

The Promised Land for Cats

Somebody once called Israel “The Promised Land for Cats”. Even a short trip to Israel will reveal immediately cities, towns, hamlets and communities full of cats. They are all over the place. You never see mice, rats, moles or squirrels; but cats-a-plenty.

Scientists tell us that the modern cat evolved in what is now Efrat, in Eastern Israel, near Jerusalem.

When our daughter, Kaila, was living in Jerusalem, after she finished the Army and while in law school, she decided that she was lonely. No boyfriend, but lots of friendly cats around. Right about that time, the government announced, in what started out as an April Fools Day joke, that anyone who adopted a cat would have free spaying and a set of shots for the cat.

This all started when, on April 1st, a newspaper announced that the Prime Minister had created a new “Cat Ministry”. In parliamentary systems, it is not unusual for the Head of State to create or eliminate ministries in order to enhance his or her power. Lots of people believed that the story about creation of the Cat Ministry was true, and enthusiastically embraced the concept of a Cat Ministry to address the large population of felines in the country.

Uncharacteristically, Kaila gave her cat the name “Alice”. Subsequent events found Kaila married and pregnant. You guessed it. The cat traveled to Philadelphia, and now resides with our son, Joshua, in his apartment in Philadelphia. It was not an easy transition for a wild outdoor Israeli cat, unused to American ways and unschooled in the English language. At first, she would snarl, hiss and scratch anyone who came near to her. Now, however, she has settled into a middle-class American life, where she has waxed fat and indolent.

Enter the cats of Haifa. On this trip to visit Kaila, we noted Bat Galim to be a paradise for cats. Perhaps there are more cats here than any other beachside community, although cats are not dumb and they seem to prosper along the beaches of this coastal nation.

The Talmud tells us that if we were not given the proper religious rules to live by, we could learn “modesty” from the cat. I do not know how modest these cats are, but certainly there is an abundance of them. They appear, for the most part, healthy and they have no reluctance sidling up to those who stroll along the promenade in the pleasant, 60-degree evenings this time of the year.

One such cat, who became known as “Boner” because of his straight tail, was a regular at feeding time. Joshua, like many locals, bought a bag of cat food and, at night, would go out and pour the food on the pavement for the local cats of Bat Galim. We all

thought that the cat's name was a tad crass, and there was some objection from the wife of the Rieders household.

Another cat, whom we failed to name, was black and brown and rather sinister looking. Nevertheless, the cat was extraordinarily friendly and, upon sitting down at one specific bench along the promenade, this animal, who we will simply call "Killer", would move right on to the seated person's lap, proceeding to purr. In petting the cat, Joshua noticed a gold piece of metal sticking out of Killer's side. He thought it was probably a fish hook. We tried to contact someone to find out how the cats are taken care of if they are ill, to no avail.

One night, we met a lovely young local couple walking their dog. We asked them how the municipality deals with sick cats. "Oh, there is a number to call for that," the girl explained. She was kind enough to call the number, and also sent a message on her animal welfare WhatsApp group. Within an hour or so, a white ambulance showed up, personed by a pretty blonde Russian-speaking woman, who introduced herself as Anastasia, the veterinarian. She said that her job was to respond to calls about sick cats. She had just come from the scene of a cat having been hit by a car. The impressive looking vehicle was an ambulance on wheels, only mostly for cats. There are stories of hoards of wild boars living on the outskirts of the city, but we do not know if she takes care of those particular residents.

Anastasia proceeded to run around a little park area right on the beach, chasing Killer with a hypodermic needle. In one hand, she had the needle, and in the other, a cat catcher. Joshua gave chase as well, although I do not know if it was after the veterinarian or the cat. Finally, Anastasia managed to give the cat a sedative, but the wily feline still had lots of fight left and climbed up a 15-foot tree! Joshua was not able to exercise equal climbing skills; and there, the cat fell asleep - in the tree. In the excitement, Joshua managed to get bit and scratched on the hand.

Now, we know this cat has had some treatment before because it has a clipped ear. Cats in Israel with a clipped ear have been picked up in the past, neutered, and perhaps given a round of shots. Obviously this cat either was a house cat or just lived a privileged life along the promenade on the beach.

The next night, I was taking a walk on the beach myself, wondering whatever might have happened to Killer. Did the authorities come back for her to isolate her for 10 days as the law requires after a bite? Well, there was Killer sitting on the same bench, with her feet nicely tucked underneath her body, smiling, and waiting for me to sit down. I did not take the bait. However, just a few minutes later, a young Russian couple taking a romantic stroll together sat down, and, sure enough, Killer climbed right onto the leg of the young man. I told them the story of the night before, but they looked at me incredulously.

I could only think of *Little Shop of Horrors* and wonder whether Killer still had the metal sticking out of her gut, ready to take a bite out of some other friendly passerby?

No one could argue that this is a remarkable country, populated by unique people. Bat Galim is particularly enticing to me since I have never met a tourist here and very little English is spoken. If you do not speak Hebrew, Russian or Arabic, this is a place where a tourist might feel uncomfortable. It is the real deal; this is Israel.

One night, while sitting on a bench with Joshua, when he and Killer were still friends, I saw a squad of young soldier recruits running along the promenade. Bat Galim is very close to an Army/Navy base. At the head of the group of soldiers was a woman with a long, blonde ponytail, excoriating soldiers not to be such babies and to run faster and harder. I cannot remember the last time I saw a group of Marines urged to pick up the pace by a woman. Such things are alien to the military in the United States, although we have made a lot of progress. We are still arguing about whether a woman can be as rough and tough as the Marine recruits. In Israel, the answer has already been given.

It started to drizzle. This is the rainy season in Israel, and the moisture from the heavens is a sure sign that the Lord above approves of the people of Israel. Rain is always considered to be a blessing from heaven and a reward for proper conduct. Perhaps taking care of the cats and the other wildlife in this country is part of the charm and industriousness of the Jews of this ancient Holy Land.

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