Perils and Victories Crossing the Divide

ALICE ROTHCHILD

JEFFREY GOLDBERG IS A DYNAMIC journalist whose Middle East reports in the *New Yorker* during the past few years have brought readers face-to-face with leaders of Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. (Critics of his reporting have charged him with helping to incite the Bush Administration's "War on Terror" and the invasion of Iraq.) Goldberg's new book, *Prisoners, a Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide,* is a brilliantly told account of his journey of self-discovery — from a lost, neurotic American college student to a dirt-under-the-fingernails *kibbutznik* to a military policeman in the brutal Ketziot prison camp in the Negev during the first *intifada*.

Jeffrey Goldberg

Goldberg's narrative, however, is not only an intense dialogue with himself as he searches for his own identity as a Jewish man. It is also a conversation with a number of the prisoners he first meets behind barbed wire and later in offices and mosques in the Middle East and Washington, D.C., where they have become the Palestinian Fatah leadership. Goldberg mixes his own personal story with direct quotes and interviews, all framed by a layered historical commentary that grounds the book in several thousand years of Jewish and Arab history.

The story he tells is filled with mind-boggling contradictions and paradoxes. Most of the Yiddish Goldberg knows, for example, is learned from Palestinian prisoners who had previously worked for Israeli Jews from Eastern Europe. Descriptions of torture in Israeli jails are juxtaposed against an unabashed belief in Jewish morality.

Prisoners is also a tortured, self-deprecating, and intelligent exploration of Goldberg's Jewish inheritance, what he describes as "a melancholic and mostly unmentioned understanding of the gentile world. . . . Oppression was a birthright." He explains that his passion for Israel and his birth as a Zionist came strangely enough during his frantic bar mitzvah amidst rocking, black-hatted Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Goldberg, raised a Conservative Jew in Malverne, Long Island, found the experience euphoric. "It wasn't just Chuckie Greer, Malcolm X, and Meir Kahane who turned me into the Moshe Dayan of the Howard T. Herbert Middle School," he writes. The bar mitzvah sparked his excitement about Jewish militarism, with its promise of power and redemption, after years of stoop-shouldered, Long Island wimpiness.

His tale opens like a thriller, with his arrest in Gaza, where he was working as a journalist for the *New Yorker,* by a militant Hamas faction at the beginning of the second *intifada*. He writes that he waved his passport and yelled about being American. "I had learned, in previous encounters with dyspeptic and well-armed Muslims, the tactical importance of behaving in the manner one associates with Steve McQueen, and so I resisted the urge to unleash, as I do in moments of tension, great gusts of words."

Goldberg maintains this crackling tension as exposes the reader to his own initiations into Israeli manhood and the brutality, stupidity, and injustice he sees around him. He is in a constant argument with anyone willing to listen — over politics, Zionism, religion, and violence — and his prose is consistently fearless and ironic.

Arafat's handshake, he writes, is "like herring in cream sauce." Women sitting on a Gaza beach are described as wearing "black scarves

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Prisoners, a Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide, by Jeffrey Goldberg. 2006, Alfred A. Knopf, 336 pages.

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and thick cloth, and they boiled inside them like eggs."

On joining the Israeli military, he exclaims: "I was exceedingly happy — the rifle was electric with the promise of Jewish power — and so, too, were my new comrades, all of us from the Diaspora, most of us having lived our lives in the company of quisling Jews who, for reasons inexplicable and bizarre, believed that the main lesson of the Shoah was that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it, instead of the actual lesson of the Shoah, which is that it is easy to kill a unilaterally disarmed Jew but much harder to kill one who is pointing a gun in your face." About the Hamas leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, he writes, "The thinking of scriptural fundamentalists seems, to the secular-minded, or even to the sort of person like me who feels the constant presence of God in his life but does not believe Him to be partisan in His love, as lunacy on stilts. It is also cruel beyond measure. Fundamentalism is the thief of mercy."

Goldberg interviews an extraordinary array of Israeli and Palestinian leaders. He writes about Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whom he met first in 1992 and then in 2000 shortly after Sharon's bellicose visit to the Haram Al-Sharif (Temple Mount) and the onset of the second *intifada*. Goldberg debates repeatedly with the founder of Hamas, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, whom he knew from the prison and the second *intifada,* and who was later assassinated by Israel. He also interviews socialist *kibbutzniks* and future suicide bombers, exploring the underbelly of militant Islamic fundamentalism as he travels all over the Middle East, from fabled Biblical towns near Hebron to post-9/11 Afghanistan.

His particular obsession, however, is with a young man named Rafiq Hijazi, a Gazan whom he first encounters while serving as a prison guard at Ketziot. Goldberg is drawn to Hijazi through "the enzymes of friendship . . . He thought I was kind, for a Jew, and I thought he was smart, for an Arab." His compulsion to create a relationship with this Palestinian man, as both a symbol and an actual act of outreach across the Middle East divide, becomes the central recurring theme of *Prisoners*. It is a very personal and stormy effort. As Goldberg explains to his Hamas captors, "I am here in search of the secret afflictions of the Palestinian heart. I am here exploring the contradictions of Jewish power. I am here seeking the elimination of ambiguity. I'm looking for the bridge that will carry me across the black hole of cognition that separates Arab and Jew. I am here to quiet the conflict in my heart. I'm here because I'm alive to hope. I'm here in search of the key to all mythologies. I'm here because I'm a fucking idiot."

In his relationship with Hijazi, Goldberg finds a co-conspirator; they issue "commentary, only to each other, about the farce and absurdity of prison life." He also finds a balm for his Jewish guilt. Hijazi, writes Goldberg, "understood the moral justification for Zionism," while maintaining a strict devotion to Islam. Goldberg, for his part, recognizes the "poisoning effects of the occupation" and the resilience of Palestinian nationalism. He seems fully able to address the stereotypes and racism that seep through Israeli society, and to feel the consequences of using humiliation and collective punishment to control the "enemy."

He bluntly documents the brutal prison rules of conduct set by Hamas and Fatah factions, the punishments imposed by them on prisoners who collaborate with Israelis, the carefully regulated order and disciplined indoctrination, the vigorous resistance to Israeli occupation. Goldberg writes with real credibility because he is at once the brutal Israeli soldier and the guilty moralist searching through the American Library in Jerusalem, looking for a copy of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

This leads to his increasing disaffection with the muscular Israeli mythos. After returning to his newspaper column at the *Jerusalem Post,* Goldberg ultimately goes back to the U.S. and becomes a correspondent for the *Forward* and later the *New Yorker* and *New York Times Magazine.* "We lived in New York, which is sort of like living in Israel but without the Arabs or quite as much yelling. I went to work for the *Forward*, a Jewish newspaper, which was a substitute for religious devotion . . . I wrote about American Jewish groups and their leaders in a disparaging way, because they were so small compared to Israelis, who were flawed, but grandly flawed."

In* Prisoners*, he grapples with his experiences as a disillusioned believer in the righteousness of Zionism. "My love for Israel was so bottomless that my disappointment with it was bottomless, too." Eight years after their prison encounter, he learns Hijazi's full story in all its humanness and brutality. Now a statistics professor in Gaza, Hijazi gradually unfolds his sobering account: the bookish high school student from the Jebalya Refugee Camp arrested by the Israeli military in a retaliatory sweep against Hamas; the multiple episodes of rearrest and torture; his rise in the Fatah leadership; his ultimate return to Birzeit University; his advanced degrees at the American University in Washington, D.C. Goldberg also

learns the painful story of Hijazi's father's dispossession in 1948, his struggle to survive in Gaza, and his unwavering belief in educating his many children.

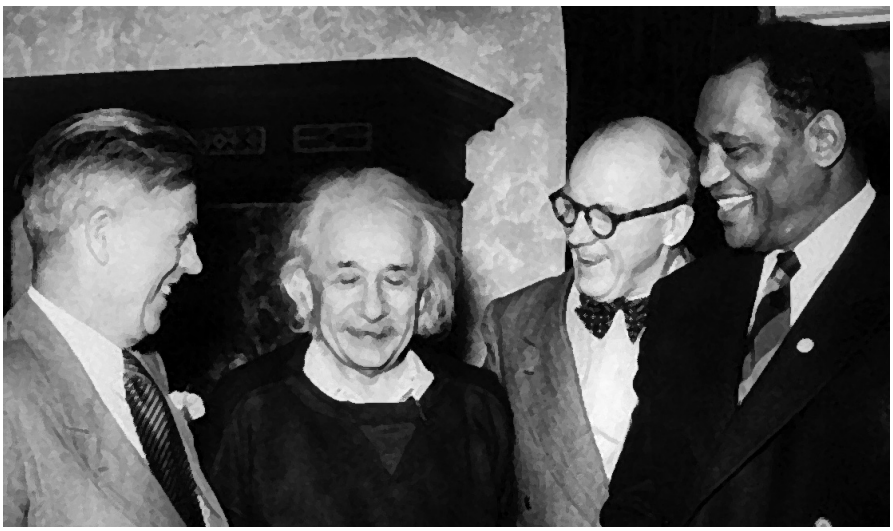
The author struggles to build a bond with Hijazi, who has the potential to heal Goldberg's inner torments and bring a flicker of hope to a deadly situation. At the same time, Goldberg comes to terms with his own origins: "[T]here were American Jewish traits I now had come to appreciate: irony, tolerance, and ambivalence about the possession of physical power and the use of force. These were not, after all, shameful traits."

I read this book through my own lens as secular, leftwing Jew, and I must admit I am not usually sympathetic to Israeli militancy or the endless retelling of competing religious justifications. I found Goldberg too forgiving of the inherent flaws in the Oslo Agreements and too sympathetic to Sharon and Barak. I have, however, never had the opportunity to crawl into the brain of a fast-talking Zionist who is grappling with his devotion to the Holy Land and his horror at the brutality and contradictions of steroidal Israeli military bravado. While Goldberg is still unabashedly tribal and more magnanimous towards America and Israel than I will ever be, he tells a gripping, nuanced, and unsentimental story that bridges many of the divides that haunt this world, and he offers a glimpse into the power of friendship and connection in the most unlikely of places. ■

Einstein and American Racism

BENNETT MURASKIN

EINSTEIN ON RACE AND RACISM seeks to redress an egregious omission by the numerous writers who have written about Einstein.None have mentioned his civil rights activism, his ties with W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, and his relationship to the African-American community in Princeton, New Jersey, where he lived for the last twenty-two years of his life.



Henry Wallace, Albert Einstein, Lewis L. Wallace of Princeton, and Paul Robeson, 1947.

REVIEWED IN THIS ESSAY:
Einstein on Race and Racism, by Fred Jerome and Rodger Taylor. 2005, Rutgers University Press, 206 pages, indexed.

Co-authors Fred Jerome (the son of Communist Party intellectual V.J. Jerome and the author of *The Einstein File: J. Edgar Hoover's Secret War against the World's Most Famous Scientist*) and Rodger Taylor, a librarian, succeed admirably at this task, but their spare 131 pages of text, consisting as much of historical and political background as of Einstein's actual anti-racist activities and pronouncements, tell us something surprising: At least until 1946, there is not all that much to talk about. Just as revealing, however, is Jerome's and Taylor's exposure of Einstein's FBI file, in which the famous scientist's support for civil rights is equated with communist subversion.

Einstein was visiting the U.S. when Hitler came to power and wisely decided to remain. He was given a seat at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. The town had a significant African-American community that suffered from intense segregation and discrimination. Einstein often walked through the African-American neighborhood and became friendly with many of its residents, young and old alike.