

**Reflections from east Jerusalem**    May 28, 2006

"People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."

James Baldwin

This is the end of my fifth week, only another month before returning to California. I continue to move to my own rhythms-- coffee, reading the morning papers and the flood of emails from local peace groups and the international left, long walks into unfamiliar neighborhoods, spectacular fresh fruit (apricots right now) and a growing understanding of daily lives under Occupation just below the surface of ideology and history.

I am making my way through a stack of Palestine/Israeli Journals, listening in on the conversations left intellectuals and activists were having in 1999 and 2000. Their concerns and predictions were prescient and have not changed, merely become more urgent and ominous. I am also reading about the history (ies) of feminism and lesbian peace activism here-- marxist, religious, liberal, mizrachi, Palestinian etc... glimpsing women's centers and lesbian organizations taking root, coalescing, then ending, only to begin again, sparked by other women, other concerns. I am talking with aging activists, women who do not expect to see an end to occupied Palestine but who continue their commitment to the liberation of a subjugated neighboring people. I am meeting women from the next generation of activist women with different styles, questions, strategies and a powerful sense of outrage and passion. I see the realities of any semblance of ordinary life in Palestine deteriorating, punctuated by hopes that are repeatedly dashed, and most of all the sense of intensity that is so normative here, and the stunning discrepancy between the Occupation and daily life in Jerusalem.

Each morning, the daily paper is filled with ironies. Today, Ha'Aretz featured an article titled "Mixed-Marriages"-- this after the Supreme Court just denied family re-unification for Israeli/Arabs married to Palestinians-- which turned out to be an article about a stylish restaurant in Tel Aviv blending culinary flavors in a unique ways.

Each week brings announcements about an on-going series of solidarity actions with Palestinians, most of them reactive to the urgent pressures of the ubiquitous presence of the Israeli army, settler violence against children requiring accompaniment to help them get to

school, farming gutted land, re-building demolished homes, monitoring checkpoints, providing concrete services to children and families suffering the effects of the Occupation. In Israel, there is the on-going and necessary work of trying to stretch a safety net just a bit further as most welfare and social service funds are diverted to the military. And, at least in Jerusalem, there are perhaps a few hundred people who actively engage in this peace and justice work.

This week I accompanied a group of seasoned European activists here to work in the occupied territories for three months, as they traveled through East Jerusalem and the West Bank

As we entered East Jerusalem we came upon a massive sign in the midst of the nearly empty landscape, once Palestinian land, announcing Nof Jion, a Private Neighborhood in Jerusalem. Jewish Sephardic Federation House to be built by the Digal Investments and Holding Ltd. There will be a shopping center, country club, kindergarten, synagogue-- the text in English and Hebrew. Contact [www.nofzion.co.il](http://www.nofzion.co.il) Behind the sign, the Dome of the Rock glistened in the sunlight.

There is no garbage pickup in East Jerusalem even though all taxes are collected. The narrow streets have large green bins in which residents put garbage and, when it is full, burn their contents.

Part of the expansion of settlements in east Jerusalem centers on the development of Maale Adumim which is designed to restrict the development of east Jerusalem and to split the West Bank north and south. We drove into and around the settlement. In its center is a large burbling water fountain, (meters away from where Palestinians have little or no water.) The homes have an architectural sameness, punctuated by mall like large shops. The streets are wide and perfectly clean. There are 4 swimming pools, schools, centers, programs for teens, resources for kids. Everything a family might want. What's more, it is comparatively inexpensive, providing enormous incentive for families from working class, immigrants, students and those on a limited income. And the language is comfortable and benign. Maale Adumim is not a settlement. It is now merely a neighborhood of Jerusalem.

Arriving in Anata, we are greeted by Salim Shawamreh, whose home had been destroyed four times by the Israeli Army. What is different about his situation, is that the Committee Against Home Demolitions re-built it five times! This last incarnation turned his home into a peace center called Beit Arabiya, dedicated to the memories of both Rachel Corrie and Nuha Sweidan, both killed in Gaza during demolition operations. Here internationals are educated about the nature of the demolitions, the confiscation of arable land, the cruel treatment of Palestinians, the growing and unchecked violence by

settlers, the expanding system of by-pass roads and tunnels and the control of water and all natural resources.

We were warmly welcomed as we climbed down out of the bus, and entered the small dwelling where lunch was set out for us by two family women- spicy chicken, rice, cold salads, watermelon, and liters of cold drinks.

Salim sat in a white plastic chair as we ate our meal telling us about his experiences on this piece of land. They were undoubtedly words he had spoken hundreds, perhaps thousands of times over the years, words designed to personalize the abstraction of demolitions, the Israeli laws that requiring permits for building but does not issue them to Palestinians, the purposeful destruction of cherished family heirlooms and papers.

He tells his story well, is moving, passionate and fierce in this choice of language. Everyone in the room is riveted and no one moves as he speaks.

"The soldiers began to break the windows when we didn't come out right away," he says, as the sound of shattering glass fills our imaginations. "Our furniture was thrown out into the dust," as our eyes sweep around the room, filled now with stacks of plastic chairs, one plastic table and long narrow cushions upon which we are seated.

"The Red Cross gave us a tent," he goes on, "and we lived in it while we re-built, but they came again, destroyed everything, and took the tent as well. When we said we needed at least a tent to live, the army said we would need to get a permit for a tent."

"We are refusing to be enemies," he concludes. "It is good to see you here. On the ground. We hope to see a brave Israeli leader soon. One who will make peace."

Our time with him and his family is cut short because our group has been given exactly one hour to meet with four representatives of Hamas and they are eager get to Ar-ram for the conversation. The Hamas people have been very strict about the time they will make themselves available so we make our somewhat embarrassed apologies and leave. Salim says of course he understands. He turns and enters the peace center and I realize he hasn't told us where he lives now. No one thought to ask him.

We drive into Ar-Ram, the site of last week's demonstration to meet people from Hamas who are clearly eager to talk with European peace activists. We crowd into a small conference room in the Youth Development Department facing a large table with a Palestinian flag prominently displayed in its center. Within moments, four middle-aged men enter, dressed in western clothing. They are warm, charming and articulate, as each speaks about another facet of the history of Hamas

and the recent election.

" Hamas is not from another planet, one said smilingly. "We've been elected by the people. We are Palestinians."

They speak for nearly a half hour, eager for Europeans to hear their position. They repeatedly and in a variety of forms made the following points.

Israeli should have no legitimacy. Sanctions are a disaster for our people. Pressure needs to be put on the occupier. We are asked to acknowledge the legitimacy of Israel yet Israel is not required to acknowledge us. For 20 years we have been serving the Palestinian people with schools, hospitals, social services. We are a part of the struggle, a part of the people. They emphasized the legitimacy of the elections, the corruption of the PA and the people's need for a clean sweep. Europe is a real civilization, not like America. America is too new. The US does not respect humanity as evidenced by their killing of the Indians, the realities at Guantanamo.

Those were the talking points. Then they opened the floor for questions.

"What are the programs you want to put into effect now?" an Irish man asked. .

The speaker smiled ingratiatingly and said,

"Ah. The Irish. Now you understand what we are doing better than anyone."

He answered by talking vaguely about an expansion of the programs they had been providing the people for the past decades.

"What about the role of women and the religious aspects of Hamas?" one Scottish woman asked.

"Islam is about humanity. For 1400 years there have been no problems. We have all lived in harmony. Three religions in Medina. We are not, as members of Hamas, planning to impose anything on anyone."

"What about suicide attacks?"

"We are against bloodshed and respect human rights. This question should be asked of the Israelis."

When pressed for circumstance that might lead to attacks, he replied,

"We hold the Occupation responsible for whatever outcomes result."

He then spoke at length of European martyrs and zealots over the centuries.

A British academic asked,

"How exactly do you plan to govern?"

"Our priority is to reorganize our internal house. We have spent the past 20 years fighting the aggressor and now we must clean our

own house.

At precisely the end of one hour, they smiled, thanked us for coming, and left. We milled around a bit, ate from the lavish trays of food that had been put out, then walked through the streets of A-Ram back to our bus.

Reaching for legitimacy among internationals here, the skillful language used to hold the moral high ground almost, but finally didn't obscure the reality that there are, at least not yet, any clear programmatic steps Hamas is preparing to take. Right now, the Fatah/Hamas efforts to calibrate power and authority leave the left not knowing quite where to enter, how to engage, where to make their alliances. It seems like a holding pattern.

We attempted to drive directly back to Jerusalem but the bus was re-directed because that evening was the start of Jerusalem Day and security around the city was on high alert. 600,000 people were preparing to celebrate with marching bands, flags, national songs and parades, honoring the moment that military commanders Motta Gur's voice announced, "The Temple Mount is in our hands-" marking the end of the 6 day War--39 years ago.

Now, nearly 40 years later, there are 41 settlements in the Old City, nearly one for each year, with plans to develop 33 more housing units near Herod's Gate in the Moslem quarter with walls higher than the wall of the Old City in another attempt to "reclaim" all of that land. The Israeli Housing Ministry has requested a budget increase to protect settlers in East Jerusalem where 11 compounds containing 56 residential buildings that require escorting residents as they move from place to place, guarding Jewish schools, kindergartens etc. This at a time when health care is underfunded, the welfare safety net is in tatters and 1 in 3 Israelis is close to the poverty line. Nearly everywhere I walk, soldiers are casually leaning against army vehicles, smoking, chewing sunflower seeds, looking bored.

I decided not to go to Friday's demonstration in Bi'lin, as the Israeli soldiers have been ratcheting up their use of rubber bullets and tear gas in the last months, particularly, it seems, against internationals. And indeed, three women, all of them internationals were, what was described as "mildly" wounded from lobbed tear gas canisters that hit them on the head. They were hospitalized and released. I'm glad they were there. I'm relieved I wasn't. Instead I went to the Friday Women in Black vigil. Most weeks there are 25-30 women with the same signs and banners they have been using for nearly two decades. End the Occupation in English, Arabic and Hebrew. And still they stand, some, the old ones especially, sit. But they never miss a week.

These past few days, the papers here have been filled with coverage of all the political permutations of Olmert's meeting with Bush. Addressing Congress in Washington, Olmert declared,

"We extend our hand in peace to the Palestinian People," as senators and representatives gave him a standing ovation.

At the very same time that Israel's Prime Minister uttered those words, Israeli forces conducted a mid-day large-scale invasion into the heart of Ramallah. At Manara Square – Ramallah's main square, comparable to Tel-Aviv's Dizengoff Square – the soldiers opened fire and shot to death four young Palestinians.

This letter is my act of faith for today.

Salaam/Shalom,

Sandy