



Our Israeli Diary: Of That Time, Of That Place

Antonia Fraser

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In 1975, British biographer Antonia Fraser caused a scandal by leaving her husband for Jewish playwright Harold Pinter, whom she did not marry until 1980. Like Joan Didion's recent *South and West*, Fraser's *Our Israeli Diary* is less a polished narrative than a working notebook, in this case of a jam-packed two-week tour in May 1978. She found the typewritten document "by chance [while] clearing out an old cupboard," and it is presented as is, abbreviations and all, though with added photographs.

It was a first visit for both Fraser and Pinter, so they strived to see all that the country had to offer, including mosques, kibbutzim, the Wailing Wall, the Dead Sea, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Bethlehem, and the Knesset. One particular highlight was Masada, a rock fortress reached by cable car. She evocatively describes the 110-degree heat: "the desert is fierce, hot and predatory, the verdant oasis of Jericho all the more remarkable." They also discuss how Fraser will depict sand dunes in her diary, a reminder that, though it seeks to convey immediate impressions, this is still very much a constructed document.

Although Fraser acknowledges her ignorance of Jewish history and Hebrew characters—of their apartment number she says, "We memorise ours, which I describe as Sideways Dustbin"—she is eager to rectify this through her reading. She'd read Saul Bellow's book on Israel as preparation, and she buys biographies of Prime Ministers Menachem Begin and Golda Meir, who'd resigned in 1974. There's only one breathtakingly insensitive moment in the diary: when Fraser likens her allergic skin blotches to persistent Palestinian terrorists.

In addition to their sightseeing, the couple fits in plenty of socializing—dinners, concerts, receptions, and a meeting with opposition leader Shimon Peres. It's no wonder Fraser later confesses that "heat and strain and meeting people are getting to me." Her last entry makes for a sudden ending; it's a shame she didn't add an epilogue reflecting on what has changed and what remains true. Nevertheless, this serves as both a tribute to the late Pinter and a snapshot of Israel forty years ago.

REBECCA FOSTER (July/August 2017)

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