

The American in Us

by [Steven Sher](#) (October 2019)



Woman Committing Suicide, George Cruikshank

1.

From the start, our body posture and manner of speech seem odd to the native eye and ear. We are easy to pick out: how we pitch our points and stretch our words, slur the syllables of our new tongue, butchering clotted consonants, paralyzing lungs. Our thinking

gives us away if one probes a bit more: how we navigate crowds inside the *shuk*, darting around carts, slipping through a seam between shoppers. Sure we are vigilant regarding noise and won't hesitate to hurl our complaints at the late night offenders milling about like moths drawn to lamplight, taking over the small park on our block—every word amplified by the late hour, punctuated by bursts of shouting and laughter you can't let pass—acting like Americans.

2.

Weeks of heat like raw emotion simmer beneath these steep hills, mold this holy city. On the hottest of days despair breaks loose. We hear about the neighbor's daughter who always sat alone smoking, nursing a beer in the courtyard, ignoring our greetings when we passed through to our apartment—how she jumped from a roof to her death.

If you ignore the desperate measures, if you try to deny the source of pain, this is the end you can expect—except in America one is equally likely to pick up a gun and start shooting up a school or mall as to kill himself for the despair growing there wants to wade into the crowd,

striving to be democratic, taking random aim.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Brooklyn-born Steven Sher has lived in Jerusalem since 2012. His latest (16th) book is *Contestable Truths, Incontestable Lies* (Dos Madres Press, 2019). His work has appeared widely since the 1970s. Recent appearances range from *Veils, Halos & Shackles: International Poetry on the Oppression and Empowerment of Women* to *Mizmor Anthology* to the forthcoming *New Voices: Contemporary Writers Confronting The Holocaust*. Last year he received the Glenna Luschei Distinguished Poet Award, headlining the 35th annual San Luis Obispo Poetry Festival. Visit him on his [website](#).

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