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What Makes 'Samson' Run Amok? He's Manic in Jerusalem

By CLYDE HABERMAN,

The sturdy young Canadian thought he was Samson, and went on to prove it by smashing through a wall to escape the other week from Kfar Shaul, the Government psychiatric hospital on Jerusalem's western reaches.

"He was our first Samson," Dr. Yair Bar-El, the hospital director, said as an aside before continuing to tell how the young man had got as far as the nearest bus stop when a nurse caught up with him.

"Samson, you must come back to the hospital," she called out.

Mollified by being addressed by what he considered his true name, the patient docilely returned, one more visitor who had succumbed to a form of disorientation that psychiatrists here label the Jerusalem syndrome.

Across the length of Israel, hotel keepers and restaurant owners are delighted that tourists are turning up in near-record numbers as Persian Gulf war memories fade and the Palestinian uprising no longer scares away as many people as it once did.

But for Dr. Bar-El and his Kfar Shaul staff, the boom is no blessing. If it continues, they say, they can count on having to treat a bumper crop of Messiahs, John the Baptists and King Davids wandering the narrow lanes of the Old City and proclaiming that the end, or perhaps the beginning, is near. Echoes of History

Every year, dozens of foreign tourists overwhelmed by the religious and historic weight of this ancient city are driven mad. For many it is a short trip. They arrive with a bagful of mental troubles, including in some cases a conviction that they are biblical characters or that they alone hold the key to world peace and must reveal it at Jerusalem's walls.

But also each year, Dr. Bar-El says, there are travelers with no recorded psychiatric histories who find themselves suddenly in the grips of delusion, often within days of arrival. Samsons may be rare, but there has been no shortage of other biblical figures, including God and Satan.

"The Virgin Mary crossed my path in July two years ago," said the Very Rev. John Peterson, Dean of St. George's College in East Jerusalem. She was an elderly American woman studying at the college who "really snapped," he said. "She went to Bethlehem to look for the baby Jesus and invited everyone to go to his birthday party."

Generally, according to Dr. Bar-El, Jerusalem syndrome victims stick to their own kind.

Christians tend to identify themselves as Jesus or the Virgin or, most commonly, John the Baptist, often breaking down at places associated with Jesus like Via Dolorosa and the Garden Tomb. Jews lean toward Moses, King David and other Old Testament figures, and come apart on the Mount of Olives or at the Western Wall. (Muslim tourists from overseas are so few that they are not statistically significant to students of the malady.)

The syndrome has come under new scrutiny after an English-speaking tourist ran amok this month in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on what many Christians believe to be the site of Jesus' tomb. As a female companion looked on silently, he shattered lamps, yanked down a wooden cross and tried to smash a statue of the Madonna while shouting, according to witnesses: "Suffer the little children. Do not worship idols."

Both the man and woman were taken to Kfar Shaul, where they have since uttered few words, Dr. Bar-El said. But they apparently are American Christians, he said, adding that an attack of Jerusalem syndrome must be considered a possibility.

Those looking for prophet motive admit to being stumped about what specifically rockets some visitors into delusional flight. All that is clear, experts say, is that the center does not hold for these people.

"They come as pilgrims," said Dr. Eliezer Witztum, a Jerusalem psychiatrist who has studied the syndrome. "Jerusalem for them is a core of absolute reality. They feel they will change and that something will happen to them. Some simply cannot handle the situation, and become manic."

A Western diplomat who has dealt with troubled compatriots says some come to the Holy City "expecting to find a city of peace, where they can put aside their troubles, and they find that it is filled with tension."

"That's when there's the disconnect," he said.

Another Jerusalem psychiatrist, Dr. Jordan M. Scher, has seen young Jews from overseas who are directed here by families convinced that an infusion of religion will focus them. Instead, many end up wandering the streets, visiting reality only as tourists. **Problems in Other Places**

Jerusalem is hardly the only place where travelers become disturbed. The problem is familiar to the miracle town of Lourdes and the art-rich center of Florence, where visitors have fallen apart in the presence of provocative paintings -- a phenomenon dubbed the Stendhal syndrome, after the French writer who succumbed to it on a journey to the city in 1817.

But for sheer religious power, Jerusalem is unrivaled.

Kfar Shaul has received disoriented travelers regularly since 1979, with numbers ranging from 50 to 200 a year, depending on the tourist flow. Not that the problem is only 13 years old. City lore is filled with tales like that of the English woman in the 1930's who went daily to Mount Scopus to welcome the Lord's return with a nice cup of tea.

In a study published last year, Dr. Witztum examined 177 Kfar Shaul patients, 89 of whom filled out questionnaires -- a number that was not higher, he said, because messiahs are not the types to stick around filling out forms. He found that syndrome victims were in the main unmarried, in their 20's and 30's, from North America and Western Europe and reared in religious homes, whether Jewish or Christian. Men outnumbered women by nearly 2 to 1, and those with psychiatric histories outnumbered those without by 4 to 1.

Dr. Scher strongly dissents, saying no victim arrives here "normal" and none leave normal either. But Dr. Bar-El insists that most snap out of it after a few days and are then sent home.

Later, he says, "they do not remember it as a terrible or painful experience," although he acknowledges that serious followup studies are rare. Over the years, says Dr. Bar-El (whose name means Son of God in Hebrew), he has found little point in aggressively trying to persuade deluded souls that they are not who they think they are.

A few years ago, Kfar Shaul had at the same time two patients convinced that they were the Messiah. He put them together, the hospital director recalls, but it didn't work out.

"They spoke, and they discussed," he said. "And finally, each decided that the other was an imposter."