

The Flying Bottles of Romema

by [Ehud Neor](#) (September 2024)



The Absinthe Drinker (Viktor Oliva, 1901)

The first job I had in Israel after getting married was delivering newspapers at 4:45 am. My wife and I, newlyweds, were living almost rent-free in the Haifa University dorms for married students while she finished her BA and teacher's certification. I was attending a course on industrial quality control at a government-run training center at the foot of Mount Carmel. My paper route started at the dorms on Shikma Street in the New Romema neighborhood of Haifa, went down and up Oren Street, past the Young Israel synagogue where I would be joining prayers at 6 am, then continued with a right turn on to Perachim Street, with its strip of 12-story apartment

buildings. In total it was a one-hour job.

The product that I was delivering, the actual newspapers, contained multitudes. This was different from when I delivered papers as a boy on Martha's Vineyard. In the States, and I think that this is a general rule, you delivered one paper. If there was another local paper, a different paper boy would be delivering it. The paper that I delivered as a boy was *the New Bedford Standard Times*. The papers that I delivered as a young man in Haifa were all but the two big ones "*Maariv*" ("Evening News") and "*Yediot Acharonot*" ("Latest News"). They were thinner, sectarian publications, and their content was as diverse as the people of Israel were at the time. Except for "*Haaretz*" (The "Nation"), these were papers owned and operated by political parties. From the religious sector there were two. "*HaModia*" ("The Informant") was the voice of Agudath Israel, a political party representing traditional "black hat" Jews who were not committed Zionists, though they participated in Israeli politics. "*HaTsofe*" ("The Watchman") belonged to the Religious Zionists. "*Davar*," ("Comment") belonged to the Labor Party, "*Haaretz*," was an independent liberal paper, at that time secular and Zionist. At the far left was "*Al HaMishmar*," ("The Guardian") published by the Israeli Communist Party.

During the week, these little bundles of paper were nothing more than objects to be folded as I approached each apartment building where I would jam them in the slot of the subscriber's mailbox. I did the folding blindly, with my hands inside the side-satchel choosing the right paper and ordering them for their placement as I approached the next building. There was a built-in incentive to work fast, as the weight of the satchel decreased with every paper delivered.

There was also a very nice fringe benefit beyond the pay slip. Saturday (Shabbat) being the Israeli Sunday, on Friday all of the papers had weekend supplements. I did not enjoy the extra weight, but I did enjoy reading the content of those weekend

papers. On Shabbat afternoon, the multitudes within those pages emerged. It was quite the ideological parade. In Israel, we have what is called an Ulpan, an intense several weeks to several months immersion course to learn Hebrew, designed to help new immigrants with the language. With these papers spread out before me on those afternoons, I felt that I was participating in an Ulpan for Israeli culture. I knew even then that the vast majority of Israelis were reading the two big dailies that I did not deliver, but I sensed that I was connecting to an inner nerve of Israeli society by reading these representatives of disparate ideologies, whose followers felt strongly enough to support having their ideas put in print. Though some of these ideologies were and are on the extreme ends of the political spectrum, their messages were being voiced, and eloquently so. The two largest of these sectarian papers, Davar and Haaretz, were by far the most eloquent. At the time, Davar represented a socialist approach to government, while Haaretz championed free market Capitalism. Right there in my hands, arguments for and against particular issues were forwarded to my brain in a literal war of words. I knew that these were not merely academic discussions with no application to the real world. I knew as I read that these issues were critical to the future of the Jewish nation. Though most of those papers have disappeared, as have the political parties that produced them, or have been transformed beyond recognition, still the parties and ideologies that have replaced them argue over many of the same issues to this day. After so many years, that give and take among the proponents of these ideologies itself has become almost routine, like delivering papers, as they fold their arguments in blind allegiance to some set of beliefs.

Automated and routine as my paper route was, there was one apartment building on my route that was routine, but never dull. Two or three times a week, but always on Sunday, I came under fire from an apartment on the eleventh floor of the last building on my route. From high up in that building the

occupant awaited my approach, and timing himself, let out a powerful curse in Russian and threw an empty bottle of vodka in my direction. I'm glad he yelled because the first time it happened it was that yell that made me look up and allowed me to avoid the bottle, which exploded with a tremendous crash on the street, shooting out glass shards in all directions. "What the hell!" I thought. "How inconsiderate! Someone could get hurt!" the residual polite American in me thought. It wasn't until the third or fourth time that it happened that I realized that the man was gunning for me. "What did I ever do to him?" At that age I would assume during minor conflicts such as these that they were about me. But as the weeks passed, under the influence of my newspaper-based education, I began to see these encounters as another form of political commentary, for the meaning of the curse was finally revealed to me by one of his Russian neighbors, who, when seeing my questioning face, smiled and grabbed his crotch. Universal sign language. I delivered papers, my friend from above delivered a single empty bottle of vodka to his single customer, spiced with a curse to the Universe for everyone to hear. With time, I visualized his bellowed phallic curse plunging all the way down to Haifa bay, impregnating all of the virgin nooks and crannies and neighborhoods on the way. I saw the leaves of trees and bushes shimmering, resonating with the passing echo. It was a powerful exclamation, and it seemed an awful renunciation of everything that invigorated me, of everything that I took from that wild mosaic of newspapers, but more so, of everything that I received from the morning prayers in our synagogue. His was an anti-prayer, a proclamation of negation.

As was my wont in those early years, I saw this engagement as a test. There had been enough existentialism in my higher education, and I had negated that negation from my life. Here, on Elijah's Mount Carmel, I would not be sitting on the fence. I carried with me my own powerful vision to counter his, a vision from a few months earlier, where I too had shattered

glass.

The occasion was my wedding, and as is well-known, at the end of the Jewish wedding ceremony the happiness is tempered by a reminder of the long list of misfortunes that have accompanied the Jews throughout the ages, in particular the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The groom stamps his foot upon a glass to shatter it, then everyone shouts (strangely when you think about it) Mazal Tov! At the time of our wedding I was poor, and the new shoes that I bought for the occasion were of questionable leather, but with an unquestionable slippery plastic sole. I did not worry about it; I was strong and knew that I only had to catch the curvature of the glass in that angle between the heel and the shoe-bottom. Looking back, I have just one thing to say: don't skimp on your wedding shoes.

I stomped on that glass with great power, and it shot out from under my shoe like a bat out of hell. Incredibly it did not hit anyone on its way to wherever it ended up. I was in shock and a quick look around told me that this was something new, that nobody would come up to me later and pat me on the shoulder saying: "It happens all the time." In terms of the ceremony, it was no big deal, just a pause while someone ran to bring another glass which I demolished like a pro. There was dancing and it was a great wedding but there it was, planted in some deep corner of my mind: an anomaly. I couldn't shake the totally unwarranted feeling that my new wife and my in-laws might be thinking to themselves: "Nice guy, but he couldn't even break the glass. How is he going to provide for a family?"

New and creative mythological thinking was called for, and it was my ongoing encounter with my Russian nemesis—Obsidian Rex I now called him—that provided the opportunity to straighten things out.

In my mind Obsidian Rex became the all-powerful wizard of idol worship. He not only chose the wrong side of the fence, but he

was also downright evangelical about it, projecting his fertile seductive thoughts down towards the old industry side of Mount Carmel, the side of petrochemical pollution and poorly-rewarded manual labor. The wrong side of the fence. I would not be seduced. My future was down the other side of the Carmel where the training center was located, near Elbit and Elscint, companies paving the way for a new industry, hi-tech, that would transform Israel beyond recognition. Though the training that I was receiving was ironically preparing me for work in the type of industry found on the other side of Mount Carmel, back then I still had the ability to dream far and wide. Somehow it would work out.

It was during one of my daily bus rides down to the training center that I had my insight. The Word of Obsidian Rex was weighing heavily on my heart. My belief was not shaken but I knew that this evil manifestation had to be confronted. The bus took a turn too fast, and I grabbed the support pole and held tightly to my place. Without being summoned, the shooting-star glass of my wedding zipped through my mind's eye. As I imagined the shoe receding in the distance, I had an overwhelming feeling that the trail it left behind was one of a warm, all-enveloping comfort. That was it. The time was ripe. I understood. The glass had refused to take part in the mourning over the Holy Temple. Now was not the time for Jews to mourn; now was the time for Jews to rejoice. I had my weapon for upcoming verbal battles, and I had a story to feed to my in-laws.

What to do when we learn that life is richer than any internal mythology we may construct for ourselves. In my quality control course, there were many new immigrants from Russia. They happened to be the stars of the classroom, with excellent math skills, an instinct for statistics and exquisite eye-hand coordination in handling the various measuring devices. I stuck close to them out of respect and wanting to improve my own skills. I hoped that something would rub off on me.

Interestingly, I made no connection between them and Obsidian Rex, though they must have arrived in Israel at about the same time. For me, these immigrants were on my side, on the right side of the mountain. Maybe Elbit would hire us. We were moving ahead. We moved ahead right to a party we held after a round of testing at the training center. The tests were a joke for the Russians. They were straight-A students. I was overjoyed with my A-minus. Out came the vodka, and then out came the connection.

What did I have in common with these men? Not much, but being tipsy from the vodka I decided to regale them with my story of a Russian vodka drinker. When I described the vodka bottle bombs, I looked up to see their reaction. Four pairs of eyes were staring at me intensely. I was taken aback and did not continue. One of them asked me: "Where are you delivering these papers?" When I answered "New Romema," they all sat back and nodded at each other while saying the name "Oleg." They knew him. It was obvious from their demeanor that they also respected him. My story interrupted, I asked about Oleg.

"He's in a wheelchair. He was seven years in Siberian prison. He lost a leg. He is in constant pain. Pills do not help. He drinks vodka."

I was flummoxed, and asked: "Why was he in Siberia?"

"He distributed subversive literature. The KGB did not like that."

"What literature?" I asked.

"The usual. Bibles, Jewish prayer books, Psalms."

I wanted to cry. My mountain mythology came crumbling down inside of me. I could not open my mouth, and it was a good thing because none of them were speaking. I understood that their silence was a salute to Oleg. More than anything I have ever wanted in my life, I wanted them to see in my own silence

a worthy salute to their friend.

The next Friday I approached Oleg's tower with a peace offering. I placed a full bottle of vodka with his name on it next to the elevator. No more bombings. There was evidence in the street that he was still tossing empty bottles. but they were not aimed at me. I continued bringing him his gift even after I had given up the paper route, until that day when one of the other occupants stood waiting for me as I approached. He said, "Oleg gone," and I knew that he meant that Oleg had passed away. I stood in silence. Something was called-for, some gesture to mark the moment. Without thinking, I opened the bottle and took a long swig and said Oleg's curse and handed the bottle over. He took a swig and cursed too and handed the bottle back to me. I turned and threw it towards the spot where that first bottle long ago had landed. I felt that it was an offering pleasing unto the Lord as I walked towards morning prayers.

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