Of Rolling Black Hats, Two Rav Schachs, Old People, Snowmen, Sheitels, Illuminated Manuscripts, Chickpeas for Your Shalom Zakhar, and Two Kinds of Shabbat Zemirot: Images of Jerusalem

Images of Jerusalem? What have chickpeas and snowmen to do with the luminous majestic, mysterious holy city of light and stone and sky? Very much—because in the mystery and the light and the stones there are details, and individuals, and small, mundane events.

... It is a stormy day, with winds of tornado force. In the middle of the street a black hat rolls by on its brim, swiftly propelled by the wind. Its owner, a yeshiva student with peot and black kappotte, is running hard after it, but, laden down with a suitcase and a heavy Gemara, he will never retrieve it. Sprinting out of nowhere comes a bare-headed teenager. He catches up to it, picks it up, and runs back to the yeshiva bachur, and without saying a word gently places it back on his head. ...

... Picture cards of great contemporary scholars—the Orthodox answer to American baseball cards—are very popular here with the children. Gedolim cards, as they are known, do not come with chewing gum, but the youngsters love them anyway. Overheard conversation:

"I'll trade you my Rav Schach for your Rav Ovadia Yosef."

"No! I have two Rav Schachs already. I need a Rav Eliashiv."

The cards are in color, laminated, very attractive. The child with two Rav Schachs has amassed over fifty different cards. (If there are fifty true gedolim in the world, we are either the most scholarly generation in Jewish history, or inflation has struck the world of Jewish learning.)

... Old people are rarely seen on American streets. They are shunted off to old age homes. Not so in the religious sections of Jerusalem. While there are numerous such institutions, old people abound here on the streets. They go to Shul and to classes; they shop, do organizational work, volunteer, and are treated with respect—as befits a city that prides itself on its halakhic scrupulousness and learning. It is good to be old in a truly pious community. In the daily Talmud shiur which I attend, one of the students is over eighty. He has never had the opportunity to study in his life, is thus not learned, but he attends faithfully. The teacher of the group is half his age, already renowned as a major scholar (but not yet on gedolim cards...). When the old man walks in, the teacher stands up out of respect, in literal fulfillment of mipnei seivah takum. ...
... Last winter, Jerusalem absorbed two major snow storms within three weeks. This is a Middle Eastern country, and few know how to deal with snow. Drivers speed, spin their wheels and do all the wrong things when, inevitably, they skid. Across the street from me a man, obviously bereft of a shovel, tries to extricate his car from a snowdrift by using his sponja mop. (If you don't know what a sponja mop is, you haven't lived—in Israel.) The neighborhood children, unfamiliar with the niceties of such a winter, throw raw snow at each other. I teach them how to make real snowballs, how to shape them round and how to pack them firm. But since these youngsters do not throw as naturally as American kids do, they take their laboriously made snowballs, place them on the ground and kick them, soccer style. The snowballs don't last long. ... The snowman out front sports a black frock coat, a black beard, and a black hat; the snowlady has a proper sheitel. In the morning, sabotage: someone has replaced the black hat with a knitted yarmulka complete with bobby-pin, and the sheitel with a tichel. In the wars of the Lord, there is no armistice day, even in snowstorms, for in Jewish life, especially in Israel, everything is a religio-political statement: the type of your yarmulke, the color of your hat, the width of your brim—even the snowman you make. ...

... The Israel Museum mounts a special showing of original manuscripts by the great Sephardi scholars of the Middle Ages. Behind magnificent display cases are original works of Maimonides, Nachmanides, Gersonides, Kimchi. A full pantheon of the rishonim—first editions, some in their own handwriting, illuminated manuscripts—is on breathtaking display. Visitors, most of them tourists from America, ooh and ah. The guide is very pleased and very proud. Less than a mile away, at any of the dozens of yeshivot which dot Jerusalem, thousands of young men actually study these same texts. It is even more breathtaking to realize that Maimonides and Nachmanides and the rest are not preserved behind glass, but are discussed, reviewed, analyzed, debated. The tour-guides—for the most part themselves religiously deprived—will not be taking the tourists to see the rishonim being studied in the adjacent yeshivot. The tourists will return home duly impressed by the museum. But they will never know that these great figures are not dead museum pieces at all, but are still vibrant a thousand years later. ...

... Jerusalem takes its chesed work seriously. The variety of lending societies is dazzling. Here is what you can borrow; tables and chairs for a simha in your home; cribs, baby carriages, strollers, high chairs; baby pacifiers; tools; medical equipment, wheel chairs; artificial flowers; wedding gowns; maternity clothes; dishes, silverware, pots and pans; a Sefer Torah for the shiva house. One group will supply you with chickpeas for your shalom zakhar. Another will visit the sick or the house-bound. The poor can obtain good used clothing. If you require medication late at night or on a Shabbat when the neighborhood drugstore is closed, there is a fully
stocked unofficial drugstore in someone's home where you can obtain what you need, with the proviso that you replace it the next day.

... From the windows of the yeshiva on my block comes the sound of many voices on Shabbat afternoon. Zemirot are being sung. The voices are lusty, enthusiastic, the sound enveloping the streets below: HaShem ro'i lo echsar, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He restoreth my soul..."—the traditional words sung at twilight as Shabbat fades into the week. The voices rise up and swell. Other words; yom ze mekhubad, "This day is honored from among all the days, for on this day He Who fashioned the universe rested..."

From below the adjacent hills there rise up other voices. From the distance, as the voices bounce off the canyons and echo upward, they sound like zemirot. The voices are lusty, enthusiastic, enveloping the hills and the rocks. But as you approach the sound and look across the hills, you see tens of thousands of people sitting in a stadium watching a soccer game, and you realize that this is not the sound of zemirot, but the sound of a crowd cheering their heroes down on the field. The crescendo of voices rises and falls, and they are singing the songs of their team. Jerusalem Betar is playing Netanya for the league championship. As the twilight of Shabbat fades into the night, the voices swell and rise up; "Go Jerusalem, Go Jerusalem, Go Go Go!"

From the windows of the yeshiva, a hundred voices cry out as one: Rahem behasdekha, "Have mercy in Thy compassion upon Thy people, upon Zion the dwelling place of Thy glory..."

From the grandstand in the stadium, ten thousand voices cry out as one: "Go Jerusalem, Go Go Go!"

City of exultation and heartache, of saints and scholars and scoundrels, of light and stone and sky; luminous, majestic, mysterious Jerusalem.