



TRASH TIME

Just when I renovate the house for my wife and move everyone into a temporary apartment for her sake, she suddenly starts speaking English

as it did before.

A cease-fire negotiated with Egyptian mediation started to roll, and – although most Israelis find it unimaginable – direct negotiations with Hamas could be a solution.

But all this is absent from the photograph. After all, it was not taken at a site struck by a missile, and the people in the picture have no direct connection to the attacks. Nevertheless, two papers ran it on the front page (presumably without coordination) not because it represents reality or news events, but because of its reaffirmation value. More than it describes reality, it affirms something in the world. It affirms the very existence of panic, to invoke a concept in an exquisite article by Michal Schwartz, which appears in “Reality Trauma and the Inner Grammar of Photography,” published (in Hebrew) by the Shpilman Institute for Photography.

Although the image here has no artistic goals, it affirms the sheer existence of fright without resorting to well-worn images (such as a pink teddy bear lying on a bed that was abandoned, which appeared on the front page a day later). The point is that people who are in a hospital with a child are already at the mercy of the system. They are simultaneously exposed and vulnerable, yet must put on a brave face; they represent themselves efficiently, but in this inherently disorienting arena, an air-raid siren compounds their plight.

Thus, the focus of this photograph is not the expressionless face and cascading hair of the girl-mother, holding a white iPhone 4 in fingers tipped with black nail polish and wearing sharply pointed moccasins with a metal inset – the latest fashion – but the blurred face of the baby and the baby’s neck, tilted backward almost to breaking point. Nor is the focus on the man standing next to the sign with the name of the hospital (in Arabic as well), but the blurred body of the security man. For security has vanished, giving way to the blur of fright.

But what also stands out in this photograph, though it was excised from the newspapers by cropping and by text, is the seemingly marginal items it contains: the plastic cups in the cylindrical stone garbage bin, inset with small stones and overflowing; and the cigarette butts and oil stains and soot. All this is in blatant contrast to the sterility, whiteness and cleanliness we associate with hospitals. The siren gives rise to the people’s situation, but it is the dirt, the intolerable dirt lurking there, that tells us where they live.

That’s it, renovations will start next week. And as I have already mentioned here, what began as a plaster wall to divide a space into two rooms soon deteriorated into a complete overhaul. How did I get into this situation in the first place? That’s what I asked myself as I started to pack my study into cardboard boxes. But I couldn’t put my finger on the exact point at which the minor renovation turned into a project that is making us leave the apartment for three full weeks.

“You don’t have to leave,” the Ashkenazi architect in charge of the work said, “but the house won’t be in an ideal condition for family life.”

I’m not sure I know what ideal family life is anyway, but I was in no mood to take the risk. Certainly not now, when my wife is a bit sensitive. Recently she started to draw all kinds of conclusions about life. Suddenly she gets weird insights, and every so often throws out scary remarks like, “All the decisions I made in my life were mistaken,” and “I failed and did not succeed in realizing any goal.” And the scariest of all: “It’s too bad I didn’t get married in the traditional way.”

Good god, that last utterance was spoken in English: she looked me straight in the eyes and talked in English about a “traditional husband”! Well, I wasn’t born yesterday. My father always warned me about Arab women who sud-

as this was off-season. “Excellent,” I said, and asked for more information about the apartment.

“It’s a four-room place,” he said, “on Kovshei Katamon Street, next to the synagogue.”

“Excellent,” I replied. After all, when it comes right down to it, I always wanted to be part of the Kovshei Katamon corner of Haportzim, the bastion of the national-religious elite. The owner didn’t care that we were Arabs. That is, he cared at first, but when I told him my name, he said it would be a great honor and lowered the price a little more.

So that’s it. We are about to move, and now we are packing. “If only I’d known I would have to pack the whole house!” I heard my wife shout from the living room. “That’s how it is, I have never been lucky.”

I said nothing, but continued to pack the books and scattered papers. All kinds of notes, bank statements, mortgage forms, insurance reports, warranties for electrical items I didn’t even know we had in the house and, if so, whether these warranties were still valid. After all, I must have had a good reason for keeping all these documents. For sure, there was a moment when the various official letters arrived and I decided, after perusing them, “Hey, I have to keep this form, otherwise I’ll have problems.”

throwing out clothes, especially underpants and socks. I always imagine I will get stuck without and then regret having thrown them away.

“And these?” she asked, holding up dozens of single socks. “What were you thinking? That you would find the matching socks after all these years?”

The truth, I almost said, is that I always hope in my heart that the single socks will be reunited. “You’re right,” I told her. “I’m sorry. I will throw out all the things I don’t use right away. Sorry.”

“I don’t understand,” she said out of the blue, with tears in her eyes – she is always on the verge of tears lately – “I don’t understand why we are renovating at all.”

“What are you talking about?” I wanted to say. “It’s because I wanted you to be happy, because I wanted the bedroom to be more comfortable, the showers to be more pleasant, for the kids to have nice rooms. I wanted you to love the house.” I wanted to say that I was doing it for her, because I thought it would make her happier.

But I didn’t say a word. I started to go through my clothes and discovered that I don’t use most of them. I made two piles, because we decided to

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denly start speaking English. Serious concerns started to gnaw at me. I was afraid that the apartment renovation, meaning life in conditions of dust and with the doors to the toilets wrenched off, might lead my wife to make fateful decisions related to the continuation of life with me.

“You know what, honey,” I shot back in English, before switching to the vernacular, “we won’t stay here during the renovation. I will find something. It will be nice and it will be fun for the kids. What do you say?”

She said fine, and I started to look for a place. I was surprised by the large number of apartments in Jerusalem available for short-term rental. An ad on the Internet for a place in Old Katamon asked, “Looking for a vacation home? Renovating your home?” I dialed the number that appeared in the ad. A polite man answered and told me the apartment was available when I needed it and that he would even give me a discount,

I threw it all into a garbage bag and hoped for the best. “What’s this?” I heard my wife scream from the bedroom, and immediately rushed down the stairs and got to her in record time. “Tell me what this is?” she asked, picking up socks and underpants that filled my underclothing drawer. “Why are you touching my drawer?” I asked – gently, under the fragile circumstances. “I told you I would pack my stuff myself.”

“Fine,” she replied, “but why are you saving perforated underpants from the Palmach period in your drawer?”

I really don’t know why. I’m not short of new underwear, but I have a problem

donate the better stuff. My wife, in her turn, threw a lot of documents, papers and notes into a black bag and packed the rest into a cardboard box on which she wrote “Studies.”

I looked into the bag of documents for the trash, stuck my hand in, mixed them, and took out the first piece of paper my hand touched. My heart froze when I saw my handwriting on a page torn out of a loose-leaf folder on which I had written words of love 20 years ago. I placed the wrinkled page on the floor and tried to smooth it out, ironing it with soft motions of the hand, so it wouldn’t tear.

