The Men We Loved

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Male Friendship and Nationalism
in Israeli Culture

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To Itzik, the joy of my life

CONTENTS

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Prologue

In this book I explore emotions associated with male friendship. I argue that some of these emotions can only be experienced through a sense of loss, and that by entering the public discourse they transform into rituals of passionate commemoration, suggesting a dynamics of collective necrophilia. I perceive this transformation of face-to-face emotions of friendship into a collective mode of desire to be a core aspect of the imagined community, especially in its national form. I situate this claim in contemporary Israeli culture. As an accentuated case of a society going through an enduring political and military national struggle, the Israeli case offers a magnified instance of what may be a profoundly broader male-to-male (homosocial) phenomenon, a phenomenon of commemorative desire. My analysis unfolds step by step, proceeding through stories of men's friendships in typical sites of male interactions, such as school, recreational activities, the workplace, and the military, and concluding with collective, national practices.

The story behind this book is twofold. Originally, what set me out on this study was an incidental expression I came across while reading a book on IDF (Israeli Defense Force) veterans. In an interview with psychologist Amia Lieblich (1989: 57), one of the soldiers, Eitan, born in a religious Kibbutz, recounted the social ties that developed among the men in his infantry unit, after completing their training stage:

> At this stage you become very close to others in the unit. You have more time to sit and chat. You get to know them better and you love them more. This is the famous love among soldiers, which is as much a mystery as love of women.

The question of combat fraternity has intrigued me for a host of reasons. My own experiences in a field-unit on the Israeli border as a soldier and officer (although not in a combat role) left me with something of a void in place of the bonds that such a close-knit situation is alleged to forge between men. Feeling somewhat detached from the dominant social circles of my military unit, I assumed that being gay limited my own experiences in such matters. In fact, only a few of the men I served with remained in contact with each other after terminating their military service. Yet I kept hearing stories of such deep friendships, or at least I thought I did. I felt that when it came to male love, my earlier work on military and

masculinity based on interviews with gay and bisexual soldiers (Kaplan 2003a) only scratched the tip of the iceberg.

Returning to Eitan's wording, I sought to understand more of the meaning of this "mysterious" bond. What "famous love" was he referring to? And what does "getting to know them better" imply? I sensed that his phrasing implicitly addressed the renowned biblical verse of King David's lament for Jonathan: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Samuel 1:26).[1] How does such a verse become entwined in the story of a contemporary Jewish-Israeli man?

These questions are not limited to military culture. I felt that there are broader issues at stake related to Israeli society, the sociology of male emotions, and nationalism. As part of my PhD dissertation I set out to explore friendship and fraternity through interviews with heterosexual men. Between 1999 and 2000 I conducted thirty in-depth interviews with a range of Israeli men, discussing their male friendships in various settings and at various stages throughout their lives. This corpus formed my initial group of informants (See appendixes 1 and 2).

Little did I know then that on the very same day that I completed my last interview, 27 September 2000, a Palestinian roadside bomb would be set off against an Israeli patrol in the Gaza Strip; followed the next day by Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, it would mark the start of the second Palestinian Uprising (*Intifada Al-Aqsa*), one of the bloodiest wars in the history of the Jewish-Arab conflict. At the time I was studying toward my PhD at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva but most of my social life took place in and around Jerusalem, which was at the heart of the conflict. Although my work has nothing to do with everyday politics, and does not address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict directly, it is inevitably colored by the impact of the events. The themes of solidarity, sacrifice, and death, which were already present implicitly in some of the informants' accounts the previous year, gradually shifted to the forefront of my analysis. Fortunately, only a few of the men I interviewed had experienced the death of a close friend. But this made these men's implicit allusion to these themes all the more significant for me. My study gradually expanded to ethnographic observations based on media coverage of current events, analysis of popular cultural artifacts, and some participant observations in public commemoration ceremonies. While still focusing on friendship and male fraternity, I became more interested in how the two were related to national discourse.

Combining the personal with the political, I explore in this book how private friendships draw on national discourse and, vice versa, how national discourse draws on the emotions of friendship. Employing a phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, I analyze the relations between *haverut*, the Hebrew word for various patterns of friendship and sociability, and *re'ut*, a more literary term that specifically connotes heroic, male friendship. Throughout this book I go back to the

themes surrounding King David's elegy, which has become a cornerstone of commemoration of fallen soldiers in the Western Tradition, and in Israel in particular. I explore diverse manifestations and displacements of the "wondrous love" between men in Israeli men's lived experience and discuss its implications for nationalism. My case study is both very narrow and very broad. As an ethnographic study focusing on emotions it does not entail a holistic exploration of Israeli localized culture as a whole, but rather a holistic exploration of a *localized emotion* within that given culture. I attempt to explore how a particular set of concepts, values and feelings associated with the idea and practices of male friendship are shaped in the Israeli national context.

Chapter 1 briefly sketches several simplified signposts in the traditions of fraternal friendship in Western thought. It draws a distinction between two leading ideological frameworks for friendship, liberalism, and nationalism, set in the modern distinction between private and public life.

Chapter 2 discusses how Zionist culture provides an exemplary case of the national-ideological framing of fraternal friendship. Fraternal friendship is associated with the Hebrew word *re'ut*, originally a general term for friendship which has narrowed in meaning and now signifies predominantly combat fraternity. Perceiving the modern pioneers and soldiers as successors to the biblical tradition of heroism, Zionist pedagogy reinterpreted and inculcated biblical epics of comradeship into the fabric of the modern Israeli state.

The subsequent chapters turn to explore how friendship is constructed in concrete lived experience, first in everyday life and then in national spaces perceived as sacred. Each chapter presents a meeting point between canonical representations of friendships and their interpretations in narratives and practices of contemporary Israeli men, moving gradually toward culturally more rigid dimensions. In chapter 3 I follow the narratives of long-lasting close friendships as they unfold in different life stages, looking at alternative perceptions of *origin* through which the formation and maintenance of friendships are made sense of. A central account of male friendships focuses on shared activities. This leads to a broader, cultural construct of shared past in line with a familial rhetoric of friendship. Other accounts stress a sudden and immediate "click" relating to a sense of a shared destiny, and reflecting a romantic rhetoric.

Moving to issues of male relatedness and intimacy, chapter 4 delineates an explicit folk-model employed by the interviewees to make sense of the emotions involved in their bonds and discerns two different styles of sharing. The first one revolves around the image of the *hevreman*, endorsing "cool sociability" set in physical action, in line with common gender distinctions; the second revolves around "intellectual sociability," stressing "soul talk" and ideological or psychologistic discourse.

The next chapters address more covert terrain in the discourse and practice of friendship, unraveling how the common rhetoric is haunted

and overshadowed by ambiguous emotions, emotions that are at times constrained and at times sanctioned and legitimized by the hegemonic male discourse. Chapter 5 explores homosocial humor set in the context of the group joking relationship and "public intimacy." The men employ a lingo of eccentric and ambivalent speech and bodily gestures that teases the participants and forms a dynamics of seduction. The semipublic spaces of these interactions displace homoerotic desire under the guise of instrumental activity.

Finally, chapters 6 and chapter 7 address the cultural context of *re'ut*, male friendship set in sacred spaces associated with mythic epics of heroic male bonding. Chapter 6 describes three structural features of a hegemonic script for male bonding set in military action: (1) the traumatizing setting that induces the bond; (2) emotional moments of "crying together" that symbolically form a conjugal pact; (3) the maintenance of the pact over time, based on a semi- "post-traumatic" solidarity. Although military friendships rarely develop into intensive, everyday relationships, they are often perceived as strong, enduring, and everlasting.

Chapter 7 explores ways through which male relatedness is made sense of in light of the spectral ideal of death. Instances of anxiety and loss on the verge of death bring the men closer together. Whereas other homosocial circumstances present diverse and often displaced expressions of male affection, circumstances of loss and sites of commemoration present a unique instance where desire between men is publicly declared and legitimized. The rituals of *re'ut* employed in the commemoration of the fallen men serve a double function. First, they mask a national ideology that demands self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Second, they produce a symbolic stance of collective necrophilia, an erotic gazing upon the dead, transforming a repudiated personal sentiment into a national genre of relatedness.

In the discussion I wrap up the main arguments of this book. The interrelations between male fraternity and commemoration provide a crucial link between individual friendship and national solidarity. Rituals of commemoration are not only gendered, they are also eroticized. The act of declaring the lost and yet eternal friendship symbolizes a passionate 'blood pact' between men. At the political level, this passion serves to explain how the imagined ties of the national can take precedence over the blood ties of kinship and matrimony. I interpret fraternal friendship as an emotional-ideological space of both identification and desire whereby the citizen brother becomes, via national commemoration, the desired brother.

Notes

1. All English translations of the Bible have been taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* by Herbert May and Bruce Metzger (1973). However, the term 'wonderful' is inaccurate and should have been translated from the Hebrew as 'wondrous' or 'mysterious.'

Part I
Friendship and Ideology

Friendship is often viewed as a relatively free-floating social form, when compared to kinship and contractual (hetero)sexual ties. Many studies take as their point of departure the premise that friendship is a "pure" relationship in terms of its voluntary nature, its moral qualities, and its disconnectedness from collectivities with clear interests, boundaries, and power (Eisenstadt 1974: 141). For instance, Cora Du Bois (1974: 16) notes that "friendships are voluntary and gratuitous acts rather than exclusively items of social behavior" involving variable "gratifications" that "may be phrased as intimacy, social conformity, protection, social prestige" and more. Although there is great variation in the manner in which societies distinguish between different kinds of friends, bonds of friendship are often perceived as "voluntary-preferential" in character, lacking the prescribed status of age and sex that define kinship and marriage relationships.

This book follows a different approach, one that views friendship as a social relationship nested in political constraints. Precisely because of its ill-defined quality, friendship is highly dependent on normative indoctrination, which often remains implicit and goes unacknowledged. As an array of emotions, interactions, and expectations friendship is shaped by collective knowledge and ideals shared by members of the social group. As such it is implicated both in lived experience as well as in ideological form. As individuals make sense of their activities in a fundamentally "prereflective" way, ideologies often take the form of tacit knowledge (Fine and Sandstrom 1993; Rogers 1981). I focus on ideological aspects of friendship associated with hegemonic masculinity, a form of male social ascendancy, constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. Hegemonic masculinity is achieved in a play of social forces extending beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes (Connell 1987: 183-184).

It produces cultural representations that dominate the very conceptual categories through which men interpret their emotional experiences, including the experience of friendship.

Throughout the ages, various ideologies and schools have attempted to tackle the concept of friendship, almost exclusively in its male form, and to explicitly define or appropriate it. Although I avoid a theoretical exposition, the present work focuses on the interrelations between male friendship and one such ideology, loosely defined as nationalism. The Zionist-Israeli context presents an exemplary case of the ideological labeling that a national framework provides for friendship.

Chapter One

THE CASE OF FRATERNAL FRIENDSHIP

Friendship and the Political in Western Thought

As a topic of scholarly inquiry friendship draws on various discourses in the social sciences and humanities. It incorporates political science and sociological debates on nationalism, liberalism, and socialism and their treatment of *solidarity* and *comradeship*; it involves military, organizational, and behavioral studies on small-group *cohesion* or *fraternities*; it draws on social psychological and developmental research on dyadic *attachment* and *intimacy*; and, finally, on psychoanalytic scholarship and postmodern, queer-theory analysis of *eroticism* and *sexuality.* These discourses are often disconnected and cut off from each other. Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow (1987: 243) point out that friendship is interstitial in the social structure of most Western cultures, compared with examples of institutionalized friendships in some other societies. For instance, in the North American context a plethora of books, in genres ranging from pop-psychology to theology have struggled with the meanings of friendship.[1] As noted by Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson (1998: 31), the very term "friend" may be used for quite different purposes and take many shapes, ranging from "intimate confidante" to a "tennis partner." Analyzing various patterns of male friendship in non-Western societies, Robert Brain (1976: 105-106) argues that friendship has lost both emotional expression and ceremonial patterning in contemporary Western cultures.

A central tradition of friendship that has influenced modern Western thought is that of the Hellenistic world. Greek thought provided the roots for a central assumption underlying much of modern political understanding: individual, specific friendships could serve as an exemplary analogy for discussing larger social phenomena such as political ties. Plato's discussion of *philia* and *eros*, and most significantly, Aristotle's definitions of friendship types, make the bonds of friendship situated in individual emotional experience into a prerequisite of a just political order. In *Nichomachean Ethics*, one of the earliest explicit formulations of friendship influencing subsequent Western thinking, Aristotle defined three types of

primary friendships: first, the higher friendship based on virtue, a bond between two men "who are alike in excellence or virtue," advancing the happiness of each other as an end in itself, a perfect, altruistic relationship (Aristotle 1962: 1156b6-7); second, useful friendship grounded in utility, where the partners feel affection not for one another per se but in terms of their usefulness to each other; third, friendship grounded on pleasure, guided by emotions existing typically among young people, who easily replace one bond after another for the sake of gratification. Aristotle also introduced the notion of civic friendship, the binding force of the community, noting that "friendship also seems to hold states together" (Aristotle 1962: 1155a22). Aristotle's thinking initiated a wide-ranging debate on the relation between an ethic of civic friendship and the notion of personal or primary friendship. Without going deeply into these long-debated issues, a common interpretation of civic friendship identifies it as an extension of primary friendship of the virtuous kind. In a just society citizens experience a form of friendship with each other, doing things for their fellow citizens both individually and as a citizen body, on the basis of shared values, goals, and a sense of justice (Schwarzenbach 1996: 7). By contributing to the utmost actualization of individual citizens, primary friendship generates and sustains the highest good of all, that of the city (Stern-Gillet 1995: 4). Civic friendship, in its turn, is altruistic in the sense that good citizens wish to do what is good for the sake of each other (Scollmeier 1994: 83).

Turning to the modern era, two central processes associated with modernity shaped contemporary ideologies regarding friendship. The first process which has received the majority of scholarly attention, is the rise of individualism. The process of industrialization sharpened the polarization between the growing public realm of the market, the modern state, and the bureaucratic organization on the one hand, and the emerging private realm of intimacy and emotionality on the other hand, embodied in cultural sites such as the nuclear family, primary groups, romantic love, and friendships (Oliker 1998; Silver 1997). Reinforced by ideas of the Enlightenment, an emerging ethos of "personal life" shaped what historian Lawrence Stone has referred to as "affective individualism," a new mentalité that sanctioned the expression of autonomy, self-expression, and introspection as well as the manifestation of sentiment toward intimate others (Stone 1977: 18; quoted in Oliker 1998: 24).

From this perspective, friendship has gradually become more and more detached from the political, public sphere. Philippe Aries (1979; overviewed in Kumar 1997) claimed that families in the premodern European society inhabited a space that was simultaneously private and public, mixing servants and masters, friends and kinship, intimates and strangers. The burdens—social, economic and emotional—were shared "in a sea of sociability." Aspirations for love, companionship, consolation, nurture, and protection were not restricted to the immediate family,

as in the modern sensibility. Along these lines, Alan Bray and Michel Rey (1999) emphasized the notion of "the friend" in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England as a patron, a benefactor, someone to rely on in a potentially hostile world. In such a world bodily intimacy between friends was foremost a form of symbolic capital and a signal of comforting security, reminiscent of the ritualized friendships of ancient Greece.

In contrast, based on the novel eighteenth-century social thought of the Enlightenment, Allan Silver discusses how friendship in modernity dissolved traditional ties based on "necessitudo" or "clan brotherhood"—obligatory bonds defined by "custom, corporate group, station and estate" (Silver 1997: 55). New ideas of civil society based on universal sympathy formed a new kind of friendship relationship freed from the instrumental and calculative orientations that characterized the public realm. It was to be dissociated from impersonal negotiations, explicit contract, rational exchange, and the labor market and to inhabit a distinctive domain of the private life. Friendship became the purest and most widely available instance of the private and the personal—a relation that draws on subjective definitions, ungoverned by the structural definitions that bear on family and kinship. It was the ideal arena for modern notions of personal agency and freedom, based on liberal ideology and morality (Silver 1997; 1990). Under this paradigm friendship represents an epitome of the "pure relationship" that has gradually developed in the late modern age, a voluntary commitment based on intensified intimacy and a tendency towards symmetry, as outlined by Anthony Giddens (1991).

Much of this theorizing on friendship lacks a gendered perspective. As is so often the case in traditional scholarship, it extrapolates from predominantly male experiences to general ideas of friendship. Traditional androcentric (male-oriented) scholarship uses the term "man" not to discuss distinctive considerations of men *qua* men, but as a generic word for human. In doing so, it misdirects attention away from the study of masculinity as a specifically male experience situated in varying social, cultural, and historical formulations. A male-focused theory of relatedness requires a cultural study of gender (Brod 1987: 264).[2] Recently, with the proliferation of research on masculinity a growing body of studies has referred explicitly to male friendship, though mostly in an unsystematic manner (Gutmann 1997: 393).[3] Taking into account gender differences entails anchoring of male relatedness in the sociological division of gender between public and private life, as formulated by feminist thought (Arendt 1958; Rosaldo 1974). The bulk of feminist scholarship identifies male activity with the public realm, and associates the private or "domestic" realm with feminine spaces, typically focusing on issues of family and intimacy (Weintraub 1997). As industrialization moved men more and more to the public sphere, it offered them fewer opportunities to cultivate the kinds of intimate relationships associated with the private sphere. Men's tasks in life, together with society's ideals of hegemonic masculinity, turned