

# Reva Mann

## Lessons from Amman

As my family and I board the Royal Jordanian Airplane headed to Amman, our stop-over on the way to New Delhi, I fear that I am stepping into enemy territory. Even though Israel has diplomatic relations with Jordan, I feel the same queasy feeling in my stomach that plagues me when I cross over the Eilat border into Egypt or venture into the Arab market in Jerusalem's Old City.

But I am soon put at ease as the flight attendant with almond-shaped black eyes lined with kohl shows me to my seat and asks me in colonial English if I need help to stow my hand luggage. We are seated four across, relaxing into our chairs, when the familiar sound of Arabic prayer drones through the cabin. I realize the chant is coming through the sound system and recognize the repeated word 'Rachmo' which is similar to the Hebrew word 'Rachamim' – compassion. When flourishing scribble flashes on the screen, I am sure this must be an Arabic version of our own Tfillat Haderech, the prayer for travelers. What a great idea, I think, since I always have trouble remembering Tfillat Haderech by heart and constantly lose the wallet-sized laminated prayer cards. When faced with the growl of roaring engines, I usually plead for mercy in my own words.

"El Al should adopt this," I suggest to my daughter who is fastening her seat belt.

"Passengers could all recite Tfillat Haderech together before take-off — it's a great idea."

"It wouldn't work," she replies. "There'd be a fight over choosing an Ashkenazi or Sephardic rendering and the secularists would boycott the airline complaining they were under religious coercion."

I nod sadly, knowing she is right.

Twenty minutes later, we land in Amman. As transit passengers we pass through security to be frisked and have our bags inspected. I am separated from my son as he is ushered off into the men's queue and I stand with my daughters with the other women. Again I am impressed with the public display of religious belief and adherence to the modesty laws. How different it is in Israel where Jews poke fun at the segregated mechitzah bus that drives the ultra-orthodox around the Bible Belt route, from Romena to Mattersdorf, with a curtain drawn down the center dividing the women from the men.

The curtain of the security cubicle opens and I step inside. I am told to raise my arms by a female officer who is dressed in combat uniform but still keeps to her modesty code by wearing a traditional headdress that covers all of her hair and most of her face. She frisks me and runs a black 'magic wand' up and down my body. This must be how the Arab women feel, I think, when Israeli soldiers check them at border crossings. I feel uncomfortable now the tables are turned and scurry out the other side as fast as possible.

As we board the night flight to Delhi, I leave Jordan with food for thought. I am impressed by this nation who are proud of their traditions. What is wrong with us Jews? Why can't we adhere to our Torah in public places and show respect for the Sabbath? Would it be so terrible to keep our restaurants closed and public transport stationary for one day a week?

As the plane soars high into the clouds, verse 4:1 of Ethics of the Fathers comes to mind. 'Mi hachacham? Halomed mi kol adam'. 'Who is wise? He who learns from each and every person.' We certainly have what to learn —even from our enemies.