

MYA GUARNIERI JARADAT

The LIVES of
ISRAEL'S NEW OTHERS

THE
UNCHOSSEN



The Unchosen

The Lives of Israel's New Others

Mya Guarnieri Jaradat



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I

Black Market Kindergartens

When I arrived to the building on *Sderot Har Tzion*, Mount Zion Avenue, there was no sign of the police raid. There were no boot prints in the sandy yard, only a half-dead palm rising out of a sea of litter. Cracks climbed the building, the once-white façade now gray and crumbling. Buses rumbled by, towards the ramps at Tel Aviv's New Central Bus Station a block away.

I knocked. The door swung open and I looked down to find Jeremiah, one of the handful of big kids who came to the daycare in the afternoon. The son of Filipino migrant workers, Jeremiah greeted me in Hebrew. *Shalom*, he said. Hello.

Shalom shalom, I answered, doing my best to sound cheerful. It was a struggle to remain upbeat knowing what I'd see inside.

I entered, slid my sandals off, leaving them by the couch that occupied the small space between the door and the kitchen. Keeping my backpack on, I made my way to the tiny room where the toddlers spent their days.

I paused in the doorway and took a deep breath to steady myself. No matter how many times I came to the *gan*, or kindergarten, I was never prepared to see it: a two and a half by four meter room packed full of cribs, toddlers sitting two to a pen. A TV blaring on the wall. No toys. A Formica floor, hard and bare—with no carpet to soften the falls that come with one's first teetering steps. Instead, the rug had been rolled up and placed along the brown rubber baseboard. When I'd asked "Tita," the Filipino woman who ran the daycare, why the carpet was there, she'd explained that she didn't want the children to get it dirty.

Not that they spent much time out of their cribs anyways. Because Tita had far more children than she could care for, she didn't take them out of their pens. She fed them and changed their diapers. Otherwise, they passed their days sitting behind wooden bars.

On that day, the day after the night raid, the children were having an afternoon snack of cookies and juice. The cookies had been distributed in small plastic bags; I wondered how safe it was to leave toddlers alone with such things. Their cribs were full of crumbs; some of the kids picked at the food they'd dropped in their pens. Tita had been here recently enough to give them food and drink, I assumed. But where was she now? Had she run to the store, leaving the children alone? Anything was possible.

Some of the toddlers stood when they saw me. They stretched their arms out, calling "down, down." One of the boys tried to climb out of his crib. In the months that I'd been volunteering there, the children had gotten used to me taking them out of their pens as soon as I arrived. I was worried about the tiny space, the hard floor, the kitchen just beyond the doorway. But I couldn't just leave them sitting there.

"Where's Tita?" I asked Jeremiah. In Tagalog, *tita* means aunt and is used as an honorific. It felt strange to me to call her this, as the children did; our relationship was tense. On the one hand, Tita had allowed a local human rights' organization to place me in her black market daycare. On the other, she kept her distance throughout the year that I volunteered there. And she never picked up the practices I was sent to model—simple activities and basic things like taking the kids out of their cribs, talking to them and playing with them. Instead, she often used my presence as a break, ducking out to run errands or to wire money to her daughter in the Philippines.

Before Jeremiah could answer, Tita emerged from the bedroom. She sometimes put children down to nap in her bed, piling them in four, five, six, however many could fit. She gave

me her standard hello: a forced smile and an upward flick of the eyebrows—a gesture that, in the Philippines, means “yes”—an acknowledgment of my presence.

I continued lifting the children from their cribs. She leaned on the doorjamb and watched in silence.

Once all the children were out, I sat on the floor and slid the black backpack off my shoulders. I just managed to take out the colored paper and markers I'd brought when one kid, then another, plunked themselves down in my lap. A third attached himself to my back, wrapping his arms around my neck. Another tugged on my sleeve; children pushed at each other to get closer. It wasn't about me. The children in daycares like Tita's—and there are scores of such places in south Tel Aviv—are so starved for attention and touch that they greet any visitor, even newcomers, like this.

Sometimes, as the toddlers piled on, I was struck by a deep sadness. The kids didn't have to spend their days like this. Israeli children don't. Only the children of migrant workers and asylum seekers are stuck in these black market daycares; government policy is to blame.

That day, I did my best to stay present and give the children love and attention. I also tried to work on skills they would need when they entered the municipal kindergartens at the age of three. The markers weren't just for fun—they would help us practice sharing. As I encouraged a little girl to surrender the red pen to a boy, I heard the steady *tuk tuk tuk tuk* of knife on cutting board. Tita was in the kitchen. She'd started working on dinner.

As I headed out that evening, the food was simmering on the stove. Tita didn't offer me a plate. Instead, she stood, her arms folded, and watched me buckle my sandals. As I fumbled with the second shoe, I tried to make conversation.

“How are you?” I asked, glancing up at her.

She seemed to consider her answer before offering it: “The immigration police were here.” There was accusation in her voice. I wondered if she thought I’d ratted her out.

“Oh,” I said, embarrassed. As a Jew who would take an Israeli passport, I felt some responsibility for the state’s actions.

Maybe because Tita thought the same—or maybe she mistakenly believed that I was in the position to help—she shed her usual reserve and told me about the raid. They’d come in the early morning hours, pounding on the door. They’d asked for her visa and her daughter’s papers. Tita had none. Because it was 2007 and Israel was still following an informal policy against deporting mothers and children—though that would soon change—the police had settled instead for turning the place upside down. They opened drawers and dumped the insides out, claiming they were looking for drugs. They opened closets and threw the contents on the floor. Finding nothing, they told Tita to “go home,” back to the Philippines.

For Tita, the Philippines was, indeed, home and she did hope to return someday. She had a 19-year-old daughter there who she hadn’t seen for almost a decade; now, her daughter had a child of her own who Tita had never met. Sending money back wasn’t enough. Tita wanted to be there. So the policemen’s words hadn’t hurt Tita. But they’d devastated Yael, her Israel-born, Hebrew-speaking daughter. Go home? But *ima* Mom, isn’t Israel home? The pudgy, pig-tailed seven-year-old girl had looked on as other Hebrew speakers—people born in the same place she’d been born, people who celebrated the same *hagim*, holidays, she did, people who had gone through the same school system she was enrolled in, people who had Hebrew names, just like hers—trashed her house. Cleaning up after the police left had been easy; calming Yael down had been impossible. *How was she and her mother different?* she’d wanted to know. *Couldn’t they stay in Israel? Where were they supposed to go?*



Figure 1.1 A Filipino migrant worker cries after immigration police raided an apartment that doubles as a black market daycare. (Photo: Activestills)

The family had gotten lucky, though—Tita’s husband had slept in their minivan that night. He’d done this for years so that the immigration police wouldn’t find him. Israel has a policy that forbids migrant workers from having romantic relationships. If the authorities caught Tita and her husband together, he would be deported. But, for now, the family was safe.

* * *

Neither Tita’s daycare nor the night raid are remarkable in south Tel Aviv—in this part of the city, such places and stories are commonplace. They don’t fit, however, with Tel Aviv’s carefully cultivated image. Thanks to a concerted government effort, the city is better known for its beaches, cafes, and nightlife. Due to an abundance of Bauhaus architecture, UNESCO has designated Tel Aviv as a world heritage site; the narrative of the “White City,” as it is known, encapsulates Tel Aviv’s founding

myth and to a large extent that of the country—that it was built by Europeans, or, as architect and historian Sharon Rotbard puts it, “that Tel Aviv was originally born, *ex nihilo*, from the dunes.”¹

The government has also had a hand in developing Israel’s budding arts scene and burgeoning film industry; many consider the country—the so-called “start-up nation”—a place of progress, creativity, and innovation. Tel Aviv’s annual gay pride parade lends the state a veneer of tolerance. The event is exploited to depict Israel as an oasis of liberalism in a desert of Arab sexual repression and Muslim fundamentalism.

But the city’s south, in general—and the areas surrounding the *tachana merkazit*, Central Bus Station, in particular—tell a different tale, one that better reflects the country’s history and political currents. Rotbard calls south Tel Aviv the “Black City” and argues that it contains “everything hidden by the long, dark shadow of the White City, everything Tel Aviv does not see and everything it does not want to see.”² Prior to Israel’s establishment in 1948, much of south Tel Aviv was, technically, part of Palestinian Jaffa. After the state was founded, it became home to *mizrachim*, Jews from Arab and Muslim lands—a marginalized group that, until today, faces discrimination from the *ashkenazi* (Eastern European) mainstream.

In the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel took control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; Palestinian day laborers from the occupied territories began to work throughout the Jewish state, primarily in construction and agriculture but also in factories, including those in south Tel Aviv. But in the early 1990s, during the First Intifada, Israel sought to decrease its dependence on Palestinian day laborers. The state began to bring migrant workers from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia; the demand for laborers also attracted workers from Africa and Latin America. Many of these non-Jewish foreigners came to rent apartments in impoverished south Tel Aviv. Last came the African asylum seekers. While they’ve been trickling into Israel

since the 1980s, the mid- to late 2000s saw a dramatic climb in their numbers with most coming from Eritrea, a country gripped by a brutal dictatorship, and from war-torn Sudan. Those who have entered in recent years have been imprisoned without trial. After being held for an arbitrary period, they've been released with a one-way bus ticket to south Tel Aviv's *tachana merkazit*, the Central Bus Station, and a visa that does not allow them to work legally. Stranded in this shadow city, the community has made the area its home. Today, the Black City is a face of the country that Israel would rather the world not see.

Israel's policies vis-à-vis south Tel Aviv's communities call into question the image of a city—and, by extension, a country—that is a liberal bastion, an outpost of democracy and tolerance. That its treatment of migrant workers and African asylum seekers resembles, in some ways, its treatment of Palestinians also calls into question the claims that its policies towards the latter are shaped by security concerns. Nothing illustrates this more dramatically than the black market kindergartens like Tita's daycare. The state has no security claims against these children. Nor have they entered the country illegally or violated the terms of their visas, as could be said of their parents. The children have done nothing “wrong” other than being born non-Jews in the Jewish state. This is why they end up in the black market kindergartens—the state doesn't recognize migrant workers' and asylum seekers' children, even when they're Israel-born, because the government considers all non-Jews to be a demographic threat. As such, there is no path to citizenship or residency for the parents or their kids—no matter how long they've been in the country—save for two “one-time” windows that were opened in 2005 and 2010 and that resulted in the naturalization of hundreds of “illegal” children.

While the state doesn't recognize the kids, individual government bodies can and do; the Ministry of Education, for example, allows these non-Jewish children to enter the municipal

kindergartens at the age of three, like citizens. They may remain in the Israeli educational system through high school. But, afterwards, they find themselves outside the framework of recognition once again, just as they were when they were little.

As is the case in most of the Western world, licensed, regulated daycares in Israel are expensive, running anywhere from 2000 to 4000 NIS (approximately \$500–\$1,000) monthly. This can be a significant chunk—or all—of a migrant worker or asylum seeker's income. If citizens can't afford this, however, the Ministry of Welfare offers subsidies according to one's income. But because the Ministry of Welfare doesn't recognize the children of migrant workers and asylum seekers, their parents can't get help footing the cost of daycare. Nor can they quit working to take care of their children themselves. They're left with only bad options: leave their infants and toddlers home alone—and such things happen in south Tel Aviv—or send them to a black market daycare, which usually costs somewhere between 400 to 600 NIS (approximately \$100–\$150).

Human rights organizations fault not just the state and the Ministry of Welfare but also the Ministry of Industry Trade and Labor (MOITAL), as this body is legally responsible for monitoring the conditions of daycares in Israel, whether they are licensed or not. They also point out that MOITAL is woefully understaffed—in 2010, for example, there were only eight inspectors, tasked with the responsibility of looking after thousands of licensed and unlicensed daycares. And on the rare occasion that a black market daycare is shut down, a new one quickly pops up to replace it because the demand for them remains. Estimates vary, but anywhere from 50–90 pirate kindergartens exist in south Tel Aviv today. They serve thousands of paperless children.

The Mesila Aid and Information Center for Migrant Workers and African Refugees—an organization that is funded, in part, by the Tel Aviv municipality—has written letters to the Ministry

of Welfare demanding that it take responsibility for the children. The agency passed the buck, responding that it cannot help because the Ministry of Treasury doesn't allocate funds for such services. But advocates point out that Israel, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, must take care of migrant workers' and asylum seekers' children whether or not the budget allows for it. But this isn't the first time Israel has been criticized for its blasé attitude towards the treaty—within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Israel has also come under fire for its treatment of Palestinian minors in the occupied territories.

* * *

Tita's was not the first *gan* I'd seen, nor was it the worst. I first encountered the black market kindergartens in the fall of 2007, a couple of months after I'd arrived in Israel to participate in a left-leaning volunteer program. The program included partially subsidized housing in the south Tel Aviv neighborhood of Kiryat Shalom; I was living off student loans as I tried to wrap up my master's thesis and the rock-bottom rent had figured into my decision to spend a year in Israel. I was also 26 years old and newly separated. And though I didn't feel that Israel should be a home for the Jewish people alone, I was indeed there, as a Jew, looking for a home.

The volunteer program offered more than a break on housing—with an orientation towards social justice, it also offered, among other options, the possibility to volunteer in Palestinian Jaffa. That's what I'd committed to while I was still in the United States. During orientation in Tel Aviv, however, we were required to visit all of the other sites so that we could become better acquainted with Israel's internal issues. And, so, one afternoon in October 2007, the other volunteers and I followed Sivan—the program coordinator, with her long, wavy black hair, fair skin,

and manicured toes peeking out of Birkenstocks—to a daycare run by Marie, an asylum seeker from the Ivory Coast. We walked through Kiryat Shalom, Shapira, and past the *tachana merkazit*, the New Central Bus Station—a south Tel Aviv landmark that’s either the heart of the area or a festering wound, depending on who you ask. Marie’s *gan* lay on the other side of the bus station, in the Neve Shaanan neighborhood.

The façade of Marie’s building was cracked, crumbling and grimy; the sandy yard was full of shredded plastic bags and empty bottles. The entryway reeked of piss and stale alcohol and was littered with trash. There was no light in the stairwell and so we ascended in darkness, gripping the handrail, shuffling forward until toes touched cement, a reminder to pick up a foot and place it on the next step. I was certain that Sivan was confused—how could there be a daycare here, in this building?—until we reached the top floor where a broken window provided just enough light to read the handwritten, paper sign taped to the metal door: *Remember! You MUST pick up your child by 7PM!!!!*

Sivan knocked but there was no response. She explained that Marie was worried about the immigration police. Only after Sivan announced herself, in English, did the door swing open. And there was Marie: a heavy-set African woman with short, plaited hair, a bright green skirt, and a baby on her hip. A toddler peeked out from behind her leg. She smiled and said “Hello” as we entered but, otherwise, Marie didn’t make conversation. She didn’t have time to—she was alone and busy with more than two dozen babies and small children.

Sivan closed the door behind us and immediately I was overwhelmed by the air, which stood thick with the smell of sweat and shit. I retched. Embarrassed, and not wanting to insult Marie, I did my best not to gag as I looked around. The place was a cement block room with one window, no kitchen, and no bathroom. A garbage can stood by the door, overflowing with used diapers. Next to the bin was a small counter with a sink