

Out There

Slick Trick at Patt Junction

By Robby Berman

"Fill it up, please."

No doubt the word "please" and waving my credit card like a frond identified me as a sucker. The attendant at the Patt Junction gas station in Jerusalem stuck the nozzle into the rear end of my car and offered to check my oil. Through the crack formed by the lifted hood he yelled, "It's half empty!"

"Put it on my card!" I yelled back.

That was Saturday night.

I was back on Tuesday. A different attendant checked my oil and showed me a dry dipstick. Thinking I had a serious oil leak, I rushed to my Honda mechanic. Like a nervous patient waiting for the doctor's diagnosis, I gritted my teeth trying to estimate from his facial expression how serious the situation was. He looked at me with disgust.

"How long have you been in Israel?"

"Eight years," I said sheepishly.

"Eight years and you don't know that they lie to your face? Shame on you! You have twice the oil you should have and it's damaging your engine."

Son-of-a-bitch! That meant they'd lied to me Saturday night and again today. I paid him to siphon off the extra oil and raced to my appointments, already late.

On Thursday I was back at the gas station to demand a refund for the oil. But first I filled up on gas. A third attendant asked the all-too-familiar question. Out of curiosity, I agreed. He showed me a dry dipstick. Now

I'm no idiot, but I swear, for a split nanosecond I thought I had a serious oil leak. I slapped my naive face, reminded myself they're lying, and finally got my butt out of the car. I grabbed the dipstick and stuck it down to the bottom of the tank. It came up as wet as my little nephew Yoni's thumb.

The attendant mumbled he must have made a mistake, yet he admitted he'd been working at the gas station for three years. The conciliatory owner gave me a song and dance about oil dripping from gears and the gas station not being perfectly level. Yet he swore it would never happen again. He returned my money and yelled at his attendants. I felt like I'd made a difference.

Now, if you fill up four times at this station you get a free car wash. So I was back Saturday night. Another attendant told me I was low on oil. I'd had it.

SUNDAY MORNING I called the municipality, looking for the Better Business Bureau. Ten phone calls and three hours later they told me it's under the jurisdiction of the Industry and Trade Ministry. The ministry referred me to the Better Business Bureau.

Instead, I went to the police station at the Russian Compound. I unloaded on the detective in the Fraud Department, waiting for his indignation. It never came.

Lighting a cigarette and leaning back in his bureaucratic chair he said, "I know exactly what to do!"

Excited, I leaned forward and listened.

"Don't go back there."

Excuse me?

"Fill up at a different station."

A long pause followed. I tried to explain to him that he was missing the point. But he countered, "We can't do anything about it."

Why not? Send an unmarked car with a detective who has a naive face like mine waving a credit card like a frond and ask them to check the oil.



"We don't have the manpower for things like that," he said, dragging a puff.

At least call the owner and tell him the police are on to him and if he doesn't stop he's in big trouble.

"Oh, we don't do things like that!" he replied, shocked that I even suggested it.

"Then what kind of 'things' do you do?" I inquired.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee. Would you like some?" he said seriously.

I filed the complaint and stormed out of his office.

Rethinking my tactics, I called the Fuel Administration, the umbrella organization for gas stations. They referred me to the municipality.

That was it. It was time to pull out the big gun. Time to use the "What's your name?" weapon.

"HELLO FRAUD? Give me the officer in charge. Hello? What's your name? Ah hah. And what's your ID number? Why? Because if I don't see some action on the Patt Junction file within 24 hours I'm reporting you to the State Comptroller's Office." I don't even know what comptroller means.

The very next day I received a call from the head of the Fraud Department saying the station owner had been summoned, interrogated and warned. I felt like I'd made a difference.

A few days later I went to fill up at Patt Junction. Different attendant. He checked the car. It seemed I was missing some oil.

I've been oil-scammed in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Beersheba and Jerusalem. There have been slight variations with some attendants claiming, "I didn't say to 'add oil.' I just said you were missing some."

Most of the local hoi polloi are aware of the oil scam, and the police are indifferent to it. Now the oil scam may not be the end of moral society as we know it, but as Churchill once said, "It may be the beginning of the end." It's not corruption but complacency toward corruption that's a sign of societal decadence.

Where is the Jeremiah of our generation to warn us about the iniquities of complacency? He ain't at Patt Junction.

So here's the moral of the story. There are two dots on your car's dipstick. The oil needs to be anywhere between them. And if you're going to be lazy, at least remind the attendants to insert the dipstick down to the bottom of the tank. They tend to forget.