

# Have A Nice Day: the Semantics of Occupation

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Almost every Sunday I make the long trek from Hebron to the Arab village of Ibillin in the Northern Galilee, so that I can spend a 24 hour holiday with my wife. Each time I cross the Green Line dividing Palestine from Israel I am reminded of Dorothy remarking to Toto with wide eyed wonder that they weren't in Kansas anymore.

One of the many differentiating features between life in the Kansas of the West Bank, and the Oz of Israel, is a small one. Nevertheless it is one, which I find difficult to put out of my mind. It's this:

Workers in the Israeli service and retail industries invariably end conversations, inquiries, sales, etc. not with "goodbye," but with a cheery, "Have a nice day." No matter what one does or where one goes in Israel, one will not be immune to this incessant salutation.

For me the semantic phenomenon often starts at the Central Bus station in West Jerusalem where I go to catch a bus. I ask the woman in the Information Booth what time the next one will leave. She tells me. I say, "Thank you." She says, "Have a nice day."

Then, if I have time, I walk over to the coffee shop for a Cappuccino and a sweet roll. The counterperson delivers the currently preferred alternative with "Have a nice day."

Last week, I bought a new memory card for my digital camera at an Office Depot in Haifa. After paying the clerk, she said, "Have a nice day."

Earlier we rented a car in Jerusalem to do some sight seeing. As I collected the keys, the Hertz clerk launched us with a genial "Have a nice day."

Later we stopped for gas where a solicitous attendant after filling our tank and washing our wind shield saw us off with an energetic wave and a boisterous "Have a nice day."

Meanwhile in the West Bank one encounters a grimmer version of the pervasive pleasantry.

For instance, taking a visiting friend to see Bethlehem we had to pass through the heavily guarded check point from Jerusalem. In line behind us was a Muslim woman who told us that she hoped to get through because she had a noontime appointment - just forty five minutes off - at the only hospital with the medication to ease the condition of her Cancer stricken sister. She had to get there by noon, or the doctor who could issue a prescription would be gone for the rest of the day.

We were waved through, but looking back we saw the soldier shove the woman's ID back at her and then wave her off. We could see her pleading with him to let her pass. But he wouldn't.

So, we went back to try to change his mind.

Clearly annoyed by our sudden interference, he explained testily, "She does not live in Bethlehem." The woman showed him and us other papers prepared by a Jerusalem doctor attesting to 1) the need for the medicine, 2) that the hospital in Bethlehem was the only place to get it, and 3) that the woman needed to meet the doctor, who would write the prescription, by noon.

But still the soldier would not change his mind. "Her papers," he told us impatiently, "are no good."

"Do you think she is a bomber?"

"No, but her papers are no good."

"Then why don't you check them? You heard her say that she has an appointment in half an hour."

"That is not my problem."

Another soldier came over and tried to shoo us away. But we weren't in a mood to be shooed. Finally the first one took the woman's ID and called some information into a portable phone.

Surprise! Surprise! Seconds later--not minutes--he said ruefully, "she may go."

As we and the woman walked happily by him, the clearly miffed soldier said sarcastically, "Have a nice day."

A few days later as I was starting to walk across a major Israeli Highway south of Bethlehem, a Palestinian man driving a small truck - without looking carefully - suddenly made a U turn, cutting off an Army Jeep headed in the same direction.

Standing yards away - astonished by the near miss - I watched four soldiers pile out of the Jeep and swiftly rush the car, pull the driver out through the window and start beating him. So I began taking pictures with my digital camera.

IDF soldiers do not, under most circumstances, want their pictures taken. There are countless stories of them breaking offending cameras, so I knew I was taking a risk by photographing four of them beating a Palestinian. And I was right.

Suddenly one of them glanced up and saw me clicking away. He shouted something to his buddies. All four stopped kicking and punching the Palestinian, and quickly moved on me, yelling "No pictures! No pictures!" as they advanced. I knew my camera was in for it (and maybe me too).

Remembering the old football strategy, “the best defense is an offense,” I yelled at the soldiers as they were striding angrily up to me, “I am an American, and we don’t do in America what you are doing to that man.” Of course, I was counting on the fact that they wouldn’t have heard of Rodney King. That specific worry, however, was moot, because one of them simply grabbed my camera without a word, pulled out the memory card and with a sneer crushed it in his large calloused palm.

“Are you going to buy me a new one,” I snapped.

Shrugging off my scathing remonstrance, he simply snarled, “Go! Go!”

Taking advantage of the soldiers’ shifted focus, the man quickly slipped back into his car and drove off in the opposite direction.

Once the car was far enough down the road, I said to the soldier who had ruined my memory card, “O. K. I’ll go,” and again weakly added, “But one of you guys needs to buy me a new memory card.”

All the soldiers simply laughed and began walking away. Then one of them, as if struck by a gleeful afterthought, turned back to me and said with a facetious grin, “Have a nice day.”