

Mordechai's Moustache and his Wife's Cats

Mordechai was a simple man. There were tens of thousands like him in Tel Aviv. However, he insisted that there were few like him there. He liked to live an easy, comfortable life, not disturbing anyone and not being disturbed by anyone. That was why Mordechai continued to be liked by his neighbours, for he did not disturb them. Mordechai joined the army and left it, but he continued to consider himself a soldier even though he was only a reservist. He practised many trades, simple trades suitable for a simple citizen, but these trades did not yield much money. He worked for many years as a carpenter while Stella worked as a waitress in a restaurant. With the money they both earned, they brought up their son and daughter. Their son became a prominent young man and married the neighbour's daughter, and the couple left to live together in one of the city's suburbs. Their daughter left the family home to live with her boyfriend in a small apartment.

Mordechai was looking forward to living a quiet life

with Stella now that their home was theirs alone. Stella entertained similar feelings as her husband's. They were both past fifty now and felt it was their right to live their remaining years in peace and quiet. They prepared themselves for that: Stella kept three cats, two grey and one black with bright eyes, the latter being her favourite because of its unexpected daring and initiative; and Mordechai let his handlebar moustache grow, giving each side free rein to become so long that they covered "the lower sector" of his face (Mordechai was still fond of military terms).

At first Mordechai did not complain about his wife's cats. Rather, he considered them a necessary variation of life that would take its usual course. Stella too did not complain at first about her husband's moustache. She considered it, rather, an extension of the traditions of many soldiers and army generals in Israel and the world who distinguished themselves by their long and thick handlebar moustaches. However, the ends of Mordechai's moustache were unusually long and made Stella complain, and they later filled her with aversion. Mordechai slept beside her in bed and she often woke up in the middle of the night, disturbed because the right end of Mordechai's moustache had settled near her nose. She would be obliged to wake Mordechai so that he could remove his moustache away from her nose. Mordechai would then sleep on his left side, and the right end of his moustache would rise in the air above the bed like a dry,

desert plant. But that lasted only for a short while, for Mordechai would not stay long in this position and there would be other occasions for his moustache to toy with Stella's nose before morning dawned.

At dawn Stella's cats jumped onto their bed and stretched their limbs energetically while purring continuously non-stop. Mordechai disliked his wife's cats and complained to her that they did not let him sleep during the most beautiful moments of the morning. Stella did not feel happy at his complaining about her cats and told him he clearly no longer loved the home atmosphere. Mordechai felt his wife had developed a dislike for him or, more precisely, for his moustache, which had become the longest in the neighbourhood and perhaps in all of Tel Aviv. Stella would prepare breakfast and say to him: "Please, come and have breakfast, you and your moustache." Mordechai accepted her words as a sort of pleasant flirtation but, day after day, he increasingly felt sure that she intended to insult his moustache. Despite all this, he would not stop the ends from growing longer, even if they were to become ten metres long.

Mordechai and Stella sat at the table to eat, he and his handlebar moustache on one side and she and her three cats on the opposite side. Stella would look at the moustache stretching out to the right and the left, and say: "It's as if I'm sitting at the airport!" – hinting at Mordechai's moustache stretching out like the wings of an airplane. Mordechai would smile and consider his wife's words a

mere joke, but deep down inside he understood them to be nothing but implied insult to his moustache.

Mordechai had sufficient reason to make critical insinuations about his wife, but he avoided that in order not to anger her. He could simply vilify the behaviour of her cats, but he refrained from that out of respect for her. Now the two grey cats were irritating him by rubbing themselves against his legs and making repulsive purring sounds that reduced his appetite more than any time in the past. The black cat then jumped onto the table, not far from the plates of food, and stood there, its body taut and its tail rising upright above its back like a radio aerial. Oh, how Mordechai disliked this scene of the cat's body! It looked as if it was about to broadcast a news bulletin, and Mordechai saw evil omens in news bulletins, so he turned his face away because he could not bear to look at it!

Mordechai stopped eating. He drank his tea as he read the details of the military operation that had taken place in the heart of Tel Aviv the previous evening. After a short while he folded the newspaper.

"I am going to volunteer for military service," he said to his wife out of the blue.

"At this age? They'll not accept you."

"I know people of my age who volunteered to serve at the checkpoints, and they were accepted to go there."

Stella encouraged him to do that because she had noticed his temperament was beginning to get worse as

his time spent doing nothing continued. "At least," she told herself, "he will be away from home for some time." Mordechai did not tell her that he was bored with the atmosphere at home. He told her that what had made him take that decision were the positions of Yossi Beilin in particular. He said: "Beilin works against the interest of the state, and we have to defend it against his destructive plans." He said he was angry at the leftist writers who were poisoning the minds of Israelis. He told her he had read an article in Yediot newspaper saying that the state would be afflicted with syphilis if it continued to embrace this "occupation".

One day later he put on his military uniform, picked up his M16 rifle, and went to the checkpoint of Qalandiya, south of Ramallah. He stood behind the concrete wall of the checkpoint, a steel helmet on his head. Nothing appeared above the wall except his face, his moustache, and parts of his shoulders and hands. He stared ahead and saw the Palestinians close at hand. For the first time Mordechai stood face to face with Palestinians. He examined their faces and saw that they were silent and anxiously apprehensive as they stood in a long queue in front of the checkpoint, waiting for the opportunity of passing through. He contemplated them. They were a mixture of human beings: men of various ages, old women who could only stand with difficulty, and young women, some of whom wore tight trousers while others were wrapped in flowing garments that covered their bodies and wore

white or coloured scarves on their heads. Conflicting ideas and feelings overcame him. He was almost ready to express his sympathy for these unarmed human beings waiting for a hand gesture from him. However, the security of the state was greater than all other considerations and this made him suppress his tender feelings; for these people – in the final analysis – were the enemies of Israel! And in order to strengthen feelings of harshness within him, he rejected any possibility of looking at children, old women, and aged men, and decided to focus his stern looks on young men, the source of danger, the origin of trouble: for it was they who were the saboteurs girding themselves with explosive belts or concealed Kalashnikov machine guns under their jackets to plant death in the chests of Israelis.

Mordechai uttered his first words at a crowd of Palestinians whom he was seeing at close range for the first time in his life, “Fawda mamnu‘a!¹ Asoor!² Atem mefinim!”³

He heard no clear response from the waiting crowd. He only heard indistinct murmurs and saw grins that made him feel neither comfortable nor at ease. He recognised that being hasty in permitting Palestinians to pass through might cause great harm to the state. At the checkpoint in

front of Mordechai himself, there was – of course – an electronic gate that screened the Palestinians as they passed through it. Opportunities for smuggling arms and explosives were utterly non-existent under these conditions. Yet easy passage across the checkpoint would give an unsuitable impression, for it would appear as though the state were more lax than it ought to be, which would prompt the Palestinians to dare to harm the state and its security.

Mordechai did not want his first day at the checkpoint to have any kind of failure. What would his soldier comrades say about him if even only one suspect were to cross the checkpoint in a moment of inattention on his part? What would Stella say? Despite his meekness, Mordechai was a stern military man when necessary; the past wars in which he had participated or not participated were witness to that. Furthermore, who could guarantee to Mordechai that this crowd standing nearby was innocent of any reason for suspicion? If it were up to Mordechai, he would close the checkpoint and tell all those crowding people, whose numbers were increased increasing every minute: “Lech, lech!⁴ Muroor min hon ma fi!”⁵

But it was not up to him. Yet he had to prevent any attempt by dangerous Palestinians to pass. Mordechai was

1 Fawda mamnu‘a is Arabic for ‘Chaos is forbidden’.

2 Asoor is Hebrew for ‘Forbidden’.

3 Atem mefinim is Hebrew for ‘You understand’.

4 Lech, lech is Hebrew for ‘Go, go!’

5 Muroor min hon ma fi is Arabic (Palestinian dialect) for ‘There is no passing from here!’

not a god to know what the Palestinians concealed in their hearts. Therefore proceeding patiently and unhurriedly was the best policy in this complex situation. He noticed that a number of men in the queue at the checkpoint were raising their voices, as though they were protesting that he had stopped their movement through the gate.

“Sheket!⁶ Fawda ma biddi!⁷ Atem mefinim!⁸”

The noise increased and many voices were raised. Mordechai exchanged meaningful looks with a soldier standing next to the electronic gate. The soldier immediately closed the checkpoint and the Palestinians were at a loss. Mordechai gave his orders again.

“Uskutu, bitmurru!⁹ Fahmin?!¹⁰”

The Palestinians were divided, some suggesting that everyone be quiet while others vented their anger with further shouts and comments. In the end, the first group had the upper hand. Mordechai seized the opportunity of the closure of the checkpoint to give free rein to his thoughts. He liked to indulge in wool-gathering for it allowed his nerves to rest and gave him an opportunity to contemplate life. At the same time, Mordechai could practise some of his hobbies: smoothing the ends of his

6 Sheket is Hebrew for ‘Silence!’ or ‘Shut up!’

7 Fawda ma biddi! Arabic (Palestinian dialect) for ‘I don’t want any chaos!’

8 Atem mefinim Hebrew for ‘You understand.’

9 Uskutu, bitmurru Arabic (Palestinian dialect) for ‘Be silent, you’ll pass.’

10 Fahmin Arabic (Palestinian dialect) for ‘You understand?!’

moustache with pleasure and enjoyment, and watching women’s bodies. He cast direct looks at the bodies of the young women crowding at the checkpoint. He said to himself: “The Palestinians have beautiful girls!” And quickly compared them with the girls of Tel Aviv, thinking: “But the girls in Tel Aviv are more beautiful.” It pained him that some of the girls in Tel Aviv behaved immodestly. He once saw an Israeli girl walking in Dizengoff Street and a young man had his arm around her waist. The girl’s beauty appealed to him but he was disturbed to see that the young man with his arm around her waist was an Israeli-Arab, heaven forbid! Mordechai attacked the young man and would have killed him had passers-by not intervened to save him. Mordechai did not like to see the girls of Tel Aviv in the laps of young Arab men, the Arabs of the state. That was a bad omen, as he would say, and the state should make a law forbidding Jewish women from marrying Arabs. Mordechai was somewhat sad that the state was remiss in regard to itself, for it ought to make more laws to protect itself from every kind of evil. It ought to make a law about mulukhiya (Jew’s mallow) – yes, mulukhiya! The law should provide that cooking it be forbidden except by permission of the army leadership. Mordechai had not yet forgotten that ‘joke’ which one of the Israeli newspapers quoted from an Arab newspaper made up by a witty Arab. Mordechai insisted that it was not a joke but rather a malicious plan disguised as a joke. The joke went like this:

“There is no need to resist Israel with arms. It is sufficient to gather ten million Arabs along the River Jordan and keep them hungry for the duration of one week. A rumour will then be planted among them that the inhabitants of Tel Aviv are now cooking mulukhiya. They will cross the river immediately, heading towards Tel Aviv. Israel will then oppose and defeat them with its deadly arms and kill five million of them. The rest will be able to remain in the country, take part in the elections of the Knesset, win the majority of seats, and take possession of power in Israel.”

Mordechai was disturbed because of that “joke”. He believed that the state should be required to observe well the borders well whenever the inhabitants of Tel Aviv cooked mulukhiya, and it should be required to observe well the borders well, also when the inhabitants of Tel Aviv were satisfied with eating only hamburgers, for it was not yet proven that the Arabs did not like hamburgers! Mordechai woke up from his wool-gathering when an old woman rushed up to the checkpoint shouting: “Are we going to sleep here at the checkpoint? What sort of treatment is this?”

Mordechai asked the woman to go back but she stood firmly where she was. Mordechai’s soldier comrade tried to push her back with force but she persisted in shouting and threatening the soldier with her gnarled, and veined hands. Mordechai recognised that the old woman had won the round and he had no alternative but to permit

her to pass. He gestured to the soldier, and the soldier permitted her to pass. Mordechai then permitted a number of other Palestinians to pass after an inordinately strict examination of their identity cards.

Mordechai felt he needed some rest after all the effort he had exerted. He ordered the Palestinians to wait in the long queue, and he let his thoughts roam freely as he twirled the ends of his moustache. He remembered Stella and felt a flow of vitality run through his loins. He remembered he had not approached her body for three months. He had said he would surprise her this night in a manner she would never expect. He would tell her that military service was indeed life itself and that the army was the living root upon which the state stood. Under the influence of these refreshing thoughts and on account of the dense crowd at the checkpoint, Mordechai permitted a further group of Palestinians to pass. “They say they are a small nation,” he thought to himself, “and I bet they are more numerous than the population of China!” The movement of passing through the checkpoint continued at a very slow pace until Mordechai’s working hours came to an end and he left the checkpoint and went back home.

Stella received Mordechai with a warm welcome. She listened to his long and often diverging account of the Palestinians whom he had now seen with his own eyes. At times, Stella laughed and pitied the Palestinians; at other times, she felt she occasionally hated them. Her feelings

were mixed, coloured by the particular events her husband related to her. Then he said to her, as he carried her in his arms to their bedroom: "You will be exposed to some 'heavy bombardment' tonight." He was silent for a moment as he assessed the effect of his words on her, and when he noticed there was no resistance, added: "I will 'advance under cover' of soft light towards you." She appeared to be annoyed and said: "You've gone back to this old jargon. Did we not agree some time ago to forget it?" He asked: "How can you dislike a jargon that titillates feelings?" "I'm not a wall," she answered. "If you want to bombard anything, here is the wall in front of you. Bombard it as you like." Mordechai fell silent.

In the morning, he returned to the checkpoint.

He worked with greater perfection than he did on the first day. He continued to pressure the Palestinians there until they became extremely exasperated. He did not notice until some time later that certain sounds like farting came from them whenever he touched twiddled the ends of his moustache. At first, he considered it to be a coincidence, something unintended, but the derisive smiles on the faces of the Palestinians and their whispered comments aroused his suspicion. Again and again he shouted, "Sheket, sheket!"⁶ "Silence, silence!"

At his order they fell silent. Mordechai seized this opportunity to smooth stroke the ends of his moustache once more and admire the bodies of the beautiful girls, whereupon the farting sounds could be heard again.

Mordechai could not exactly locate the spots in the crowd from where these sounds arose, but he was no longer ignorant of their intention as they clearly had no other purpose than to mock his luxuriant moustachehandlebars. What should he do? Should he finally close the checkpoint in their faces? That was not possible. There were orders from the higher authorities stipulating that the Palestinians should be permitted to pass. Should he arrest some of those he suspected as the source of these derisive farting sounds, who were mostly a group of uncouth teenagers? Perhaps, but there was no law in the state decreeing that anyone who did that should be arrested. Furthermore, Mordechai did not want to create a scandal on account of his moustache, particularly as the newspapers of the Left might write about the matter and revile both him and his moustache. Yossi Beilin might take advantage of this matter to strengthen his call for abolition of the checkpoints and redeployment of the army from its present positions. Should Mordechai stop twirling the ends of his moustache and thus forego a pleasure he could not give up? This was difficult, very difficult. But it seemed to him that there was no escape from this option if he wanted to preserve the good reputation of his moustache!

Mordechai tried to avoid touching the ends of his moustache as he moved about at the checkpoint. However, the farting sounds did not stop. The very sight of Mordechai's moustache had become sufficient cause for

the Palestinians to “play the music” that their lips could performed so well. Even Mordechai’s colleagues at the checkpoint began to behave in an equivocal way: they defended their colleague’s moustache with a wave of scoldings and threats whenever the accursed “performance” started; andbut, among themselves, they laughed with gusto when they were out of sight of the Palestinians.

Mordechai felt that he was at a decisive crossroads: he should either stop serving at the checkpoint, thus saving his moustache from insults and – at the same time – giving up his sacrifice in the cause of the state; or he should shave off his moustache and preserve his loyalty to the state. (He thought of suggesting that the state should establish an annual award of 50,000 shekels to be given to the ideal citizen, and he was sure he would be the first to receive it.)

And this was indeed what happened: Mordechai decided to shave off his moustache and use this decision to get rid of his wife’s cats. Mordechai was confident that she would be obliged, even though it was painful for her, to give up the cats she loved because she so hated his moustache; it would mean she was accepting a kind of exchange between the two of them from which she would both have rest and give rest.

And so Mordechai entered into a long process of dogged negotiation with his wife, which finally ended with success. Stella agreed to get rid of her two grey cats

and keep just her black one in exchange for Mordechai’s shaving off his handlebar moustache.

And so, the next day, Mordechai went to the checkpoint without his moustache.

For their part, the Palestinians noticed that passing through the checkpoint had become a little better, perhaps because Mordechai had given up some of his hobbies and preoccupations!

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