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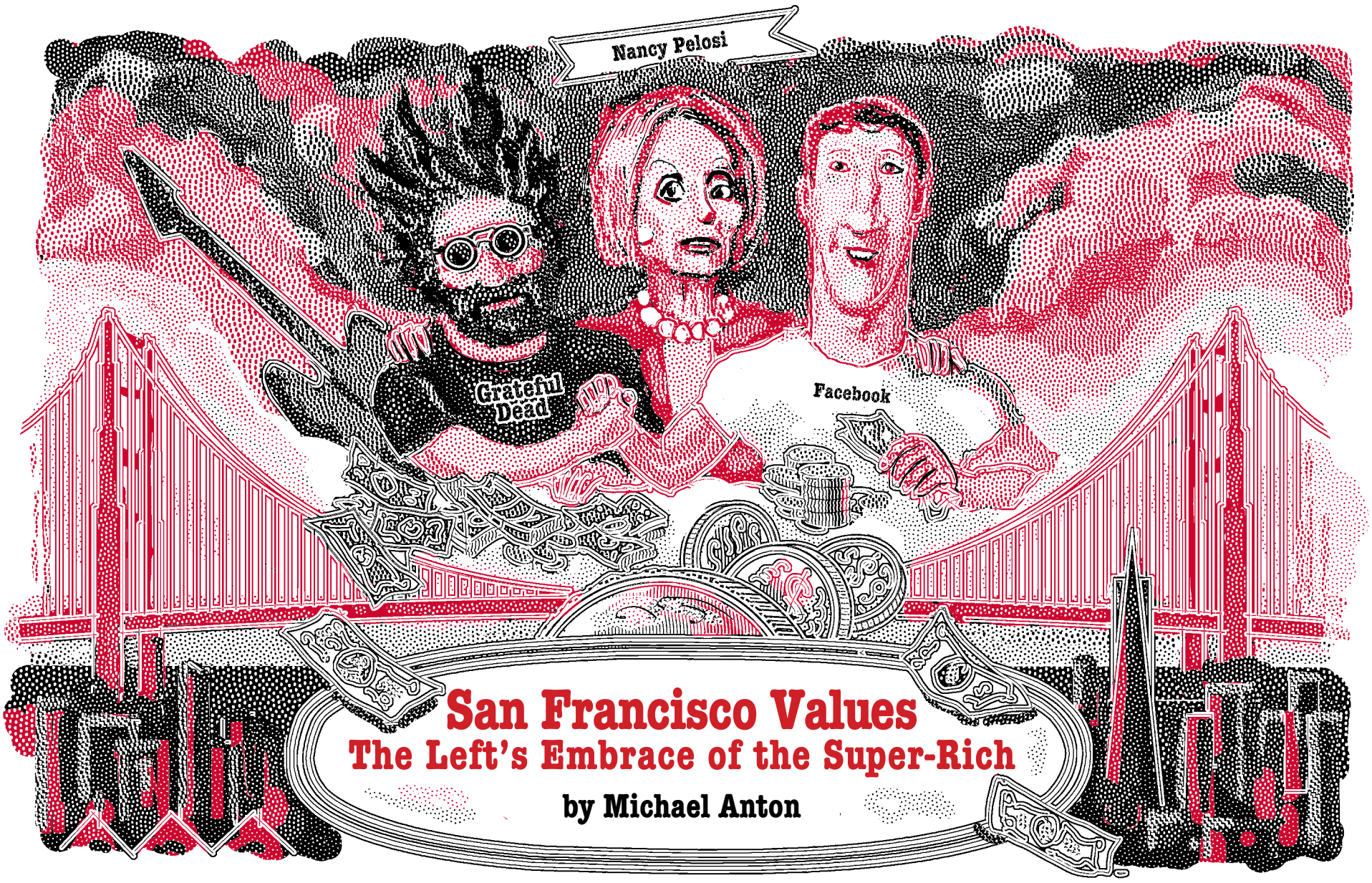

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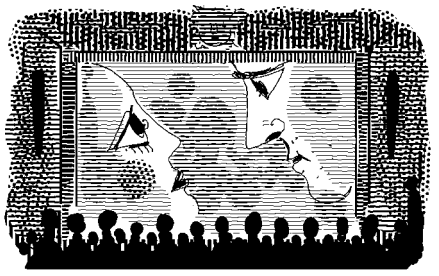

In Our Guts

In october 2011, an israeli soldier named Gilad Schalit returned home after five years of captivity at the hands of Hamas. His release, in exchange for over 1,000 Palestinian and other Arab prisoners, was the result of a prolonged negotiation that was highly controversial on both sides. The following year, a smaller controversy arose in Israel over a popular TV series that, according to critics, blurred the line between entertainment and real life by dramatizing a similar event.

The Hebrew title of that series is *Hatufim*, meaning "Abductees." Called *Prisoners of War* in English, the show lasted only two seasons, and while it is not well known in the United States, quite a few Americans know that Gideon Raff, the creator of *Prisoners of War*, also helped to create our own popular TV series *Homeland*. Today Raff is one of nine executive producers of *Homeland* and is said to be planning a third season of *Prisoners of War*. He must be an adaptable sort, because although these two programs are alike in blurring the line between entertainment and real life, there is a world of difference between how they do it, and why.

Though a critic of the Israeli show, Moran Sharir of the newspaper *Haaretz* admitted that the program had a powerful impact: using the Yiddish word for guts, he wrote that *Prisoners of War* "talks to the audience's *kishkes*." The same could be said for *Homeland*. But that raises a question: what do these two series reveal about the *kishkes* of 21st-century Americans and Israelis?

Good Timing

Now in its fifth season on the Showtime cable channel, *Homeland* is straining hard to connect two disparate storylines. The first is the psychodrama of the main character, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), a CIA agent lately discharged, who suffers from bipolar disorder and a chronic inability to sustain ordinary emotional ties. The second is a heart-stopping thrill-ride through the latest developments in America's war with such bloodthirsty jihadist movements as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and now ISIS.

Discussed in this essay:

Prisoners of War, created by Gideon Raff. Keshet Media Group

Homeland, developed by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa. Showtime Networks

At the time of this writing, Carrie's psychodrama is following the same trajectory as in previous seasons: desperate to solve a looming terrorist conspiracy, she is letting herself fly high in her manic phase, knowing full well that the solution will come to her in a brilliant stroke just as her mood peaks and she plunges back into depression. The thrill-ride part is less predictable, because the conflict it tracks has gotten bloodier, costlier, and more politically divisive than many Americans expected four years ago, when *Homeland* made its debut. Back then, on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, America's efforts at counter-terrorism did not seem entirely in vain: Navy Seals had taken out Osama bin Laden; President Obama was downsizing the "global war on terror" to a mere "war with Al-Qaeda"; and the troops were coming home from Iraq.

That auspicious timing helped make *Homeland* a hit. During the first three seasons, the two storylines were strongly connected through Carrie's convoluted romance with Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), a U.S. Marine held captive for eight years by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In the pilot episode Brody is released, welcomed home as a war hero, and vetted for signs of having been "turned." Carrie's CIA and military colleagues are persuaded of his loyalty, but she is not.

Over time, we learn that Brody is a secret convert to Islam and that he spent part of his captivity tutoring Issa, the young son of his captor. Through flashbacks, we see Brody growing fond of Issa, only to witness his death in an American drone attack. These details make us more sympathetic toward Brody, but also more suspicious of him. Carrie gradually uncovers this backstory while falling in love. So her feelings are even more mixed than ours.

Superficial Suspense

This is all very entertaining. Carrie's freaky mood swings, the murky schemes and fiery skirmishes of terrorists and counter-terrorists, the *Spy vs. Spy* love affair—these ingredients, deftly mixed against a flashy, up-to-date backdrop of turmoil in the Middle East, keep viewers hooked.

But while some TV series rise to the level of art, some do not. A good test is whether a series is worth watching more than once. Recently a friend who had lately discovered *Homeland* invited me to watch a couple of old episodes. My friend, who had never seen the show before, was enthralled. But I soon realized that this series is held aloft entirely by suspense. Lose that, and the whole soufflé collapses into a soggy pudding.

My second viewing also revealed the utter superficiality of the thrill-ride. Here is one director's account of the type of research conducted by her and her colleagues:

> We all went to the CIA, which happens every season…we meet in an incredible…building in Georgetown and all these incredible people come and speak to us about every issue that they're dealing with. Whether it's cyberterrorism, narcoterrorism, ISIS, and it's shocking and kind of horrifying and fascinating and all of that.

This is pretty much the reaction *Homeland* seeks to elicit in us. The writers, directors, and producers milk the headlines for subplots and atmospherics that evoke the shock, horror, and fascination of real events; but their true focus is not the volatile situation in the Middle East. It is the volatile emotional life of the show's heroine.

This is evident in the current season, which opens with Carrie living in Berlin with her daughter and new boyfriend, heading up security for a German philanthropist. This quiet life comes to an end when, during a visit to a Syrian refugee camp on the Lebanese border, she saves her boss from a terrorist attack. Discovering that the attack was actually aimed at her, Carrie jettisons child and mate, and morphs back into the Edvard Munch painting we all know and love.

Only this time there is no strong connection between the psychodrama and the pyrotechnics. Instead of the crazy-brave defender of America and its allies, Carrie is now the crazy-brave defender of *herself*. There's a subplot dealing with the National Security Agency's spying in Germany, and a passing allusion to the refugee crisis in Europe. But whenever the star makes her entrance, these urgent matters are forgotten, and the only suspense is about whether, or when, she and her fellow spy Peter Quinn (Rupert Friend) will jump each other's bones.

Personally, I'm not thrumming with excitement over that one. But I fear many Americans are. Hence the problem: *Homeland* is about a war that most Americans don't want to think about—and don't *have* to think about, because the people fighting it constitute almost a separate caste in our society. Carrie's psychodrama takes center stage because *Homeland* appeals to an audience that is self-absorbed, uninterested in the fate of real soldiers, and chronically ill informed about the rest of the world.

Conspiracy of Silence

By contrast, *Prisoners of War* is entertaining and suspenseful, as befits a series that became the most watched program in the history of Israeli television, but it is much more. Indeed, it is worth watching many times, because along with being an important reflection of its society, it is a work of art.

When it comes to conflict with violent jihadist movements, Israel faces circumstances very different from America's. The conflict is closer to home and fought by a military based on universal conscription, including women and minorities (excepting some religious Jews and most Arabs). There is greater familiarity, bred of proximity and danger, with Arab neighbors and adversaries. And there are many more veterans (virtually everyone), including 1,500 former POWs, 90% of whom are estimated by Zahava Solomon, a professor at Tel Aviv University, to suffer some form of post-traumatic stress.

For years there was a conspiracy of silence about the plight of returned POWs. One reason for the silence was a political backlash against negotiations that over time, in exchange for a few dozen Israeli POWs, had set free thousands of Palestinian and other Arab captives. When some of those freed carried out new attacks, the POWs were blamed. Another reason was the fear, highlighted in *Homeland*, that some returning POWs had been brainwashed or coerced into committing treason.

Both of these factors are present in *Prisoners of War*. The backlash is mentioned in the first season, if only in passing. The fear of treason is the centerpiece of season two, which imitates *Homeland* in trying to be more action-packed. Unfortunately, this makes the second season less compelling than the first, because it is hard for a relatively low-budget Israeli production to compete with Hollywood in the manufacture of gun battles, car chases, and explosions.

When I call *Prisoners of War* a work of art, I am thinking mainly of the first season, which tackles the most vexing cause of the conspiracy of silence surrounding returned POWs in Israel: the agonizing shame of soldiers who did not live up to a code that expects them to fight to the death rather than be taken prisoner. As noted by Dr. Solomon, who in 1997 was one of the first people to bring this taboo to light, the model for this code is Uri Ilan, who committed suicide in Syrian captivity in 1955, leaving behind a note saying, "*Lo bagadeti*" (I did not betray).

Solomon's work with traumatized former POWs led to the creation of an organization called Erim Balaila (Awake at Night), as well as to a collaboration with Gideon Raff on the first season of *Prisoners of War*. As Raff stated in a 2012 interview, "In *Hatufim*, I wanted to show broken soldiers, broken masculinity."

There is no broken masculinity in *Homeland*. Early on, we catch a glimpse of Brody emerging wild-eyed and filthy from solitary confinement, followed by one sexual fumble with his wife and a couple of nightmares. But as Raff himself has noted, "In *Homeland*, Brody comes back buffer, a poster boy." In part, this is because Damian Lewis's emotional range extends from "A" for arrogant to "B" for bemused. But Lewis got the part because Hollywood likes its soldiers to be tough, macho, and on a hair-trigger—the same qualities Carrie finds alluring. Far more impressive are the searing, soulful performances of Ishai Golan (as Uri Zach), Yoram Toledano (as Nimrod Klein), and Assi Cohen (as Amiel Ben-Horin) in *Prisoners of War*.

Human Nature

The two who are released, Uri and Nimrod, are so unmanned by physical and psychological torture that every setback in their re-entry is like salt in an open wound. Uri is a gentle soul whose mental pain is boosted by his captors when they arrange for him to see an Israeli tabloid reporting that his fiancée, Nurit (Mili Avital), has married his brother. Upon his return, Uri is not only manhandled by Israeli intelligence but also subjected to a surreal charade in which Nurit and his family pretend that she has been waiting for him.

Meanwhile, Nimrod is greeted by his wife, Talia (Yael Abecassis), whose fidelity and devotion to the cause of rescuing her husband have made her a national celebrity. From an American perspective it might be objected that Nurit and Talia are "just" wives and mothers—not until season two does *Prisoners of War* include a female character with a career comparable to Carrie's. But this doesn't matter, any more than it matters in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (the 1946 classic about soldiers returning from World War II) that Myrna Loy is "just" a wife and mother. What matters is the wisdom of her welcome.

Talia's welcome is not wise, because she has so idealized her strong, handsome husband that she is unable to cope with what captivity has done to him. Of all the characters in *Prisoners of War,* Nimrod is the least likely to show up on an American movie or TV screen, because, despite his heroic looks, he frequently behaves like a whimpering child. Not only that, but Nimrod's torment is not just that of a victim. Among the memories that disturb his sleep and threaten his sanity, the most traumatic is of being ordered to beat his fellow prisoners—and of obeying those orders to the point of delivering what he thinks is a death blow to the third POW, Amiel.

This is the crucial dimension to Nimrod's character—not just shame, though that is bad enough, but also guilt. More boldly than its American counterpart, *Prisoners of War* also portrays those who imprison and torture others. The man who controls the fate of our three Israeli POWs while in prison is Jamal Agrabiya, who we learn over the course of both seasons is an Arab Israeli who was himself captured by the Israelis and turned, more through threat than persuasion, into their agent. Played with great finesse by Salim Dau, Jamal is a living example of how the damage done by torture continues to spread in the lives of both victims and perpetrators—a "cancer of the soul," Dr. Solomon calls it.

The best thing about season one of *Prisoners of War* is its refusal to chase headlines. Not only does it contain very few specific references to current events, it also contains only minimal references to the Arab-Israeli conflict itself. Because of this, it transcends its particular setting and becomes something greater—a timeless commentary on what is worst and best in human nature.