

## Israel Under One Sky

by Julie Zuckerman

Every day, two things can be true at once: a brilliant orange sun rising above the Judean hills and the chaos of the Na'alim checkpoint at dawn. An aura of good-heartedness and the imbroglio of two peoples over the same land.

On this day, I awake at 5:17, eight minutes before my alarm. I slip out of the bedroom I share with my husband and dog, pull on the clothing I've laid out the previous night, brush my teeth, and prepare a coffee to go.

Every day, dozens of Palestinians must travel from their homes in the West Bank and Gaza for medical appointments. Volunteers meet them on the Israeli side of the checkpoint to drive them to hospitals across Israel. They are given phone numbers and names, but most have never met prior to the pickup.

On this day, 50 years ago, 11 Israeli athletes were murdered by Palestinian terrorists at the Munich Olympics. The games continued for seven hours before being halted.

On this day, the sky is black when I leave my house, headed for my first pickup. It is a five-minute drive to the checkpoint by Maccabim. In the darkness, I do not see the appointed meeting place next to the man who sells *beigele*, which are not the same as American bagels or the Hebrew word that means pretzel, but elongated rings of bread coated in sesame seeds and za'atar. Women at the checkpoints are a rare occurrence, though, and within a few minutes Manar finds me and climbs into my car. Manar's brother gets in the back. In broken Arabic, I introduce myself, ask where they are from. "You speak Arabic?" she asks. *Shwaya*,

*shwaya*, I say. Not really. The Arabic I learned in graduate school is rusty from 28 years of nonuse.

Every day, thousands of Palestinian laborers flood across major checkpoints like Na'alín on foot. Awaiting them are hundreds of white minivans, taxis and private cars that ferry them to day jobs, mostly in construction. Men and teenage boys carry small black plastic bags with their lunches. Border police on bullhorns try to keep order, barking at men who are sitting in the wrong place or vehicles that have stopped illegally. There is no place to park.

On this day, it is getting light by the time I arrive at Na'alín, driving slowly, on the lookout for my two additional passengers. Finding the right people and getting them in the car as quickly as possible is the goal, every minute fraught. I do not spot any likely candidates, and quickly phone the contact number I've been given, which rouses a man from slumber. No, he says, his daughter is not scheduled for a hospital visit today. A back and forth with the volunteer coordinator ensues, but even if I can find the 19-year-old boy I am meant to take, I cannot move. My tiny white car is wedged between trucks and minivans, a police car, and men streaming around the vehicles. Total logjam. Several calls later, the coordinator confirms that my passengers are indeed at the checkpoint somewhere. A minivan driver gets out of his vehicle and directs traffic, banging his fist on the back of another van, telling the driver to stay put or move forward so as not hit anyone. Only with his help do I extract my car from the morass. Manar's brother finally spots our other passengers, but again, a difficulty, nowhere to pull over. He leaps out of my slow-moving car and trots across a traffic circle. All the while, taxis honk, the police continue shouting on their bullhorns, and the torrent of workers does not stop. My hands grip the steering wheel tightly, and after many long minutes, Manar's brother arrives back with the boy and his sister.

Every day, the sun rises in the east, but I do not spot it in my rearview mirror until I am on the main highway.

On this day, my driving is one tiny act against the backdrop of a century-long conflict. I am taking my passengers on one leg of their journey; another volunteer will take them all the way to Haifa. I drive carefully, slowly, the car silent, save the music Manar plays from her phone. A relief when they arrive at the midway hospital, the same place I gave birth four times. A relief to bid them goodbye and switch on my audiobook, to listen to the account of Leonard Cohen's little-known visit to the Israeli troops during the Yom Kippur War. A soldier who was there described Cohen as having "an aura of good-heartedness and unusual humanity."

Every day, and sometimes every hour, I am reminded how two things can be true at the same time: the imbroglio over this land and basic human kindnesses.

On no day will I give up hope.