

When Past and Present Collide- May 5, 2006

Dear family and friends,

I am preparing for my second Shabbat here, and will spend it, not in synagogue as I did last week, but on a Ta'ayush action in Hebron, accompanying children home from school, children who are being attacked by settlers. This week's parasha reminds Jews-- "*Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh Ani Adonai Eloheihem* [You shall be holy, for I, The Lord your God, am holy]." Again, I face the question of holiness in action, in faith, in practice.

I send you an excerpt of my experience on Independence Day when I joined a tour of an "abandoned" Palestinian village, just on the outskirts of the central Jerusalem bus station, its old stones leaning up against the concrete walls of Highway One- the primary road in and out of Jerusalem- in plain sight. And utterly invisible.

Wednesday- Israeli Independence Day

Flags have been flying everywhere for days now, in preparation for this national holiday. At Judy's suggestion, I will tour an "abandoned" Palestinian village in the heart of Jerusalem, an old village whose walls abut the enormous road networks (Golda Meir Highway) that connect the settlements to the north and east of Jerusalem.

On a road behind the gas station, just across from the Central Bus Terminal, I make my way down a wide footpath to the intersection where our tour of Lifta is gathering. There are nearly thirty of us circling a young Israeli man with wild hair and soft eyes, navigating both his cell phone and the questions of the people before him. To his side, with calm and stillness, stands a Palestinian man, perhaps my age, with his granddaughter and two grandsons. They too scarcely move, awaiting the people their grandfather will shepherd on this day, to what was once his home.

"We lived together, the Jews and the Palestinians here. I lived right there, pointing down the steep hillside to the cluster of deserted homes, until I was eight years old, and then we were forced to leave."

Yet again, he tells the story of his dispossession to the gathered Israelis and foreign tourists. The grenades. The threats against those who wanted to return.

"Those who tried to return, were shot," he replies flatly in response to a question. His grandchildren stand close beside him, eyes straight ahead, not examining the gathered adults, or the

landscape. Simply standing beside their grandfather as he teaches their history, their geography.

I wonder if the Israelis were hearing this part of their history for the first time. What has prompted them to come? But my Hebrew is insufficient to ask and I can only feel grateful that they are here.

We begin the descent down the rocky slope, picking our way across the boulders and dry wadi. Half way down we stop as he tells us that one of his childhood memories was of swimming with friends in ancient pools built over 2000 years ago by the Jews who lived in the area then. The central pool and tunnels for water all carefully constructed then, are still perfectly preserved.

Rounding the turn on the narrow path, we come upon his childhood pool surrounded by ancient stone, and on this Israeli Independence Day, found it filled with Orthodox Jews swimming and picnicking in what was, for them, an abandoned landscape.

The air was thick and heavy, the sounds a combination of a distant thrum of cars speeding along the Golda Meir Highway above us and the laughter of Jewish children, descendants of those who built this pool, splashing in the water. Our guide's face remained impassive as he gazed at the adults cooking and eating, the children playing in the water, the families enjoying the balmy holiday, then he turned and continued to lead our descent into the village.

Passing by empty shells of stone, we passed ten young men standing in prayer on the roof of what had once been a home, facing out over the serene landscape as they davven.

As we enter what remains of the village, our guide points and explains to us.

"This was the grocery store," stepping aside as we pick our way through the narrow opening into the clammy stillness of long uninhabited space.

"And here," he points, as we emerge, "the elementary school, here, the olive press."

We enter the building, the remnants of the press still intact, the wheel, the pulley, the graceful arc of stone.

"Across here," he gazes outward, "the cemetery."

It is all a cemetery, I think. He is surrounded by the death of his life.

He is a member of the Reminiscence Project, this old Palestinian man, like old Jewish men and women, who in their retirement, go to high schools and colleges to tell students of their experience during the Holocaust, so they will hear it from the source. We are hearing this from the source.

"Here, we grew the etrogs for the Jews," he points to a thicket, now overgrown with bramble and weeds. An old man, traveling the pathways of his childhood, over and over again. He does not lament. He does not exhort us to do anything at all. He wants us simply to know what really happened. What we do remains up to us. He is an old man who honors his history by repeating it to everyone who wants to listen. Endurance is often the best form of resistance.

You are holy, because I, your God, am holy. How we practice holiness remains up to each of us.

Shabbat Shalom.

Sandy