

Crossing all the borders

Dear family and friends,

This last letter before my return to the U.S. is a report on borders, border crossings and life on both sides of the divide. I look forward to the conversations that await me upon my return and to seeing each of you. While I have been warmly welcomed by both Israeli and Palestinian activists, I was always aware that I was visiting their lives and their reality. I have tried to make myself a faithful observer and a trustworthy translator of what I have seen, heard and felt during this intense time. Now, as I prepare to return home, I am aware of the longing to be inside my life and my realities, now expanded and deepened by this trip-- and finding skillful ways of honoring all that I witnessed, as together, we create ways to deepen our anti-Occupation activism with intelligence and courage.

Three checkpoint stories:

Zeitun is a new terminal, designed to close the labyrinth of small checkpoints around it, routes that while filled with the daily humiliation of navigating the checkpoints themselves, have allowed Palestinians to travel in moderately direct routes to and from their homes. Now all these scattered checkpoints are being shut down in order to incorporate all travel through Zeitun. Accompanying Machsom Watch, I saw the continuing strangulation of travel and access as well as the human faces, both Israeli and Palestinian that doggedly work to remain open and in contact with one another.

Just to the south of the Old City is Jebel Makaber on the Israeli side and Sheikh Sa'ed, on the West Bank side, cut off from one another by the nearly completed Wall. Palestinians attempting to travel are now turned away from the checkpoint between them and their destination. I joined three Machsom Watch women, one fluent in Arabic, one engaging the soldiers and the third gathering specific details and writing their weekly reports. They work seamlessly together.

We approached the makeshift checkpoint in Sheikh Sa'ed a little before 9 am. At the top of a rocky uphill slope are a row of houses, a large van and about fifty Palestinians, many of whom had been there since 6 a.m., some having traveled long distances to arrive at this once active checkpoint.

Facing them was a line of plastic barriers, and in the center were two large boulders. Standing between them was a soldier in an

aggressive open legged stance, his gun pointed directly at the people gathered there. Women with bundles on their heads and elderly men wanting to go and pray wait their turn. Only blue ID holders from Jebel Mukaber and Sheikh Sa'ed are let through – in both directions. No others can pass now. All the rest are sent to the Zeitun 'terminal' checkpoint.

As soon as we arrived, the commander of the checkpoint, lowered his gun and strode down the hill towards us. A German-Israeli, well known to Machsom Watch women for his brutality at the Bethlehem checkpoint, he ordered us to step away from where security work was being carried out. One of our group is a German-Israeli as well and she tried to speak to him in German. As soon as he heard the first German word, he barked out,

"Join your colleagues." He turned away, walked back up the hill and re-positioned himself with legs spread wide apart, raised his gun to point it at the villagers and studiously ignored us as he bellowed for the next person to step forward. Sometimes police decide to close the checkpoint entirely so no one can pass unless the women from Machsom Watch leave. If the soldiers are angry enough, tear gas is used on the people remaining in line as a punishment for our presence.

As we stood to the side watching this ugly drama unfold, one of the Machsom Watch women caught my eye and gestured with her head to the wadi where people were climbing down and seeming to disappear. Later she explained,

"There are several ways to bypass the checkpoint. The soldiers do not do anything about it, but we are certain they know this – so perhaps they have made a decision that it is this checkpoint they must guard at all cost - to 'teach' the local population to keep a distance, follow their rules, approach it one by one, only if they have a blue ID, etc. To show them who is in control - and make sure that despite the Supreme Court ruling, this remains a checkpoint, that there is no free crossing into Jebel Mukaber and the rest of Jerusalem."

Yet just behind them was a steady stream of Palestinians. After their descent into the wadi, they climbed mid-way up the other side to disappear behind a group of homes. Nearly a hour later, the nose of a Palestinian bus appeared between the trees near the homes and there was a sudden flurry like the ascent of a flock of birds, people running for the bus which filled and drove away within moments-- all this only hundreds of meters away from the soldiers.

There is a large unused watchtower at the top of the hill just across the road from the checkpoint barrier. In front of it were three women who were filming the checkpoint activity with a telephoto lens. They are always documenting, I was told. They are everywhere

documenting for the future what was done in these places.
For more information about their work contact:www.mahsanmilim.com

Abu Dis was the first stop on our Women in Black tour last August, and now nearly one year later, the Wall is nearly complete, the land confiscated on both sides. The lower gate is guarded by soldiers sprawled in the shade, smoking, chewing nuts, requiring the Palestinians standing in the now searing heat, to lean down to make their requests to these young men, young enough to be their grandchildren. But no one can pass here now. What was once a checkpoint that allowed people more direct access to their destination is now closed. Only Palestinians who have appealed to the Supreme Court and are on a list that all soldiers are given are allowed to pass. Everyone else, without exception, is sent to the Zeitun 'terminal'. There is no room to negotiate anymore, the soldiers, and their superiors, are very firm. "If we let one through, they will all want to pass here..."

One of our Machsom Watch group has developed a personal relationship with a Palestinian family who son has a congenital medical condition requiring costly treatment, a wheelchair, physical therapy and medications. Much of Abu Dis is a ghost town now and the father has difficulty making enough money to support the family. B. has taken it upon herself to raise 1150 shekels each month that the family needs to absorb their son's expenses. Over the past two years, she has received a few small grants and passes the hat each time she is in any kind of group situation. She has taken the specificity of this child, this family, this life to focus upon.

"I need to feel like I'm doing something concrete as well as symbolic when I demonstrate or go on a Machsom Watch. One family, one child. At least I can make a little difference somewhere." On this day, the father is not allowed to cross into Israeli territory to meet with her, but we are permitted to go across the open field, a rubble strewn space between the Wall and the temporary barrier. B. called him on her cell phone to tell him they could only meet at the sliver of space between their worlds. Together, she and I climb across the concrete, barbed wire, empty plastic bottles and dirt to a small opening in the Wall, just big enough for her to look through and pass the envelope filled with money. I watch as they stand talking together animatedly in Arabic, the face of a German-Israeli woman and a Palestinian man leaning in towards one another to have a conversation, both of them framed by concrete, surrounded by empty and abandoned buildings, blasted fields, deserted streets and soldiers with guns. They begin by exchanging formal but warm kisses on both

cheeks and begin to talk. I suddenly feel I am observing a hard-won intimacy that is their own, and I turn away.

This was an ordinary checkpoint watch, I was told. There was nothing that would qualify as violence. No tear gas was thrown. No one was injured. No one was critically ill. Just another day as the Palestinians are sealed off into smaller and smaller pieces of land, entering and exiting through electronic terminals, waiting in line for permission to live their day. An ordinary day at an ordinary checkpoint.

Last night I was taken to Ramallah in a van with Israelis, internationals and Palestinians to a concert sponsored by the Daniel Barenboim-Edward Said Foundation. Four members of the Jerusalem Symphony were performing a small chamber concert of wind instruments to be held at the home of a Palestinian human rights lawyer. Getting across Qualandia was forbidden to this mixed group and as we approached the checkpoint, we got our "story" together, in case we were stopped. Don't worry, the woman driving the car said, "I'll just put on my settler face. Impatient, no eye contact, surly. They'll wave us right through. You'll see."

As we approached, the car fell silent and she drove, eyes straight ahead, face in an unpleasant scowl, and we were waved through. The occupants of the car broke into nervous laughter, some checkpoint stories and jokes were made, then everyone fell silent again, words insufficient to bridge the very ominous experience of crossing from Jerusalem to Ramallah to hear a chamber concert.

Driving back at 10:30, the streets were nearly deserted, except for an occasional group of young men gathered to hang out on an empty corner.

"This is night life in Ramallah," our driver said with a bitter laugh. "and here it's livelier than in east Jerusalem that shuts down completely."

Again, as we approached the Qualandia checkpoint, anxious jokes about sharing a cell if we are arrested are made, our cover story is created in case we are stopped and arrested-- a real possibility. It is dark now, and even with the good-natured bantering, I know that I, as am American, am the only legal occupant of the car. I remain silent as the anxious joking continues. We approach the checkpoint, our driver puts on her settler face, we all keep our eyes straight ahead and are waved through by a very young woman soldier.

The car explodes in laughter both of relief and contempt for the illusion of security that this ever more elaborate system promises to Israelis. A system that functions on assumption, stereotype, bureaucracy, cruelty and arrogance.

The concert was splendid, as was the home, the hospitality and my conversations with Palestinian writers, academics, lawyers and activists. They can no longer enter Jerusalem. Israelis are forbidden to go to Ramallah. Together, in a well-appointed living room, we listened to Beethoven, Poulenc and Mozart. For just a few hours, we inhabited the future... a world of intelligence, beauty, laughter, connection and freedom.

Salaam/Shalom,
Sandy