Boycotts and bagels: Sayed Kashua goes Yonkers

'I am in favor of the boycott because I love that screwed-up, dumb country and wish it only well': A weary Kashua confronts energized collegiate crowds.

By Sayed Kashua | Apr. 5, 2014 | 7:58 AM | 3

I landed in the United States three days ago and still haven’t gotten over the jet lag. The pills I take every night aren’t doing much good – I keep waking up at 3 A.M. and then can’t get back to sleep again. I feel terribly nauseous, and am concerned that the sleeping pills my wife gave me before I left home are somehow managing to change the taste of the water, turning it heavy and bitter, as though it’s not water at all.

My first stop was New York. A cold, rain-swept city awaited me. The local news channels bemoaned the lateness of spring, for which New Yorkers are yearning after a particularly long, cruel winter. After spending an evening and a night in the city, I was driven to a nice college in the Hudson Valley. I met with students of literature, Middle Eastern studies and other subjects. In the evening there was an event with more participants, in which scenes from my television series were screened. I had to talk for almost an hour, then take questions from the audience, some about writing but most about Israel-Palestine.

I didn’t sleep well at night, and now I’m on a train that’s taking me to a town called Yonkers, not far from Manhattan. I hope that despite the early hour of arrival, the hotel room will be ready, so maybe I’ll be able to grab a little shut-eye before embarking on a round of meetings with students and lecturers.

I’ve been making this spring journey to American universities and colleges for a few years now, and with every passing year I can feel the way things are changing on the campuses. True, it’s different in every state and every city, but there’s no doubt that the Israel-Palestine discourse is assuming a new form and acquiring new dimensions.

“You have to understand that there is a bit of tension on campus,” the lecturer hosting last night’s event told me.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how your lecture will go,” he said, “but you have to take into account that there might be a few students who will demonstrate – I don’t know, I can’t say for sure.”

“I don’t understand.”
“Well,” the lecturer continued, “I don’t think it will happen – you’re a Palestinian, after all – but everything that has anything to do with the name ‘Israel’ has started to stir a lot of tension among students and also among lecturers.”

This energetic, young Jewish fellow told me about classes that travel to a different region of the world every year to research the politics of water management. This year the trip was supposed to be to Israel and Palestine, in order to study the problems there. The lecturer explained how the planned destination had generated a stormy debate on campus, with demonstrations and sometimes even threats due to the very notion that a delegation from the university would go to Israel.

“It became really serious,” the man told me, “and it’s possible that because you carry an Israeli passport some members of the university community will consider it a type of collaboration with Israel – but again, I’m not sure that will happen.”

No demonstration preceded my talk, but the first question I was asked – by a lecturer in the audience – was: “What’s your opinion of the boycott against Israel?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I think I am in favor of every means that can bring pressure to bear on the government of Israel.”

I found myself getting tied up in knots as I tried to articulate a coherent approach. I am in favor of the boycott, even though I am liable to be boycotted myself; I am in favor of the boycott, but I am still a citizen of the state and it will be hard for me to boycott myself.

“I am in favor of the boycott,” I told the audience, “even though I know that the boycott doesn’t make the average Israeli think that if more and more communities and countries are boycotting us – it’s a sign that we are making terrible mistakes and committing grave crimes.”

I went on: “On the contrary: Many Israelis are liable to become entrenched in their opinions and to argue that the boycotts are due to Jew-hatred. As a result, the voices of warmongering will be strengthened. They will say that this is yet another sign that we have no one to rely on but ourselves and our father in heaven.”

I am in favor of the boycott because I don’t trust the leaders of the country to know what’s best for it. Maybe the boycott of Israel, which is gaining powerful momentum worldwide and is also seeping into the United States – and also, if to a certain extent, into the Jewish community there – is what is necessary to compel Israel’s leaders to get their act together and strive for an agreement that will put an end to the occupation and the discrimination.

“I am in favor of the boycott,” I found myself saying on the dais, “because, believe it or not, there is no other place for me to live. I am in favor of the boycott because this is the only country I have, because I like my neighbors, my colleagues at work, my friends and the people I went to school with. Yes, boycott us, please, in order to save us from ourselves. Boycott us before we become pariahs who are ashamed to say where we come from.
“Believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen, I am in favor of the boycott, because, despite the sometimes unforgivable injustices done and the fact that the state is liable not to consider me a citizen, and even though it is threatening to get rid of me and my family by means of plans of one kind and another – I am in favor of the boycott because I love that screwed-up, dumb country and wish it only well.”

I’ll soon be arriving at my next destination, and I hope I’ll find something to eat there. I am tired and hungry, even though I bought a bagel in the train station, because they didn’t have a tuna sandwich. The saleswoman asked me, “How are you this morning, sir?” And I said I’d like a bagel, please. I paid $1.25 and she gave me, along with the bagel, a small packet of butter, a disposable knife and a white napkin.

I had time before the train arrived. I sat down on a bench, opened the napkin on my lap, separated the two parts of the bagel and started to spread the butter gently. One unthinking move toppled the bagel to the ground, and for some reason I started to cry, because of the bagel that for no good reason fell onto the floor of a train station in the United States.