

Reva Mann

A different kind of Shabbos

I feel a pang of guilt as I drive out of Jerusalem with my friend Helen on Shabbos morning, passing families walking to synagogue in their 'Saturday' best. Instead of praying, we are driving south past the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus and into the Judean desert through the rolling hills that look like bodies reclining in the hot sun and the golden dunes rising and falling under clear blue skies. Three hundred metres below sea level, we stop at Kalia, the only beach for miles that doesn't have trance music pulsating out of its speakers by nine o'clock in the morning.

The first glimpse of the Dead Sea is a breathtaking view of silent turquoise water that stretches to a horizon of pink Jordanian mountains only fifteen kilometres away. Only forty minutes from home, yet a foreign message has popped up across my phone screen disabling my cell and informing me that I am in an Arab country. Walking up to the ticket booth, we pay our twenty-five shekel entrance fee and walk down the wooden steps into a surrealistic scene. Bodies covered in mud lie upon the pebbly beach, giving an initial impression of a shanty town, but at a closer look, blond hair sticking out of tar black faces gives away the fair-skinned Russians who have arrived in busloads, many of them in need of healing not only from the skin complaints the Dead Sea is famous for curing, but also from their mundane office jobs for which they are over-qualified.

Up until twenty years ago, the chore of renewing a passport or acquiring an identity card was to be avoided like the plague, but with the first Russian Aliya in 1989, Israeli government offices have become more efficient and the lazy Middle Eastern bureaucracy has been whipped into shape by the Russian academics unable to procure a position in their fields of expertise. Their efficiency is apparent even here; they are equipped with empty bottles to fill with Dead Sea water, and a supply of plastic bags to collect mud from the seabed, that I imagine they take home for a mid-weekly detox in their own bathtubs.

I spot a lounge chair splattered with dry mud and encrusted with salt, cover it with a towel, drag it down into the water and relax in the morning sun. There is not a word of Hebrew to be heard above the distant sound of Russian chatter.

The sun burns at my skin so I enter the oily waters to cool off. Jelly baby shoes on my feet, I try and balance on the slippery stones until I plummet down and push off with my hands, floating in liquid that has the same consistency as my mother's Shabbos chicken soup. I rub the sea's natural oil onto my skin, lie back on the water, buoyant, as if I was still lounging on my chair.

There are two ways to get mud. Either dig down into the seabed and grab a handful or climb up onto the mounds of dried mud and blonde rock that were under the sea before it started drying up, stick a hand into a crevice and reach for a clump. Helen climbs up the rock face and clinging on for dear life pulls out a chunk of mud the size of a football. She brings it down to the pebbles where I am sitting and we rub the sticky stuff up our arms and over our legs, wetting it intermittently to keep it moist enough to spread like butter. After a few minutes of smearing, we too look like aliens.

On top of the hill, a tour bus bearing the words 'Nazareth Tours' has parked and a group of thirty African-American tourists are making their way down to the seashore.

I guess it must be their first time on the famous biblical turf where Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt as, overcome with emotion, they stretch their hands heavenward and bow down to kiss the caked earth.

They must be a band of gospel singers, I think as I watch them swaying this way and that to the music of their own voices and the accompaniment of a single tambourine. It doesn't take long till we sunbathers and floaters clap in time to the beat, and then stand up and jive, allowing our pelvises to rock in a way that would normally be impossible without our muddy disguise.

The soul and rhythm get to me and I am up there with the crowd, gyrating and hollering with the chorus. My guilt at not being in synagogue this morning falls away as I thank the Lord (and Helen) for bringing me to this divine place. Hallelujah!