

THE PAAVO NURMI MARATHON: WHERE ARE THE JEWS?

NANCY DATAN

On August 9, 1986, we ran the Paavo Nurmi Marathon in Hurley, Wis., an astonishing experience in every way. I am a graduate of the University of Chicago, whose most remarkable chancellor, Robert Maynard Hutchins, was noted for dropping football and for having remarked of himself, "Whenever I feel the urge to exercise, I lie down until it passes," a maxim I took for my own until just three years ago. What's more, its hilly course led *Runner's World* to rate the Paavo one of the 10 most difficult marathons in the world—but we didn't learn that until we reached Hurley, a five-hour drive from our home in Green Bay, a distance that discourages one from simply turning around and going back home. Last, but certainly not least for a first-time marathoner, the timing of this ordeal was just 10 days after we returned from a month in Israel, a trip that we calculated (when we got up the nerve) consumed a total of 30 hours' travel time.

Run hills, our local running guru advised us when we picked up entry forms for the Paavo and asked him how to prepare for our first marathon. We'll be in Jerusalem for a month, we told him, we'll run in the mountains of Judah. And so we did, from one chapter to another out of my life on that first morning, from the apartment in Beit Hakerem up HeHalutz, up up up Herzl and into Kiryat Yovel, to Shirun Sela, my first home in Jerusalem. But the air of the mountains is pure as wine only in song now; the city has grown and the number of cars has grown even more; running along Herzl Boulevard is like running in Los Angeles, about which it is said that only five days in the city is enough to darken the lungs on autopsy. Where do people run?

Nancy Datan is Professor of Human Development and chair of the Women's Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Her book, A Time to Reap: The Middle Age of Women in Five Israeli Subcultures (Johns Hopkins), was nominated for the National Jewish Book Award in 1982. She is also the author of "Bat Mitzvah in Morgantown, W. Va." (MOMENT, January 1976).

In the Jerusalem forest, we were told. Up Herzl at dawn, before the rush hour, and down the road that circles Yad Vashem, and from there, into the forest, along the narrow one-way road that offers everything to the runner: clear air, hills, and the occasional swift bus, generally just at the point where the shoulder of the road has disappeared, ensuring a constant supply of adrenaline. Sure enough, that was where the runners were, and that became our training route. But it did not seem quite right to run in singlet and shorts past the entrance to Yad Vashem until I described the experience to my mother, who remarked, "I think that if the Jews who were going to their deaths could only have known that they would be remembered in a shrine in Jerusalem, and that Jews would be going out to run, safely, they would have rejoiced." That thought gave me strength to run through the July heat wave.

One Sabbath run brought us home through Beit Hakerem past the school that had been home to my daughters through third and fifth grade. On Shabbat, we discovered, there is a group that *davens* somewhere in or near the school: It was sunrise, and the sounds of prayer lifted to the heavens, an unfamiliar joy this year in Jerusalem, where I have come to associate the strict observance of the Sabbath with the burning of bus stations and the endless debates over who is a Jew.

Who is a Jew? It's the wrong question for those of us—and there are many more than might be supposed—who live on the margins of the Diaspora, in our small towns and cities, surrounded by Christmas trees and Easter bunnies. We are the Jews I left Israel in 1973 with three children I had been struggling unsuccessfully to support alone, and came to West Virginia University, in Morgantown, a small city where women and children were safe from urban blight, but Jews were scarce. That year the school's annual Christmas Pageant became a Winter Festival, through the efforts of my daughters, who refused to sing Christmas carols. The following year, a junior high school assignment to write about "Christmas in Palestine" brought a letter of ma-

ternal protest that invoked the Anti-Defamation League, and that in turn brought a rare apology from a teacher who said, "Your daughter isn't the first Jewish student I've taught, and I'll never know how many times I've hurt a child, because this is the first time anyone has said anything to me about it." Later, a colleague whose blackboard sprouted anti-Semitic cartoons one semester explained: "I'm a Southern Jew. I guess I learned to duck."

In the Morgantown High School, a biology teacher asked my daughter's class on the day following the final episode of the television mini-series "Holocaust," "All right, who wants to go to the showers?" No reprimand was ever issued. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the principal himself announced over the loudspeaker, "Happy New Year to all my Jewish students—but you'll be counted absent tomorrow"—absences that counted toward a total of five, which forced the student to take a punitive three-hour examination, a measure intended to prevent truancy, irrelevant for the Jews, who all made the honor roll. Indeed, it was a violation of state law, as a small delegation of parents attempted to point out to the principal and his staff, who replied that it would not be possible to observe everyone's holidays—"after all, some people around here consider the start of the deer-hunting season to be a holiday."

The move to Wisconsin brought a different test of faith on Rosh Hashanah. Students at the university could not be compelled to attend classes on religious holidays; faculty members, however, were not permitted to be absent. This was explained as a result of the "complete separation of church and state" represented by the Wisconsin system, which did not quite account for the fact that the winter semester always ended just before Christmas, never just afterward. If one missed a class, it was one's obligation to provide an "alternative experience." My students had the experience of taking a class that was canceled on the Jewish High Holidays, an alternative to the near monopoly of Christendom in northeast Wisconsin.

Near, but not quite total. Spring semester began with a handwritten invitation from a student to come to the synagogue for Purim services—a wonderful, heartwarming gesture, a perfect holiday, the holiday when we remember that it was said to a Persian king that there were abroad and about in the land a peculiar people whose ways were not the king's ways, and therefore it did not profit the king to suffer them. They were the Jews. We are the Jews. My student is glad of a chance to invite a professor to worship at the synagogue, and the professor is grateful for the invitation. "Who is a Jew?" is a question of luxury, which can be asked only when there are enough Jews around to split hairs over. It's part of our month in Israel, a question for the headlines, the editorials, and the letters column of the *Jerusalem Post*.

When the month is over, it's back home to Green Bay and the *Press-Gazette*. Here the headlines report that the Packers are considering moving their training camp away from the city of Green Bay. On the editorial page, the national columnist James Kilpatrick dismisses as a "straw-man charge" the fact that Justice William Rehnquist twice purchased houses with restrictive covenants in the deeds of sale, and belatedly advised the Senate Judiciary Committee of a 1974 letter from his lawyer to another lawyer in which the "anti-Hebrew

clause" was mentioned. Kilpatrick assures his readers that Rehnquist never even glanced at the letter. Let's confirm him as Chief Justice without further delay.

And in the letters column of August 6, the caption "Not anti-Semitic" introduces a letter from one of the *Press-Gazette* regulars. He quotes Hannah Arendt on rabbinical law in Israel—inaccurately, as a response from someone in the Jewish community will point out—notes that she remarked on the similarity between Israeli law and the Nazi Nuremberg laws, and concludes, "I have never been an anti-Semite and despise those who are." We've missed the beginning of this dispute, but we retrieve it from the pile of newspapers that arrived while we were in Israel; we began to keep a file of such letters after an ecumenical Holocaust memorial service a year ago brought letters advising the Jews to "quit crying about the Holocaust" and to "forgive and forget," all letters that assured the reader that the writers were not in any way anti-Semitic. Soon we'll have a large directory of non-anti-Semites in northeast Wisconsin.

And then it's the afternoon of August 8, and we are heading north for our improbable adventure. The Paavo Nurmi Marathon winds through the small towns of Iron County, Wis., from Upson to Hurley, 26 miles, 385 yards. Each portion of the run is an



The entire town of Hurley, Wis., was awake at 7:30 a.m. to cheer marathoners into the dawn.

adventure unto itself: the start in Upson, the entire town awake at 7:30 to cheer us into the dawn, the country road that dips into the great North Woods; the highway that takes us through Pence and Montreal and Gile; and the last long stretch on County C before heading up the hills to the finish line in Hurley. Three hundred twenty runners registered for this race and only 250 finished it, I wonder how many lost their nerve or their legs on County C. Aid stations every three miles offer sponges, water, Gatorade; unofficial aid stations on people's front lawns in Montreal and Giles hearten the weary runner. And on County C, in the middle of nowhere, a table with glasses of ice water waits by a solitary house. Rosenberg, says the mailbox. But surely not a Jew, not here in the middle of nowhere! Still, a radio plays music in the Saturday morning, and we are reminded of our glorious Sabbath in Jerusalem. We take our water and go on and finally we reach Highway 51 and we know we're going to finish this marathon. It isn't quite that easy; these are the last six miles and they hurt. But our running guru had told us, "You'll know you've reached Hurley when you see the cemetery at the top of the last hill." And we thought of the vast memorial to the dead that we ran past in Jerusalem, and here was the Hurley cemetery, the last hill, and we were turning on to Silver Street and there was the finish line and our names were being called out, "It's Nancy Datan and Dean Rodeheaver, let's bring them in." And an entire town—and the rest of the runners, for we were nearly the last to finish—cheered us in as though we had finished first.

We photographed landmarks from our first marathon on our way out of town. Banners welcoming marathoners, billboards declaring Hurley to be the home of the Paavo Nurmi Marathon—and the cemetery marking that final hill. But we discovered that there were two, not one: the larger held the Catholic dead of Hurley, in graves marked by statues of Mary and Jesus. Beside it stood a smaller, fenced cemetery, the cemetery runners see as they come up that last hill, and the names of the dead were



Photo by Nancy Datan

graven in Hebrew or Yiddish. The Sharrey Zedek Cemetery, announced the metal gateposts. A small group of the Jewish dead of the Wisconsin North Woods slept quietly on the road to the Paavo Nurmi Marathon finish line, and their names and memories stirred two of the runners, who had strengthened their lungs, legs, and hearts on the Mountain of Remembrance in Jerusalem. It is hard to imagine anyone asking, "Who is a Jew?" in Hurley, Wis., population 2,100. But there they are, with water for the thirsty and a final milestone for the weary. ★

At the top of the last hill—The Sharrey Zedek Cemetery, Hurley, Wis.