



PHOTO The south side of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as seen between the free-standing arches on the Temple Mount.

“I Went to Jerusalem, and Returned Delighted and Enriched”

Boualem Sansal

While returning from Jerusalem to Algiers, after attending the International Writers Festival in May 2012, Algerian writer Boualem Sansal wrote the following essay to explain, and perhaps justify, his decision to go to Israel, which was denounced throughout the Arab world.

PHOTO: ASIM BHARWANI

Dear brothers, dear friends, from Algeria, Palestine, Israel, and elsewhere—I'm writing these few lines to you to pass along some news. I suspect you were worried about me. I am a simple man, as you know, a writer who never pretended to aspire to anything other than the happiness of telling you stories, these "stories not to be told," as my friend the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lledo used to say. Even so, people have decided to meddle in our bonds of brotherhood and friendship and to make of me a scandal in your eyes.

Mind you, they're accusing me of nothing less than high treason against the entire Arab nation and Muslim world. It is what it is—there will not even be a trial. Dangerous and calculating members of Hamas are behind the witch hunt. They've taken the poor people of Gaza hostage and held them for ransom day after day, for years now, in a sort of indefinite imprisonment enforced by the Israeli blockade, and now they are trying to dictate—to those of us who strive to liberate ourselves—what we should think, say, and do; there are also other anonymous individuals, bitter and spiteful, opposed to everything, who spew hate on the Internet. Thanks to their communiqués and incessant insults, news of my travels leaked out, and I write to confirm that it's true, so that nothing troubles your spirit and so that things will be clear between us: *I did, indeed, go to Israel.*

What a trip it was, my dear friends, and what a welcome! Forgive me for not having announced it before leaving, but as you can imagine, I had to be discreet—Israel isn't exactly a tourist destination for Arabs, even though others greater than I have preceded me in this land of milk and honey clandestinely, or even with false names or borrowed passports, like the good Khalida Toumi in her day, fervent opponent of the majority regime of surveillance in Algiers, and now today our brilliant minister of culture, a bureaucrat obsessed with rooting out traitors, apostates, and other harkis.¹ It's owing to her, in particular, that Algerians live, in their beautiful country, with such dissatisfaction and fury on a daily basis. Her customs agents would have never let me out of the country if I had shown up at their checkpoint with a ticket for a direct flight from Algiers to Tel Aviv in one hand and a brand-new Israeli visa affixed to my lovely green passport in the other. I wonder, would they have

gone to the extreme of gassing me? In lieu of that scenario, I decided to take a circuitous route through Paris and leapt from a taxi in the Rue Rabelais to obtain an Israeli travel visa, thanks to which I'm now in possession of 1,001 stories "not to be told," which I promise to tell you in detail in a future book (may God grant me the time to write it).

I will tell you about Israel and the Israelis as I saw with my own eyes, where they live, without intermediaries, far from any doctrine, and without requiring any proof of authenticity upon my return. The fact is that in this world, there is no other country or people like them. For myself, I'm reassured and fascinated that each one of us is unique. Uniqueness can be bothersome, it's true, but one comes to cherish it, because to lose it would be irreparable. I will also tell you about al-Quds: Jerusalem. As I experienced it, this place is not really a city, and its inhabitants are not really inhabitants—there exists a certain atmospheric quality of unreality and dogmas unlike anywhere else on earth. In the old millennial city, trying to understand is simply useless, all is magic and dream, one rubs shoulders with the greatest prophets, the most majestic kings, questions them, speaks to them like neighbors, Abraham, David, Solomon, Mary, Jesus, and Muhammad last in line, as well as the valiant knight Saladin, may salvation be upon them, one passes from mystery to mystery without transition, then falls silent among the millennia and paradoxes beneath an all-white sky and burning sun. The innovations of the present are so ephemeral that one ceases to think about them. If there is a celestial voyage in this world, it starts here. Moreover, didn't Christ make his ascent into heaven here, and Muhammad the miraj astride his steed Buraq, guided by the angel Gabriel?

What phenomenon keeps the ensemble in order? Especially in Jerusalem's burgeoning modernity, a true capital with clean streets, paved sidewalks, solid houses, dynamic cars, attractive hotels and restaurants, neatly trimmed trees, and so many tourists from every country . . . except for Arab countries, the only ones in the world unable to come visit the cradle of their faith, this magical place where their religions were born, Christianity as well as Islam.

Ultimately, it is the Arab and Jewish Israelis who profit from it. They see these wonders every



Boualem Sansal is an Algerian writer engaged in the struggle for democracy in his country. As a result of his stances in opposition to the Algerian regime, he was relieved of his position as a high government official, and incessant defamation campaigns attempted to force him into silence; his books are banned in Algeria. Abroad, Sansal has received numerous awards, including the 2011 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. His recent trip to Israel, which he carried out despite threats from the Islamist Palestinian group Hamas, sparked a shrill campaign against him throughout the Arab world and accusations of betraying Islam and the Arab people and of defaming the memory of Arab and Palestinian martyrs. His novel *Village de l'Allemand, ou, Le journal des frères Schiller* (2008) appeared in the United States as *The German Mujahid*, translated by Frank Wynne, in 2009. Sansal lives near Algiers.

¹ *Harki* is the term for Algerians who fought for the French during the Franco-Algerian War (1954–62) and were subsequently given French nationality (Larousse.com).



day, all year long, morning and evening, and apparently without ever tiring of their mystery. It's impossible to count the tourists in these labyrinths, they are too numerous, outnumbering even the natives, the majority of whom behave like they are also pilgrims from afar. They go about in tight little groups that cross paths without mingling, English, Hindu, Japanese, Chinese, French, Dutch, Ethiopians, Brazilians, etc., led by tireless guides, no doubt under oath, who day after day, in all the languages of creation, narrate the legend of the centuries to the spellbound crowds.

By listening carefully, one can truly understand how Jerusalem is at once both a heavenly and terrestrial city, and why everyone wants to possess and die for her. It is foolish but understandable that when people desire eternal life, they kill one another in order to possess it. I felt completely other than myself, crushed by the weight of my very own questions, being the only one in my group who touched with his own hands the three holy places of the eternal city: the Kotel (Western Wall), the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Dome of the Rock. As Jews or Christians, my companions (the other writers attending the festival) could not enter the Esplanade of the Mosques, the third holiest place in Islam where the Dome of the Rock (Quba al-Sakhra) ascends, in an azure glow, along with the imposing Al-Aqsa Mosque (Haram al-Sharif). They were immediately barred from entering by the Waqf security guard, assisted by two Israeli policemen who guard the entrance to the esplanade and prevent any non-halal contact.² I was able to get through thanks to my passport, which marks my identity as an Algerian and, presumably, a Muslim. I didn't gainsay that deduction; on the contrary, I recited a verse from the Qur'an recalled from my childhood memories, which absolutely stunned the guard. It was the first time in his life that he had met an Algerian; he thought that, except for the emir Abd al-Qādir, they were all partly atheist, partly Sephardic, partly other things. It's funny how my little green passport safeguarded my entrance into the Noble Sanctuary faster than it opens the Schengen border crossings in Europe, where simply seeing a green passport inflames the customs agents' ulcers.

In the end, to be perfectly candid, I returned from this voyage delighted and content. I've always been convinced that *doing* is not the hard-

On the Visit of Algerian Writer Boualem Sansal

David Grossman

Boualem Sansal is a brave man. Brave in his deeds, brave in his thinking. I met him at the writers' festival that took place in Jerusalem in May 2012, and I could feel it at once: here was a man whose spirit is free.

He arrived in Israel despite threats, denunciations, and defamations, leveled at him in his own country and throughout the Arab world. I don't know how many of us could have withstood such pressures and remained faithful to themselves and their values.

The greatest courage of all, in my view, is Sansal's readiness to stand up and face *reality*—not to hide behind prejudice and fanatical belief. It is easy enough to find refuge in stereotypical thinking from the complexities of a situation like the one in our region. It is comfortable and tempting to give oneself over to the hateful demonization toward Israel so prevalent in the Arab and Muslim world, rather than face up to the intricacy of the Middle East tragedy.

Boualem Sansal made up his mind to come to Israel and see it for himself. And when he saw it, he said honestly, to himself and to his readers,

est thing, but rather putting oneself in a position to be ready to do something. There lies the revolution, in the intimate idea that one is finally ready to move, to change oneself in order to change the world. Much more than the last step, the first step is the one that helps us reach our goal. I always said that peace is above all a human affair, too serious to be left in the hands of governments or, even less, political parties. They talk about territories, security, money, conditions, guarantees. They sign papers, conduct ceremonies, hoist flags, prepare Plan Bs. Humanity does none of that—they do what humans do, go to cafés, to restaurants, sit around the fire, gather in stadiums, meet one another in festivals, on a beach, and share happy moments, mingling their emotions and, in the end, promising to see one another again. "See you tomorrow," "See you soon," "Next year, in Jerusalem," they say, which is what we did in Jerusalem. Writers, men and women from numerous countries, got together at a literary festival to

² In Arabic, *Halāl* means "permissible" or sanctioned by Islamic law; in the context of food, it means ritually fit for use.

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that what he saw did not resemble what he had heard about Israel over many years of preaching and brainwashing. In his public appearances and in private conversations here, he did not ignore Israel's problems, and certainly not the wrongs it has caused to the Palestinians. But he also saw Israel's uniqueness and its great accomplishments. He came to understand its complicated relationship with its traumatic history, and the existential insecurity that looms persistently, even as Israel is the strongest military power in the region, and a wellspring of vitality and creative energy.

Most of all, he saw human beings, he spoke with them, listened to them, argued with them. He opened himself to the painful complexity of the return of the Jews to their land, and the tragedy that this return brought upon the Palestinians. He met the primary obligation of anyone who really wants to understand, and not hide behind mind-numbing slogans: he came. He was here. He experienced—without filters—both sides, and their contradictory stories.

And when he came here, he also gave the many Israelis he met a chance to shed—if only briefly—their armor of stereotypes about “the Arabs” and their own entrenched beliefs. They heard a new voice calling to them from inside the Arab world.

They sensed that this man was offering them a new path to dialogue, interaction, acceptance. Believe me—given the suspicious, hostile relationship between Israelis and Arabs, this is a rare opportunity, almost a fantasy. Is there a creative act bolder and more liberating than what Sansal the writer did in his journey here?

So few are the Arab intellectuals, authors, journalists, academics and clergymen who have dared to do what Boualem Sansal has done. But perhaps, overall, only a few people are capable of reaching as he has into the complexity of the lives of strangers, even of enemies, and feeling their common humanity. But this is precisely the sort of contact we lack here: the contact that can bring strangers and enemies suddenly to recall the possibility still contained within them, a possibility from which they have been exiled for years by their own hatreds and fears. Few are the people like Boualem Sansal, whose vision and sensitivity have the power to heal a pained, torn world.

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Translation from the Hebrew
By Stuart Schoffman

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David Grossman (b. 1954, Jerusalem) is the author of *To the End of the Land* (2010), translated by Jessica Cohen, and other works of fiction and nonfiction. His work has been translated into thirty languages.

Stuart Schoffman, an American-born journalist, has lived in Jerusalem since 1988. His translations from Hebrew include books by David Grossman, A. B. Yehoshua, and Meir Shalev.

talk about their books, about their emotions in the face of the world's desolation, about this and that, and, in particular, about what might enable humanity to begin making peace someday. In the end, we promised to see one another again, or at least to write to each other.

During my five days and nights in Jerusalem (which included a quick trip to Tel Aviv on the third day to share a lovely soirée with our friends at the French Institute), I don't recall ever talking about war. Is it possible we simply forgot to talk about it or avoided the subject, or might it be that we acted as if the time had come to talk about peace and the future? Obviously, it's impossible to speak about war and peace at the same time—one excludes the other. Still, I was quite sorry that no Palestinian had been among us. After all, both the Israelis and the Palestinians must agree to make peace. For my part, I'm not at war with either one, because I love them equally, in the same way, like brothers since the dawn of time. It would be gratifying if, along

with some Israeli writers, I should be invited to Ramallah someday. It would be a lovely place to talk about peace and about that famous first step which would allow us to get there.

I would like to make special mention of David Grossman, that monument of Israeli and world literature. I found it remarkable that two writers like us, two men awarded the same prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, one year apart (he in 2010, myself in 2011), could meet in 2012 to talk about peace in al-Quds, the city of Jerusalem, where Jews and Arabs live together, where the three Religions of the Book mingle in human hearts. Might our meeting mark the beginning of a vast assembly of writers for peace? Will such a miracle see the light of day in 2013? Chance often tricks us into believing things that owe nothing to chance.

Translation from the French
By Daniel Simon

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