

It's never the wrong time to meet ordinary people living in an extraordinary place and to be reminded of all that is good, at times even holy, in that place. That's exactly what Bret Lott does in *Gather the Olives*, a memoir of his experiences in Israel of people, places, and food, told in an engaging voice by turns wondrous, charming, tender, humorous and, as are the people we meet along the way, fully, deeply human.

—**Richard Chess**, author of *Love Nailed to the Doorpost*

How to respond to a book about Israel published in a time of war and division that is not about terrorists, genocide, rape, hostages, bombs, and failed leadership? As a Jew who spends an inordinate amount of each day consumed with the daily tragedies, I approached warily. This is what I found: Bret Lott has written a book of heart, and kindness, with gorgeous prose that reminds us of the beauty of the land, and the value of life. He eschews stereotypes, celebrates humanity and, without sentimentality, gives us hope for the future. This is the travelogue that I would recommend to any of my friends heading to—or thinking about—that part of the world. Even now. Especially now.

—**Richard Michelson**, National Jewish Book Award Winner

Olives, yes, but *za'atar* and cherries, earthy cheeses, lemon-mint water, and so many more gifts from friends and strangers are gathered here at this most capacious table. Bret Lott writes with the eye of a Dutch Master, the soul of a poet, and a heart that loves people in all their unconventional beauty and prickly complexity. Every daily walk, chance meeting, close call, and shared meal is sensually observed, wide open to wonder, and tuned to the ways hope might be found in the most fragile, yet soul-sustaining moments.

—**Lia Purpura**, author of *All the Fierce Tethers*

In *Gather the Olives*, his memoir of his years in the Holy Land, Bret Lott does what seems almost impossible to do. He offers us taste after taste of the food—gift after gift—he was invited to share with friends over the years: the Shabat feasts, fresh fruit—especially those cherries--and vegetables and wine (including even *treif* bacon and ribs at times). But he offers other tastes as well: the landscapes of Nazareth and Bethlehem and Jerusalem, but also Petra and the Golan Heights from the summit. And—most importantly—he gives us the taste of real friendship, and the extraordinary generosity of those Israeli doctors along the Syrian borders caring for Syrian soldiers and mothers and children. As he himself so eloquently phrases it, “Somehow, in this tablespoonful of green and bitter herbs mixed with other spices and seeds, I am partaking of the history of my faith, tasting time and place and salvation.” This book is a must read.

—**Paul Mariani**, University Professor of English emeritus, Boston College

To behold *Gather the Olives* is to admire Bret Lott as a painter of words growing out of the Holy soil. Bret’s stories cultivate the fecund, but fractured, earth of generational memories, to remind us of what writing can do, and of what writing can become. Every word is to be savored in this poignant American memoir excavated in Israel, a conflicted land of surprising encounters, of indelible generosity, and of miraculous abundance.

—**Makoto Fujimura**, artist and author of *Art+Faith: A Theology of Making*

Gather  
the  
Olives

## Books by Bret Lott

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*A Dream of Old Leaves*

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*Letters and Life*

BRET LOTT

Gather  
the  
Olives

On Food and Hope and the Holy Land

S L / . N T  
B O O K S

GATHER THE OLIVES

On Food and Hope and the Holy Land

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Slant Books

P.O. Box 60295

Seattle, WA 98160

[www.slantbooks.org](http://www.slantbooks.org)

*Cataloguing-in-Publication data:*

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Names: Lott, Bret

Title: Gather the olives: on food and hope and the holy land / Bret Lott

Description: Seattle, WA: Slant Books, 2024

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-63982-163-1 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-63982-162-4 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-63982-164-8 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Cooking, Mediterranean | Food--Israel | Food habits--Israel | Israel--Description and travel

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For Melanie, as ever and always

For he satisfies the longing soul,  
and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

Psalm 107:9

They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;  
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—  
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,  
the young of the flocks and herds.  
They will be like a well-watered garden  
and they will sorrow no more.

Jeremiah 31:12

We must eat.

M. F. K. Fisher

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# A Word

I TURNED THIS BOOK IN to the publisher in the summer of 2023. Then came the horrors of October 7th and after.

Immediately these pages became missives from Before, and now, as you read these words, they are operating in the After.

There is no going back.

Yet here is a book. It is about food, and about communion. It is about taste, and about people, and place. It is about breaking bread, and with whom we break it. My wife, Melanie, and I lived in Jerusalem for a while—five months, to be exact—and have stayed there for extended periods for, at last count, a half dozen times. We have traveled to the West Bank, to East Jerusalem, and to Ramallah. We have been to one side and the other of the wall, and found good and beautiful people on both. But let it be known that I am no expert on Israel, no professional guide or apologist or even dilettante. Please don't imagine this will be anything like a cookbook or a list of suggested tours.

Or a book on war, barbarity, retribution or responses measured or disproportionate. It is not a book on social justice, or political stance, or a solving of the Middle East situation, one state or two state or war or peace protracted or paused. By the time you read these words, the world will have moved forward into realms unknown, and even these terms I've paraded about just now will seem antiquated because of whatever new news will have arrived via the predictable ways news of the world arrives.

This is a book about another story to this place. One of people to people, and the way, when sharing a meal, whether cherries from a roadside stand or pork ribs sauced and grilled on the stoop of an Arabic apartment, there can be peace.

## GATHER THE OLIVES

We lived there, and visited, and have partaken in meals with more people through the years, Israeli and Palestinian alike, than we can count, from falafel with newfound friends at the best street-corner shawarma stand in Jerusalem's German Colony, the place set with maybe a dozen plastic chairs and a window out onto the street; to a lunch of innumerable fresh salads cluttered across a flowered plastic tablecloth in a family's home at the border with Lebanon, the father seeking to restore the Aramaic language as far and wide as he can; to a food truck hamburger at a minor-league baseball game, the diamond settled in a field of sunflowers outside Beit-Shemesh, where the ark of the covenant first came to rest after the Philistines had sent the tumor-inducing thing back to Israel on a wooden cart pulled by those straight-arrow milch cows.

We've eaten in a lot of places. And we have met good people all along the way.

This is a book about them. This is a book about their places. This is a book about their food. It is an account from Before, yes, but it is an account of the way food and place and people inform and enlighten and broaden and magnify what it means to be human.

Now that we are After, there is no going back.

But now, as forever, there is hope.

With this book, I am trying to give a glimpse of that hope. Because hope still lives.

## First Morning

I'M THE ONLY one here, and I'm hungry.

Early morning, the restaurant bright with sunlight in through the huge glass wall to the right, the other walls all calm and stoic limestone, like the rest of everything here at Mishkenot Sha'ananim. It's a guest house, though more a small private hotel than anything else, for artists and authors, musicians and thinkers staying in the city for one reason and another. The limestone walls of the hotel's single hallway—there are only a couple dozen rooms—are lined with photos of past visitors: Pablo Casals, Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, Isaac Stern, the Dalai Lama, and more.

Somehow, they let me in the place.

And this is its restaurant. Maybe twenty tables in four rows before me, each set with a crisp white tablecloth, a small vase of fresh flowers at its center. Nobody else here, save for a man in a white shirt and black pants, his back to me. He's standing at the bar/coffee station at the end of the glass wall, and he turns, the echo of my steps on the tile floor as I approach what has given me away.

He's a little older, short graying hair, shirtsleeves turned up once at the cuffs. He steps toward me, dips his head, smiles, then gestures to the empty tables with a slow sweep of his arm, a silent gameshow host introducing what might be won.

"Shalom," he finally says, the word almost a whisper for the quiet of an empty restaurant early in the morning.

"Shalom," I say, the word a little too loud out of me, and I nod. He turns, leads me into the rows, still with his hand sweeping around, and he says more words, ones I don't understand but that I know mean: The place is yours. Take any seat you want.

## GATHER THE OLIVES

I've been awake all night, the flight from Prague arriving at 4:30 in Tel Aviv this morning. I'm tired. But I am happy, and hungry, and there's a quiet course of adrenalin in me. Because I am here.

I am in Israel. I am in Jerusalem. The place of all places.

And this is when I pause to look out that huge glass wall at the view. I've already seen it from the covered porch off my room here after I'd checked in, dropped my bags, taken a shower.

But it's a view I need to see again to try and make myself believe I am really here. I am really here:

The walls of the old city itself, maybe three hundred yards away and to the left across a low rocky valley. Crenellated limestone walls still in shadow for the rising sun behind them, the walls white but streaked with age. To the right of them stand more limestone buildings—a white belltower, a blue cone roof on another white building, white buildings in a kind of cascade down the forested sides of the promontory just over there, just over there: Mount Zion itself.

That's it, all right there. Those limestone walls, that hill with its white stone buildings. Old Jerusalem, and Mt. Zion.

The man says more words to me, all of them still just as quiet, and I turn from the window to him, see him paused at a table. As quietly as I can so as not to break the spell of any of this—the light, this place, the cool emptiness of the early morning—I say, “I don't speak Hebrew.”

Our eyes meet for the first time, and he smiles, nods again, looks down at the table. “Is okay,” he says, then, “How about here?” each word given a small space before the next, and he gives another nod, this time at the table, the matter decided.

He sets the table with a napkin and utensils I only now notice he has had in his hand the whole time, pulls out a chair, and says, “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” I say, then add “Bevakasha,” one of the three or four words I've practiced before getting here: Please.

He looks up from the chair and smiles just a little wider now, his shoulders up only an instant and in the smallest way. “You speak Hebrew,” he says, and sweeps his hand to the chair for me to sit.

And now I see past him, beyond the row of tables behind him, the breakfast buffet. Wedges of cheese, shiny stainless steel bowls of fruit, baskets of pastries, more bowls and more, all lit up as though for a play, arranged just so, with white tablecloths and shiny serving spoons and two stacks of plates to the left of it all.

## FIRST MORNING

Only what appears, at first glance, a breakfast buffet in a very nice hotel.

So, this is where we begin: first morning and first meal in Jerusalem.

Once I'm seated, once the coffee has arrived—an espresso, actually, in its little cup with its saucer and little spoon, to which I nod to the waiter and say “Toda” to impress him with the fact I also know Thank you in Hebrew—and after he has asked if I would like orange juice too—“Yes,” I say, then, “Ken”: word number four—and after I take a sip of the wonderfully bitter coffee after this very long and sleepless night, then drink the whole thing in two more sips, and after I marvel yet again at the view from this table of those walls, and Mt. Zion, it is time to go to the breakfast buffet, because I am hungry.

The three tables all in a row are a still life, everything perfect. Track lighting above gives the bowls and baskets and trays all a kind of dramatic presence, and because I am the first one here, I'm afraid of wrecking it all by digging in with one of those shiny serving spoons or hacking away with a cheese knife. So I stand for a few moments, surveying it all.

Watermelon, the deep matte red of all these cubes, beside it a bowl of pale orange cantaloupe, these in cubes too, and then cubes of cool green honeydew, and pineapple, and then orange wedges and grapefruit halves. Green grapes and red grapes. Apple slices miraculously white.

And here is a bowl of dates—dates, for breakfast!—shiny and the color of teak, their skins slightly puckered. More bowls: Kalamata olives in one, deep red and glistening with oil, green olives and herbs in another, black wrinkled olives in yet another. And more bowls, one with diced vegetables—tomatoes, red peppers, cucumbers, scallions—beside one with pale pink tuna salad in a nest of lettuce leaves beside a bowl of what may very well be tabbouleh for the tight mince of green, then roasted eggplant in a marinade, each shriveled round layered into the next to make a wheel of brown and purple and green.

All these vegetables for breakfast. And tuna fish too.

Cheeses then: white and yellow and orange wedges, a small wheel crusted in what may be ash, another in peppercorns, another wheel chalky white with sprigs of herbs on top. Typical fare, I'm thinking, but still a marvel of color and arrangement, and now here's a bowl of hardboiled eggs, and a basket of croissants and sliced bread and small iced buns—but rugelach in there too, and some sort of triangle- and square-shaped puff pastries, golden brown and, it would seem, filled with something—and now another

basket with bagels, plain and sesame and salt and Everything, and a stack of halved pita the color of wheat.

Now four or five shallow bowls of cream cheeses, soft or slightly crumbly, chived or with bits of vegetables mixed in, and of course plain, perfect white. There's a wooden board with the thinnest slices of lox, bright pink trimmed with dill, beside it a row of ramekins filled with capers and slivers of red onions and chopped tomatoes. Next to them a bowl of what looks like yogurt but with herbs stirred in, a pool of green olive oil settled at its center, and then, at the end, a bowl of hummus, taupe with a sprinkle of pine nuts and some sort of green spice that seems to have sesame seeds in it, all of it drizzled with olive oil too.

I take a plate from the stack back at the beginning, spoon up some of those red cubes of watermelon, then two hardboiled eggs, a pita, and last, though I am even more afraid of breaking this spell than when I first stood and took all this in, I dig into the hummus, making certain to catch some of that oil, a touch of that green spice with its sesame seeds, and of course those pine nuts.

Why do I remember this all? Why is it, nearly twenty years after this arrival in the Holy Land, I recall the set of bowls, the light, the pool of green olive oil in that herbed yogurt, those puff pastries, the stack of pita for which, just now, I have searched for an hour to find the right word for their color in my memory, the word *wheat* only a dull imitation of what I remember as a stack of perfect pita, ready and ready?

*Laban* will be the name of that herbed yogurt-looking dish, I'll one day discover, and in my discovering discover too that everyone knows this—How could you not know this is *laban*? You've never heard of *laban*? Further confusing the matter will be that in some places the dish will be called *labneh*, that variation in names a partner to the fact the English spelling of words in Israel is something of a crapshoot, street names and buildings and towns on maps and in person oftentimes two or three different things. And yet that mix of cucumbers and peppers and scallions and tomatoes will be called, unwaveringly, Israeli Salad, and will appear at pretty much every meal we'll ever have in this country.

One day more than a year from this buffet, the mystery of how to tell what's in those shaped puff pastries will be revealed in a cafeteria at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv where I will be teaching, a gang of my grad students marshalling me through the food stations for lunch my first day there. When we come to the pastry station, and when I remark that I love

## FIRST MORNING

*burekas* (get this: they're sometimes spelled *bourekas*, but also *borekas* too), but that I can never figure out whether I'm going to get one filled with cheese or potato, the whole group freezes, looks at me opened-mouthed, agog at my naivete. Then one of them—a young man from Toronto who will years from then become an attorney back in Canada—will pull me by the elbow right up to the glass behind which sit the rows of baked goods, and tell me, “Triangles are cheese, squares are potato and, well, other things, but never cheese,” and suddenly all will be made clear, the mystery solved.

One of those cream cheeses in the array of them over there—a pure white one but with a texture a little firmer, a touch crumbly—I will one day discover is called Bulgarian cream cheese, and will become my everlasting favorite for the bright lemony bite to it, its presence schmearred on a nice polite sesame bagel the perfect combination.

But none of this is available to me at this moment, here in an empty restaurant, my plate filled with those cubes of watermelon, those two eggs, a pita, and hummus.

I know hummus. I know watermelon, and eggs, and pita the color of pita.

But why do I recall this all?

Maybe the really real question is, Why do I want to know why I recall this in the first place?

Can't I just enjoy this breakfast, all these years later, a breakfast after an overnight flight from Prague where I've spent two weeks teaching at a writer's conference, before me two more weeks of teaching here in Jerusalem, this time teachers of English and literature sponsored by the U.S. State Department?

Can't I just partake of God's bounty here, in His city? Now, as I write this?

The answer: I put my fork to the first cube of that red red watermelon, a deep and memorable red that will last all these years and more for the promise of it, the crisp cold sweet of it about to arrive, and I bite in.

And oh the beauty of that first taste of Israel, the cool of it, the sweetness, the promise fulfilled, and I look up from the plate in this restaurant to the majesty of those walls across the little valley—not much more than a ravine—between us, and the cascade of low white buildings on the forested sides of Mt. Zion, atop it that belltower, that blue round roof.

“Is everything good?” the waiter quietly says, suddenly here beside me. He’s still smiling, nods his head, his hands on his hips now, his once-turned cuffs crisp, sharp. “Perhaps more coffee?”

“Everything is great,” I say, and glance down at my plate, then back up. “Can I have a cappuccino?”

“Of course,” he says, and nods again, reaches to the empty espresso cup and saucer and takes it, nods again.

“Toda,” I say, and he says, “Bevakasha,” and smiles, heads away.

A tear off the pita next, a drag with it in the hummus and olive oil and pine nuts and that green spice, all of it creamy, and savory, and chewy, and beautiful, the earth and all its bounty here at once, and already the waiter is back, sets the cappuccino down, the foam in a leaf pattern.

“Toda,” I say yet again, and now the truth of how little of the language I have is fully revealed, me just a dumb automaton. But the waiter still smiles, says, “Bevakasha,” and nods, starts to turn.

So to cover my dullness, to make it seem maybe I might be a little more engaging—actually, maybe a little smarter than I really am—I say, “So bevakasha means please and you’re welcome both?”

He turns back to me, gives a small shrug. “Ken,” he says, still as quiet as ever. Then he puts a hand to the chair across from me, the other hand on his hip, crosses one foot over the other, the toe of his shoe to the ground, like a farmer leaning on a rake to take a break.

He’s going to stay for a moment or so, but I don’t mind. There is no one else here. It is early morning in Jerusalem. Here on my plate is the bounty of this place, and I make my confession.

“This is my first time here,” I say. “In Israel. And I’ve already used up all the words I know,” and I give a small laugh.

He shrugs, that hand at his hip out now, palm up. He dips his head one way and the other. “You are doing good,” he says, still in that near-whisper, still with that space between each word: You. Are. Doing. Good. He puts the hand back to his hip, dips his head again, and says, “You can use other words.” He pauses, shrugs. “In Arabic, shukran mean thank you. You are welcome, afwan.” He shrugs again. “Is different way to say.” He smiles.

I smile, nod.

Something has happened here. Something good. But it will take a while before I can see what it is.

## FIRST MORNING

Maybe not until now, writing this down, at the beginning of this book about food and place and people, and being a human, and wondering why I remember this all.

I know something more now, sitting at my table with this cappuccino, this plate of watermelon and eggs and pita and hummus. Something that has made this new world in which I have arrived even larger but, strangely, even smaller with the dimbulb recognition there are two languages here.

*Za'atar* is the name of the green spice with sesame seeds sprinkled across the hummus, I will one day find out. It's the lingering taste I taste here in the midst of learning these new words; it's what has given the creamy hummus its earthy sense, the forest I can taste just above its lemon hint. It is the *here* of here I can still taste.

I lift up the cappuccino, hold it in a kind of toast to its arrival. "Shukran," I say.

"Afwan," he nods, and makes yet again the sweeping gesture with his arm to the table, and the food before me, and then he is gone.

I take a sip: warm, bitter, soft.

Here are the walls of Jerusalem. Here is Mt. Zion. Here are new words.

I take another tear of the pita, another dab at the hummus. I take another taste of here.