

Can We Talk?

BY [ABIGAIL PICKUS](#) July 3, 2012, 12:00 am



This time the cabbie's name was Mordechai. [FREE SIGN UP!](#)
Moti for short.

"Ask me anything," he said from behind the wheel, after he so graciously accommodated me by stubbing out his cigarette.

It turns out he's a Jerusalemite. Born and raised. Grew up in Bakka, in fact. That's right, on Reuven Street, that wide boulevard with the trees planted down the middle.

"Really," he urged me, "Ask away. Anything."

I thought for a moment. Where to begin?

Where are we before birth and where do we go after death? And in between, why do we waste so much time worrying?

Oh, and where is my husband already? At a little café somewhere far away (from me) reading Alan Watts, playing air keytar and dreaming of Goldenberg's Peanut Chews?

"Ok," I said, breathing only through my mouth so as not to inhale any lingering smoke. "What's the story behind all of those windmills?"

We had just passed a yard full of windmills of all shapes and sizes. It reminded me of this one house in Chicago that's famous for its extravagant Christmas decorations with tourists coming from near and far just to check out the flashing reindeer and lights show.

But this display of windmills is there year round. I know because I pass by a lot and each time wish I had my own personal cabbie to answer my innermost questions.

But Moti seemed stumped. He didn't know about the windmills, but he corrected my Hebrew: it's tachanat ruach. Just in case you ever find yourself wandering around Israel and need to find the nearest windmill.

"No really," he continued. "You can ask me anything."

He handed me his card and urged me to call.

"You know, let's say you're going to buy a refrigerator and you need some advice," he said. "Or even if you just want to talk."

I didn't want to talk. You know why? Because everyone else in this country is doing such a good job of it already.

Take the man ahead of me at the checkout line at the grocery store who argued over every single purchase and, even after he'd paid, when the rest of us would have just gone home already, managed to make a public nuisance of himself by standing over the cashier, receipt in hand, the better to review everything with a fine tooth (and accusatory) comb.

"That cheese was 12.75 shekel, not 13.25 as you rang it up. Sure, that's only half a shekel, but half a shekel isn't nothing. Everything adds up."

"He's right!" said the lady behind me, which was curious since because of this man, we had been at a standstill for nearly 15 minutes.

"You need to learn how to read better. Everything I rang up was the real price," the cashier said, having finally run out of patience, and with one sweep of the hand sent him off to argue with someone else.

But maybe it's not just Israelis. Maybe it's Jews.

Take the President's Conference, that big conference to end all conferences organized by Israeli President Shimon Peres.

It's stressful going to the President's Conference because it's just one huge mass of Jewmanity all talking at once. And there aren't enough snacks.

And everyone seems to congregate in very important little huddles. You know, to discuss Peoplehood. And the Future. Without forgetting the past, of course.

This reminds me of Hillel Halkin's introduction to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman: "Jews have perhaps always been a highly verbal people," he writes. "This astonishing verbosity ... was at once the greatest strength and the ultimate pathology of Eastern European Jewish life. Reviled, ghettoized, impoverished, powerless, [Sholem Aleichem's] Jews have only one weapon: the power of speech."

So how to explain that over 100 years later, on a sun-kissed dot of land surrounded by hostile nations, when we're no longer so ghettoized, impoverished or powerless — while still managing to be reviled — we're still talking so gosh darn much?

"Hello, little babies," I say to my friend's adorable 8-month-old twins seated side by side in a double stroller. I kiss their sweet, soft bellies and sing them "Slip Sliding Away" by Paul Simon (to remind them that life isn't always so great) and play peek-a-book, which Israelis call "cuckoo."

"Ask me anything," I whisper. "Anything at all. Like a question about the Jewish people. Or Emily Dickinson. I love questions about Emily Dickinson."

"What strange language is she speaking to you in?" their father says to them in their native Hebrew.

But they don't mind.

Soon enough they'll have words and will join the incessant chatter of their incessantly chatty people. Maybe they will even go to important Jewish conferences.

In the meantime, they're still straddling that place before language, where the only thing that matters is love.

Abigail Pickus' column appears the first week of the month.