

**POINT OF VIEW****Every eye has its own look KOLL'EIN O ELHA NA THRAH**

**This issue marks the start of a world tour. We will speak of life experiences, of people encountered, of particularities, of the uniqueness of places and of habits and customs - even business ones - that, far from making the world seem like one global entity, reveal it to be an ensemble of "other", singular and surprising places. As Albert Einstein once said, "He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed."**

Sonia Bernicchi

I discovered The Near East because of my work, and it immediately conquered me. I am fascinated by the kindness, the human warmth of this world, by the souks with their perfumes and their colors, by the crowds, the noise and the bustle, the pride of men wearing their long white caftans and the wide-eyed women whose faces are covered by a veil.

In The Middle East, in the summer, life is lived at night. During the day, the heat is unbearable and looking for refuge in the shade of the souk is a question of survival. At sunset, when a light breeze blows in from the desert, the streets fill with people. Shops and bazaars open until late, open-air coffee shops where men lazily sip mint tea or coffee and animated by who knows what discussions, women strolling arm in arm, restaurants where the slowness of the hookah wins over the worries of life.

**DESCRIBING THE ARAB WORLD IS NOT EASY.** We speak of Arabs, Muslims, Maronites, Berbers, Kurds, Africans, etc. Islam is the dominating religion in the Arab world but most of the world's Muslims are not Arab. The Middle East defines a cultural area, but it has no precise boundaries. Populations that inhabit a variety of lands that go from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and from the Sahara Desert to Anatolia, and this explains why being an Arab is more or less like being a European<sup>1</sup>.

The soul of the Arab world has many facets: it is proud of its history and tradition, it does not know compromise, it is master of the art of negotiation and is good at hiding its own feelings. And let's not forget that also Israel is also part of the Middle East, but it is a world apart. It is not by chance that in Arab, there is no translation for the word compromise. We can use the words Musawama or Hal wasit<sup>2</sup>, negotiation or intermediate solution, but there is no actual term to define the word compromise, which says a lot about the nuances of the Arab world.

And we cannot understand this universe unless we participate in the ancient art of bargaining, an art that has its own rules. It is a balanced confrontation where every party slowly reveals its interests with the aim of reaching a fair and satisfying agreement. The modern West, detached and rational, does not fully understand this refined art and liquidates it as if it were a game of make-believe. But negotiating, even in business, is strategic. The Arabs are a people of skilled negotiators and this is an art that sharpens patience in re-launching and that prepares one to face the trapfalls of the game in order for the parties to reach a fair agreement.

The Near East is a land where different cultures and different faiths coexist: a land that speaks Arabic, Hebrew and Latin and where historical identities and cultural peregrinations entwine - something that for us Westerners is hard to fathom and, as we often do, we try to answer to the many open issues facing this world with the unilateral approach of our own culture.

**ISRAEL, THE PROMISED LAND.** My first impact with Israel back in 1995 was not one of the happiest. At the airport, I was mistaken for a quasi-terrorist: accomplice was the fact that I was coming from Cyprus, I was stopping in Tel Aviv for just a very short time, I was elegantly dressed, young and traveling for work. All elements that, at the time, in the opinion of a very nice Israeli philosophy professor who was teaching at the University of Florence and had witnessed the scene, could have catalogued anyone as "the perfect terrorist". After having checked my ID and always treating me politely, they finally let me go. It is an episode that I still remember today because it gives the idea of

how, in this country, no one ever lets their guard down. Airport controls are lengthy; it is necessary to arrive way ahead of time in order to undergo all the security procedures - different from those in the rest of the world - but that confer travelers a real sense of tranquility. At passport control, entering and leaving the country, I always ask them not to stamp it with Israel's visa. If I had it on my passport, I could not enter into most of the Arab countries because they do not recognize the State of Israel. On the contrary, having visas of Arab countries is not a problem for Israel.

What strikes about the Holy Land is the vivacity, the joie de vivre and the engrossing energy that one can breathe here. Tel Aviv, the most densely populated city in Israel, means Spring Hill and embodies the essence of hope and of all that is modern Israel.

I think there is so much intensity because there is also lots of precariousness and maybe, living so energetically is a way to distance the specter of death and pain. But Israel also has an ancient soul, and that is Jerusalem. For many aspects, Tel Aviv is its exact opposite; so much so that an ancient Israeli saying recites "Jerusalem prays and Tel Aviv plays."

One is history, the other is modernity. Jerusalem is one of the most exciting cities that I have ever visited, with its neighborhoods housing different cultures, languages and faiths. It possesses traces of great civilizations and a very busy life, between laity and religiosity.

Strolling through the old part of the city is a continuous discovery, and the identity of its Armenian- Christian- Jewish-Muslim neighborhoods is vigorous. From the Mount of Olives, the view of Har Ha-Zetim - the Old City - shines in the thousand warm nuances of its ancient stones and of the gold of its mosques.

**BUSINESS MIDDLE EAST: INSHA'ALLAH.** I have not yet gone as far as Saudi Arabia for business. For a Western woman, it's a bit complicated. You cannot enter the country without an invitation and visitors are subject to the same Islamic laws as Saudis. My experience in the Middle East is limited to more open countries like Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and North Africa. However, religion is an integral part of daily life of Middle Eastern countries and it is important to remember some essential points.

Pork meat and alcoholic drinks are not consumed. The working week is from Saturday to Wednesday. It is preferable not to organize business trips during the sacred month of Ramadan or during the other Islamic holidays in the course of the year, which are based on the lunar calendar.

Women should always have a shawl with them or a scarf that is useful in certain occasions, such as when visiting a mosque.

Muslims pray five times a day. Even if not everyone observes this rule, it may well happen that, during a meeting, your counterpart unexpectedly leaves the room for about fifteen-twenty minutes to pray. Israel is a subject that it is best to avoid.

As a woman, before extending my hand in greeting, I always wait. If the male counterpart does not do so for religious reasons, I greet him with a nod of my head. For men, formal attire is required, and for women, it is preferable to wear long-sleeved jackets. Trousers are not really appropriate but, for commodity, I wear baggy ones, similar to a divided skirt and I've never had any problems. It is better not to wear traditional Arab clothes because it may be considered an offensive gesture in regards to local traditions.

Arabs, as I've already mentioned, are excellent negotiators. Their hospitality is proverbial and if on the one hand they behave according to an antique ritual - the Tahiyat Wamujamat that embodies great politeness, courtesy and cordiality - on the other they are very skillful at hiding their real intentions and hence their Western counterpart must never reveal all his or her cards and must not quote the lowest price right from the start, because bargaining is the rule and consequently there would be no margin for negotiation. You have to know how to wait for the countermoves, like in the game of chess and, like in all the Souths of the world, you have to know how to exercise the art of patience and of non-aggressiveness.

Even non-verbal language is important, and knowing some of its aspects allows us to avoid hurting the susceptibility of our counterpart. Here are some examples: never show signs of impatience; do not show the sole your shoe when crossing your legs; never offer anything with your left hand as it is considered impure.

Even in this part of the world, the conception of time is flexible and, as always, haste makes waste: reacting by putting your Arab counterpart under pressure could turn out to be very unproductive. Remember that you are expected to be punctual even if Arabs, on their part, do not behave the same way. So try to adapt to the slow pace of negotiations and the established intrinsic rules.

My experience, however, leads me to make a different consideration for what concerns Dubai, where a more Western behavior pattern is followed. As a city, it has many definitions: the Miami of the Middle East, the Hong Kong of the Arab World, but what strikes us above all is its Uncle Scrooge-style core. Money moves everything and through it is celebrated the greatness of Dubai - where everything is more magnificent than in the rest of the world.

In my field, business is carried out European style, hence quickly and according to the motto time is money. I have never dealt with a feminine counterpart. The world of women in Dubai remains a mystery to me. I meet them in the Souks and in the futuristic and luxurious malls where they wander, bored and bejeweled, in the quest for the umpteenth new designer handbag since, due to the long black tunic that completely covers them, a handbag is the only thing that shows.

I wonder if their thoughts, their dreams and aspirations are very different from our own. The Arab world that lives on traditions and on a deep-rooted pride in its history and culture, is fascinating and I think it is the other half of our soul. Trying to capture its spirit can help us in relating with the unknown in a culture, even a business one, and it humanely enriches us.

**BUSINESS ISRAEL: SHALOM.** In Israel, the style of doing business has a Western footprint. As far as I'm concerned, it's like being in Europe. We speak in English, during negotiations we go directly to the objective and we follow the philosophy of time is money. The Israelis I negotiate with are intelligent, competent, interesting interlocutors, fast in analyzing and hungry for information. In my field, they are always very open and receptive of the ideas and suggestions that propose a savings, the possibility of improving productivity and incrementing the speed of the machines.

Israeli society is very vivacious and talkative and it is fundamental to have the right contacts that open the doors of the business world. Israel is a world where personal acquaintances, proteksia, are strategic and allow penetrating the market and obtaining useful information at all levels.

In negotiations, it is vital to focus on the clarity of the subjects treated and the lack of preambles before entering the heart of the discussion can be misinterpreted for aggression.

I have been working with Israel for many years and have succeeded in establishing long-lasting relationships based on professionalism, trust and esteem that are reason for satisfaction also from a human point of view. Their welcome is always warm, the given word sacred, their correctness transparent, their collaboration complete and the commitments made are always honored.

This, at least, is my experience.

Remember that the Jewish Shabbat goes from sunset on Friday until dusk on Saturday. In this lapse of time, many buses, trains and the El Al - the national airline - do not make transports, but the Ben Gurion airport remains open and the other airlines perform flights regularly. Always bring an ID with you. It may happen that, walking into any public place, it is requested of you for security control. Try not to organize business trips during Jewish holidays.

In Israel, there are non-believers, people who follow rules called Mitzvah<sup>3</sup>, and people who practice their religion. In any case, the holidays are dedicated to the family, to friends, to reflection and to happiness, and business is put on hold.

**CONCLUSIONS.** Knowing how to relate with others is important in order to move well in the world. Every people is proud of its identity, culture and traditions, and consequently, acting according to the philosophy that says that no one civilization is superior to another and that what a given people find interesting may not necessarily be so in the eyes of another, helps to enter into contact with others. We all harbor biases that hinder communication, while the nuances of the different cultures are motley and, in some cases, inscrutable. I have learned to act based on "good sense", observing what surrounds me and really being interested in others. Business is not something removed from an individual human being. We do business with people and if there is no empathy between the parties, everything becomes more difficult. I get the feeling that, in many cases, human rapport in a commercial negotiation is seen as a useless game that yields scarce results, while instead I firmly believe that cultural exchange leads to a mental richness necessary for establishing good commercial relationships. Doing business also means socializing, setting up bonds of friendship, knowing the uses and customs and appreciating the culture of the country hosting us. •

[1] *The Economist*-July 25th-31st 2009. *Waking from its sleep. A special report on the Arab World.*

[2] Eli Amir, "Jasmine". Edizioni Einaudi publications, 2008.

[3] It is a term used in the Jewish religion that means commandment.

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