

## Pulse of the City



AM KATZ

Joan Leegant

**W**E HEARD IT FROM A DISTANCE OF A QUARTER mile away, while strolling along the broad paved walkway that runs along the sea from North Tel Aviv to the ancient port of Jaffa. It was a pulsing, almost ominous sound that carried across the water and drew us in like something primeval. We had no choice but to investigate.

It was our third week in the country; I'd come to Tel Aviv to be the visiting writer at Bar-Ilan University's master's program in creative writing. If the university opened on time – never a given, paralyzing strikes nearly shuttering higher education three years in a row – I'd start teaching the following week. My husband would do his work via cyberspace.

We dodged the whizzing bicyclists, some tethered to their dogs, and headed in the direction of the beat.

It was coming from behind the hollowed-out Dolphinarium discotheque. Eight years before, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the crowded entrance just before midnight on a Friday night, killing 21 teenagers, most from the former Soviet Union. Now the long, low building sprawls, grim and ghostly, in a deserted strip mall fronted by a cracked asphalt parking lot that doesn't look friendly to tires.

We threaded ourselves through a narrow opening between the crumbling concrete buildings, sidestepping the broken glass, and emerged onto an open space that gave out to the sea. A makeshift bar had been carved out of the cement. A couple of women in shorts casually belly-danced. And around them, in a loose, loopy semi-circle, 20 drummers pounded, sweating and concentrating hard. Some had beards and graying ponytails; others were bald, as per the current male fashion. The lone female drummer drank from a bottle of

Maccabi beer.

Above them, on a broken-up stone terrace that looked like the remains of a Roman-era House Beautiful patio, two more guys blew curvy, horned instruments. We inched up to get a better look. Shofars. Three-foot long and curled, the real thing, as if a couple of rams had poked their heads through the thicket just in time. Their reedy whine was a perfect accompaniment, if a little out of context. This was not your synagogue's Rosh Hashana.

"Who do you suppose they are?" my husband asked me, talking directly into my ear. I shook my head and shrugged. Locals?

Visitors? Europeans like the German sculptor we'd met the night before at an open-air café-kiosk who in four days had already learned to count in Hebrew. There was little talk over the music, and what there was you couldn't really hear. The drummers and shofar blowers could have been anyone. Just like the merry Hare Krishna who sang and danced with tambourines a half a mile up the beach. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, they used to wear saffron robes. Here, a pale yellow.

We listened for an hour and a half. The sun, a crimson ball, set into the water. The belly dancers drifted off. Drummers came and went, some leaving and others taking their places, unpacking their *doumbeks* and *djembes* and *darbukas*. A man of about 80 wheeled up next to me on an ancient Schwinn, pulled a sesame roll from a paper bag and chewed. Every now and then I looked back at the ruined building with the colored dolphins welded onto the concrete. It was once an actual dolphinarium, a giant tank for the sea mammals. Then, for a time, it was a modest aquarium with colorful fish, water snakes, turtles, even alligators, before becoming a dance club.

I don't know why the burned-out building still stands, or if the drumming happens there for a reason other than that the space is free. It's not a memorial; no one makes speeches. But standing there, listening to the ceaseless pounding, you had the feeling that someone must have needed to do something to eat up the silence.

When the sky had darkened to pewter, my husband tapped me on the shoulder, gesturing: It was getting late, time for dinner. Afterward, we'd walk to the restored Tel Aviv port where bustling shops and fish restaurants had mushroomed in the old abandoned warehouses. We turned away and threaded our way back out, the cry of the ram's horn rising up, high, behind us. ●