

Israeli Culture

Making a Spectacle of Himself

For Boris Johnson, the charismatic editor of The Spectator magazine and a British Conservative MP, last week's visit to Israel was a respite from the storm he's stirred up back home



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What is more dangerous to a young member of the British parliament who is also a journalist and a writer and a classicist and an entertainer: to travel to Liverpool, or to visit Tel Aviv and Ramallah? Boris Johnson, one of the more colorful and intriguing people in British politics and media, visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority last week. As far as he was concerned, this was a quiet visit, far from the limelight, a respite from the brouhaha he had created a few days earlier in his own country. Before he left for Israel, Johnson had to go to Liverpool to apologize to its inhabitants for having insulted them. The apology in the northern port city was perceived by the British press as a far more exciting and scary event than his visit to the Middle East.

Meeting him in his room at a Tel Aviv hotel, Johnson looks exactly like he does on television: He is funny, charming and easygoing, as well as aloof, pompous and elitist. It is possibly this mix of contrasts that is the source of his popularity. He has a genuine fan club, The Boris Johnson Fan Club, which operates an active Web site on the Internet; he is much in demand as a guest on television shows; and he is considered one of the most beloved figures in Britain, even though he is a member of the Conservative Party.

Johnson himself has a different explanation: "The source of my popularity, to the extent that I have any, lies in the fact that people love to see their leaders and authoritative figures make a fool of themselves. Ever since society has discovered its need for leaders, people feel the need to laugh at them. I'm afraid I give them that, though I do so - more often than not - unintentionally. Well, anyway, that's how I spin it to myself. It's my apologia if you will."

Lacking restraint

Johnson, 40, is a graduate of Eton College and Oxford University, a "blue blood" and speaks a very highbrow English. But he lives with his wife and four children in Islington, a London neighborhood of Labor supporters where he rides around a lot on a bicycle like one of the common folk.

In April this year he was appointed the Conservative Party's shadow minister for the arts (an appointment that is considered a considerable step up in his political career). He writes a political column in the conservative Daily Telegraph and a motor column in GQ magazine, he is a well-liked participant in the successful satirical television program "Have I Got News For You" (the model on which the Channel Two program "Fixed Game," moderated by Einav Galili, is based) and he has published two non-fiction books as well as a comic novel, "Seventy-Two Virgins."

In addition to all this, he is the editor of the conservative weekly The Spectator, a long-established and prestigious publication (founded in 1828). After Johnson was appointed editor in August, 1999, The Spectator recovered from a long decline, but it still has a relatively small circulation. "Is it well read? Well, it's well written! Oh, you mean how many readers? Well, they are countless as the stars in the sky and

measureless as the sand on the seashore," he says with a straight face and then gives in. "Okay, the circulation is 64,000."

An article he wrote entitled "Bigley's Fate," which was published on October 16 and caused the big row in Liverpool, faithfully represents that weekly's political line: conservative, right-wing and almost void of compassion. The article discussed the debate that aroused concerning a soccer match between England and Wales, which was held one day after British hostage Kenneth Bigley was murdered by beheading in Iraq. Bigley's family and friends, residents of Liverpool, asked that a moment of silence be devoted at the beginning of the game to the memory of the dead hostage. Johnson wrote that this request lacked "a sense of proportion" and exhibited the "mawkish sentimentality of a society that has become hooked on grief and likes to wallow in a sense of victorious victimhood."

Johnson - like a kind of Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who lacks all restraint - went on to write that the inhabitants of Liverpool have "a predilection for welfarism" and that "part of this flawed psychological state is that they cannot accept that they might have made any contribution to their misfortunes." Along the way, he also argued that "the deaths of 50 Liverpool [soccer] supporters at Hillsborough in 1989 was undeniably a greater tragedy than the single death, however horrible, of Mr. Bigley."

A servant of two masters

Michael Howard, the head of the Conservative Party, immediately disassociated himself from these remarks: He declared that they were "nonsense from beginning to end" and ordered Johnson to go to Liverpool and apologize to the inhabitants of the city. Johnson did as he was bidden and

also published a written apology - "Operation Scouse-grovel," as he cynically put it - rich in self-flagellation and wry cynicism ("I'm writing this in a cold, damp three-star hotel in Liverpool, and I have to admit I don't want to go out. Not only is it raining, there is also a chance I will be beaten up."), reiterating that the message he wanted to transmit in the article had been criticism of "the culture of self-pity." In Tel Aviv, Johnson insists, tongue in cheek: "It is important to me that Israeli readers know that I love Liverpool."

He notes that while the British media made a big fuss about this, and many were worried about his political career, he himself "can't see the problem." Nevertheless, an interesting question came up in the British press: Can one be a servant of two masters - be the independent editor of a newspaper and obey the head of the party?

"Yes, this is really a serious issue. Though it is a tradition - there have been quite a few editors of The Spectator before me who were also members of parliament - but to do what I have been doing in the past six months is really too hard. This is a problem to which I must give serious consideration."

Is this a problem of time management - too many tasks and too little time - or of journalistic ethics, of the difficulty of maintaining journalistic independence, distinct from party commitment?

Johnson: "Look, evidently I keep my independence, or else I wouldn't get into so much trouble. But the time management problem is not to be taken lightly. I get a lot done in a day's work, but it is beginning to be excessive."

What will you give up?

"I don't know. I'm still thinking about it."

Visits to Ramallah

For four days Johnson toured Israel as a guest of the Foreign Ministry, with a delegation of "Friends of Israel in the Conservative Party." He says the tour was excellent: "I've heard the full range of forecasts [on the situation here]: from a Knesset member who suggested I be optimistic to a learned and highly respected politician who drew up for me in graphic terms the way Israel is to be convulsed by a terrible storm." He says he visited Ramallah and heard complaints from Palestinians about Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, spoke to people in a village near Nablus where he heard about Israeli reprisals, the uprooting of olive groves by the Israel Defense Forces, visited the separation fence ("How can I possibly fault it?") and also toured the Carmel Market in Tel Aviv, where he saw the site of the terror attack, "a horrific sight."

He adds: "I looked at the smashed and torn cheese stand, and I tried to enter the mind of a person who does a thing like that, to the anger and the despair of a young person of 16 who goes to commit suicide." He tried to meet the suicide terrorist's family in Nablus to better understand the wellsprings of despair, but he was not allowed to enter the city.

Have you learned anything on this visit that you didn't know before?

"It could be said that this visit has led me better to understand the great sacrifice that [Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon intends to make in Gaza. He is not getting enough credit for this internationally. Israel is not doing a good enough job of explaining itself. In fact, I don't know whether I learned much on this visit, but I certainly formed a lot of opinions."

In the very near future, he will formulate in London the opinions he has formed in Israel, after he has digested what he has seen, he says. In the meantime, in Tel Aviv, he is in a hurry to write his column for The Daily Telegraph about President George W. Bush's victory in the elections. "I have mixed feelings about Bush," he says. "It depresses me to see him in power again because the man can hardly speak English. It is sad that he is in power right at a time when the United States is threatened and threatening and desperately needs to make her case, a just one. I would prefer a more versatile leader, like [Bill] Clinton or [Ronald] Reagan."

Give Jews knighthoods

In addition to his writing and his political activity (elections will apparently be held in Britain within about six months, he estimates), Johnson also invests energy in the symbolic position of shadow minister for the arts. He says he is especially interested in the bleak state of the museums in Britain. "I am addicted to museums," he says. "This is one of my deformations. In my youth I spent most of my time in museums. I am devoted to them."

What is the problem? Lack of funding?

"Yes, the museums are desperately underfunded. They have very few acquisitions. Not long ago I went into the British Museum to look at the bust of Pericles. This is a very famous thing, classical, and the Greeks are demanding it back now. But it was not on display there because they had shut the display hall on that day because of a staff shortage. This is tragic, in my opinion."

Why is this happening?

"In Britain there is a very strange phenomenon. Only three kinds of people donate money to art: Americans, Jews and

criminals. Alright, maybe not criminals, but people that are somehow dodgy. The British aristocracy donates hardly anything to art, in contrast to American tycoons and especially Jews. At the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square, for example, they added an east wing, and succeeded in collecting 18 million pounds sterling for it. Nearly all of the money was from American donors - not even a single penny from the British lottery or from the British nobility. It shouldn't be like that. I am 40 years old, and my friends, people of my age, are making a lot of money in the City and don't know what to do with it. They have to be encouraged to donate and there have to be tax breaks for donors in Britain. Today this is not happening."

Johnson adds: "Among the Jews, there is a tradition of giving that I respect very much. At every museum in the world there are marble plaques, like tombstones, with the donors' names. The problem is that in Britain exactly the same names appear. My challenge is to try to change the culture of giving in Britain. I would like to understand why only Jews have a tradition of giving."

For a moment, Johnson is uncharacteristically cautious: He watches his tongue, notices that he has perhaps said something that could be hurtful and adds: "It's not that I would want to discourage donations from America and Jews - they are highly appreciated. I want to encourage them. Yes, definitely, we should put them on the boards, give them management positions, give them knighthoods. Yes indeed, give them knighthoods!"

Do you have the power to move anything as shadow minister for the arts? Does your popularity translate merely into love, to the enjoyment of the entertainment you provide, or also power?

"In the meantime I'm just in the opposition. But yes, I do think that sometimes I am influential. Every journalist has the illusion that the article he wrote resonates, gets things moving, that the things he has said are the beating of the butterfly's wings that sets off the storm on the other side of the world."