

# Israel Diary



Israel Diary:  
The Jewish State through the eyes of a Goy

By

Nicola Seu

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P U B L I S H I N G

Israel Diary: The Jewish State through the eyes of a Goy,  
by Nicola Seu

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*For my family*



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## PREFACE

Finding a straightforward term or formula to describe how 'Israel Diary' was conceived, shaped and eventually written is a difficult task, even for somebody who has regular contact with the world of literature or literary criticism. The title may be as useful as it is misleading; indeed, the association that most readily springs to mind is with the category of 'travel writing'. However, this literary debut from Nicola Seu only fits that description to a limited extent, since travelling itself was not the main purpose of his trip to Israel, which lasted in fact for several months. Instead, the driving force was a thirst, a necessity to gain first-hand knowledge of its people, places, culture and ways of life, as Seu himself acknowledges in the opening pages of his book. 'Israel Diary' contains a degree of reportage, certainly; there is autobiography, given that everything the author writes about is the fruit of real experience; and there is also, finally, an element of essay-writing. It could not have been any other way for somebody who, like Nicola, has dedicated a large part of his academic training to essays on Arabic and Jewish language and literature, the history of the origins and development of Islam, and international political relations.

What sort of book, therefore, are we preparing ourselves to read? Perhaps the most suitable definition would be 'diary of a brief sojourn', given that the intention is not only to offer a description of the places visited and acquaintances made, but also, and above all, to seek out as deep an understanding as possible of the spirit of a nation – Israel, so complex and rich in its characteristics and contradictions – based on his experiences of work, personal relationships and everyday life. The idea for this book sprung from a desire, combined with

the thirst and necessity already mentioned, to describe the Jewish State through the eyes of a *goy*, a non-Jew, free (or not) of passions and ideologies. Indeed, the majority of the text is dedicated to the way in which Nicola Seu – in his capacity as a young Sardinian, Italian and European – perceives and conveys the character of Israeli society to his readers. He explores its customs, usages and the behaviour of its citizens by immersing himself in daily life, spending time in farming communities, teaching Italian to local students, and participating in official ceremonies such as the celebration of sixty years of independence and the commemoration of the assassination of the former prime minister, Rabin. If only for the fact that Seu has succeeded in investigating and communicating the way it is possible to conduct a normal life in a climate of unpredictable terror attacks and continual warfare, if only for the fact that he has made it clear why Israel can legitimately aspire to be part of the Western world, ‘Israel Diary’ is a valuable work of major importance.

Some readers may, legitimately, disagree with the portrait of the Jewish State that emerges from the pages of this book or wonder why there is no mention, if only incidental, of Palestine. The key to Nicola Seu’s literary debut can be found in its title, however, which does not contain accusations against any party or faction, or recipes for a solution that even the greatest of statesmen do not seem able to identify. All that it presents – and this is already a great deal – is the courage and determination of a restless academic who decided, rather than setting his sights like so many others on his comfortable immediate surroundings and contenting himself with hearsay, to enter body and soul into a difficult society that is too often distorted by political intrigue and self-interest, to learn about this country and to help us learn along the way.

—Alessandro Marongiu

# CHAPTER ONE

## VIENNA

*May 2007*

It's raining on this Austrian May afternoon as I lie listening to the *Ave Maria*, stretched out on the bed in my spacious room in this ninth district that was the very birthplace of its composer, Schubert.

The sky seems leaden and heavy, as if wanting to remind me of the weariness of Vienna's long history; this great city that was the last bastion of Christendom, world capital of music and the waltz, and centre of the last great European empire. The first light of day glimpsed by Franz Joseph, Marie Antoinette, Freud and Popper was here in Vienna, and the same that inspired the best years of Beethoven, Mozart and Klimt. I am enchanted by the atmosphere in the midst of its wonderful buildings and churches, intoxicated and enveloped by the air that fills my lungs. Vienna is my Europe, where my values and tastes reside, and something that I recognise by now as my own.

The water continues to course down the windows as I realise that my life, just like this city anchored to its past, is not moving forward. The stagnation of my research, the lack of interest from the teaching staff and the funding that has yet to materialise are dampening the enthusiasm I have for my studies. As the grey smoke from my cigarette winds around my fingers, my distracted gaze suddenly falls upon the bookcase opposite and rests on a book whose title immediately captures my attention. *Altneuland*, the old new

land. Herzl was a scholar under these same skies and, like so many of his contemporaries, at a certain moment in his life he felt an irrepressible desire for the new, to free himself from the burden of old Europe and build his own dream. How much time in my life have I dedicated to the study of Israel without ever having walked its streets, listened to its words or sampled its fruits? I cannot deny the importance of the Jewish State for my present and future as a scholar, to such an extent that I feel I have some precise obligations to fulfil. I ask myself whether it is possible to understand the essence of a nation while closed behind the doors of a university lecture hall. Could I ever consider myself a true historian without gaining first-hand knowledge of my subject matter?

The only answer I can come up with, the only one that feels possible in my case, is no. I have to give a part of my life to Israel. I have to do it for the sake of intellectual propriety, for myself and for this unique society. I need to understand what it really means to live there, to look its people in the face and understand what moves their hearts and minds.

I have to do it to give some meaning to my journey, which without direct experience would always remain incomplete.

My mind is made up at last. I am leaving indefinitely for Israel and this is now my priority. My doctorate studies, the Viennese cafés and the refinement and fascination of *Mitteleuropa* can wait, and they will still be there waiting when I see fit to return home.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TEL AVIV, JERUSALEM, TEL AVIV

*August-September 2007*

Towards seven in the evening I decide to go for a walk. I have only been in this city for a few days and I hope to find a means of staying once I have found a job. It is here that I want to start learning about this country, living its life and discovering its vices and virtues.

I set off in the sweltering heat along *Rehov Dizengoff*, Tel Aviv's 'Fifth Avenue'. The street is full of lights, cafés and shops that are open and bustling with life. There is a sound of chattering and continuous clamour in every direction I look or listen. The atmosphere is happy and people seem to be enjoying these last moments of the day to the full: some in the company of friends, some with a partner, while others sit at a table in perfect solitude enjoying a glass of wine or reading a newspaper or book.

I have no destination to reach or particular place to visit, but for the moment I do not feel the need; it is the people who capture my attention. I notice some smiling girls giving information in good English to two disoriented tourists, I happen to see two teenagers kissing in the street, and some youngsters sitting on a bench giving out 'Free Hugs', as the sign they are holding reads. These particularly lively youths jump to their feet the moment they sense that a passer-by may be willing to take advantage of their high spirits.

Tel Aviv is Western. It is the West in the Middle East. Tel Aviv is Milan, Barcelona, Munich: this city has nothing in

common with the world around it. Cairo, Damascus and Amman seem light years away, not just a few hundred kilometres.

The conflict that has been tearing this land apart for decades does not seem to exist. Save for the odd soldier here and there to serve as a reminder, there is an air of intoxicating vitality. It exudes a love for life that does not and will not make time for the tragedy of war, the complexity of politics or the hatred of one's enemies.

Swept up in this lively and captivating atmosphere, I continue walking and decide to go and pay a visit to Rabin in the square where he was murdered around twelve years ago.

It has been some time since his death and as I stand there, in front of the monument that was built in his memory, it brings me back a little to the real world, where peace is just an illusion. I sit on a bench looking at the Israeli flag and commemorative images of the great statesman in the company of Bill Clinton and King Hussein, and reflect on how much more serious and deep-rooted the situation in the Middle East has become since his demise. The pretty girls with their tight jeans and close-fitting tops quickly disappear from my thoughts. I attempt to translate the commemorative inscription on the peace memorial, but my attention is distracted by a group of people gathered in a small crowd at the centre of the square opposite the large stage. They seem to be holding a protest or celebrating something. As I approach I see photos of Gilad Shalit, the soldier who was captured during the last conflict. Today is his birthday; Gilad is twenty-one years old. There are many Israelis giving out sweets, flags and stickers to commemorate their countryman and raise awareness of his terrible plight. Others are writing dedications and giving interviews to the television crews that have shown up for the event. None of this comes as much of a surprise of course. It is natural that Israel should always close ranks, whenever it

comes to the army and want to remember the soldiers who have died or been taken prisoner in the course of their duty to defend their country.

It is Shalit's age that paralyses me as I stand there looking at the big cake with a candle shaped like a number twenty-one on top. He was nineteen years old when he was captured. I think about the same period in my own life that I spent travelling with friends around Europe, free of care and safe in the knowledge that my loved ones and my country, Italy, were in no danger.

The remembrance ceremony that I am witnessing brings me back to the miserable reality of the Middle East where the war does not spare anybody, least of all a young man who is unable spend his birthday surrounded by the love of his family and friends. Instead he finds himself prisoner, victim of a conflict in which he has been defeated, victim of the inability of the powers on this planet to bring this never-ending tragedy to a close.

The good mood that I picked up on my carefree stroll has been destroyed in just a few minutes. All it took was a turn down the wrong street, a visit to the wrong place, and I have come back down to earth and the harsh reality of this bloodstained land. How can people live in this country? How do all the Israelis on *Rehov Dizengoff*, so full of energy, smiles and laughter, manage to stop themselves from being dragged down by the situation that surrounds them? Is it desperation or a lack of awareness? Right now I couldn't say, but I can see that I will not find the answers to my questions in books and essays on history or politics. If I want to understand the life in this state, I need to experience it for myself.

The Israeli national anthem alludes to a far-away East and the country's popular traditions tell tales of wilderness and mysticism. There is not a trace of the Middle-Eastern spirit

here, however, and I wonder where I would need to go in this country in order to find it, provided of course that it truly exists.

It is surely Jerusalem, the city of three monotheistic religions, that can satisfy my curiosity. My friend David has just moved there, and I decide to go and pay him a visit since I haven't seen him for more than a year. I catch the bus from Tel Aviv and arrive there in only forty-five minutes. David is still at work and calls to confirm that he will meet me later in the Old City.

I take in my surroundings as I slowly make my way towards the ancient walls, studying the people's faces. I soon realise that there is a tangible difference between the nation's two biggest cities.

The area is swarming with *kippot*<sup>1</sup> and Orthodox Jews, with their black hats and long sidelocks hanging down to their shoulders. There are far fewer girls in Western-style dress, but plenty of long skirts and headscarves. This is the typical dress of the most observant Jewish women, most of whom are accompanied by a baby or two in a pushchair.

The security is also tighter in Jerusalem. I am searched at the bus station, at the entrance to the Old City (at Jaffa Gate by two rather rude policemen), and again at the entrance to *ha-Kotel ha-Ma'aravi*, the Wailing or Western Wall.

This is precisely the destination that I choose after a stroll around the streets of the Old City. Following the security checks, I make my way toward the square opposite the wall where a large group of male and female soldiers are standing in a formation similar to a military parade. I approach one of them who does not appear to be part of the celebrations and ask what is happening. He tells me, in rather laboured English, that they are celebrating the end of their course. They

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<sup>1</sup> Plural of *kippah*, typical Jewish head covering worn in holy places and during religious functions.

are now soldiers, ready to defend Israel. Before watching the ceremony I decide to visit the wall, which visitors must not approach under any circumstances with their head uncovered. I put on a *kippah*, but the fear that the strong wind might cause it to fly off at any moment forces me to keep one hand permanently on my head to avoid the need to go chasing after it in such a holy place. The air is heavy and instils me with its sense of holiness, of power almost. I am embarrassed to find myself among these Jews, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, who are praying with such intensity and feeling that they seem possessed.

On the left side of the wall there is an opening that leads to a sort of cave, where the most observant Jews spend time praying and studying the *Torah* (or Pentateuch).

I go inside and take a look at the inscriptions on the walls, fruitlessly attempting to read them with my still very basic Hebrew. I am approached by a pleasant old Sephardi, a rather eccentric sort, who somehow works out that I am Italian and begins to address me in a mixture of Italian, Spanish and Hebrew that I struggle to understand. He asks me if I am Jewish with a face that is bursting with such joy and happiness – owing to what I really have no idea – that it seems they would probably disappear in an instant if I were to tell him the truth. I decide to nod my head, and he begins to speak with even greater enthusiasm about *Yom Kippur* that is fast approaching, enquiring whether I will be fasting on that day. I have no idea what to say or do to get myself out of a situation that is fast becoming awkward, and in the end I mumble that I too will be fasting. He seems heartened by my promise to honour this tradition, so much so that he bestows me with a satisfied smile that reveals two wonky rows of teeth and politely bids me farewell.

A little perplexed, but relieved more than anything at no longer having to camouflage my true identity, I go outside to

watch the ceremony. The most striking aspect is the fact that most of these new soldiers are around eighteen or nineteen years old. There are many young women, some of them very pretty, following the orders imparted by their leader in a loud, firm voice. She is a young woman of around twenty, all the more impressive due to the confidence and fighting spirit she exudes, who brings to mind the work of Herzl, the drawings of Lilien and the theories of Jabotinsky. Things were set to change for the small, hump-backed, intellectual Jew, forever relegated to the ghettos of the large European cities. The moment had arrived for a new type of Jew, a fighter, proud of his origins and ready to battle to the last for his country. The 'muscle Jew', as the slogan coined by Nordau went: the young lady before me seems proof of the fact that this nation has made it and that the transformation has been perfectly accomplished.

All the soldiers follow her movements in perfect synchrony, loudly repeating, almost shouting, what I guess is an oath to the state of Israel. During the ceremony they sing the beautiful national anthem, *haTikwa* or 'The Hope', and then they break ranks. I continue to wander around the square in front of the wall and observe these girls, so young and so different from one another. Black, white or dark skinned, with blonde, black, red, curly or straight hair, they bear witness to the considerable diversity in the racial composition of their country.

I think about the conflict, the continual state of warfare in which people here and in the rest of the region live, and these young people who are undoubtedly indoctrinated into violence. What must it be like to spend a youth with thoughts of bloodshed, the protection of one's borders and territories, and death? It is a reality that we young Europeans are not able to understand. We have no idea what it means to experience it. Although this feels like a Western nation in so many ways,

it is something that divides us and prevents many of us from understanding the gravity of the situation. My generation, and to a certain extent the one before it, does not know war, has never truly experienced it. We are accustomed to the peace and security of our homes and cities, while here they believe that fighting is their only hope of survival.

‘My friend!’ A shout interrupts my reflections, and I look behind me to see David approaching with his arms waving above his head.

‘*Ma nishma, Haver?*’<sup>2</sup> I answer, giving him a hug.

After a few cheerful greetings, I invite him for a drink, adding that the first round is on the *goy* (word of Ashkenazi origin meaning ‘non-Jew’).

‘Gladly, but first let me go and see the wall.’

I slip on my head covering again and together we approach the holy place.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ David says, brushing his fingers against the square stones. ‘Yes, I truly think it is amazing,’ he adds. ‘I come here as often as I can.’

We sit down on the ground opposite the remains of the temple destroyed by the Romans and begin to talk about the past year, his trip to India and what is new with him.

‘You know, Nicola, I have been in great conflict with my homeland. It irritates me to see graffiti everywhere celebrating victory and the conquest of Jerusalem. What have we gained from this war? We have simply become villains in the eyes of the world, and that is something that not many people are willing to acknowledge. We are celebrating forty years of madness.’

‘Listen, David, that’s history for you and there is no point in judging it. These have always been its laws and it is clear that those who hold the power and authority are never nice.’

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<sup>2</sup> ‘How are you, my friend?’

Besides, this war has consolidated the existence of your state and made it possible to pave the way for peace with Egypt.'

'That's true. It's certainly not the best kind of peace imaginable but for the time being, as far as they are concerned at least, things are alright. In any case, I have finally made my peace with Israel. My people have certainly made some mistakes, but I don't feel that I can blame them. They cannot be judged responsible for everything that happens in the Middle East.' It seems almost as though he is addressing these statements to himself rather than to me.

When darkness and the temperature begin to fall, I remind my friend of my invitation to go for a drink.

We get up and make our way out of the Old City, without haste or conversation, towards a bar in Jewish Jerusalem. Along the way we pass a family of Orthodox Jews, and David breaks the silence with an interesting observation.

'Walking down these streets I realise how much richer Tel Aviv is than this city. It can be noticed in the people, the sounds, the activities, everything.'

'Yet this is the capital,' I counter. 'Why do you think it's poorer?'

'Reading the Bible doesn't make you rich. Here in Jerusalem they work a lot less and study a lot more. It's clear that there is not so much cash in circulation. Think about Italy, also. The government is based in Rome but for many people the real nerve centre is Milan, isn't it?'

'Yes, our countries are similar from that point of view, even if the importance of Rome for an Italian is not comparable with the significance this city has for you. Seeing that Orthodox family has made me wonder about something that I am curious to know.'

'Ask away,' says my friend. 'I'm here to give you answers if I can.'

‘You see, in Christianity conversion is really easy. All you need is a quick ceremony, a bit of water, two godparents and everything is taken care of. In the Jewish religion it’s a lot more complicated though. I’ve never understood the exact requirements and procedure for being converted.’

‘Well, the *Rabbanut* (Rabbi Council) considers each case individually and decides who should or should not be converted. There are some fundamental elements anyhow, such as circumcision, the *Mikveh* (ritual bath) and respect for *Halakha*, Jewish law. It also depends a great deal on the branch of Judaism through which you want to enter. There are different denominations; some reformed and permissive, others more traditional and strict. The process lasts a while; I don’t think it can be completed without at least three years of study.’

‘If it’s so difficult, I don’t imagine that many people have converted, either now or in the past,’ I comment.

David proceeds to pull up the sleeve of his shirt and show me his arm, ‘Look at me. My skin is so white and my hair so red that I could be Irish. I certainly don’t come from Babylon. I can’t say for sure, but it’s likely that one of my ancestors was converted in Europe several centuries ago.’

Our conversation is interrupted by my companion’s mobile phone ringing. After talking for a couple of minutes, David tells me that some of his roommates and friends are waiting in a bar near Zion Square and have invited us to join them.

We walk through a small district of stone streets and houses that is busy with little shops, restaurants and children and young people looking for fun. It reminds me for a moment of the liveliness of Tel Aviv.

‘This is really bustling, what a great area,’ I comment, highly impressed.

‘Yes, this is where everybody comes for a good time, particularly during *Shabbat*.’

‘So it isn’t so bad here after all, then,’ I add, waiting for my friend’s reaction.

‘There isn’t just a sea breeze here on the coast; the air you breathe is more secular. The importance of religion in Jerusalem cannot be compared to the rest of Israel. It may well be the holiest city in the world, but, thank God, this country is not a theocracy,’ David concludes as he opens the door to the bar.

‘Yes, thank God,’ I mutter, almost to myself.

In the days that follow I travel back and forth continually between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, where I begin to seek out a job, a place to live and some experience. A friend of mine who loves it here tells me that this city has everything that a human being could possibly desire. Every trend and fashion, lifestyle or transgression, drugs, sex, music, and a variety of restaurants and shops are all within arm’s reach. I begin to experience the life in this city, exploring its streets, bars and beaches. I try to probe its numerous forms and customs, enjoying what it has to offer without lingering too long, perhaps only momentarily, on its problems.

Despite the short geographical distance, there is a deep divide between ancient Jerusalem and vibrant Tel Aviv. Like it or not, there is no escaping the weight of the Holy City’s multi-millennial history. Instead, it envelops and almost crushes everyone that it encounters. Its stones, skies, inhabitants and religions suffocate anybody who seeks to rebel against their laws and customs.

Tel Aviv is the Western, secular dream of a life without room for hesitation. It races on without reflection, imposing its own rules for beauty and behaviour, where failure to comply spells isolation.

These two different worlds, two contrasting and apparently irreconcilable philosophies, complement one other. Born of

the same earth and product of the same people, neither one could survive without the existence of its antagonist.



## CHAPTER THREE

### ROSH HASHANAH

*September 2007*

*Rosh Hashanah* means New Year or ‘head of the year’ in Hebrew: *rosh* ‘head’ and *shana* ‘year’. The celebrations to mark the beginning of the Jewish year have been underway in Israel over the past few days and while the typical sense of excitement felt in cities across Italy or Europe for this kind of event is undoubtedly missing, I still notice decorated shops, gift packages of honey and wine, and an increased sense of general activity.

My friend David very kindly invites me to celebrate the event with his family in Tel Aviv. I arrive at his house at eight in the evening and am soon introduced to those present: his elderly but highly lucid grandmother of ninety-one, his mother, his brother with his girlfriend (who is expecting a baby), and an aunt and uncle. They are a typical family of Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, well-educated and not overly religious. The table is already laid and each food item bears a precise significance. We open a bottle of wine and the glasses are filled for the *kiddush*, which translates as ‘sanctification’.

It is obligatory for the men to wear a skullcap while we listen to David recite prayers for the sanctification of the wine, in Hebrew of course. Although my still very basic knowledge of the language means I cannot understand what he is saying, I seem to make out two words nonetheless: *Israel* and *Mitzraim*, which means Egypt. After drinking the

wine I seek confirmation from the girlfriend of David's brother, who speaks good Italian. She explains that the flight from Egypt is a very common theme in Jewish prayer, together with the promise to return to *Eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel.

We then move on to the second custom. David rests his glass and bible on the table to pick up a large round loaf of bread, which he cuts into pieces, dips in honey and distributes among the guests. They tell me that this round, very sweet bread symbolises a peaceful year that will be free of troubles, and that the honey serves to make it all the sweeter. The same process is then repeated with slices of apple, which, after their baptism in honey, are eaten by all the guests at the same time.

Finally comes the turn of the *rimon*, or pomegranate. This fruit with its juicy seeds symbolises fertility and prosperity for the people of Israel. I cannot deny feeling a little out of place to tell the truth, but the incredible warmth and kindness of David's family help me to remain at ease.

After these initial customs we move on to the meal itself. The first dish is the infamous *gefillte fisch*, which in Yiddish (language of the Jews from Eastern Europe) means 'stuffed fish'. In all the time that I have been studying this country, its history and culture, I have never come across a flattering description of this traditional Ashkenazi dish. In one of his books, the great Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua dubbed it 'inedible filth'. With a certain mix of curiosity and apprehension therefore, I prepare myself to eat what appears to be a simple fishcake accompanied by two sauces, presumably to make it more palatable. It is certainly no delicacy, but I think that the novelist exaggerated in describing it as repulsive. There is plenty of conversation during the meal and I exchange a few pleasantries with David's uncle, who is a very interesting person. He is an Argentine Jew of Russian descent who moved here in 1960 at

the age of about twenty. We communicate very comfortably in Spanish and he tells me about his past and his military experiences in Israel. Since he arrived in this country he has participated in every war up to the first Lebanese conflict in 1982: 'no he perdido ni una', 'I haven't even missed one,' he jokingly tells me. He is an expert on military and political issues and briefly explains his point of view on the current situation. After a few minutes he gets carried away and starts spewing out resentment towards Moshe Dayan, accusing him of each of Israel's failures from 1973 to the present. In his opinion the pernicious legacy, above all political, of this former minister and military leader is a burden from which the nation has still not managed to escape. I listen with some surprise, but his arguments are not unfounded and, although I do not agree, it gives me plenty of food for thought.

The meal continues with rice, salads, vegetables and cheeses, but no meat. This is not because meat is forbidden during these celebrations, but simply out of choice by David's mother.

One aspect that makes a real impression is the singing between courses. Everyone has a copy of the words and together they sing songs, both religious and non-religious, about the New Year and the Jewish people. In contrast to this wealth of songs, there is a shortage of wine. The glasses that were used to toast during the *kiddush* remain half full and I politely refuse to have another bottle opened just for me, although it would be a very welcome accompaniment to these excellent dishes.

Before the dessert is served, the guests express their hopes for the coming year. Obviously everybody speaks in Hebrew, but both David and his uncle translate for me. I am particularly touched by the wishes of his grandmother, which she dedicates to her own people, asking for peace and prosperity in the land of Israel. When I am asked to express

my own wish, I, like her, ask for peace and harmony for this region. When everybody has finished, David's grandmother asks to speak again. She expresses a special thought for me, the guest, wishing me luck during my stay in this country and a year surrounded by love, hospitality, and people as friendly as her family. Somewhat moved, I thank her in my laboured Hebrew. We eat the dessert and continue to make light conversation. The Argentine uncle holds court and is a never-ending source of anecdotes, jokes and witticisms. His Argentinian heritage makes itself felt in contrast to the calmer, Northern-European demeanour of the rest of the family.

As the evening wears on, I say goodbye and a heartfelt thank you to David's mother for her invite. I add that David is always welcome to visit Sardinia, although I warn her that he will have problems with the food given that almost every Sardinian speciality is forbidden under Jewish law. His mother smiles and, in this warm and friendly atmosphere, we take our leave.

The next day David calls to invite me to spend the rest of the New Year in Jerusalem. During the meal his brother's girlfriend had explained that this festival, which concludes with *Yom Kippur*, lasts for a total of ten days. Only the first three days are holiday, however, and then life returns to normal.

The following morning I go to Tel Aviv station and catch a *sherut*, which is the Hebrew word for 'service'. These ten-person minibuses carry passengers at an inflated price to the country's most important destinations during the religious holidays.

The Jerusalem that greets me is a ghost town. It is a singular spectacle. Bars, shops, banks; everything is closed. The streets are deserted save for the odd car or taxi, although I cannot imagine how they are doing any business since there is