

Hila Gutfreund  
Eloquent Essay  
January 2009

### Here is Margalit Street

Down a dusty, road-worn street, ancient buildings and newly rebuilt playgrounds, Margalit Street—with all its disheveled beauty—comes into full view. Hundreds of brick houses are crammed together above the street, their majestic staircases leading the way towards a street that has a permanent traffic-jam of parked cars. Along the road are a few benches, a recycling center, and cats that do not have a home—or maybe they do and roam around for fun. And there, right in the middle of the compressed road is my old house.

Margalit Street, located blocks away from the center of Carmel, Haifa, was where I grew up and left, sadly, after six short years. Some may say that since I was young when I left—six and a half to be precise—the street would not impact my life. However, since leaving Margalit, I have been on a frantic search to find a replacement street in America. I am sad to report that I have had no luck in the past ten years; nothing in America is like it. A few years back, I extended my search to streets in other countries—still no luck. Though some places—London, Seattle, and New York City—had traces of Margalit, I never found anything that was truly like it.

Margalit Street can be divided into three separate sections: the beginning at the bottom of the hill, the middle which is midway up the hill, and the top of the hill that extends into the main road. Though each section has its own distinctive characteristics, stone pathways and buildings line the entire road. With all the new buildings that surround Margalit, and are now being developed on it, the aged limestone adds a rustic feel to Margalit Street. When one leaves Margalit all aspects of the old road are left behind; in front lie skyscrapers, concrete buildings, and traffic lights. This is what makes the stones lining Margalit special: the stones emphasize the natural beauty of the street, the basic simplicity that Israel started with, and the deep connection

Israel has to its past. Once the stones are gone, the beauty of old Israel is gone as well, and modern Israel, though an incredible sight, looks exactly the same as every other street in the world.

We will begin our exploration of Margalit Street at the bottom of the hill where the stone buildings rise into view, and firmly distinguish Margalit Street from the plain buildings of the road before it. We must walk uphill for a minute in order to reach our destination: the playground. Out of the hundred or so things that need to be fixed on Margalit, the playground has, so far, been the only place to get the honor of being brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A circular path leads into the oval shaped playground that is located several feet below street level. This used to be one of my favorite places in Margalit; I remember running down the hill to get to my playground. The playground has evolved from the small, broken playground that it used to be. At one point, my life revolved solely on the lone swing in the playground, and I can still hear the incessant creaking that burst from the rusty object every time it swung backwards. However, there are new swings—someone finally realized that one swing is not enough—which do not creak in a shrill tone when they swing backwards, and the old concrete floor has been replaced with a Technicolor foam-padded floor that bounces with every step. In addition, there is a new plastic and colored metal play-structure that has three slides at different levels with a tire-swing attached to one of the sides—when I was younger I used to complain that the only thing missing was a tire swing. And if that is still not enough, there are spring animals to bounce on and enough benches to seat the entire community. It is truly magnificent but, surprisingly enough, does not detract from the rustic atmosphere of the road.

We will now continue our trek uphill where we pass more stone buildings, a couple of people fighting from their balconies, and a car accident in the making as one person desperately

tries to maneuver his car around the jumble of oddly parked cars. The hill is now becoming steeper, and the parked cars look as if they are about to fall off the road. As we make our way to our destination at the top of the hill we see balcony fights, stray cats wandering with their conniving stares, and a jogger who is unsuccessfully trying to answer two cell phones at once. A few more steps and we are here: the shack. The natural question to ask is, “Why, of all the historic and beautiful places in Israel, are we visiting a shack?” Well, the truth is that this is not a shack—though it looks like it—but a small candy store. The entire room is filled with shelves upon shelves with hundreds of plastic jars sitting patiently, waiting to be opened. Every jar is filled to the lid with a different type of candy, chocolate, or gum; it is a challenge to restrain oneself from buying the entire store. But the candy-lined room is not the best part of this small treasure trove; the finest part of the store is a small blue cooler with a picture of an ice cream cone, located at the entrance to the shack. This cooler contains every type of Israeli sherbet popsicle known to mankind—“Matara,” the lemon, raspberry, and strawberry combo in the shape of a bulls-eye; “Avatiach,” the watermelon shaped popsicle barely resembles the taste of an actual watermelon; and finally, “Limon,” which is the classic lemon flavored treat that adults and children adore. This place is a landmark of Margalit Street; it has been serving the best selection of candy on this obscure road for over 17 years.

We must make our way back down the hill, though not all the way. It is easier to go downhill, and we can finally take a closer look at Margalit Street: trees encompass the entire road, and the pale yellow sidewalk is cracked with age. Along the road we can see a few residents hanging laundry off of their balconies, while others are honking loudly in search of the perfect parking spot. We have finally arrived at our destination right in the middle of Margalit Street: my childhood home. Up a few steps, across a stone path on the right, and up three final

steps we come across the front yard of my old house. My old house is most likely the smallest house you will ever see. It is almost the same size as a one-room apartment, yet somehow all the amenities of a two-bedroom house are crammed in. I have never been attached to houses, but I can never seem to let this one go. When I lived there, the house had red tiled floors throughout the house, two bedrooms that barely had enough room to fit beds in, and two tiny but luxurious bathrooms—an odd combination, but completely calming and homey. I do not know what the inside looks like now, since I haven't been back since we moved to America, but let me take you on a tour. The small outside area near the front door was where I used to ride my tricycle.

Underneath the two bedroom windows there is a lily-pad-shaped grass patch with flowers along its perimeter: beautiful pink and purple flowers with an occasional white flower popping every few bunches. The brick path leading up to the house smoothly transitions into the stone floor of the outside area; the outside walls are covered with the same stones, creating a cohesive look. Where there should be a roof there is a balcony overlooking the patio area—although it has its own entrance, the house is actually part of a 30 year-old apartment building. It is a beautiful house with as much charm as Margalit Street itself.

The sun is about to set. We could stay in front of my old home to look at the sun going down into the Mediterranean Sea, or we could walk across the street to the best location to view sunsets in Haifa. Across the street there is a thick metal fence at waist-height. All of Haifa is clearly visible underneath the metal fence: the two energy towers that light up red at night, the beach, and the rich navy-blue sea. The sun is setting slowly; its coral rays falling towards the surface of the sea. Now half the sun is gone, now a quarter remains, now darkness has fallen, and now the sun says a last goodbye before departing into the dark abyss. These natural rituals give Margalit a sense of mystery and magic, making Margalit an incredibly unique road.

However, the main thing that makes Margalit so different from other roads is that it is a very comforting street. No, I do not mean that it can somehow cheer you up when you are sad; however, it does have an atmosphere that emanates a sense of belonging. It is a strange feeling, but when you are on Margalit Street you know that you are part of something special. It is like Margalit Street is a song and all the people are the notes. When someone is not there, the song falls apart. The street is rebuilt everyday by the actions of its inhabitants. This connection creates a sense of belonging that can be felt by visitors and residents alike. This feeling is a very distinct part of Margalit—even though in many stores and on roads in Israel people also know each other pretty well—and in no other neighborhood in Israel, even in Jerusalem, is the feeling that the entire street is a family more evident.

Though I visit the road every time I come to Israel and still feel deeply connected to it, Margalit has turned into my fairytale. I know there is no prince waiting for me there, but I use Margalit as my escape. The road has become my retreat from reality and that makes me feel more connected to it than ever. The calmness of the street—apart from the regular neighbor fights—seems as if it is in anticipation of something magnificent. It is the perfect landscape for my imagination—even though I only come up with relatively realistic things. I dream of escaping to Margalit and enjoying a popsicle or walking down to the playground. Often though, I just find myself dreaming of watching the sunset.