

Next year in Mas'Ha

by Starhawk

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On the eve of Passover, after a month I spent in the occupied territories of Palestine working with the International Solidarity movement, a month that saw one of our people deliberately run over by a bulldozer driven by an Israeli soldier, and two young men deliberately shot, one in the face, one in the head, I found myself unable to face the prospect of a Seder, even with my friends in the Israeli peace movement. I couldn't sit and bewail our ancient slavery or celebrate our journey to the promised land. I was afraid that I might spew bitterness and salt all over any Seder table I graced, and smash something.

So I went to the peace encampment at Mas'Ha. Mas'Ha needed people, and the moon was full, and I thought I could just lay down on the land under the moonlight and let some of the bitterness drain away. Mas'Ha is a village on the line of the new so-called "security wall," where a peace camp has been set up at the request of the local people, mostly farmers who are faced with the confiscation of ninety-eight per cent of their land.

Mas'Ha, on one of the main roads into Israel proper, once had a thriving trade, until the Israelis closed the road. The farmers grow olives and figs and grapes and wheat--but now the land has been confiscated for the building of the wall, with no compensation offered. In places the wall is a thirty-foot high concrete barrier, complete with guard towers.

Elsewhere it is an electrified fence in deep ditch surrounded by a swathe of bare, scraped ground, flanked by roads to be continually patrolled by soldiers. It will soon separate the village from the neighboring settlement of Elcanah, with which it has always had peaceful relations. No armed resistance, no suicide bombers, have ever come from Mas'Ha.

Faced with this prospect, given only a few short weeks notice, the village council came to an amazing conclusion. With every reason to hate Israelis, they decided to invite Israelis in, in company with internationals from the International Women's Peace Service and the International Solidarity Movement. We set up an encampment on the edge of the bulldozers' route, to witness and document the destruction.

To be at Mas'Ha is to be on the absolute edge of the conflict. The road block that separates the village from the settlement is the divide between two realities. I got to Elcanah from Tel Aviv on the settlers' bus, full of elderly women who could have been my aunts and old men that could have been my uncles and a few young people, everyone wishing each other Hag Sameach--"happy holiday," for Passover or, in

Hebrew, Pesach.

We drove through one settlement to let people off and I got a tour of what looks like a transplanted Southern California suburb, complete with lush gardens and new houses, all with an aura of prosperity and complacent security--provided by armed guards and razor wire and the Israeli military. The landscaping featured olive trees in the street dividers-- I suspected they had been transplanted from some farmer's stolen fields--the Palestinians' livelihood turned into a decorative element of the settlements. From Elcanah, I walked down the road a few hundred yards and climbed over the road block bulldozed to keep Palestinians out of Israel. I was in a dusty village of old stone and new cement houses and shuttered shops, backing onto open hillsides of ancient olives.

The camp at Mas'Ha is on a knoll, two pink tents set up in an olive grove on stony ground studded with wildflowers, yellow broom, and prickly pear. The olives give shade and sometimes a backrest. If you look in one direction, the groves are spread out below the hilltop for miles of a soft gray-green with blue hills in the back ground and small villages beyond, But encircling the hill, and cutting a gray swath across the hillsides, is the zone of destruction, a wide band of uprooted trees and bare subsoil, where a giant back hoe is wallowing like some giant, prehistoric beast, grabbing and crushing stones, gouging the earth, filling the air with dust and the mechanical bellowing of its engines.

A young man is sitting under a tree as I arrive, writing on stones with a black marker. He's a farmer, he tells me. In Arabic, he writes, "Don't cut the trees." He thinks for a moment, and adds another graceful line. I ask him to translate. He gives me a sweet smile, and points to the ground. "What is this?"

"Earth?" I ask, not meaning if he means earth or land or soil.

"The earth speaks Arabic," he tells me.

All the Israelis but one have gone, to celebrate Pesach with their families. There are only two of us from the ISM and one woman from IWPS who stay over, along with two of the Palestinians, to guard the camp.

As the full moon rises, I lie on the stones and meditate. I am hoping to find some peace or healing, but the earth is tortured here and all I can feel is her anguish. Down and down, through layers and centuries and epochs, I hear the ancestors weeping. The land is soaked in blood, and generations have faced ruthless powers and been cut down, and why should we be any different?

I am woken up at three AM to take my shift on watch. I sit by the fire, exhausted, and finally drift back into sleep, waking again in the morning feeling sick at heart.

But people begin to arrive, for a midday meeting. The women from the IWPS, and the men from the village, and dozens of Israelis. We sit under the tent with its sides raised, talking about building an international campaign against the wall. One of the men, a stonemason, makes miniature buildings out of the stones at our feet as we talk. "Maybe we can't stop it here," one man from the village says, "but maybe we can stop it other places."

The Israelis who come are mostly young. They are anarchists and punks and lesbians and wild-haired students, and it strikes me that the mayor of Mas'Ha and the village leaders in a very socially conservative society might actually have more in common with the Orthodox Jews who hate them than with these wild, social rebels. But the village accepts them all with good grace and a warm-hearted Palestinian welcome. One woman is from the group "Black Laundry", which requires a somewhat complicated three-way translation of a Hebrew play on words. She explains that it is a lesbian direct action group, and asks our translator if that's a problem. "Not for me," he says with a slightly quizzical shrug, and the meeting goes on.

Later we meet with the village women, who want to know if we can help them in any way. They are about to lose their source of livelihood--is there anything we can do? We have a long discussion about what we do in the ISM, and promise to research organizations that do community development work. They are excited to learn that we watch checkpoints and help people get through them. Students from the village who go to the university often get stopped at the checkpoints, or have to walk round through the mountains. Maybe we can help them.

Back at the camp, all the young shabob--the term for young, unmarried men--have come out for the evening. We sit around the fire while two of the men prepare us dinner, laughing and talking. And suddenly I realize something wonderful is happening. The Israelis and the Palestinians can talk to each other, because most of the young men speak Hebrew. They are hanging out around the fire and talking and telling stories, laughing and relaxing together. They are hanging out just like any group of young people around a fire at night, as if they weren't bitter enemies, as if it could really be this simple to live together in peace.

So it was a strange Seder this year, pita instead of matzoh, the eggs scrambled with tomato, hummus instead of chicken soup, water instead of wine, and instead of the maror, the bitter herbs which I have already tasted, a slight sweet hint of hope.

I can't ever again say "next year in Jerusalem." I can no longer believe in the promise of a land which requires the building of concrete walls and guard towers and ongoing murder to defend it. Far better that we should abandon the old stones of Jerusalem than to practice torture in order to claim it.

But I would like to believe in the promise of Mas'Ha, in the example of a people who, faced with utter destruction of everything they need and hold dear, opened their hearts to the children of the enemy and asked for help.

I would like to believe in the Israel reflected in the eyes of those who answer that call. That somehow, on this chasm between the conquerors and those who resist being finally conquered, the bridges and connections and meetings are happening that can tear down the walls of separation.

By next year, the camp at Mas'Ha will most likely be gone. Already the contractors who work for the Israeli military have begun blasting a chasm that will soon cut the olive groves off from the village. An international campaign to stop the building of the wall

has begun--but the reality is that they have the capacity to build it faster than we can organize to stop it.

And yet I say it again, as an act of pure faith:

Next year in Mas'Ha.

An **International Day of Action** in support of justice for Palestine is being called for June 5, 2003, the 36th anniversary of the occupation. For information, visit the website at: <http://www.peacejusticestudies.org/palestine.php>

For a map of the wall, see:

<http://www.gush-shalom.org/thewall/index.html>

(NOTE: either page will open in a new browser window)

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