

Welcome to Tehran

I know by now that I get the flu each February. As the month begins I start feeling sick. Soon after come the fever and the cough.

I should have known from the start that there was something odd about that hotel on the Dead Sea. Before leaving home, I'd promised to myself to see the trip as a rest. I'd soak up the salty air and try to soothe away anxiety. I'd get massages and then march off to the famous mud baths.

What I didn't focus on was the small notation in the brochure saying that the hotel was also hosting a religious weekend, describing the visitors as observant Jews. In essence, the hotel would be filled with Haredim.

This requires an aside.

Haredi, a Hebrew term, describes the most conservative of Orthodox Jews. There are many groups and their total numbers unknown. What is known is that they're growing thanks to high birth rates (most women at least six children). Haredi Israelis represent about 10 percent of the country's population.

If, as statistics suggest, Israel will be 50 percent Haredi in 30-to-40 years time, the future of the country as modern, technologically advanced state is in jeopardy, at least according to Menachem Friedman, a professor religion emeritus at Bar Ilan University and an expert Haredi world. Haredi schools teach no math, foreign languages, history or philosophy, focusing instead on religious subjects. Boys and girls study in separate classes.

There are also the datiim Mizrahi (plural of dati), Sephardic Jews who are also deeply religious but much more inclined to embrace lay values. Their children are allowed to focus on other subjects in addition to faith.

Moreover, Mizrahi Jews are completely integrated into Israeli life. They serve in Parliament and the army (the country's deputy chief of staff is a datiim as are several senior officers). There are also ministers, professors, scientists, and now high court judges. As religious Zionists, plenty of their numbers are settlers in the occupied territories. But that's another story yet.

Now let's get back to the hotel and the Haredi.

Arriving in the lobby, my companion and I were greeted by a crowd of screaming kids. There were elegant ladies in wigs wearing long skirts down to the ground blacks. The men were dressed in their typical slacks and white shirts, with traditional beards and hats (they're known as penguins).

My companion is a Mizrahi, but he'd on the "light" side (he wears a skullcap, a "kippah," and follows the rules). But the noisy scene both surprised and annoyed him.

At the same time, he was also determined to enjoy a well-deserved weekend. An eternal optimist, he quickly shrugged off the scene, put on his shorts, turned on his cheer, grabbed his tanning lotion, and two of us headed off to the pool. All went well until we reached the pool entrance.

"Hold on there," said an energetic woman poised at the entrance. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Swimming," he replied. "I'm a guest of the hotel. I have a towel, slippers, am wearing a bathing suit as you can see. I have sunglasses. It seems like I have everything I need."

"But apparently you don't see the big blue tarp just behind me," said the women, in apparent disbelief. "And don't you see the other tarp, shielding the pool? At this time of the day, the pool is open to women only. You wouldn't really be thinking of going to the pool when it's open only to women?"

She then opened the door to a woman in a robe and a wig.

"I didn't know," said my companion, all at once resigned to his fate. "Maybe then you can at least tell me when the men get their turn."

"There's the indoor pool," said the woman.

"Okay then," he said, "Today I'll do my swimming without the benefit of Dead Sea sun. Tomorrow, I'm guessing it's the other way round, women out and men in?"

"Tomorrow," she replied, "it's closed. Tomorrow is the last day of 'pesach' (Passover). Tomorrow the pool is closed, along with the beach cabanas, the spa, and the elevators. They'll just be stopping briefly on each floor automatically.

Disconsolate, we returned to our room. "If you want a massage I think you better get it now," he told me, by this time

a little depressed. "I'm glad you brought a book because I'm guessing we're going to be locked in here reading for the next few days. What else can we do?"

I took his advice but it was already too late. The spa was closed. So was the pool. The remaining women were dressed in overalls or robes; just like their Arab counterparts I'd seen the week before in

A "haredi" in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem.

a documentary about life in Tehran.

Creativity saved the day. We figured out how to scale the small wall dividing our hotel from the one beside it. The concierge, deprived of his computer because of the Sabbath, turned a benevo-

lent blind eye to our comings and goings. Suddenly we were sitting beside the comfortable and welcoming swimming pool of the hotel next door. It was less luxurious, but also much less "haredi."

"Next time I'll be a lot more careful," said my shell-shocked companion. "I'll have to see if anyone's pre-booked the hotel." ●



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