

## The Human Spirit: Shop for peace

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Barbara Sofer , THE JERUSALEM POST

*Ha'aretz* reporter Avi Issacharoff recently described the fireworks at the opening of the five-story, \$5-million-dollar Hirbawi Home Center near Jenin. At this luxury mall, Palestinians can choose from imported home furnishings, low-priced locally made furniture and fancy accessories such as espresso machines with built-in coffee grinders. According to Issacharoff, the next city to enjoy a Hirbawi Home Center is Ramallah, where one is already in partial operation, then Hebron, Tulkarm and Nablus.

Said Issacharoff: "This may not sound like the familiar description of the occupied territories - the impoverished Palestinian village or the overcrowded refugee camp, a population sustaining itself on international aid. But it turns out that quite a few Palestinians consider a plasma screen, a surround sound stereo and comfortable chairs to be fairly essential items." Indeed, the commercial boom debunks the universal gloom - always somehow Israel's fault - that usually characterizes reporting from these cities.

I hope we're getting credit for the reborn ebullience.

NBC'S PRIZE-WINNING reporter Martin Fletcher invited international viewers into the streets of Nablus with him where riots nearly broke out as crowds were determined to get a taste of the world's largest kanafe, 3,891 pounds of noodles, cheese and honey that put the city in the *Guinness Book of Records*. *The Jerusalem Post's* own Khaled Abu Toameh confirms that there are indeed new shopping and tourism opportunities in Nablus, bargain clothing and the newly renovated Turkish baths with invigorating massages.

According to National Public Radio reporter Daniel Estrin, Jenin is trying to "rebrand" itself with the help of flat-screen TVs and espresso machines. Branding and rebranding is the latest public-relations speak for "changing the image of." If there was ever a city that needs rebranding, it's Jenin. This fortress of terror, where millions of euros were diverted from jungle gyms to a jungle of booby trapped homes, was the place from which terrorists set out to murder Holocaust survivors making Passover Seder in Netanya. Jenin is the scene of libel against the IDF, still accused of a massacre that never happened.

Writer/photographer Daniella Cheslow joined a Shabbat shopping junket with Israeli Arab women from Abu Ghosh. The women headed there on buses subsidized by Denmark's Mission in Ramallah, reportedly to help Nablus's ailing economy. I don't want to belittle the spirit of altruism among shoppers from Abu Ghosh, but I'd guess that at least some might have gone just for the fun of it, and for the pleasure of stretching their shopping borders.

ARE WE Israelis to forgive and forget, to pick up our shekels and credit cards and head to Jenin to order a larger dining room table? Certainly not today. Besides, only Israeli Arabs are currently allowed to enter. But what about some time in the future? There is an unmistakable appeal to "open shopping" that goes way beyond the lure of finding a bargain.

Who of us veteran Israelis cannot tell of what now seem like impossible shopping trips in these Arab cities? My own favorite shopping tale comes from my student days at the Hebrew University. For unique Shabbat skirts, I would buy fabric on Rehov Mea She'arim from a shop where the bolts of cloth were tossed down from high above by a hassidic merchant. Then I'd take an Arab bus from the Old City, get off at Manger Square in Bethlehem, and walk up Star Street to the tailor. I'd met the tailor through my resourceful upstairs neighbor who had her husband's pants copied there and swore he never realized she'd replaced the worn ones. The skirts were less colorful than the adventure and the feeling of congeniality, imagined or not.

Last year, I was taking part in a Jewish-Palestinian joint activity called "Let's Make Up" in the Mamilla Mall in Jerusalem, sponsored by Trust-Emun, an NGO which encourages dialogue, and in this case employed makeup - cosmetics - as the vehicle for conversation. The dialogue over cappuccino with my counterpart from Ramallah wasn't going so well. While she was speaking I was wondering, "How many times can you say occupation in one sentence?" I was about to reply but was spared the sparring by a cosmetician from the sponsoring company. She lectured about skin care and offered a new wrinkle cream. "Forget it," whispered the woman from Ramallah. "I can take you to a place in Ramallah where you can get Botox for a good price."

I haven't taken her up on it, but I was touched by her offer. Our conflict fell away.

LIKEWISE, I was in Washington last year for the publication of *Sixty Years, Sixty Voices*, in which mine is one of the Jewish voices. We were on a demanding schedule of public appearances. To the organizers' chagrin, we Jewish and Palestinian women all quietly slipped away one afternoon. We'd all been wanting to visit the end-of-season-sale at the clothing store downstairs from the Peace X Peace office. We didn't have much time. We were very well matched in our no-nonsense approach to shopping. We'd both come with little notebooks bearing lists of requests from family members, and wanted to get something new ourselves. We got busy helping each other, using teamwork to find the right sizes and colors before being whisked off to another presentation.

Looking back, it was an ideal exercise in coexistence.

According to unofficial sources, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu thinks all this shopping is a healthy prelude to serious negotiations. Let's say, with no preconditions, we could organize a Shop for Peace junket to Syria. It could be a one-day bus trip to the Al-Hamedia Old Market in Damascus. Not that the specific merchandise is a draw - one travel site waxed eloquent about the leather camel whips you could get there - but the bazaar has an exotic appeal.

We are notably energetic shoppers. Why else would a lad hawking his wares at a tourist stall on the equator in Kenya bother to learn to call out, "*Zol hayom, yakar mahar*" (cheap today, expensive tomorrow) when he couldn't say the equivalent in French or German with many more native speakers? We can use this positive energy for breaking through the stalemate.

If a table tennis competition, so called Ping-Pong diplomacy, was able to break the ice between America and China, leading to reconciliation in 1971, maybe shopping junkets can do the same for us. Shop for Peace.

By the way, I already own a coffee grinder.

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