



Video Story Transcript

Culture Shock: An Israeli Immigrant Learns America

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Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU9-XcP7Pu0>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hello, my name is Noa Baum.

In August of 1990, I left Israel to come to America. It wasn't the first time I came to America. The first time, I was in fifth grade, didn't know a word of English, but I learned very fast. Second time, I went to graduate school in New York City. But in August of 1990, I followed my American husband to the University of California-Davis, where he wanted to study. And that month Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened Israel.

And so, I came from a place where everyone was walking around with little black boxes holding gas masks, in case Saddam Hussein attacked us with mustard gas. My friends were making a lot of cynical jokes to try and cover up their panic as they practiced to get their babies into strange collapsible plastic contraptions. And everyone wondered, "Can this flimsy thing actually protect my baby from the lethal gas?"

So, I left the war threats, new and old. I left that hectic pace of Tel Aviv with the relentless humidity and unbearable heat. I left the drivers, aggressive and impatient, honking at every turn. The demonstrations that continued for and against the diplomatic solution with the Palestinians, for and against the preemptive strike on Iraq. I left a brother still wrestling with hallucinations and voices that began after the 1982 war. A grandmother who raised me but no longer recognized me. A sister recently married like me. And my aging parents, anxiously following loud step-by-step TV instructions on how to prepare a safe room. I came from all that to the stillness and static home of cicadas in Davis, California.

To call it culture shock would not do it justice. Davis is a small college town in the middle of California's Central Valley. It is a place where the biggest political struggle in its entire history has been to save the toads from being squashed when they crossed the highway. I was sure it was a joke at first but they actually built a tunnel so that the toads could get to their ancestral wetlands, on the other side of the highway. It almost hurt to think that I come from a place where protecting the lives of humans was not as successful as preserving the rights of toads in Davis.

Well, the weather was somewhat familiar, a relentless heat, 100 Fahrenheit in the summer. But other than that I was surrounded by strange phenomenon. People were actually standing in line and not pushing into the elevator or the bus. People like you talk and not interrupt you, mid-sentence. Drivers were actually patiently waiting in the light when it was green, for all the cars to come through before making a left turn. Oh, I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that on that first week of August 1990, on flat roads of Davis, only one person was heard honking the horn of their car. And that person, was me.

No gas masks, no sirens, no bombs in the marketplace, no wars. America was peaceful and safe but I was an alien. Suddenly, interrupting others mid-sentence to and impatiently finished their thought, what I knew as signs of participation, showing that you're interested and invested in their concern, was looked upon as rude. Where I come from, listening without interrupting means you are bored and that's rude. Or, or talking with determination and urgency, obvious of your marks of leadership, dedication, showing that you're here getting ready to get things done; was considered having an attitude. Well, having an attitude of what? No one ever finished that sentence, just...having an attitude. Or talking with a loud, dramatic voice and big, hand gestures; what in Israel is considered clear indications of passion and enthusiasm, were described as too intense. Me, a deeply caring person, rude, with an attitude, too intense?

I just couldn't get it and I couldn't understand the subtext in conversations or the nuances of non-verbal language. To me, Americans were cold and uncaring. They send cards instead of picking up the phone. I mean, where I come from, writing instead of talking in person, means you don't care enough.

And Americans are hypocrites. They say please and thank you and smile to **everyone**. We Israelis we're warm, we're loving, we're honest. Smiling means you're like someone. Smiling to somebody you've never met before? That's pretending.

And Americans, they are uptight and not generous. They have to make phone appointments for everything. They never just spontaneously show up at your door and you can't go to their house without calling. And if they happen to come by, after dropping the kids from a play date and you invite them in to eat, they look so uncomfortable. It's like you can only invite somebody to eat if it's an official dinner invitation. Whoever heard of such a thing. Where I come from, somebody is at the door, you instantly offer coffee and food whether it's dinner time or not.

And Americans are so superficial. A few weeks after we arrived in that August, my husband took me to an event at the University. And he was smiling and talking to so many people. I thought, "Wow. He has so many friends." But when we came home and I said, "So what's the name of that friend of..."

"I don't know."

"Well, what you are talking about? That that guy?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, what were you talking about?"

“Just chit chat.” Chit chat? Networking? Let's do lunch sometime? But no one ever says when or where. Oh, I was an alien.

And for many years I just stayed close to Israelis and other foreigners. And it took many years to learn to understand the culture that I had moved into. And even longer to learn how to communicate who I was to the Americans without scaring them away. It took time to begin to identify that so much of what felt normal to me, was actually reactions to the world that came from growing up with a lot of anxiety. It took time to realize my own assumptions and stop judging, comparing, or labeling, “them.”

And I learned that Americans write because talking on the phone may interfere with your day and they don't want to intrude. You see privacy is a big thing, which is why they don't push into the bus or the elevator. Because giving you personal, physical space is a sign of respecting your privacy. And that is also why they don't just show up at the door without being invited. They don't want to intrude on your privacy unless, I discovered, you happened to come from the South. And they show kindness and generosity in so many ways, thousands of ways, that are different but just as heartwarming and big. Like the complete stranger from across the street who mowed the lawn when we moved into our house. I don't know an Israeli that would have done that for a complete stranger.

And I discovered that Americans say please and thank you because being polite is a cultural value. And smiling...smiling puts the other at ease. It says welcome. Because, you see, at the heart of this culture, there is a large, green woman up in New York City standing with a torch held up high, welcoming. Welcoming the stranger, regardless of where you come from, your color of skin, or your religious, or your religion. Welcoming the stranger. Welcoming me. Welcoming everyone.