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Story Corps

An Israeli website focuses on the lighter side of news

BY HADARA GRAUBART | 7:00 AM Nov 20, 2009



Daniella Ashkenazy, editor of Chelm on the Med CREDIT: Avi Katz

Over the past month, the Israeli press has been as somber as ever, dutifully marking the anniversary of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's death, following Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas's retirement threats, and debating the merits of military versus diplomatic solutions to stave off the increasing threat of a nuclear Iran bent on destroying the Jewish nation. One news site, though, was focused on entirely different stories: a zookeeper in Gaza painting stripes on donkeys to pass them off as zebras, medical marijuana farmers playing psalms to their plants, and elderly Israelis painting their city's streets purple.

[Chelm-on-the-Med](#), named for a [town known in Jewish folklore](#) for its near-holy fools, offers a collection of human-interest stories culled primarily from the Hebrew-language Israeli newspaper *Yediot Achronot*. Daniella Ashkenazy, a 64-year-old journalist who covers environmental issues for the *Jerusalem Post*, translates, paraphrases, and highlights the humor in these man-bites-dog articles, strange stories of the type more familiar to local news viewers than to CNN junkies.

More broadly, though, the site is an attempt by Ashkenazy to open a window onto the parts of Israeli life and society that are more wacky than war-like. And while the topics are inherently

silly, the mission is not, as Ashkenazy—who was born in the United States but has been living in Israel since 1968—has taken sides in a growing ideological split among those who engage in *hasbara*, the diplomatic campaign to explain Israel to the world. The divide was laid out in a recent article by *Commentary*'s executive editor, Jonathan Tobin, who argued that as Israel's image becomes increasingly controversial, advocacy resources are being misused in a campaign to “rebrand” the nation as normal and relatable, when the more pressing mission is to counter serious political charges.

Ashkenazy doesn't see things that way. “I know all the serious stuff, but I also know it has a limited affect on people,” she said in a recent interview with Tablet Magazine. “If you only see what's reported in the news, it's a form of victimization—you only see us as in conflict.”

Of course, in most cases the protagonists of her stories are in some form of conflict. Take the farm community that set up fake border checkpoints to keep drivers from using a shortcut through its land, or the sign-language translator who fled the set of an Israeli talk show because of “off-color” language, or the hairdresser who sued a competitor for stealing her signature style. While Ashkenazy's portrayal of Israel through these quirky stories may serve to enrich the perspectives of those who see the nation only in terms of war, they may also reinforce negative stereotypes of Israelis as sneaky and pushy. And her conception of Chelm-on-the-Med as an “unconventional weapon” for a nation with an imperative “to use all the ammunition we have in our arsenal” detracts somewhat from her commitment to dispel the idea of Israelis as militaristic.

Tobin, for his part, describes Chelm-on-the-Med as “cute,” although he maintains that “the fact that people have odd ideas about Israel is not its biggest problem.” Many of the state's critics firmly believe that “Israel equals apartheid,” Tobin argues, and that accusation “is not answered by this idea that the women are pretty and the people are funny.”

After spending a post-high school year on a kibbutz, Ashkenazy made aliyah after college. She spent three-and-a-half years as chief researcher and writer for the nonprofit pro-Israel organization [Myths & Facts](#), run by tech-industry veteran Eli Hertz and dedicated to rebutting political arguments against Israel as well as providing information about the nation's history and industries outside the military and political sector. In 1986, news monthly *Israel Scene* hired her to write “Gleanings,” a humor column based on soft news from the Hebrew press. *Israel Scene* folded in 1994, and in March 2009, she launched Chelm-on-the-Med as a continuation of the “Gleanings” project.

Ashkenazy does not have hard statistics on her readership, but she claims that approximately 30 percent of first-time visitors to the site return to it, and the site got a publicity boost after she published an [op-ed](#) in the *Jerusalem Post* last month. She particularly hopes her material will be used in rabbis' sermons, made into animated sequences to close news broadcasts, or—her “pipe dream”—adapted into a revue-style theater piece.

And even though she operates firmly in one camp, Ashkenazy sees the two sides of *hasbara* strategy as mutually beneficial, with her stories serving “to hammer home or dress up serious arguments.” “I definitely think Jews need exposure on both scores,” she said. “It can't work as a stand-alone thing.”

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