

BUSINESSWOMAN

For Bay Area Women Who Believe in Commerce with a Conscience

Women in Black Stand Vigil for Peace

— By Suzanne Fried



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Penny Rosenwasser, Marcia Freedman, Nan Gefen and Ronnie Gilbert at the Tasblich observance sponsored by Bay Area Women in Black on Sept. 23 at the Emeryville marina.

The women stand in silent vigil on a busy street corner in Jerusalem. They are clothed in black. Their signs read "End the Occupation." Cars are darting all around them, it is Friday at 1pm. Some drivers scream at them. The women are a quiet center in the midst of the traffic swirling about them. They are a powerful presence, a reminder that not everyone supports the Israeli government's policies of oppression and apartheid against the Palestinian people. They have been standing vigil since 1988.

There are women standing vigil at Bancroft and Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. It is Friday at noon. They are clothed in black. There are hecklers across the street. Sometimes the hecklers cross the street and try to intimidate the women. It has not stopped them from standing vigil on this corner since 1988.

There are women in San Francisco. They come together once a month. They are clothed in black, they hand out leaflets

to the rush hour crowds. It is 5pm on a Friday and the corner of Montgomery and Market is very crowded. Sometimes they are a group of twenty women and sometimes the numbers swell to the hundreds. After Sept. 11 others felt a need to join them.

There are mothers in a town square in Argentina. They are clothed in black. They walk silently. They have been asking for years, "where are our

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disappeared children?" There are groups in Yugoslavia and Serbia. There are over 150 groups around the world standing silent vigil in protest of the inhumanity of war, torture, oppression, and occupation that are happening around the globe. Here in California groups are being born in Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Sacramento, Chico, and San Diego.

Who are these women and what do they believe will come from these silent vigils they keep? The history of these independent groups goes back to the 1980s in Jerusalem.

Marcia Freedman lives in Berkeley and Jerusalem. In the 1980's she was a member of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. We spoke about the beginning of Women in Black and her involvement in it both here and in Jerusalem.

"The first women in black began in 1988. One of the co-founders was Hagar Rublen, a Jewish lesbian who died suddenly last year of a heart attack. She and others began their group during the first Intifada. The word is the Palestinian name for the struggle for freedom.

"We make a difference with our work and presence when we take the long historical view. There really is no other 'solution' to the situation in Israel and Palestine other than having two states co-existing side by side with each other. Unless the world accepts Israel's reconquering the Palestinian people and confining them to apartheid-like conditions under Israel's control.

"My hope and belief is that the world will not let this happen. Women in Black is but

one of the many peace groups in Israel. There are nine different women's peace organizations and several other general ones. What we do is hold a candle in the dark bearing messages that people will come around to accepting when the time is ripe.

"This was the role of Women in Black to others during the first Intifada that began in 1988. When Israel joined the peace talks in Oslo in 1993, the messages of Ytzchak Rabin did not fall on deaf ears. They adopted positions we had been holding since the beginning. This will happen again. As allies of the Palestinian people we are an additional voice for them in Israel and the West.

"The Bay Area Women in Black was an outgrowth of my work in the American Jewish movement for peace, especially as things are worsening during this second Intifada.

"But I do not expect things to get better in Israel or the rest of the world for that matter in the near future. The short term feels very threatening and dangerous to all of us everywhere. This work for peace with Women in Black keeps me sane. I always hold hope, otherwise how can one live?"

Nan is the co-director of Chocmet Halev, the Center for Jewish Meditation and co-founding publisher of Tikkun magazine. She is a member of Bay Area Women in Black. She had this to say: "I have stood with Women in Black in Jerusalem. In 1989 and 1990, when the peace process seemed to be underway things calmed down. Now it is one year since Intifada. The Palestinians are increasingly frustrated and angry. Their homes are being destroyed, their children being killed, their olive groves are being uprooted. I feel extremely

upset about the Israeli government's killing and wounding Palestinians and taking their rights away.

"I wanted to join other Jewish women who have both a love for Israel and a nuanced understanding of the situation over there. The silence we hold is not in our name nor is the violence that is taking place in Israel.

"I like doing this with other women. We wanted to involve other women, not just Jewish women, and if men want to support us they can do other things to help. Just visit our website for ideas and information. We are a new group, and on Sept. 20 we had a community Tashlich service. This is a ceremony before Rosh Hashanah where Jews go to a body of water and throw bread into it symbolizing the many things we want to let go of and do not want to do anymore.

"So we called for a community service to let go of violence, militarism and war. Originally we were only planning to do this with regard to Israel but after Sept. 11 we broadened it. As Americans we added to the list of what is happening in our own country.

"We will be having another public observance and ritual on Dec. 16. We express ourselves in a heartfelt artistic way about what is happening in Israel. This is not about 'Israel is bad.' We are selling pins that say 'Salaam and Shalom' with black ribbons attached to them. This means both peace and hello in Hebrew and Arabic.

"We mourn the loss of life on both sides, we mourn the oppression and we acknowledge the pain of this tremendous sorrow and loss. We provide a place where people can become educated about what is going on in Israel and Palestine.

"My hope is that all the groups of Women in Black will create a growing presence and voice for peace. As women we are very affected by militarism and wars. We who are disenfranchised from government and military processes still have a powerful voice.

"We do not make wars. Men make war and historically we, as women, share a voice for peace and a set of values that are often forgotten by men in power. I hope we can give a voice to the yearning for peace scattered all over the world. Collectively we can make a difference. The Women in Black in Serbia and Jerusalem were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Perhaps that says it all."

Kate Raphael is part of the San Francisco Women in Black who stand once a month at Montgomery and Market streets. "During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia I heard about the women in black there. Our first vigil in 1996 drew about 500 women. Our vigils were directed at the bombings of Iraq and Yugoslavia then, but there was not enough energy to sustain it.

"Last year when the Intifada began again we wanted to do something very quickly to bring out Jewish women, although we do not identify as a group that is exclusively for Jewish women. We demon-

strated in front of the Israeli Bonds office on Kearny and Post. Now we demonstrate once a month at 5pm on a Friday. We hand out leaflets and most people respond positively to us.

"I feel that this helps me because I am bearing witness and making a statement. This is an ongoing commitment not just a one time demonstration. Being public and confronting people is one way to do this but this is also a contemplative form of action.

"We spend some time in silence, some in chant and sometimes we have someone speak. I definitely feel we are reaching people. This is where they work and they see us month after month so they begin to think about the issues. We have had Muslim women and Palestinian women come speak and we try to have this be multicultural.

"We hold two banners. One says 'End the Occupation of Palestine,' and the other says 'Stop U.S. Aid to Israel.' We support the right of return for Palestinian refugees, that they be allowed back to their lands and towns they came from. We see the State of Israel as an exclusive state as an issue. These are some of the beliefs we stand for. We urge other women to join us, we range in age from young to elders and we welcome all women to stand with us."

Jane Welford is a nine year member of the Berkeley Women in Black. "When I began standing, the Oslo accords had been signed and people believed that we did not need to stand anymore. But... Hilda Roberts and I believed that in order for leaders to do the right thing they needed constant pressure, so for years we continued standing, just the two of us. It was a real commitment because if one of us did not show up then it would not be Women in Black, and who can hold a banner when one person is not there?

"Please tell your readers we are NOT an organization. There is no central organization. This is an organic springing up of groups everywhere, individual women feeling called to come together. We have experienced more heckling since Sept. 11. It seems that now everything is being linked to terrorism both here and abroad.

"In Colombia there are U.S. ground troops hunting down people who are being labeled terrorists. We had a heckler who stood by our table with the petition asking UC Berkeley to divest itself from Israeli investments simply screaming that our petition supported terrorism in Palestine. More people signed our petition that day than any other time! So we thanked our heckler for helping out.

"I think that peoples' quest and thirst for freedom is so strong. We move towards wanting justice as a plant moves towards the light. The vigil helps point the way towards that light, we are a voice of reason in the mixture." ❀

For more information, contact womeninblack.org, wabbkly.org or womeninblackssf@netscape.net.