“Well then tell her that she has to get out of here, mister,” the Israeli policeman called out. He was standing, arms folded, at one entrance to Mandelbaum Gate when I explained to him that we had come with my mother who needed to go through – I pointed – to cross over to the Jordanian side of the gate. She had her permit in her hand. That was at the end of the winter. The sun was hinting at spring. The dust between the mounds of rubble was covered in green. Rubble heaps to the right, mounds of rubble to the left. Children with pe’ot (side curls) playing amidst the piles and the green stirred a sense of wonder in our children’s hearts. Our kids had come with us in order to say goodbye to their grandmother. “Children and hair braids – how on earth?!”

In the heart of that old neighborhood we always called “Masrura”, there was an expanse of dusty asphalt which formed a wide courtyard. It was marked off by two doorways: the “here” door and the “there” door. These gates were made of stones from ruins and flattened tin, and were whitewashed by plaster. Each was specifically marked to ensure proper passage for the “exiting” or the “entering” car.

Stressing the word “exit”, the guard said, as if he wanted to teach me a lesson; “What’s important is leaving the Garden of Eden, not getting in over “there”.” Not a father himself, it seemed, neither did the customs officer miss the chance, when everyone was kissing mother goodbye, to intone: “Whoever exits from here never comes back”.

Indeed, it seems that such unsettling thoughts also plagued mother during her last days with us. When our close friends and family members gathered the night before the trip to Jerusalem she said, “I lived in order to see my mourners (those who would eulogize me) with my own eyes.” And in the morning when we slid down the alley – open at both ends – to the car, she turned her gaze behind and gestured toward the olive and apricot trees at the door of her house, musing, “Twenty years I’ve lived here, and who can count the number of times I’ve gone up and down this alley!” And when the car passed by the cemetery on the outskirts of town she turned to her deceased dear ones and let out, like an inner whisper, “Why isn’t it my fortune to be buried here? And who will place flowers on my granddaughter’s grave?”

In 1940, when she had gone up to Jerusalem, a fortune teller had told her that it would be her fate to die in the holy city. Would his prophecy come true in the end?

She was seventy-five back then and had not yet experienced this feeling of terror that was taking over her heart and injecting utter emptiness into her soul; a feeling like the pangs of a suffering conscience – missing one’s homeland. And if one were to ask her, for example, to explain the meaning of the word “homeland”, she would undoubtedly become confused just as she did that time she first came across the word in her prayer book and didn’t know whether to say it meant house, or at a minimum, laundry tub. Or perhaps it meant the piece of land – the crater – that had come down to her from her great grandmother (her friends laughed at her, by the way, when she said she was now going to take the wash tub with her). Or maybe “homeland” was the cries of the milkman that came with the dawn, or the din-don of the oil vendor’s bell, or her sick husband’s
coughing voice, or nights like the nights when her children were home – those who had
gone with their families and abandoned her doorstep, leaving her alone.

Of all places, this lintel was her house’s doorstep, the one on which her last gaze
rested, and the one that was privy and could attest to the countless times she had planted
herself (stood/established herself) on it, day in, day out – to see her children off, having
gladden their hearts, or to sing them a song; a tender, mother’s song, with tears in her
eyes:

Dark-feathered chick, your expression grew
Into that of a bird; to sing and to nest were your teachings
Now you have grown, your wings have lifted your feathers,
You have flown, and I troubled over you for nought.

Even if she were told that “homeland” was each and every one of these things all
together, the term’s riddle would not have been solved. But now, when her legs are
stepping over to the “no-man’s land” and she is expecting them to let her move and step
forward – now she turns to her home and says, “How my soul yearned to sit and rest, if
only one more time, on that bench!” Her elderly brother, who had troubled himself to
come from the village to part from her, gave an instant nod, his face pained and puzzled
(inscribed with pain and puzzlement). For indeed, this was the mysterious thing which
caused him to mourn and his sister to suffer; that which she could not uproot from the
ground and take with her – this thing that was most dear to his heart as well. A neighbor
of ours (of our house) said to him: “When all’s said and done you’ll be forced to sign on
to their vendor’s contract. The law’s on their side!”

But the old man turned to me and said: “Listen my dear, one day my father, my
younger brother, and I were watching over the field. Suddenly a flock of thrushes
engulfed the field. My little brother took a hunting rifle in his hands, to show that he was
a real man. A loud laugh burst from my father (you remember how your grandfather
laughed, my dear?). When he saw the son of his old age thus, he called out, “Hunting
thrushes is a man’s job, my boy!”

But the little one was immensely stubborn.. He held on to the rifle without
relaxing a muscle. Some time later he came back with a live thrush in the palm of his
hand. Wonder of wonders! We were dumbfounded. And he, the little wild thing, was
jumping with excitement. He was so proud of this chance to hunt that had come his way.
“But we didn’t hear the gun shot!” my father called out, to which the little hunter replied,
“I put a spell on the rifle, Dad!” And my father and my father’s fathers made me swear
never to tell his secret – which was: he saw the thrush in danger, when it was caught
between the teeth of a big cat. Without a second thought the boy bolted after the cat amid
the boulders and the corn stalks, until he caught it and rescued the feathered thing from
the predatory jaws…voilà! And they expect me to sign on to a contract to sell (out) these
memories? They have no power in their laws to do such a thing – none!

My advice to you is not to come to Mandelbaum Gate with your children. And it’s
not because the ruined houses don’t fascinate or entice them to cast about inside for a
magic lamp or adventures like Aladdin’s. In fact, it’s not even because of the Hasidim’s
waving sidecurls (pe’ot) that cause children to ask intriguing questions. They shouldn’t
come with you because the road that leads to Mandelbaum Gate does not stop at it, even
for a fleeting second, for those entering “there” or exiting “here”. There are American luxury cars whose passengers are healthy and dressed up, either with a blaze of color around their necks, or in their army uniforms.

There are the cars of the “cease-fire people”, and of groups of U.N. inspectors. The rest of the passengers are ambassadors and representatives of Western states, with their presidents and their presidents’ cooks, their drinks, and their beautiful women. They do stop briefly by “our gate” so their drivers can exchange greetings with “our” guard – as cultured people do. And after passing through the no-man’s land, they stop briefly by “their gate” and exchange greetings with “their policemen” too, such that in this space of good manners and culture there is a back-and-forth Israeli-Jordanian competition.

The “he who goes from here” death sentence does not fall on these travelers; nor do they come under the Garden of Eden law of “he who enters does not leave.” For this way the honored observer can take lunch at the “Philadelphia” hotel over there, and dinner at the “Eden” hotel on this side, while his smile never skips off his face.

When my sister turned to the soldier – to the one who stands by “our gate,” to ask his permission to accompany mother to the Jordanian gate, he replied: “It’s forbidden Ma’am.” But I see those foreigners entering and leaving as if this were their home!” “Everyone is allowed to pass through these gates except Jews and Arabs. Except for the natives, my good lady.” He then said, “I must ask you to move out of the street. This is a main road bustling with traffic.” He broke off in mid-sentence to joke with the passengers of a car pulling up (was it an “exiting” or an “entering” car?)

But we didn’t see what was funny here.

“Everything comes to an end, even in a time of parting!” said the customs official. An old woman leaning on a stick set out from “our gate” in the direction of “their gate.” She slowly crossed the “no-man’s land,” turning her head back from minute to minute, waving her hand and advancing further. And why should it be precisely now that her conscience knocks at her?

A soldier in a kaffiya and band burst out from among the ruins on the opposite side. He approached the old woman who was entering and stopped to snatch a bit of conversation with her. The two of them looked over to our side. We stood here with the children waving our hands. A soldier who looked deprived because of his exposed head stood in front of us and talked with us as well. He repeated that it was forbidden to go one step further.

Why did he say, “It’s as if she’s crossed the Valley of Death from which we don’t come back. That’s the reality of war; borders and Mandelbaum Gate. I must ask you to move over to the other side of the U.N. car”?

And suddenly a small body, squirming with life sprang out – leapt like a ball thrust into the air by a soccer game kick, streaking conspicuously towards the rival team’s goal post. The body leapt out and started to run ahead of us, cutting across (bisecting) the “no-man’s land.” With a shock we realized that this was none other than my little daughter running after her grandmother, yelling, “Grandma! Grandma!” Look – the “no-man’s land” is already behind her and she’s reaching Grandmother...and Grandma is lifting her up in her arms.

From afar we saw how the soldier in the kaffiya was looking at the ground. My eyes were moist and I can attest that the soldier stood there pecking at the ground with his foot. And as for the soldier who stood with us, he also lowered his head and started
scuffing the ground. The guard who was standing by the office doing nothing faded back and went inside. The customs official started looking for something in his pocket which he had apparently lost all of a sudden...

A great miracle happened here (Nes gadol haya po – I’ll comment on this Hebrew in class). A little girl cut across the Valley of Death from which none return. And see, in spite of everything she does come back to us crowned with triumph over the present reality of war, borders, and Mandelbaum Gate.

A girl ignorant of all of this, who doesn’t understand the real difference between the soldier in the kaffiya, and this one here with no head covering. A small, innocent girl! And because in those days there were no open hostilities towards the remote lands, how could the silly little one not think, as she was accustomed to, that she was still in her country? Here she saw her father stand on one side and her grandmother on the other. Here were cars galloping back and forth across the “no-man’s land” just like they did by her house. Here people speak Hebrew, there they speak Arabic. And therefore she speaks in the two languages, in the one with her great-grandson and in the other with his horse. The customs official despaired, it seemed, of finding the thing he had lost (there is an end to everything, even to embarrassment), for he suddenly stopped the exhausting search, moved in his place, and said to the soldier as if to comfort him: “an innocent child…” “I must ask you good people to move away from the street lest one of your children fall between the wheels of the stampeding cars.”

And he moved back first.

Do you understand, therefore, why I advised you not to come to Mandelbaum Gate accompanied by your children? Their logic is so simple and uncomplicated, but so healthy!