

You WERE Here!

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At the entrance of Jaffa's Old Port, next to the old warehouses now converted into a series of harbour cafes, boutiques, and exhibition halls, the visitor is greeted with a trilingual "Jaffa Port Map", a wall map guiding the tourist/visitor to the landmarks of the zone. Warehouse One. Warehouse Two. Central Piazza. Steimetzky. Toilets. The Lighthouse. More Toilets. Fishing Arena. At the heart of this map comes a shocking announcement. In English, "You Are Here!" In Hebrew, Ata Nimtzah Kahn ("You Are Here!"). In Arabic, nota bene, Kunta Huna ("You WERE Here!").

Is this a case of mistaken translation? Israeli official signposts are notorious for their massacre of the Arabic language. Often, Israeli graduates of Arabic classes are entrusted with the task of inserting equivalents of Hebrew and English signs. Frequently these are Arabic renditions of Biblical sites, or Hebraization of Arabic local names or, sometimes, designations for Palestinian villages and towns as they should sound in Arabic. My favourite is the sign for the village of Kharbata on the road to the Latroun triangle. It simply reads, خربطة, which means roughly—"A scrambled mess". A very appropriate term for this whole process of naming.

In this case however there is more to it than meets the eye. And who is the author of this wicked signpost? Could it be a mistake by a novice scribe who got their tenses mixed up? I doubt it, since all the other references in the map are correctly translated in perfectly elegant Arabic script—not the usual kharbata. Furthermore the sign is located at the entrance to the old city—converted in the seventies into a gentrified artists colony. This is where Jaffa exiles on a visit to their ancestral homes often begin their melancholic "return" nostalgia, looking for the residue of their old houses in the alleys of the Nuzha, Ajami, and

Jaballiyeh quarters. In the summer they come in droves from Jerusalem, Ramallah, Amman and the Gulf.

You are here. You might be here physically passing in your melancholic journey. But in reality you WERE here, you miserable bastard. You are not here anymore. A cunning greeting for the vanquished Jaffaites.

