

A Bone from Rafah

March 26, 2003

While bombs are falling on Baghdad, killing uncounted numbers, and my friends around the world are marching, blockading, shutting down corporations and roadways and cities in protest, I find myself in Rafah, at the southern border of the Gaza strip, dealing intimately with one woman's death.

A week ago Rachel Corrie was crushed to death by a bulldozer as she tried to prevent it from demolishing Palestinian homes. I've come down here to support her friends and the activists who were with her and saw the murder. Their accounts leave no doubt that the soldier who drove the bulldozer saw her and chose to kill her.

Rachel has become a "shahid," a Palestinian martyr. She is, in fact, one of over a thousand shahids from this intifada. Their posters adorn walls all over Palestine. They are the fighters who are killed in battle and the children shot on their way to school. They are the suicide bombers and the boys who throw stones at tanks in a gesture of defiance, and the "collateral damage" every time the Israelis blow up a political leader in a crowded tenement with missiles. And now they include Rachel, with her all-American blond beauty. On one poster: she looks earnest and sweet as any graduating student in a high school yearbook. In another, she is giving a speech, hair tied back, mouth open, her whole face ablaze with passion.

I'm listening to her friends describe her death and holding their hands as they cry, and thinking about how all of this pain and grief and sorrow is being multiplied over and over again right now, in Baghdad, on people who are nameless and faceless and not reported on by our media. As Rachel's death would have gone unremarked had she been Palestinian. You didn't hear, I imagine, about the death of Ahmed, a fifty year old street cleaner from Rafah, who heard about Rachel's death and stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. He was gunned down on his doorstep, for no particular reason anyone can fathom. He has his own Shahid poster, which is up on the wall next to Rachel's, and we mourn him, too.

The Palestinians have traditions about Shahids--the poster is one. The Shahid's body is not touched with water: the blood on the body is sacred, and bloody the body is laid into the grave.

These traditions are of some comfort to the Palestinians but are difficult for her friends who cannot escape her face and their loss anywhere in this city, and who struggle to remember her not as a saint but as the real woman that she was: sometimes strong, sometimes weak, sometimes loving, sometimes irritable, funny, annoying, angry--all the things human beings are. Rachel was a courageous woman but no more so, really, than any of these others who have come here on their school breaks or in the midst of their life changes to stand in front of tanks and walk kids to school and sleep in a different, threatened house each night. They are all remarkable, courageous--which

doesn't mean noble and saintly but just that at some point in their lives they decided not to let fear stop them from doing something they hope will make some slight positive impact on an unendurable situation. What is remarkable about them is that they are not so remarkable, not really so different than anyone else. A laid-off dot commer, a football player, a website designer, a student, a sweet young man who drives a horse and carriage in the park: some are deeply political, involved in actions for many years. Some just somehow found themselves drawn to come here.

I am drinking coffee with Chris, who was Rachel's friend and encouraged her to come to Gaza, and Mohammed, who has lived his whole live in the Gaza strip and works with a human rights agency. Mohammed is telling us how he felt on his trip to Japan when he took the train from Tokyo to Osaka.

"I had never before been such a long way without a single checkpoint, without having to show a passport or an ID card, without seeing a soldier," he says. "That was when I knew what freedom felt like."

We are talking about sadness and death and what we believe. I've been having ongoing dialogues with various friends about compassion, and I admit that I just can't get there with the bulldozer operator. The closest I can come to compassion is a kind of blank incomprehension. Chris suggests that Rachel died because the soldier didn't see her. Not that he didn't see her physically, for it is only too clear that he did, but that in some larger sense he didn't see her, see her as a human being, see her as a precious life to be valued.

That Unseeing is the root of my own people's relationship to the Palestinians. I was never taught to hate them--only to discount them. When they taught me the story of Israel's founding in Hebrew School, the Palestinians were brushed aside, either not mentioned or dismissed as somehow not mattering.

I can understand how, to my grandmother raised in abject poverty in a Russian shtetl and living in slightly-less-abject poverty in Duluth, the Palestinians could disappear--she never came to this land, never met one of its people. I can comprehend how Jews from the concentration camps and refugees fleeing Nazi Europe could long for a state of their own, and how from Hitler's Germany Palestinians weren't much of a visible presence in the consciousness of terrified people needing a refuge.

But those who were actually there on the land, creating the "facts on the ground" of their time, must have noticed and deliberately chosen to unsee that there was another people standing in the way, doing their best not to be bulldozed into oblivion. As Sharon and Bush and all their supporters and all who stand by silently and justify the current murders don't see. As we are not shown the victims of the bombs of Baghdad.

There's a Bible story haunting me that seems tangled up with this all. It's one they never focused on in Hebrew School--the story of the Levite and the Concubine. It goes like this:

A Levite was travelling with his concubine and is given shelter for the night by an old man in the town of Gibeah in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin.

During the night a pack of men demand to have sex with him. Instead, the host and the Levite send out the concubine, who is gang-raped and left for dead on the doorstep. When the traveller reaches home, he cuts up her body into twelve pieces and sends one to each tribe, to call them to war.

The war is bloody and involves several rounds of smiting and killing sixteen thousand here, twenty thousand there, in a frenzy almost as senseless as our current assault on Iraq, until Benjamin is defeated and all the other tribes swear not to give their daughters to wife with Benjamin. Whereupon they realize they have committed genocide, wiped out a tribe of their own.

Repenting of this ethnic cleansing, they find some innocent town which has not participated in this oath and simply kill all the men and all the women who have known men, and give all the virgins to Benjamin.

I am thinking about this as I try to fathom what has been done to the mind of the bulldozer operator to make him capable of deliberately crushing a beautiful young woman under his machine, and trying to comprehend the hate-mail and diatribes her death has evoked along with the paeans of praise and the martyr posters.

And I conclude that the soldier was only doing what colonization makes necessary. To be a colonizer, we cannot afford to see the colonized as fully human.

So when you tell me, "The Palestinians are taught to hate-- Barak offered them everything but they don't want peace--they don't love their children--they are animals--there is no one to talk to," I say, "That is what colonization requires you to believe."

It diminishes you, as the driver of that bulldozer is diminished by his act far, far more than the crushing of Rachel's body can ever diminish her.

And if I could, I would send you a bone. Not to call you to war, but away from it. Something you cannot avoid seeing, touching. Something to make the blood on our hands visible, unmistakable. A limb, a shoulder, a hunk of flesh dripping real blood, from the rubble beneath the bulldozer, the doorstep, from the child shot dead in the gunfight or buried under the house, from the bomb shelters of Baghdad and from the bloody busses of Tel Aviv. A bone red with blood to say:

This is what colonization requires: blood soaked sand, holy earth defiled with death, human sacrifice.

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