

Dear friends,

It is again that time of the year - just before the Christmas vacation starts. Right now, my students in the 266A class (Ordinary Differential Equations) are struggling with the final exam. The word 'struggling' is a huge exaggeration, though, because I was as merciful and tender as ... (I have no idea how to complete this metaphor) when I wrote the exam and it was reflected by the big smiles on the students' faces when they saw the questions. That was definitely a pleasant surprise for them because they were terrified that the final will be as difficult as the homework assignments and the midterm exam. I guess it wasn't very good for my public relations since the students wrote their evaluations on me after the hard labour that I put them through during the quarter and before getting the sweet candy that they enjoy right now. Anyway, tomorrow afternoon, when the Christmas holiday party of the math department starts, I hope to have the exams graded and to put this course behind me.

Like in the past, the campus is being deserted during this long vacation. Several of my Israeli neighbors and friends already left or are about to leave to Israel. I regret to say that I have no plans for this long vacation, which will be therefore spent here. Thanksgiving, however, was a different story. Thanksgiving, which takes place in the fourth Thursday in November and starts a long four-day weekend, is a traditional American holiday that is non-religious but is very family oriented. The Thanksgiving dinner that takes place in the late afternoon of that Thursday is an American classic and the most important family gathering of the year. Since American families are usually scattered all over the country, this long weekend is the time of the year when many families have the chance to get together and be a family again for several days. Some love it, some hate it... (go to see the new Jodie Foster movie, "Home for the holidays", which deals exactly with this subject from a rather cynical point of view and was released, of-course, just before Thanksgiving). This is why the Wednesday before Thanksgiving is the busiest day of the year in air traffic and the Friday afterwards is the biggest sale day of the year: what else can a family do together when it's snowing outside, after recovering from the previous day's gluttony? Go together on a shopping spree!

Since I've never taken part before in a real Thanksgiving dinner and next year I won't be here anymore, I decided that I can't miss this last chance. Since I wanted to visit Dafna in Seattle and since Seattle, unlike LA, could provide the winter setting that a real Thanksgiving requires, I knew what I should do. I called Dafna and told her that I'd come over to Seattle if she gets herself invited, with a guest, to a real American Thanksgiving dinner. Dafna was happy to hear about my intention to fly north, but wasn't very keen about Thanksgiving. She just snorted with contempt and said that we don't need a turkey to have fun. Her efforts were futile; "turkey!" - I demanded, "and it'd better be with sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, all the trimmings and a disgusting pumpkin pie for dessert!". Dafna took the challenge, not without great reservations, and called me later to inform me about the dinner to which we were invited. "It'll be so American, that you'll throw up", she promised.

So - on Wednesday, November the 22nd, I flew to Seattle. The airports were surprisingly non-busy, thanks to the early hour of my flight, I guess. I arrived at Dafna's place (really nice) and made myself comfortable until she returned from school. Get this: the lady has a collection of American and English poetry books, but no TV!!! So, instead of watching Seinfeld, we read Walt Whitman and Robert Frost! I'm sorry Dafna that I have to disgrace you like this in public, but you should do something to mend this awful situation.

Anyway, the next morning we woke up at noon and started preparing our contributions to the dinner: an apple crisp (some sort of an apple pie) and baked mixed vegetables. That was quite a work and the

kitchen looked like a battle field for 2-3 hours. But I can announce victory - both things turned out smashing. At 3:30PM, only 30 minutes late, we stood outside our hosts' door with wide smiles on our face and the delicatessen in our hands. The hostess, the host and the host's mother greeted us with hugs, kisses and "Welcome Dafna, welcome Tamir, it's so nice of you to come"... (to remind you, we just met). The evening started quite awkwardly with "I would like you to meet... and this is... Tamir is from LA... Oh really?!...", silence, quick search in the head for more small talk topics etc. But very quickly the conversation began to flow and all 16 guests seemed to feel very comfortable. Meanwhile, the huge bird in the oven cooked to perfection and at 5:30 it was declared ready. A delight to the eye, nose and, as we found later, to the tongue as well. The food excelled in both quantity and quality. Our hosts planned the evening down to the tiniest detail. We found our seats that were marked by name tags on the beautifully decorated tables (very very decorated tables). Before eating, we all held hands and one of the guests said the blessing. After that, each one of us stood up and read a piece of wisdom that was written by the hostess in her round handwriting behind one's name-tag. Each proverb or quote was followed by a round of "Ohh, that's beautiful...". But after that was over, we were able to return to our conversation. At some point, the host's mother suggested that each one will tell his or her most embarrassing moment in life. Such an idea could have easily developed into another embarrassing moment or hour, but that was not the case. The stories were very amusing and entertaining (I told about my embarrassing incident in Japan to which I referred in the end of my letter about Japan) and they lead to a long session of jokes: Dafna, her funny colleague Ravi and I were exchanging the most stupid jokes for an hour or so. It's interesting to see how some jokes are known everywhere, as though they are part of a universal heritage.

Then came the desserts. Our apple crisp was in a league of its own, both because it was very good and because the pumpkin pies were not really candidates for competition. After most pleasant and enjoyable six hours, the evening was over. So I had my Thanksgiving experience after all.

The next days were dedicated to meet Dafna's friends, go from breakfast to brunch, then lunch followed by dinner. We did some walking around the beautiful Seattle that I learned to love in my visit there 4 years ago. It is not NY, LA or SF, but it is still a big city that provides an excitement of such, it is close to many natural attractions of the Northwest, it is packed with the most beautiful book stores, it looks like a very young city and there's a strong sense of local-patriotism in the air. But, usually, there's also rain in the air and this is the major drawback. However, this weekend we were quite lucky and the weather was friendly.

And then it was back to LA. The most exciting thing here, lately, was The 12th Israeli Film Festival. This festival, which is celebrated every fall both in NY and in LA, is the baby of Meir Fenigstein - the drummer of "Kaveret". For me it's the third festival and I must say that there's always a real sense of festivity there. Films are showing in front of full or almost full houses, there are discussions after each film with the director/actor/actress/writer - whoever makes it to LA, and the films are sometimes even good! I loved "Etz hadomim tafus" and enjoyed most of "Chole ahava beshikun gimmel". The last three film festivals here took place in theaters that show only foreign or off-mainstream movies. There aren't many theaters like those in the city of Hollywood that is dominated by zillion theaters that screen only "Forest Gump"s and "Jurassic Park"s. Maybe one day these theaters will screen Israeli films not in a framework of a festival, but commercially, like they do French, Italian, Mexican or Chinese films. Maybe.

That's all for now. Happy Hanukah,
Tamir

P.S. I have an interesting update. I was just told that Gila Almagor announced in the final gala evening of the festival that "Etz hadomim tafus" will screen commercially in LA. Splendid.