

## INTRODUCTION

# Writing a Book on Business and Terror



*“I love these journalists who visit Israel for three days, then go home and write the book Israel: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.”*

—YORAM ETTINGER, FORMER ISRAELI CONSUL GENERAL

THE IDEA OF WRITING A BOOK ABOUT ISRAELI BUSINESS MANAGEMENT in the age of terror came to me one morning in front of the television set. I had just watched grim news media images of the aftermath of a suicide bombing. Having seen such images on the screen since the beginning of the *intifada*, in October 2000, I, like most Americans, had become somewhat inured to the horror of terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. In this case, the target had been the passengers on yet another metropolitan bus. And, although the casualty toll had been high and particularly outrageous (the dead and wounded included many children), I found myself looking upon the scene from the perspective of a businessman. How, I wondered, do you run a bus company when your customers are being murdered in your buses?

Intuitively, I knew the answer couldn't be simply “increased security.” How could any transportation company protect innumerable passengers from bombs, bullets, Molotov cocktails, and adjacent cars rigged with explosives, along hundreds of routes, over thousands of miles, for a single day, much less a year? I supposed that guards would be placed on buses, as a first step. But to what effect? And at what cost? And suppose the attacks simultaneously

occurred, as they do in Israel, at restaurants, markets, coffee shops, and shopping malls? The wonder wasn't that Israelis still boarded buses to go to work; it was that there was still "work" to go to. Why weren't the businesses in Israel "out of business"?

As I drove to my office in the morning sun, I passed familiar and reassuring symbols of a vast status quo that I had taken for granted all of my life—the freeway itself, and the office buildings, factories, and retail stores along my route. I was part of the morning commute in Los Angeles; I was a member of what made the world turn round, the business community. And even though I had grumbled about my job the day before, I now counted myself lucky to travel in safety to an established company, with a huge customer base, in a strong economy. Whereas everyone in the world had a future, I was able to *plan* for mine. Life was stable in America and, for all practical purposes, predictable. Our economy, unlike that of Israel, was not under daily assault and had not been attacked since 9/11.

The more comfortable I felt, the more I pondered on what I imagined to be the opposite condition—business life in Israel. Then, by way of an unavoidable and possibly neurotic progression of thought, I imagined what it would be like *here* if random acts of terror were commonplace; if, for example, a sniper now waited patiently in the bushes by the road, or a suicide bomber melded in the line of passengers boarding the light rail bound for downtown. How would the American business community react to *years* of terror (four and counting, in Israel)? How would my company deal with managerial issues for which corporate policy has yet to be written? And how would I plan my business day, much less my career, in an economy under attack?

That's when I decided I would go to Israel. As a business writer, I felt I had a good chance of persuading somebody in the Israeli government to facilitate in-depth interviews with prominent business leaders, managers, and supervisors from a variety of industries. I wanted to learn how Israeli businesspeople coped with the terrorist crisis, and to see if their "best practices" would serve American companies well, even if—as we all hope—terror never strikes the United States with the punishing regularity experienced in Israel.

A few weeks later, I was granted an appointment with the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles. I arrived with a package of credentials, including business books I had authored and coauthored. In a security vestibule, I emptied my pockets in front of a friendly but observant young man in a blazer. After passing through a metal detector, I was ushered into a hallway, where another young man greeted me and led me into his office. Yariv Ovadia, consul for communication and public affairs, presented a physical image I was soon to see frequently in Israel. Lean and alert, he had the look of a military officer, slightly incongruous in a civilian suit. Two other young people rose from chairs in his office. I shook hands with Doron Abrahami, consul for economic affairs, and Dara Rosenkranz, director of business development, both from the Israeli Economic Mission. Taking a seat, I suddenly felt as if I were in a job interview, under the scrutiny of three curious members of a younger generation, weaned on technology, speedy communications, and immediate results. Hoping my white hair lent a professorial air, I got to the point.

I told them I thought the American business community might have a lot to learn from Israeli CEOs and managers when it came to dealing with threats that, God forbid, may materialize in the United States. Just as our military and police have traveled to Israel to study under the experts, I wanted to go to Israel in order to interview business leaders who have been forced to become “experts” on leading their companies to success under the constant threat of terrorism. I showed them the books I had written; they were glanced at and left to lie on the table. I told them I had contacted a number of Israeli companies via e-mail, but that the responses had been slow in coming. I needed the help of the Israeli government, I said, to facilitate the interviews. Otherwise, it might be very difficult for an Irish-American to gain access to what I was beginning to perceive as an insular business community in order to explore a rather sensitive topic—the effect of terrorism on one’s business.

The three young people before me listened politely, with unreadable faces. Doron had been taking occasional notes, or had perhaps been working on another problem, as he listened. Not sensing

agreement from the other side of the table, I took a breath and started all over again.

Yariv held up and hand and nodded his head, as if to say listening to my spiel another time was unnecessary. He turned to Doron and asked with his eyebrows what his impression was. The room was silent; I was beginning to wonder if Israelis communicated telepathically. Doron held up the tablet he had been writing on. “Here,” he said, “are the companies we can start with.” Dara craned her neck to look at the list and suggested a few more. The blood began flowing back into my brain. I was going to get the assistance of the Israeli government!

Fingering a paper on his desk, Yariv asked me casually, “So, you are not afraid to go to Israel?”

And suddenly I was. The question, coming as it did from an authoritative source, nearly brought out an involuntary “Yes!” But I cleared my throat. “Of course not; I’m sure I’ll be perfectly safe.” The room was silent once more. I glanced out the window at the peaceful streets below. “Won’t I?”

Yariv shrugged. “You have seen the news? There are suicide bombers.”

“Well, yes, but surely. . . .” I was about to say something like, “Surely I’ll be protected by a couple of guys in blue blazers and shoulder holsters.”

Yariv was smiling now. “Dan, my grandmother lives there.” His hand hovered about five feet over the carpet. “She is *this* tall, and in her seventies. Yet she goes to the market every day and rides the buses. She is not afraid. Israel is safer than Los Angeles. You will see.”

When I walked out of the building I couldn’t believe my luck. I was to have the advocacy of the Israeli government. Surely getting interviews with prominent Israeli business leaders should be a lot easier. Ideas had been tossed about the room by Yariv, Doron, and Dara—such as providing me with a driver from the Ministry of Industry and Trade to shuttle me to the interviews, and with a companion from the ministry to help with security and/or language issues. They noted that I’d need a hotel room, perhaps an El Al flight. I was very impressed by their hands-off attitude. They

would help set up the interviews, but I could speak to whomever I wanted. All in all, a very productive meeting.

When I told my wife about the enthusiasm of the Israeli Consulate, it suddenly occurred to her that my pipe dream of traveling to Israel was about to materialize. Coincidentally, there had been a recent bombing in a Tel Aviv restaurant that killed twenty-one Israelis and wounded scores more. My wife, who rarely watches the news, had happened upon that story.

“You’re not going,” she said. “It’s too dangerous over there.”

And I understood, in a flash, why the Israeli tourism industry had been hit so hard.

A month or so later, my somewhat-reassured wife dropped me off at the El Al terminal at LAX. Having heard of the airline’s security procedures, I was prepared for the third degree. I had asked for a letter of introduction from the Consulate’s office, but of course, I left it on the dining room table in my haste to pack. A very pleasant young lady with a clipboard approached me. By now I was convinced that all Israelis in the public eye were in their middle twenties and that the older specimens were sequestered away, protected by their able children.

“And why are you traveling to Israel?” She had the frank, incorruptible look of a lady I once saw depicted on a Russian World War II propaganda poster. Mother Russia. Only this was Mother Israel. I told her I was writing a book on the Israeli economy, tactfully omitting the word *terror*. Turning on her heel, she said, “Come this way.” I was led into a small room, where I watched my computer case and briefcase searched by hand. My bigger suitcase disappeared through an opening obscured by a curtain of rubber flaps. I was asked to leave my carry-on items in the room and to retrieve them once boarding had begun. I did so, two hours later, and was escorted with my briefcase and computer all the way to the boarding tunnel. No chance of somebody slipping a last-minute addition into my carry-on luggage.

After an eleven-hour flight, we arrived in Tel Aviv. My main contact in Israel would be Yoram Gilady, from the Ministry of Industry and Tourism. We had only communicated by e-mail, but he had the advantage of having seen my photo on a book jacket. As I walked into the terminal, I noticed a dark-haired man, maybe in

his late forties, scowling in my direction. Looking about for the cheerful countenance of what I imagined a diplomat to have, I saw no likely candidate, only this rough-looking character at the end of the walkway. As I drew closer, he nodded his head, as if he had come to the conclusion that I was the right passenger. “You look older than your photo,” he said, by way of a greeting.

I *felt* older, after the long flight. It occurred to me that Einstein had been mistaken: Youthful space travelers would not return to an aged earth; it was quite the reverse; I was living proof. As we walked out of the protection of the terminal into the open air of the parking lot, my fears of being in Israel returned. I became wary. This was, after all, a war zone. I glanced at the faces passing by, looking for signs of anxiety. I suppose I had imagined Israeli citizens furtively scurrying across the streets, avoiding the buses and coffee shops and living wary, joyless lives under the constant threat of terrorist attacks. I expected to see a society paralyzed by fear, and I steeled myself for the grim experience of interviewing business leaders who are trapped in an economy under siege.

The car from the Ministry of Industry and Trade pulled up. It was a little, light European car designed for little, light Europeans. My heart sank as I noticed that the rear windows were covered with funereal black curtains—no doubt to protect an important VIP, like myself, from assassination. As we drove off, I huddled in the shadows of the backseat. The driver, who had introduced himself as Kobi, saw me peeking through the curtains like the star witness in a Mafia trial, and he laughed out loud.

The curtains, he explained, were for the summer heat. “But this is winter,” he said expansively, “so open za curtains.” I did so, both literally and metaphorically, and what I saw during my time in Israel was a vibrant, resolute society with people packing the buses; cramming the coffee shops and nightclubs; and living lives of commitment, purpose, and hope.