz; my parents and my siblings also still live here. My sister has three daughters. Her husband, my brother-in-law, Amichai, passed away suddenly at a young age. For a long time, we were four generations of the same family living in Ein Gev—my grandmother on my mother’s side lived here to very old age, and we were able to give her great-grandchildren who became part of her life. It is a multi-generational safe haven for us, and the proximity to my parents gives us all strength.

My identity continues its journey of becoming. I am still very much involved in all the processes that our changing kibbutz is undergoing: I am a member of the administration, and I am active on various committees. Today I am in the midst of completing a Master’s degree at Ruppin Academic College, working as Professor Sibylle Heilbrunn’s teaching assistant and assistant lecturer at the Education and Community Department, which is my home away from home. It is there that I completed my undergraduate studies and I felt immediately connected to the spirit of the faculty. We were the first graduating class at the department: three women at a relatively advanced age for undergrads. The academic comradeship, the course content, and the encounter with the lecturers opened up our worlds. In our third year, we attended Professor Heilbrunn’s course on solidarity in a heterogeneous society. Later, my work as her teaching assistant led to my participation in this book of ethnographies.

My studies at the college were the first meaningful encounter I had with a society that had always been geographically close yet entirely unfamiliar. Every one of the students I have met is a world onto themselves; each of them is a large and unexplored part of Israeli society. I hope that this first acquaintance will allow us to keep developing our ability to create closeness and connections between the diverse parts of the human puzzle that make up our academic community.

**From Diplomat to Educator**

**Muky Tsur**

I was born in Jerusalem around the time that Germany annexed Austria in March 1938. My parents were Ya’akov Tsur Tshernovitch and Vera Gottlieb. I grew up in the Rehavia neighborhood in Jerusalem and started school at the Rehavia Gymnasium, just like my father, until the onset of the War of Independence. At the end of the war, my family traveled to South America, with my father representing Israel as an ambassador. There, I entered a youth movement and, at the age of eleven, decided that I would live on a kibbutz, even though I didn’t know what a kibbutz was at the time. When Father was appointed Ambassador to France, I was fourteen. I went back to Jerusalem to live with my aunt and uncle, Yemima Tshernovitxh and Yossef Avidar. When they too left for the Soviet Union to serve as ambassadors, my cousins and I moved into a commune we had set up in Jerusalem in order to avoid the diplomats’ life our parents were leading in Paris and Moscow.

 At the age of eighteen, I arrived in Ein Gev together with my Amirim unit. We enlisted in the Nahal program with Ein Gev, then a border kibbutz, as our base. I did a course with *HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed* and, at the end of my army service, was elected to be the kibbutz’ secretary, a post that I was chosen for three times. In 1962, I became head of the instruction department of *HaNoar*. I married an Ein-Gev native, Amy Zukerman and then went off to study philosophy, Hebrew philosophy, and Kabbalah at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I taught at the Moon House regional high school and instructed groups in the youth movement.

Following the Six-Day War, I participated in producing the book *Si’ach lochamim* (*Fighters’ Discourse*), edited by Avraham Shapira. I edited the “On their Way” section with Ta’ir Zvulun and Elisha Velotzky in memory of the casualties of the war, as well as the “Conversations among Youths” together with Yariv Ben Aharon and Avishai Grossman. In 1969, I went with my family on a mission to mobilize Jewish students in the United States and worked for the *HaBonim* youth movement.

At the time, I was already engrossed in research about the Pioneer Movement, the kibbutz, and Israeli society. I went back to the kibbutz and was working in the kibbutz restaurant when the Yom Kippur War broke out. Later, I started editing *Shdamot* (Fields)—the organ of the Kibbutz Movement youth founded by Avraham Shapira. He also edited my first published book, titled *Lelo ktunat passim* (Without a Coat of Many Colors). I taught Israeli history at Oranim College while I pursued my research. Later, I worked in the instruction department of the United Kibbutz Movement, where we held the first workshops on Israeli history and the Pioneer movement, in which we studied texts and conducted group discussions. I taught the history of Palestine to students from all reaches of Israeli Jewish and Arabic society. In 1989, I was elected to serve as the Secretary-General of the United Kibbutz Movement, a position I held for four years. At the end of my term, I continued my research and teaching work. I have edited and written several books, and I try to maintain this activity to this day.

Today, my four children and five grandchildren all live beside me in Kibbutz Ein Gev, supplying me with strength and hope. I believe in overcoming through education, striving toward justice and equality, and communal creativity in Israeli society, among the Jewish people, and the human race as a whole. In the meantime, I continue to learn from documents and, especially, from people.

**From a Large Family Guarding the Golan**

**Yaffa Atzil**

My name is Yaffa Atzil. I am thirty-four (very nearly thirty-five) years old, and I live in Ein Zivan in the Golan Heights. We are six children in my family, and I am the youngest. From all my brothers and sisters, I have eleven nieces and nephews and counting. We are a somewhat strange family that sticks out on the social landscape. When I mention the fact that I am one of six children, people tend to ask if we are Orthodox or if one of my parents had a previous marriage, and sometimes I even get comments that it’s unusual for an Ashkenazi family. That’s us, secular Ashkenazim without any previous marriages—my parents just happened to want to have a lot of kids.

My family is a significant part of my identity, of who I am, and especially of how I am defined by those around me. I should mention that my parents are pioneer settlers of the Golan. My father always held public positions and has been considered a central figure in the area since the settlement period. His reputation precedes him, and, naturally, it precedes me too. The very fact that there are so many of us and that I am the youngest has meant that my family name has always been one of influence: I have always been known and recognized as the “daughter of” or the “sister of.” Often, my given name becomes secondary, and most people refer to me by my surname. There have even been instances where I was hired by certain employers without a real interview or any kind of vetting because “if you’re the daughter of…or the sister of…I’m sure you’ll do great.” It used to happen even when I lived in Tel Aviv; it’s a small country, after all. There are positive sides to this, to all these perks and preferential treatment, but, and there is a big but, it comes with a lot of responsibility—I mustn’t ever disappoint because it will harm my family’s reputation and let everybody down. Or, at least, that’s how I’ve always seen it. So that is one significant part that defines me, who I am, and my identity.

Another part that I think had a great influence on who I am today is where I’m from. As I wrote in the opening lines, I was born and raised in Ein Zivan in the Golan Heights. As a child born in the Golan in the 1980s, I experienced my early childhood years as revolving around terrorist infiltrations across the border and when we’d have to lock all our doors, windows, and blinds until the danger passed. I would go out with my dad and our neighbor on patrol shifts to guard the *yeshuv*, sleeping in the car while they kept watch. There were also sirens from time to time. I especially remember there being talk about returning the Golan Heights to the Syrians. I heard the Prime Minister at the time, Yitzhak Rabin (RIP), say that the Golan was an inseparable part of Israel and I remember the excitement I felt at that particular assembly. I also remember the sense of harsh disappointment my parents and the rest of the *yishuv* felt when they learned that Rabin intended to give the Golan back to the Syrians—a feeling of bitter betrayal.

When I was ten, I woke up one morning to the sound of my mother crying while she stroked my hair and told me that our Prime Minister had been assassinated. Everybody was crying, which was confusing to my ten-year-old self since, up until that point, we hadn’t liked him, seeing him as a traitor. It took me years to make the distinction and understand that he had betrayed us, the residents of the Golan, but this had nothing to do with the pain we experienced as citizens of a country in which one man who disagreed with his politics decided one day to go and murder a democratically elected Prime Minister. Traitor or not, this was not the direction in which we wanted our country to go. To this day, the subject of Rabin and his assassination evoke mixed emotional baggage for me, often leading people to pass judgment on me, but I don’t have the words to explain it to them. How do you explain to people who have never had a similar experience what it feels like to live year after year with a question mark hovering over your home, the tension in the air every time the subject of the Golan Heights is mentioned, the almost innate need we have to protect our home and to explain that the Golan really is an inseparable part of Israel, not just a slogan.

Growing up in the Golan Heights in those years was growing up in the midst of struggle. It’s memories of handing out stickers at crossroads on Saturdays under the pouring rain, our fathers making hot cocoa for us at the station on a camp stove. Memories of organized bus trips to shopping malls in the central region to hand out flyers and then protest at the town square. It’s a different kind of childhood that teaches one from an early age to fight for what matters, to not just sit back and hope for the best, to be active and lead the change you want to see. There’s no doubt that this childhood shaped the most significant part of who I am today: an opinionated woman who is not afraid to swim against the current, to act for what’s important to her, who believes in doing rather than just talking. The land I live on is important to me because it symbolizes something beyond just a place of residency. Home symbolizes ideology. My home and my family, for me, signify Zionism and the love of the Land of Israel.

All this makes me think about whether my political opinions would have been different if I hadn’t been born a child of the Golan at that particular period. Is my stance that we must not return conquered territories based on fact or on an emotional position that ignores the evidence? In an alternate reality, had I lived in the central region of Israel, would my views on the question of returning territories have been different? To what extent does our environment really influence us, and to what extent are our opinions really our own? I believe that the answers to these questions are not cut and dried. Our environment plays a big role in the development of our opinions, but I want to believe that I, as well as every other person, also have the ability to look at the big picture and choose what I think is right based on my conscience—which is also, of course, a product of society. All in all, there is nothing to do about it but to keep questioning myself and pondering alternate scenarios that start with “what if….”

One of the ways which the experience of living in the Golan Heights and my awareness of the meaning of the land on which I live has affected my life is the fact that I cannot see myself living in another country, even though, on the face of it, it could be easier. In the society in which I live, leaving Israel is considered a kind of taboo, an act that is simply not done. In my life, I have had two real opportunities to move abroad, and both of them I refused almost automatically. The first of these arose when I was twenty-three. I was visiting relatives in Montreal, Canada, and during the visit, my significant other, who had stayed behind in Israel, separated from me. My relatives offered for me to stay with one of my cousins and work as a private tutor for children of Jewish families in the city. I stayed two months longer than I was supposed to (the original trip was meant to last three weeks and I ended up staying three months). However, at the moment of truth, when I was supposed to start working and settle down, I chose to go back to Israel. The thought of living far away from my family and anywhere else but in Israel seemed impossible to me, even though, for three months, I had lived in Montreal like a resident, not like a tourist. I didn’t work, but I did integrate into the local daily life routine.

Of course, when I left Israel, I was told not to speak Hebrew on the streets and not to wear clothes with Hebrew lettering or prominent Jewish symbols, and since this was my first departure from the country (except for a weekend vacation in Turkey), I decided to listen to the safety tips of people in Israel. I was surprised to discover that they were far removed from reality. There is no problem speaking Hebrew on the streets of Montreal. All my friends went around sporting pendants featuring the Star of David or t-shirts with Hebrew slogans without the slightest concern. It felt weird to me from the start because I had always been taught to be proud of being Jewish and from Israel. I consider myself a Zionist, and I couldn’t see why I should have to hide the identity that I was so proud of. I quickly realized that there was no need at all to do so, and I felt very comfortable being an Israeli on the streets of Canada. Perhaps that was due to the fact that the city I lived in had a large Jewish community, or maybe because Canada is a very multicultural country, and when you walk through the center of Montreal, you can see signs of many different cultures and hear lots of different languages. Maybe it was because I lived with family and made swift friends who accepted and supported me as I was. Whatever the reason, I felt good, I felt like I belonged.

Despite the sense of belonging, I also understood, for the first time, the concept of cultural differences and what it means to be Israeli in the eyes of citizens of other countries, even Jews. A week after I arrived in Canada, I was informed that one of my cousin’s friends, whom I first met that week, had committed suicide. At the beginning of the day, we had arranged to meet and go out, and I thought that this news would change our plans and that I would have to go stay at my other uncle and aunt’s house. I was surprised when my cousin called and told me she was coming to pick me up to go to their house anyway and that my cousin and all his friends were home. When I got into the car, I asked her if she was sure it was appropriate for me to come; after all, I didn’t know them very well, and it was a very difficult and intimate moment for friends of the deceased. Her answer is what jolted me into reality and made me understand what it means to be Israeli in the eyes of foreigners. She said that she thought it would actually be good if I joined them because I was from Israel, so I knew how to deal with the death of young people. It felt like a punch in the gut. Even as I write these lines, years after that conversation took place, my stomach churns, and my pulse starts racing. That’s when I realized that to be Israeli is to live a life that most residents of Western countries can only imagine or see in Hollywood thrillers. To be Israeli is to deal with constant security awareness, it is to live every day in alert preparedness for the next thing, and it is to know what it’s like to lose friends at a young age. I suddenly realized that this is not how one should live, that this is not the natural situation, and that being a patriot in other countries is simply to be proud of a flag and an anthem without saying or thinking that you would be willing to die for your country. What was even stranger and more confusing than these realizations was that, for my friends and family in Canada, these things made me stronger and more stable than other people. I was in the army, and I probably knew *Krav Maga*, so I had nothing to worry about. I was strong and could help them deal with death because I was from Israel, and I knew what it was like to lose a friend. Three months later, when the move had to become official, and I had to start working, I got “cold feet” and felt an intense need to return home, to Israel, to the Golan. If I was a tough and strong Israeli, my place was in the Land of Israel.

My second “almost-move” abroad was to follow love. I was twenty-seven years old and lived in the central region, and, as expected from a girl my age, I was looking for “the one.” As it happened, my one, or the one I thought might be my one, came along in the shape of an American soldier. After a few months together, I had to choose between a chance at love, which meant moving to the United States, and my determination to live in Israel. Eventually, we broke up. I never regretted my choice, but I did wonder if it had really been my decision or if it had been influenced by social considerations, such as the attitude of my immediate environment to the idea of leaving the country and my fear of people’s reactions to my having a relationship with a non-Jewish man. By the way, it is strange to see that abroad there is no problem for a Jew to marry a Christian, as opposed to in Israel, where the choice of who you marry is much more important. It must be part of the Zionist narrative with which we are raised and related to the fear of losing the Jewish identity of the State of Israel.

But let us return to the present day. The year is 2020. I live in Ein Zivan in the Golan Heights. After having lived in several rented apartments around the country, I decided that my connection to the land was stronger than any other factor and that I wanted to settle down in the Golan. I worked in a number of positions in the field of social-community education, and as I approached the age of 30, I began to experience pressures from my environment about two main issues. The first was marriage; the second was higher education. With regard to the first, I have decided to remain a rebel and stick with the approach that it is something that cannot be rushed. Mostly, I tell people that they should keep their noses out of my bed and out of my uterus and that everything’s fine. Fortunately, there are other women in similar circumstances in my immediate circle, so I am not considered an exotic creature. However, in society at large, I still sometimes encounter intrusive questions and matchmaking attempts, even after a five-minute chat in line at the doctor’s office. Regarding the second issue, I wanted to believe that it was necessary to have a degree. That’s the argument I used to convince myself, because I believed that there was no chance in the world that I would be able to get one. I had always been a “problematic” student; I graduated high school through *kiddum noar* (youth advancement), which is the last stop for at-risk youths. Needless to say, I did not come close to getting my Bagrut (matriculation) certificate. I have severe ADHD, and school has always been a challenge for me. So why even try?

Labor market requirements in Israel and around the world have changed over the years, and in more and more professions, there is a demand for an academic degree or a professional certificate. Eventually, I realized that in the field in which I work, social-community education, I needed to have a degree if I wanted to advance beyond low-paying junior positions. I decided (or perhaps society has decided for me) to make the move and begin studying after years of telling everyone that you do not need a degree to be successful in life (I still believe this to be true, just not in every field). I enrolled in the pre-academic preparatory program at Kinneret College. The program is intended for people over thirty who do not have a full Bagrut and who want to apply for a degree in social sciences and the humanities. I decided that I would not work while I did the preparatory course but would sign up for unemployment to focus solely on my greatest fear in life—school. I was surprised to find that the monster was not so terrifying after all, that studying can be pleasant and interesting, and that I’m even pretty good at it. I graduated with honors and enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program in Education and Community, also at Kinneret College. Attending college has been, for me, an experience that goes far beyond the course curriculum. During the course of all three years of my undergraduate studies, I discovered a lot about myself. And even though I started at a late age, studying at Kinneret College shaped who I am today, or at least helped me hone my definition of myself. My academic achievements completely changed my perception of my own ability; from being terrified at the thought of studying for a bachelor’s degree, I went on to think about doing a master’s degree or even a doctorate. But beyond the achievement side of it, I have been exposed to a variety of populations at the college that I had not previously been exposed to in the same way. I had never had any in-depth acquaintance with Israeli Arabs from the Muslim or the Christian communities. As someone who grew up with news reports of terrorist attacks and under a direct Syrian menace to her home, and as someone who had never been thoroughly exposed to Arab culture, I had concerns about the encounter. I don’t want to imply that I was a racist, but I admit that I held on to some not particularly flattering stereotypes. It so happened that two people who slowly became my closest friends in the program were Muslim—a young man and a young woman, Suhail and Dunaa—and as the friendships grew stronger, we dared to talk more and more about sensitive issues. One of the most complicated moments in my relationship with them was toward the end of the first year of school. The situation on the Gaza border was sensitive; there were huge demonstrations by Gaza residents on the perimeter fence, and one day, several dozen Palestinians were killed by IDF gunfire, mostly sniper fire. Dunaa came to school the day after the Palestinian protestors were killed and she was upset. It was the first day she didn’t smile, didn’t hug me, and barely spoke to me. I asked her what was wrong, and she said it was because of what was happening on the Gaza border and that she didn’t want us to talk about it. I didn’t argue with her and gave her some space. During the break, Suhail sat down next to me, and we got to talking. I told him that Dunaa couldn’t bring herself to talk to me and asked if he knew why. He explained to me that she was in pain over the Palestinians who had been killed and that she thought I probably wouldn’t understand because it was a sensitive issue, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, an issue that we hadn’t touched on in our friendship. I asked him if he would speak to me about it, and he said yes, so we talked. He explained to me their side, the side of the Israeli Arabs, especially those who see themselves as Palestinians. He described the complexity of Gaza, all the stuff we don’t hear about in the news so much, the fact that some of the protesters are children whose parents receive enough money to provide them with food for six months if they touch the fence, that many Gaza residents live without any communication with the outside world and therefore, according to the information they have, their low quality of life is caused by the “Zionist enemy.” That is why they are forced to demonstrate against Israel and touch the fence. And if they can get money for doing so, all the better. He said he understood that, in some cases, the IDF soldiers have no choice but to shoot, and it is clear that if someone tries to break through the fence while holding a weapon, it is a justified action. But that does not change the fact that those who choose to be there do so for a cause that they see as righteous, mostly because the information they have is incorrect. This conversation opened up a new perspective for me that I did not know about or consider before. I chose not to share with Suhail the fact that my nephew was a sniper stationed in Gaza and that my concern was different from theirs. But I did choose to say that, from personal acquaintances with fighters and snipers in the IDF, they do not do it for fun, and that is an important distinction to make. Most of those I had spoken with don’t want to hurt people, and they certainly don’t want to kill them. They do their best to shoot only when there is no other choice, and there are very strict rules about this. I told him it was important to me that he knew this. He said he did, which I found very surprising. He said that if a terrorist with a weapon had entered the college, even if he were his neighbor from the village, he would have been the first to shoot and kill him. He said that it was clear to him that those who endangered the lives of civilians or soldiers should be shot, but that it was important for me to understand that Gaza residents live in a different reality and that the terrorist organizations there control them and everything they think and do, so they see their actions as justified. That, in a nutshell, he said, is precisely the problem. Both sides are ostensibly right, and the people living in Israel and Gaza want the same thing, to live in peace and respect. But the conflict is a struggle over power and control. It is convenient for the leadership on both sides that the conflict should go on indefinitely. We concluded that if it were up to us, the citizens, things would look different and that only makes the situation that much more frustrating.

Later I had further conversations with Suhail and Dunaa about the complexity of the situation. We talked about the disparities, the religion and its place in the conflict, about how religion is exploited by the religious leaders to fan the flames of the conflict instead of using it as a basis for understanding and coexistence. We talked about what it’s like to walk down the street with a hijab and how I feel when I come to visit them in their villages. We had conversations on lots of topics, most of which we did not agree on, and it helped me understand that we do not always have to agree. The goal is not to convince the other side that you are right but to understand that there is another side and that it’s okay for everyone to have their own opinions. My last conversation with Dunaa on the subject began with her asking me why all Jews were afraid when they saw Arabs walking down the street or in the mall. She said that many times she feels like people are giving her odd looks when she enters a shop or a restaurant with a hijab, and that makes her uncomfortable. I tried to think of a way to explain the fear to her without saying something like, “because it’s Arabs carrying out the attacks, not Jews...” I tried to think of how to convey this message in a way that she could take it in. Then I asked her, “if you walk down the street in the evening alone and you see a bunch of young guys sitting on the sidewalk, talking and laughing, will you be afraid to pass by them?” The answer was: “obviously, yes.” I asked her why, and she said that men can hurt a woman when she’s all alone on the street. I told her that while this is true, most men don’t hurt women on the street. There are some who do, but it’s a really a very small percentage of all men. Then I told her that despite this, her fear was justified because she might be harmed by that small percentage. Fear is a survival mechanism, and it’s there to help us through life. And that’s why, because the terrorist attacks of the past and the stabbing attacks of recent years have been carried out by Arabs, even if they were a tiny minority that doesn’t represent all Arabs in Israel, our fear is a question of survival just like her fear of men. I told her that, just like she is distressed by people’s fear of her, I am distressed by having to be afraid all the time, but reality has forced this state of affairs upon us. I told her that I wasn’t afraid of Arabs that way and that I was no longer scared to come to her village, but if I walked down the street and saw an Arab walking fast with something concealed in their hand, I would be afraid just she would be afraid of a man she encountered on the street alone, but not of men in general when there were other people around. She told me that she finally understands, that it hurts to hear, but she understands. I was glad she dared to ask, and I was glad to have been able to explain. Mostly, I was glad that, once again, we were able to talk about it.

These and the many other conversations I’ve had with Dunaa and Suhail have made a real difference in my life. I now look at the situation through different eyes, I can examine the society in which I live with a more skeptical gaze, and I have learned to question myself and my environment. I can no longer accept the things I know as the absolute truth. It’s important to note that this attitude is not always welcome by the people around me. When an incident happens in the south, I don’t hasten to agree with the statement that we must launch a decisive counterattack because I’m not sure it’s the solution and because I know that there is another side to the story. I am more sensitive to racist comments, especially about Arabs. I remind my loved ones that they shouldn’t generalize and that they must always remember that there is another perspective. I still hold the opinion that Israel is the state of the Jewish People and that we have no other homeland, even when things get tough, but I am much more aware of the complexity of the situation. I am much more aware of the fact that there is a second side to every story and that one should be sensitive and take it into account. Much of the time, I find myself facing situations of constant cognitive dissonance. It is not surprising that my friends with leftist tendencies say that I am right-wing because I do believe in the Jewish State and I am opposed to the idea of returning territories, while my friends on the right say that I am left-wing because I am an “Arab-lover.” And if you ask me what I am, I will say that I am just me. I am not left- or right-wing. I see complexity, and I don’t think the solution to our problems lies in choosing a political side.

There are many other topics central to my life that I have not touched on. I believe in the butterfly effect. Every moment in our lives, had it happened differently, could have created a different reality. If we arrived somewhere a second earlier or later, if we chose to stay home on a certain day, if we decided not to answer the phone, or changed any other little detail, our reality today would have been different. On the one hand, living with this belief can lead to a lot of thoughts and regrets about “what if...?” On the other hand, it allows you to pay attention to the little things, to understand that everything has an impact on me and my environment. As someone who sees herself as an educator, it reminds me to pay attention to my every word and deed because there are those who see them and who are influenced by them, and I hope that one right word or deed can influence their lives for the better.