

“I give you three months”

Blog Toine van Teeffelen

A passport control is normally a formal encounter, a rule-governed bureaucratic transaction.

At the Allenby Bridge, entering from Jordan, I recently handed over my passport to an Israeli functionary behind glass. He asked me to sit down in a designated area. Sitting down at Allenby is customary for my ‘category’ of visitors, internationals married with a Palestinian West Bank ID holder. How long one waits differs, from half an hour to about two hours, in my experience.

After half an hour a man came to me handing back the passport.

“I give you three months,” he told me in the manner of a teacher happy to give a good mark to his pupil.

The phrase hit me. It somehow constructed in five words, without my consent, an informal relationship. When I told my wife back home, she recognized the language and had to laugh wryly.

What happened, language-wise?

The pronoun ‘I’ makes the functionary stand for the state, or the authority and power of a state. It personalizes a formal relationship.

The verb ‘giving’ emphasizes this personalization: ‘I give’ suggests a friendly gesture. The object clause ‘three months’ popularizes the relation. It avoids mentioning the formal visa document.

In a way, the “three months” ‘quotes’ from informal conversations among visitors to the West Bank about the question: “How many months did you get?” It is common knowledge among visitors to Israel or West Bank (Gaza is usually out of reach altogether) that three months is the maximum for a tourist visa. Especially when visiting the West Bank, travelers may receive a few weeks or days.

With this knowledge, the “I give you three months,” sounded like a personal act of generosity. The phrase was staged in the friendly tone of “This is the best I can give”, the functionary seemingly having my best interest at heart.

On the background was the darker echo: “I could have given you less than three months, if I wanted.”

The informality was accentuated by the seemingly casual nature of the meeting outside the office desk. The functionary wore also informally, in the Israeli style.

With the five words, our relationship was put on a different footing. A bureaucratic rule-dominated discourse was infiltrated by the informal personal discourse of handing out a

favor, further emphasized by the informality which is part of what many call the 'Israeli' approach. The discourse suggests power equality while actually hiding the highly unequal relationship at the border where decisions are made about entry and visa lengths.

Inherent to an informal, patronizing relationship is the possibility of requesting a reciprocal deed, a favor in response to a favor.

The functionary continued: "So renew after three months." I responded that after three months I would travel abroad. "As long as you do not travel through Tel Aviv."

The clause "as long as" suggests a condition, even a warning. Not traveling through Tel Aviv is in fact an informal rule for my 'category', rather grudgingly relayed to me a year ago by the local PNA Ministry of Interior office in Bethlehem. The condition is not mentioned in written documents. Why it is communicated orally is anyone's guess. Perhaps because it contradicts international legal rules; perhaps because Israel wants to avoid answering unwelcome questions by European governments; perhaps because the rule is tested out and if met without resistance may be formalized in due time?

I remember that over ten years ago new rules at the Jerusalem checkpoints used to be tested out like trial balloons. For a long time our children were able to enter Jerusalem until the rule that children below 16 could do so was changed. Over many years and with many inconsistencies, a new rule was applied that each and everybody, including babies, needed a permit to enter Jerusalem.

Informal discourse helps informal rules to get introduced, without accountability.

Patronizing informal discourse is intentionally applied in numerous instances at international and local 'crossings' and in other bureaucratic settings, and also in interrogation centers and prisons, as part of the routine occupation. The broader context of occupation suggests that Palestinians, and those related to them, do not have rights but can find favors in the form of for instance permits. Permits are withheld or withdrawn when the recipient does not fulfill the other side of the bargain.

Mind also the broader *cotext*. The micro discourse of this governmental representative resonates the macro discourse of occupational friendly gestures, such as the representation of political negotiations in official Israeli media language. Think about the metaphors of positive self-presentation in which Israel is a friendly person (no country has been so much personalized in discourse as Israel, in the service of attracting narrative identification): the 'generous offer', the "we'll make you a deal", the "we'll ease the restrictions," and so on. But only when the other party is reasonable, reciprocates, does not resist, complies with the context of occupation. Otherwise there is "no party to talk to."

In this way the informal discourse at crossing points or in politics and media, helps to background international rules and legal codes. Discursive soft power complements the practice of hard power.

My wife has her own experiences with the language of 'generosity'. During the second Intifada, in 2002, a group of Israeli soldiers came and entered our house in Bethlehem for a search. My wife started a discussion. A soldier said: "We gave you 96%". My wife, furious: "We want 100%!"

Bethlehem, summer 2019