

Online Life Writing: One Israeli's Search For Sanity

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This article introduces the burgeoning new medium of 'blogs' – online diaries with links to websites of presumed interest. It argues that online diarists step into the traditional role attributed to intellectuals of providing society with meaning and guidance. Focusing on present day Israel, it shows how the failure of Israel's intellectuals in recent years to cater to civil society has led citizens to search for meaning and guidance on the Internet. Following one Israeli online diary as it unfolds on a daily basis, it demonstrates how a young woman, failing to receive from traditional intellectual sources the insights necessary to survive in a terror-stricken environment, steps into the vacuum in search of meaning and guidance, and negotiates her personal, social and political identity online. The article concludes with an evaluation of the blog as a means of public discourse, criticizing its failure to provide for a social dialogue in the real world.

INSANITY AND MEANING

Testifying from my personal experience as an Israeli, it is not easy to live in a modern industrial state entangled in ancient religious rituals, a democracy engaged in occupation, a hedonistic culture whose citizens face the danger of being blown up by suicide bombers. The paradoxes of Israeli life are apparent on all fronts. Public opinion polls point at a desire for peace but hawkish candidates get elected to office, advanced health and welfare policies are applied but the economic divide is growing, a national pride prevails but masses of proud citizens are leaving the country, the lower classes support investments in the occupied territories against their own self-interest, thousands of orthodox youngsters are exempt from military duty in spite of severe security needs, and so on. Israelis often consider themselves as living in a madhouse. They are the focus of enormous international attention while being one of the tiniest

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nations in the world; they engage in endless debate over the direction the country should take while going nowhere; they love their land but systematically destroy its natural resources; they give to charity but kill each other in road accidents.

Living with paradoxes and contradictions requires mechanisms that would allow citizens to make sense of their surroundings. This is where the role of intellectuals as interpreters of the human condition comes in. Intellectuals are those who provide the members of every society with meaning and a sense of direction. There would be intellectuals in society even if there were no intellectuals by disposition, wrote Edward Shils (1970). In different eras, different groups fulfilled the intellectual function. Mostly, it was the church that provided societies with meaning and guidance. In the modern era, writers, scholars and artists have undertaken this function, which has changed the base from which intellectuals derive their right to be heard. If in the past, the source of their authority was transcendental, today their authority is mostly derived from civil society.

'Civil society' refers to the plurality of social groups operating in democratic states in relative separation from the state. These groups express concerns that are not necessarily given high preference by the political system: human rights, the environment, support of the arts, and so on (Colas, 1997; Walzer, 1995). Intellectuals may be seen as spokespersons of these groups. When writer Émile Zola stood up during the Dreyfus affair in late nineteenth-century France and wrote 'J'accuse' against the church, military and political establishments, he did so in the name of norms of truth and justice sanctioned by civil society (Traverso, 2004).

The view of intellectuals as spokespersons of civil society raises expectations of them: to get involved in issues of concern to civil groups; to communicate with large strata of society; to act towards the preservation of a pluralistic social structure; to encourage civilized forms of public debate, and to take responsibility for occurrences in the world around them (Goldfarb, 1998; Lila, 2001; Said, 1994).

In Israel, intellectuals have traditionally played an important role in developing the cultural capital that turned Israel into a democratic country. Writers provided the language and ideas that facilitated nation building, scholars devised the constitutional and institutional infrastructure of the state, and artists participated in critical discourse over the direction it should take. Intellectuals stood at an important crossroad of a nation-building process dominated by the state, helping to protect the civil society from the socialist and nationalist forces that challenged it (Keren, 1989).

However, in recent years, much of this has changed, partly as a result of the fact that a large part of the public discourse is taking place in the mass media. Although intellectuals are still playing important roles in social causes such as child protection or freedom of the press, their voice

is mostly heard on national political issues. They take partisan sides, join politically one-sided 'think tanks', preach to the converted and make little effort to reach out to the wide strata of society. They often seem more concerned with promoting their own power and status than with the issues under consideration, and when appearing on television, their language does not differ much from that of Israeli politicians, who are not known for their civilized forms of expression. Rather than take responsibility, they accuse anyone but themselves for the misfortunes of the country. Generally speaking, a process can be identified in which intellectuals, or at least the salient element among them, are being politicized to an extent that distances them from the concerns of civil society (see, for example, Halkin, 2004; Morris, 2004).

With intellectuals distancing themselves from civil society, they no longer provide it with meaning and guidance. And if we accept Shils's functional assumption that every society needs a social stratum providing it with meaning and guidance, then we must look for it elsewhere. Many Israelis are definitely looking elsewhere, realizing that intellectuals may be 'speaking truth to power' (Wildawsky, 1987) but are not speaking to them. In order to cope with the reality surrounding them, citizens take advantage of the opportunities opened up by the Internet to form new modes of individual and public discourse. I refer in particular to the new medium of weblogs spreading on the World Wide Web. Weblogs, or simply 'blogs', are online diaries with links to websites of presumed interest such as traditional media outlets. They came into being in the mid-1990s when Web designers put up personal journals at their home pages and linked to each other. In 1999, a company named Pyra developed the software that allowed people who were not skilled in Web design to create and manage their own weblogs and the phenomenon burgeoned. Today, millions of blogs are produced in all five continents (Sorapure, 2003).

Blogs include many of the life-writing genres classified by Tristine Rainer: autobiographies, memoirs, confessions, spiritual quests, meditations, personal essays, travelogues, autobiographical short stories and novels, portraits, complaints, conceptual writings, works of humour, family histories, and so on (Rainer, 1998). The growth of the 'blogging' phenomenon has been described as a revolution: '[the] weblog, a sort of amalgam of commentary, diary and reference, may be to the Anglosphere's traditional modes of power what the printing press was to the medieval church and its intellectual monopoly 500 years ago' (Bennett, 2001). This new medium is revolutionary in that it liberates individuals from the reign of publishers, editors, literary critics and other agents who, in the past, decided whose life is fit to print and whose is doomed to be forgotten.

Since ancient times, individuals have had an urge to express and disseminate their ideas and experiences, but the voice heard in autobiographies was mostly that of people who had achieved public prominence. Today, the Internet allows non-prominent people (although only those on one side of the digital divide) to express their unique voice. Millions take advantage of the blogging software to publish their life stories, or some fake version of them, and negotiate their own personal, social and political identities as they do so. That software also allows individuals who fail to receive meaning and guidance from traditional sources to search for it themselves.

In this article, I follow one Israeli online diary as it unfolds on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis. I demonstrate how a young woman living in an 'overburdened polity' (Horowitz and Lissak, 1989), and failing to receive the insights necessary to survive in it from traditional intellectual sources, steps into the vacuum in search of meaning and guidance. The diary's title, 'Not a Fish', hints at the blogger's urge to escape traditional modes of discourse for the sake of new ones. The title is taken from a Zen story that exposes the self-important nature of scholarly debates while providing a lively alternative consisting of simpler modes of expression. Here is the story:

One day Chang Zzu and a friend were walking by a river. 'Look at the fish swimming about', said Chuang Zzu, 'They are really enjoying themselves.'

'You are not a fish', replied the friend, 'so you can't truly know that there are enjoying themselves.'

'You are not me', said Chuang Zzu, 'so how do you know that I do not know that the fish are enjoying themselves?'

(29.6.02)

Not only does the blogger mock such polemics, she presents a different mode of expression. Writing an online diary, she does not storm into the public debate once an issue emerges on the political arena but relates to social and political issues on a continual basis, communicates with a wider variety of social groups than many writers, scholars or artists do, is far less concerned with her personal status, uses a rather moderate writing style, and depicts a deep sense of responsibility. Let me now follow this diary from its beginning in June 2002, observing its handling of civil concerns, analysing its political contributions, and noting its advantages and disadvantages as a medium of public discourse.

'NOT A FISH'

Let me begin with a word of caution. The medium of blogs is a researcher's paradise in that it allows us to follow what large numbers of individuals write about a wide variety of subjects on an ongoing basis. Moreover, while allowing the expression of personal and intimate feelings,

blogs are published texts appearing on the World Wide Web and are thus, like literary texts, accessible to everybody to read and study. At the same time, blogs are also a researcher's nightmare because of the difficulty of applying traditional research methods to this medium. It is impossible to generalize about blogs on the basis of random sampling, for instance, because of the absence of a clear, stable, finite universe of blogs to be sampled. It is also impossible to generalize about the bloggers because the whole phenomenon is located in virtual reality; we know little about them besides their nicknames. The person presented in an online diary may be in part or in full a fictional character and for all practical purposes ought to be treated as such.

Thus, we must remember the limitation of blogs; they are unique autobiographical works whose author may be real or fictional. This, however, does not reduce their importance as sources of insights on social and political life. Just as an analysis of Winston Churchill's autobiography may generate insights on the political world even though it does not constitute a sample of leaders' autobiographies, or an analysis of George and Weedon Grossmith's novel *The diary of a nobody* may generate hypotheses on political life in Victorian England despite the fictional nature of this diary, so can 'Not a Fish' be instructive. This blog has not been chosen because of the identity of the author (known to us only from its representation on the Web) or because it constitutes a representative sample of Israelis, but because of its clear style and format, its continuous and successive entries, and its bilingual nature, which makes it an important source of insights on contemporary Israeli life.

'Not a Fish' (<http://imshin.blogspot.com>) is written both in Hebrew and in English. As reported by Bronson, blogs by English speaking Israelis play a unique role in helping readers abroad to form opinions about Middle East politics. The immediacy and interactivity characterizing blogs is a great advantage in a country subjected to terrorist attacks. After a major event, bloggers all over the world turn to Israel's English blogs for immediate information. Moreover, as many English speakers in Israel are associated with right-of-centre political positions, these blogs are often seen as an alternative voice to a world media known for its anti-Israeli stand (Bronson, 2004).

The author of the blog calls herself 'Imshin'. She is described in an online profile of June 2004 as a 39-year-old Israeli working mother. Born in Liverpool, she moved to Israel with her parents when she was nine and today she lives in Tel-Aviv with her husband Bish, their two daughters aged nine and twelve and a half, and a tiny black kitten called Shoosha. Her work in an undemanding clerical job in the public service leaves her plenty of time to worry about current affairs (Normblog, 2004).

The blog stands out for its lack of pretence. Its logo describes it as ‘the meaningless chatter of your regular split personality Israeli mother trying to make sense of current insanity’. As one follows the diary for two years, the insanity involved in life in the Middle East does not disappear but its interpretation from the perspective of one citizen rather than of politics, religion, history or metaphysics makes it easier to cope with. In a region of the world in which political positions are expressed in messianic rage, it is refreshing to encounter a different approach that combines straightforward observation with scepticism. Explaining the meaning of blogging to her, the diarist writes:

I know the things I say are nothing special, probably not very different from the thoughts and feelings of many ordinary Israelis. I’m no great scholar, no brilliant columnist. I’m not very right wing, or very left wing, by Israeli standards. I’m somewhere in the middle, a bit mixed up, swayed by emotions. I have no hidden agenda. I just say what enters my mind at a given moment. All I have to offer is my little angle of Israeli life.

(3.12.03)

Imshin is aware, however, that her ‘little angle’ may be useful in terms of the broader public discourse:

Could this not be useful for someone who wants to help peace along and needs to really know and understand both sides, and not just what he or she believes is right and just, based on previous life experiences from other parts of the world? Does compromise not take into account the dreams and fears of both sides in a conflict? Is my contribution so far less valuable than that of someone with fury in his or her eyes, standing on a street corner chanting mindless, inflammatory slogans that someone else thought up, and that mean very little, but serve to increase hatred between the sides?

(3.12.03)

Imshin is neither a ‘peacenik’ nor a warmonger. She is observing the violence in the Middle East with a sense of moderation that diverts from the rigid categories by which both right wingers and left wingers approach the situation. She calls neither for a hard hand nor for a soft hand by Israel toward the Palestinians but for a sober examination of the conflict and its solutions. The first entry in the blog followed a suicide attack in Jerusalem that killed 19 people. In response, Imshin posted a letter written during the American Civil War describing Ulysses S. Grant’s behaviour after the first disastrous day of the battle of Shiloh in 1862. Grant refused to consider retreat, yet acted in sober serenity.

The technology allowing bloggers to link to a variety of materials, especially news items appearing in newspaper websites, and add their responses to them, makes them a kind of media watch group. On 22 June 2002,

Imshin posts an article by Matthew Parris on suicide bombers, published in the London *Times*. According to this post, Parris assumes that both sides to the Israel–Palestine conflict would accept the notion that ‘encompassing your own death in the killing of other people may sometimes be justified, even noble. If you or I could have brought down the temple in which the Third Reich sat, killing ourselves too, that might (I presume we agree) have been a noble act.’ He is also quoted writing that ‘I do not think that in his heart an Israeli would deny that, if your enemy has taken land that is rightfully yours and occupied it, then not just your enemy’s army but his wife and son and daughter and servants and all who, under his protection, come to live and make their living on the stolen land, are aggressors.’

Imshin, who feels that the article simply justifies the killing of Israeli civilians, exposes the rhetorical technique by which this is allegedly done: justifying murder of a group by making assumptions about what that group seems to agree to. Responding to the above statement that no Israeli would deny the right to operate against the wives, children and servants of perceived aggressors (which, incidentally, may also be seen as hinting at biblical justice), she excludes herself from the consensus imposed on her in that contention, which she can easily do because of the personal nature of the blog: ‘Wanna bet, Matty boy? This Israeli denies it. By this logic we should be shooting the children and younger siblings of suicide bombers’. She also exposes the nuances used by the writer to squeeze in a vicious point: ‘Notice how he very subtly equates Israel with the Third Reich? You wouldn’t even notice it! ... I find this neat philosophical reasoning that makes such a compelling moral case for blowing up little babies *extremely* brilliant’ (22.6.02). Two days later she exposes in similar fashion the homogeneous nature of the Argument page of the British *Independent*: ‘I must say I haven’t seen much argument on this page, at least about the Middle East. All columnists seem to agree that the Israelis are war criminals and Nazis and deserve to be blown up’ (24.6.02).

The problem is that blogging exposes violations of journalistic standards while it has no standards itself, and Imshin is aware of it. Having written analysis reports for a living, she doubts how long she would keep up with online writing. As a professional writer, she says, she used to work a few days or weeks on a piece, doing research and having plenty of time for thinking about phrasing before she even started writing. But blogging is different: ‘This is much more fun. I get to say whatever stupid idea pops into my head. And I don’t have to submit everything I write to censorship by my boss, just because his name is also on it’ (30.6.02).

The ability to say whatever stupid idea pops into one’s head is problematic in that it allows bloggers to spread unsubstantiated rumours

and make irresponsible statements. Alan Wolfe has compared today's bloggers to the pamphleteers of the colonial era in America. 'Pamphleteering is what happens when no one – editorial writers, university professors, publishing executives – is doing much "filtering"' (Wolfe, 2004). The lack of filters does, however, have an advantage in that the blogger is not confined to any agenda but may comment on civil issues that are not solicited by any 'boss'. During a regular week in June, we thus follow Ishmin's feelings when she notes the last day of school for her two girls, the closing of a little Zoological garden by request of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, or her wonderings about changes in Ronaldo's hair. Save perhaps the latter, these issues, which are part of our daily life experiences, are not without larger public implications. Take summer vacation for instance. While the readers of this blog are led through the familiar experience of the last day of classes, they are also exposed to an Israeli mother's concerns over the raising of kids in a region in which the summer vacation may provide suicide bombers with greater opportunities to blow them up in public gatherings, such as ice cream parlours. Here is the entry:

Summer vacation is an extra challenge for city dwellers with kids. Especially nowadays. If perverts and crazy drivers aren't enough, now I have to worry if it's safe for my elder daughter to have an ice cream at the ice cream parlor with her pals, or go to her favorite haunt – the local toyshop. Among some of the other mothers I'm regarded as very liberal, because I allow my daughter to ride the mini-bus to the swimming pool. What am I to do? Put her under house arrest all summer?

(2.7.02)

Such statements may sometimes appear in the established media. On the first day of summer vacation, a television crew would interview an occasional 'man on the street', in an item appearing close to the weather report, which would turn the worries of civilians into a colourful episode. Here, however, the worries about one's daughters travelling on the mini-bus become an integral dimension of the Israeli condition, a dimension ignored by politicians and pundits (unless it temporarily serves a broader political agenda) but kept alive by bloggers. As we follow the fear of a citizen in an online diary, we get a more intimate understanding of it; when Imshin is awaiting a suicide attack, we are exposed to a lively picture of the symptoms accompanying the dread of impending disaster: 'My throat feels constricted, my breathing is slightly labored and my heart beats way faster and harder than usual. Oh, and I feel nauseous. (No, I'm not pregnant)' (3.7.02).

She feels the traditional media cannot serve as her voice in such moments, not even a liberal newspaper like *Haaretz* priding itself for

its appeal to the Israeli intelligentsia. Like many educated Israelis, Imshin has subscribed to *Haaretz* for many years, but came to realize that it neglects her civil concerns. Commenting on an article by the newspaper's editor, she complains that although *Haaretz* still gives good coverage to events, the opinion columns, editorials and in-depth stories have a common political agenda that does not account for the feelings of the great majority of Israelis. By this she refers not to the 'silent majority' in the American sense, namely those who feel under-represented by an allegedly liberal press, but to the civil society whose incumbents may share the columnists' political views but whose civil concerns are ignored. Imshin exposes a growing gap between journalists, who claim they provide objective coverage, and citizens who sense that the coverage of civil society is, at best, 'patronizing and condescending' (4.7.02).

The alternative medium of blogging may be seen as a more authentic voice of civil society. It is not only the themes that are brought up in the online diary, compared to their omission in other media, but the fact that we read them as part of an unfolding life story. One mother's worries during summer vacation are not framed in accordance with a political narrative, but we get to follow them as part of an overall summer experience, which includes, for instance, the presence of sandals in shop windows: 'Time to go shopping. Now if I was still in my early twenties, I would a) worry that if I bought them now, they would be terribly out of fashion by next summer; b) not be able to afford them even at the cheaper prices' (9.10.02).

This allows a different reading of Israeli life than provided in the *Guardian* or in *Haaretz*. It becomes a more complex experience in which the change of seasons, ignored by the media but not by the autobiographer, is accounted for without neglecting the larger political and security context. The presence of the larger context is demonstrated in the following description of Imshin's family outing in Northern Israel. The family swims in one of the sources of the Jordan River, sensing the refreshing effect of the ice-cold water and strong flow in a hot August day, but the blogger also recalls that this is the same river the Syrians tried to divert in the 1960s. Or consider this: 'In the afternoon, after a rest, we took the kids to ride horses in nearby moshav [village] She'ar Yishuv, where seventy-three army officers and soldiers were killed, five years ago, when two air force helicopters collided in the worst military accident Israel has ever seen' (22.8.02).

This depiction of the little joys of life sought in a country living in the shadow of conflict may seem thrilling to some and disturbing to others, but the point is that a new medium is developing that allows such self-expression. Moreover, the new medium allows the blogger to negotiate

her condition, to contemplate what her life is worth in view of her being destined to live it in turbulent times. Her conclusion is straightforward:

Occasionally someone remarks how brave we Israeli bloggers are. Our life is so dangerous and still we laugh. What are they talking about? My life is wonderful. I am the luckiest of people (tfu tfu tfu. Sorry, it's a reflex). I have enough to eat and drink. I am healthy (tfu tfu tfu again). The sun shines every day and I am surrounded by love. What more could anyone possibly want? (a guarantee of immortality, you suggest? No, I pass.) If I get blown up tomorrow, don't reread this post and shake your heads in sorrow. Be happy for me. I may be dead, but the day before I died was a great day. Who could ask for more?

(21.6.03)

THE BLOGGER'S POLITICS

The civilian concerns identified in this blog do not imply a lack of interest in 'larger' political issues. To the contrary, this blog takes on many burning political issues. The civilian filter through which the political issues are considered, however, leads the blogger to escape rigid political ideologies, a main component of political discourse in Israel. Imshin understands the need of many to cling to such ideologies; it helps them feel more certain about the future. If only their solution to the Middle East conflict would be accepted, the future would be secure. On the other hand, giving up rigidity for the sake of uncertainty is hard: 'Uncertainty is a part of life there's no getting away from. But it's difficult to live with it staring you in the face all the time. The belief or hope that your children and grandchildren will have lives that are not living nightmares is helpful in keeping you from going mad' (7.7.02).

Yet, the blogger feels she has no choice but to live with uncertainty:

Some here are stubbornly clutching on to the belief that an end to occupation will magically solve all. Some are just as adamant that we have a divine right to all of the historical land of Israel and that this right is holier than living peacefully with the people we share this land with. Most are somewhere in the middle, awoken from false hopes of easy solutions, but realistic enough to understand the need for painful compromise to make the future possible here.

(7.7.02)

She adds that the fear of what the future holds in store for her and for her descendants in this accursed part of the world is stronger and deeper than the everyday fear of terrorist attacks. Yet none of the firm solutions appeals to her: 'Some have hardened their hearts and others have become remarkably compassionate for the other side. Compassionate to a

degree that causes them to belittle and disregard the dangers we face' (7.7.02).

She thus continues to live with uncertainty and ambiguity. On the one hand she opposes those who hardened their hearts and searches for a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, the solution proposed by those who, out of compassion for the Palestinians, would want the Jews to go back to where they came from, is unacceptable: 'They don't seem to understand that we can't 'go back to where we came from'. We came from nowhere and we've nowhere to go' (7.7.02).

One way to overcome the difficulties of uncertainty and ambiguity is ... blogging. It is easy to identify the therapeutic nature of 'Not a Fish' for the person writing it. 'Do you know, writing this blog is like psychotherapy. I used to **hate** reading the Guardian. Everything I read used to infuriate me. Now it's one of my favorite reads because I know I can always make nasty remarks about it on the blog' (10.7.02).

The blog becomes the medium in which one expresses frustrations over political statements or events that seem wrong, or highlights those that seem right. Much attention is devoted to what Imshin perceives as anti-Semitic nuances in British public opinion. A typical example concerns her and many other bloggers' involvement in the scandal over the refusal of pathologist Andrew Wilkie of Oxford University to accept an Israeli doctoral student for having served in the Israeli army. Imshin posts Professor Wilkie's letter to the prospective student according to which he has 'a huge problem with the way that the Israelis take the moral high ground from their appalling treatment in the Holocaust, and then inflict gross human rights abuses on the Palestinians'. She responds to it by dwelling on her own autobiographical experience, describing the veiled anti-Semitic atmosphere in which her parents grew up in the North of England in the 1930s and 1940s, where Jews were being blamed for the war. While some Jews tried to rationalize such behaviour by relating it to the reality of a religiously diverse city in which everyone picked on everyone else, her parents, she tells, became active Zionists and left.

What has this undercurrent of anti-Semitism, which her parents experienced in Britain as children during the war and after, got to do with present day discrimination in Britain against Israelis for political reasons, she asks. Her answer: Professor Wilkie of Oxford makes the equation between Israelis and Jews himself when he equates Israelis to Holocaust survivors, although no Israel existed when the Holocaust took place. 'Somehow I find myself terribly offended by the Holocaust sentence, rolled off so glibly and thoughtlessly. You get the feeling the good professor and his friends use this line freely in their stuffy cocktail party chitchat, without really thinking about it's meaning. (I am especially struck by the words

“*appalling treatment*”. Appalling Treatment?! What a wonderfully British understatement.)’ (28.6.03).

This entry demonstrates the blogger’s feeling that many British intellectuals are wrong in their treatment of the Middle East conflict. When she comes across the following piece from George Orwell’s 1945 essay ‘Notes on Nationalism’, she posts it without further comment:

It is, I think, true to say that the intelligentsia have been more wrong about the progress of the war than the common people, and that they were more swayed by partisan feelings. The average intellectual of the Left believed, for instance, that the war was lost in 1940, that the Germans were bound to overrun Egypt in 1942, that the Japanese would never be driven out of the lands they had conquered, and that the Anglo-American bombing offensive was making no impression on Germany. He could believe these things because his hatred for the British ruling class forbade him to admit that British plans could succeed. There is no limit to the follies that can be swallowed if one is under the influence of feelings of this kind. I have heard it confidently stated, for instance, that the American troops had been brought to Europe not to fight the Germans but to crush an English revolution. One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.

(9.8.02)

The blogger makes every effort to deal with political affairs in a different way than do traditional intellectuals. When asked by another blogger what she thinks of Holocaust denial she writes she is not very good at putting over a philosophical point at the best of times, especially while she is on a diet. She admits, as few pundits probably would, that the issue of Holocaust denial is simply too big and scary for her. While some like Professor Wilkie seem to see Israel’s preoccupation with the Holocaust as some sort of manipulation, she is ‘still trying to come to terms, to grasp, to understand the meaning, or the lack of it, and to learn to live with the feeling of loss that somehow persists’ (5.7.03).

The rejection of common intellectual modes of political debate and their replacement by personal reflections allows the blogger to make occasional arguments that are not fully thought through but do appeal to common sense, as when she deals with the controversial security fence built by Israel to separate between the Jewish and Palestinian populations. Speaking of the Palestinians, she writes:

They want a state, right? The state will have an internationally recognized border, right? The state will also have internationally recognized passports, right? Palestinians wanting to work in a neighboring state will have to use those internationally recognized passports to cross that internationally

recognized border in order to work in that neighboring state, right? So what's [their] problem with the security fence? Is it so important for them to be able to infiltrate the neighboring state, illegally? Why is that, exactly?
(20.7.02)

This outcry neglects important elements such as the Israeli government's policy of erecting the fence in accordance with the political interests of West Bank settlers rather than the economic needs of West Bank Palestinians. It does however expose the fact that the Palestinian opposition to the fence focuses less on concrete grievances than on an all-out objection to any conflict management measure: 'They don't want to be fenced in, they say. Well, what the hell DO they want?' (20.7.02).

It is interesting to follow the rejection of rigid ideological positions also in the blogger's writings on internal politics in Israel. This may stem from a personal trait hinted at when Imshin mentions how the television set in her home serves as a place of refuge for some of her daughters' friends whose ideological parents ban television sets in their homes. A typical entry concerns the Eastern Democratic Spectrum, a radical political group pursuing the cause of 'Sephardi' Jews (Jews from Arab countries). Imshin, whose husband is reportedly a Sephardi Jew himself, supports the group's lobbying for equality and impartiality in the distribution of state investments in education and housing, agrees that the rich history and culture of Sephardi Jews should be taught in schools, and praises the moderation she encountered in online communication she had with its leader. Analysing, however, the group's publications, she is unwilling to go along with the romantic yearnings she identifies in them for the past in Arab countries and the hatred conveyed in them towards Jews of European origin. 'I agree there has been discrimination. I agree we must work to close social and economic gaps. I think investing in education in poor and peripheral areas is paramount. But seeing the discrimination as intentional and conspirational is ... wrong and can be harmful' (28.7.02).

After being called by someone a 'leftie, she writes she refuses to be identified as either 'left' or 'right'. This refusal sums up the politics of the lengthy diary, whether it deals with religious fundamentalism, feminism, the right to die, the Palestinian leadership, the Iraq war, provincialism, globalization and dozens of other issues. For example, she says she feels compassion for those who haven't been lucky and donates generously to charity, but refuses to feel guilty about being relatively well off. She believes the state should supply all citizens with education and health care but also in strict law and order measures. She believes in taking care of the environment, but not at the expense of human lives. She thinks

abortion is murder, but is nevertheless pro-choice. She even diverts from the trendy anti-globalization trend, seeing nothing wrong with McDonald's, Coca-Cola and other multinationals:

It is my responsibility, as a parent, to make sure my children get a balanced diet and I see no harm in these companies offering their wares, as long as they don't force me to consume them. Living as I do, in a little country, far from the affluent centers of 'modern civilization', I am grateful for the considerable material (and even spiritual) improvement in my life that Globalization has brought about. Moreover, I fail to see how it is possible to globally solve global problems without Globalization'.

(9.10.02)

CONCLUSION

With an estimated three million bloggers at present on the Web, any generalization about this new medium, based on one case or on a sample of cases (which is hard to construct for lack of a stable universe of blogs) would be premature. However, the analysis proposed here of an online diary by a woman trying to survive the burdens of Israeli life sparks the idea that an alternative to traditional intellectual discourse may be emerging on the World Wide Web. Imshin does not pretend to share the qualities attributed to academics, columnists and other masters of public discourse; she does not present herself as cultured, highly educated, or endowed with charisma. Yet, judging by the responses she gets to her postings, her online diary probably appeals to more readers than many public speakers reach out to. She found a means of expression that allows her to make sense of her surroundings and make others think about them. This is particularly meaningful in a society in which individual concerns are not highly regarded.

At times, Imshin calls for dialogue with people of opposite views. She regrets the collapse of dialogue between Jews and Palestinians and expresses her unexplained urge to spend a Sabbath night with West Bank settlers in spite of her objection to them:

I am strongly opposed to these people and their behavior. I think they should be evacuated, the sooner the better. They are serious obstacles to any possibility of peace in this region. So why am I fascinated with the idea of spending time there? Is it just an anthropological interest or is there something more?

(1.9.03)

But blogging, to her, is more a means of self-expression and self-exploration than of dialogue. For example, after an entry in which she took

issue with an article about universal love and peace she got into an email exchange with the writer of the article, and admits it was rather exhausting. 'This blog is not a discussion', she writes. 'You don't like what you read, you go read something else. ... I need to be around people who see things as I do' (27.2.02).

Meditation comes more naturally to her than communication. She has a great interest in Buddhism and her whole blogging experience may be seen as a meditation intended to maintain inner control when the outer world seems to go out of control. She is more an autobiographer than a journalist; her aim is not to make a point but to write a life in order to make sense of it. This is why she feels uncomfortable when she realizes that her diary sparks online debates: 'I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed by all these lively discussions on my comments. I realize that I have certain responsibility for the content of the comments because it's my blog. So behave yourselves, you lot! Oh, and please don't use my comments for dealing in illegal substances or inciting to violence' (18.11.02).

While she sometimes acknowledges responses to her entries as eye opening, she admits she is detached from them.

It's like: you kids feel free to chat among yourselves while I sit here quietly and stare out into oblivion. This will sometimes happen to me when I'm sitting with a group of 'real-life' friends. I lose track in the middle of a discussion and then I tend to either daydream; go check up on the bookshelves (if I'm in someone else's home); wonder into the kitchen and end up helping the host/ess with the tasties; strike up a rival conversation or watch the smaller kids playing (usually most rewarding).

(18.11.02)

This may be a source of concern for, as important as meditation is to the individual, society needs dialogue. It is hard to disagree with Karl Mannheim (1936), Karl Popper (1945), Martin Buber (1971), Jürgen Habermas (1992) and others who placed dialogue at the centre of both the advancement of knowledge and social civility. Bloggers are sometimes seen as engaged in dialogue. As Sorapure has suggested, the Web's interactivity and the immediacy of its publishing enhance that aspect of diary writing concerned not with solitary and private reflection, but with communication and community. To her, the online diary is anything but private, especially since many diarists use the medium to make connections with others (Sorapure, 2003). Bloggers form discursive communities in that they are aware of each other, post selected media items for each other, exchange information, develop a degree of stratification and even follow power and status hierarchies. As Cindy Curling puts it,

People who write blogs tend to think of themselves as a community, and within that community there are neighborhoods of people with common interests. These neighbors keep in close touch, and spend time showing each other their best new information. If the neighborhood where you grew up was like mine, there were a few houses where all the kids gravitated because those folks had the swing set, the wading pool, the popcorn, and got the new Atari games first. Weblogs work in similar ways.

(Curling, 2003: 5)

However, it is hard to consider the exchange between bloggers as a public dialogue of the kind advocated by the above philosophers. For one, we know little about the online diarists besides their nicknames. We have just discussed the diary of a woman nicknamed Imshin who may not even be a woman but the product of Web designers inventing her on the anonymous Internet. Or she may be a woman who decided to invent a false identity. And even if she presented to us what she considers to be her true identity, she is still not obliged to do so over time or to provide us with more than passing thoughts that can be altered from one day to the other. At one point, she admits she is simply engaged in ‘chatter’:

The thing is we don't know what's right. Nobody knows. Is there any one answer to anything? Is there really any one path which, if taken will bring an end to all, or even most, ills? Can we ever say that about anything?... Let's take the middle way, said the Buddha, but where does that pass?... And we chatter on, because that's what we do. Round and round and round in circles. What's the point? Well, it passes the time, for one thing. ... So I'll keep on chattering on this blog. Just don't take me too seriously. Tomorrow I may very well be saying the exact opposite of what I was saying yesterday.

(13.11.02)

This statement provides a more realistic picture of the nature of blogging, it seems, than that drawn by scholars who stress the contribution of the Internet to deliberative democracy. Lincoln Dahlberg classified these scholars into three ‘camps’: a communitarian camp, which stresses the possibility of the Internet as enhancing communal spirit and values, a liberal–individualistic camp, which sees the Internet as assisting the expression of individual interests, and a deliberative camp, which promotes the Internet as the means for an expansion of the public sphere of rational–critical citizen discourse. Dahlberg himself is optimistic about the prospect of online deliberative democracy, believing that under appropriate structural management of the discourse, the Internet may become a means to expand the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001).

However, I tend to agree more with Benjamin Barber, who casts doubt on online communities as fulfilling the requirement of a deliberative democracy. As he puts it, 'lolling in your underwear in front of an electronic screen while accessing with your dancing fingers the pixels generated by anonymous strangers across the world is not my idea of forging a community of concern or establishing common ground, let alone cementing a trusting friendship' (Barber, 2003: 39).

Online life writing attracts us to texts without having a way of knowing whether the identities presented in them are real or fake. This is acceptable in novels, plays and movies that are situated between fiction and reality, but not in blogging, which involves the gradual formation of trust toward individuals who become selectors of media content for many people, substituting for a mass media that is widely mistrusted. Thus, while emancipating us in one way, blogging subdues us to the well-known dangers of virtual reality (see Evans, 2001; Katz and Rice, 2002; Kolko, 2003). Moreover, as we look at the new medium of blogging for meaning and guidance in a turbulent world, we face the danger of being guided or misguided by irresponsible elements. The Internet lacks responsibility: nicknames come and go, statements can be written without giving them much thought, promises can be made that do not have to be kept, and so on, while as members of society we are in need of human dialogue in which ideas are exchanged, issues raised, interests articulated, and compromises made. Blogging provides an exciting new arena for public discussion, but it suffers from the anonymity of the Web. What is missing in the bloggers' discourse is responsibility – the responsibility of human beings towards each other, and towards the maintenance of a dialogue conducted not in virtual reality but in real life.

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