

My Cat and My Heart Are in Israel

by Benjamin Fleischer, 2004

For "Love and Israel", Video: <http://bit.ly/eoandisrael>

Eo was my cat the last time I was in Israel. I'd never had a cat before, mostly because I'm allergic to cats. I was there for medical school; I wasn't looking for a pet. And yet, when Anatte picked up the little meowing kitten from her stoop and carried it to my yard, I knew I would take care of it.

I thought the little kitten, maybe two weeks old, looked like a girl. She had a feminine face, so I thought I'd call her Noa. But Anatte's ex was Noah so that was out. I couldn't think of another name. But my Yemenite neighbor took a look at the cat, all white and fluffy, took a hit, and named her Eo. "Eo," he said, "is a star". He also pointed out that he could hear the cat all night make "Eo eo eo" sounds. That worked for me. It was good for an Israeli to give her an "Israeli" name. I'm not very good at naming things.

I had originally meant to keep Eo in the yard with the other stray cats until we found her a home. But I bought food and kitty litter and found myself sharing my bed with her, though I woke up itching the next day. Hmm. I think I thought I saw something jumping. But I don't see any fleas.

Of course, I didn't know what fleas looked like. My other neighbor John pointed out that Eo was covered in them. And a former-vet friend recommended I shampoo the cat clean. I still didn't know that I was falling for this beautiful, fluffy, white kitten.

But then I got some bad news. I took Eo to the vet to get her shots and spayed, and the vet told me my forms were wrong. What was it? That I'm not a citizen? Did I misunderstand a question? No, the problem was that Eo had testicles. Yup, Eo was a boy cat. So, we changed the surgery, and I learned that you can't tell the sex of a cat by how it's face looks.

You're probably wondering at this point, "What about your allergies"? "What are you going to do when you move?" Or maybe, "Do you think your cat will be able to adjust to its "new" gender?" Well, the allergy problem was solved by daily sudafeds. That seemed to work. I hadn't thought of what I'd do with Eo if I moved. I was in Israel for the first year of a four year, English medical school program in Beer Sheva. I suppose I hoped I'd meet a nice Israeli girl at a Hillel event and just stay there. I love Hebrew and Israel, so this option seemed perfect. I just had to meet the girl and learn enough Hebrew to understand her. I liked the idea of putting down roots in Israel and maybe becoming an Israeli, not just an American in Israel.

Eo was my comfort during the difficult exams. He kept me company with his "pleowing" as he seemed to roll his "meows" and ask for attention. He'd keep me warm at night as I slept, though I tried so hard

to keep him off my face. "Anywhere but my face", I said. "Really, Eo. I love you, but I'm allergic to you. Just don't sleep on my face". But he did anyway.

So, I put him at my side under the covers. And he crawled up to my face. I put him on the floor and told him to stay, but he wouldn't. I put boxes at the door of my bedroom, but he jumped over as I stacked them higher and higher-- three or four or five times his height. I had to give in, of course, though I covered my face with the blanket just in case.

By this point, Anatte would tell me how in love I was with my cat. And I knew that part of my love was for Israel as well. Where else could I find such a beautiful cat on the street, take it in, and make it mine. And where could I forget that I might need to come home someday and remove him from the outdoor-cat lifestyle he loves. Would he live in my apartment in a city? Would I take him on walks to the park?

And then, I decided to leave Israel. I still loved the country and my friends and my cat, but I didn't want to stay in the medical school program anymore. I had to go home and live at my parents until I got a job and could move out again. My mother knew how much I loved the cat, but she also knew that my father was quite allergic to them. I had no choice, she said, I would have to find the cat a new home.

My neighbor John and his wife took Eo in. He already half-lived in their place anyhow as he'd visit when they left their windows open. I felt bad leaving him with them and worse when I was home and learned they had renamed him "monster". "Not because he's a monster", Anatte comforted me, "but because he's fluffy like a muppet monster". But that's not his name, I thought bitterly.

Of my decision to leave Israel, the hardest thing for me to leave behind wasn't the language, the people, the hiking trails, the politics, or even the hummus-- it was my cat. I think about him often and wonder how he's doing. Is he still an outside cat? Does he still "pleow"? How big is he? He must be full grown by now.

I recently found out that my neighbors who had adopted the cat had a baby and, perhaps because of that, had decided to give Eo to my pot-smoking Yemenite neighbors. It broke my heart. I wanted to change plans I was making for a trip to Europe with my girlfriend to include a swingby to Israel to pick him up. I asked my cousin who was in a program in Beer Sheva if she could find him and bring him home.

But it's a pipe dream. Even if I found him and brought him home, I don't know him anymore. Would he remember me? Would he be the same? Could he live indoors? I don't even know if he's need to be quarantined. And then there's the issue that my building doesn't allow cats.

It seems that just like I am resigned to always being an American in Israel, I will have to be resigned to not having my Israeli cat. I love the country and the cat so much, but I will have to be satisfied as a visitor, and hope we recognize each other on my next trip.



