

Standing at the Gates of Jerusalem

Updates from the West Bank

by Starhawk

I'm back in the West Bank, in Neta Golan's small apartment in Ramallah. I'm here to assist her with the birth of her second child, which could come any moment now, and to do trainings for the International Solidarity Movement, which supports the nonviolent resistance in Palestine. As well, I hope to take part in the campaign against the wall currently being built by the Israeli government, which confiscates much of the prime Palestinian agricultural land, destroys villages, and unilaterally extends the de facto border of Israel.

I'm tired now, after the long flight from San Francisco, the shared taxi ride that wound and wound around the streets of Jerusalem, the stress of getting ready to leave home, and the jet lag. But I'm glad to be here, grateful that I had no trouble getting in through the immigration lines or at customs or getting in through the checkpoint at Kalendia.

And that's where I fell asleep last night. Now I've had a good night's sleep, a quiet day catching up with Neta, who is one of the founder of the ISM. We have one of those friendships that seem to exist beyond the boundaries of time and space. I met her on my first trip to the occupied territories, to work with the ISM. I'd come first to Tel Aviv, reconnected with some of my Israeli friends, then finally worked up the nerve to head out to the West Bank. I took a bus to Jerusalem, a bus full of soldiers who were so polite and friendly, helping me with my bags, then a taxi to the Damascus Gate where the Faisal, the hostel frequented by the ISM, stands just outside the Old City. I couldn't understand why the taxi driver grew more and more nervous as we got closer and closer, then finally insisted I get out of the car half a block away. Later I learned that Jewish Israeli taxis often won't even go into East Jerusalem. They're afraid.

I'd dragged my bags to the Faisal, up a narrow stairway tucked away between the vegetable stall and the felafel seller on a street full of small storefronts, across from the big, empty lot where shared taxis to the West Bank arrive and leave. I was tired, and nervous, and wondering if I were doing the right thing. I'd been trying to call Neta for two days and hadn't gotten through. I rang the bell, and the door was opened by a young man. I peeked inside, thinking both that I was too old to stay in youth hostels and that, if I were really going to the West Bank, I'd be staying in much worse places and I'd better get used to it.

"Welcome! Welcome!" Hisham, the proprietor of the Faisal, boomed out a greeting and beamed at me with a smile so friendly that I immediately felt better. When I told him I was a friend of Neta's, his smile grew even wider. She had been there the night before. He called her in Tel Aviv, and she came back. We stayed awake half the night, talking as if we'd known each other forever. The next day, she tried to sneak me into the AI

Aqsa Mosque dressed up as a Palestinian woman. The soldiers who guarded the mosque didn't buy my disguise--the hiking boots under the long white skirt probably gave it away. Instead, we went to Bethlehem, which at that time was under siege, walking through the surreal streets of a silent, shuttered city to Nativity Square, where tanks were still stationed. The following day, she had me doing a training for internationals that was interrupted when we heard that Balata Camp was being invaded by the military. By nightfall, we'd hiked through the mountains above Nablus to get into the closed city, then down to the camp, and were sleeping in the home of a Palestinian family who feared soldiers coming to search in the night.

I was remembering this all as I retraced the journey from the airport to the Faisal, where Hisham greeted me even more warmly than before. He'd had a stroke, and now limps badly, but invited me in and gave me tea and the phone that had been procured for me. It was a special phone--it had belonged to Rachel Corrie, the young woman who exactly a year before had been killed in Rafah trying to stop the demolition of a home by a bulldozer that deliberately ran over her. I'd gone down to Rafah to do support for the team that had been with her. Today my friends will be at a vigil for her at the Israeli Consulate. There will be vigils all over the world. My own action is coming here.

The Faisal really needs a John Le Carre to do it justice. It has a back terrace that overlooks the Damascus gate, a screened porch where volunteers for the ISM and backpacking travelers and the more rugged breed of journalist all congregate, smoke, drink tea, exchange news and rumors and tips on how to get to the places the authorities don't want you to go. The bathrooms are covered with a thin scum of grey around the sink handles and the corners of the showers, the rooms are very basic, bunk beds or a bare mattress and cement walls, but the price is cheap and the information you can gather on the terrace makes up for the grime. Ironically, every actual Palestinian home I've stayed in has been far, far cleaner than the Faisal, even in the most crowded refugee camp. For that matter, they've all been far, far cleaner than my own house.

But I can't stay at the Faisal--I want to get to Ramallah before the checkpoint closes at nine o'clock. I hoist my pack, say goodbye, and walk round the corner to find the busses for Kalendia, the checkpoint outside Ramallah. Out on the street, I'm struck with a sense of double vision. East Jerusalem is truly a different world from the Jewish-Israeli suburbs of the west side. The Old City looms before me, enclosed by its walls of stone, and I am thinking that for thousands of years travelers have gone down this street looking for transport. Damascus Gate--in Hebrew, Sha'ar Shechem, the Gate of Shechem, which is now Nablus. I am feeling just one of the many deep ironies of being who I am, a Jew in this land who has come here to stand in solidarity with the people whom my own people are dispossessing--moreover, a Jew who was raised and taught and conditioned in every fiber of my being to believe that this land is mine by birthright, my ancient heritage. Standing at the gate of Jerusalem, I can't help but feel that this is, indeed, the place above all others where my ancestors walked, the place woven into our prayers and dreams, embedded in the very language we use to describe the sacred.

We "go up," in the synagogue, to read the Torah, make an "Aliyah," because Jerusalem itself is in the mountains, and you must ascend to get there, and climb again to reach the Old City and the Temple Mount. I turned fifteen the first time I came to Israel, with

the summer Ulpan study program of the Hebrew high school I belonged to That was in 1966, when the Old City was still held by Jordan, and off-limits to us. I remember how I rejoiced in '67, when it fell into Israel's possession.

Now I stand for a moment, remembering what the passageways inside the gate look like in the day, when they are thronged with people and food carts and street vendors and felafel makers and women coming to shop in their long coats and headscarves or laying out their wares on blankets. The stone streets wind into the labyrinth of passageways and markets, covered by domes and arches, the very archetype of "city" intact from some ancient era when pilgrims would have ascended these same stones carrying lambs for the sacrificial altar or fruit and grain for the offering. There is nowhere else on earth I can feel both so at home and so strange, so akin and so alien.

I can understand, in my very bones, why my people want this place. But my own sense of kinship is poisoned by the knowledge of the incredible injustices we are perpetuating in order to claim it. I know the power of the story I grew up with--that we were homeless for two thousand years, despised and oppressed by every nation, but now we have come home, to our own true home, and by God no one is going to take it from us ever again. It's a powerful myth. The Palestinians, unfortunately, have no role in it. Their very existence spoils the tale.

When I think back on my childhood, on what I learned in Hebrew school, on the history we were taught and what we were shown on the trips we took on that summer Ulpan, I'm struck by how rarely the Palestinians were even mentioned. When I was in Balata, there was one family that were held prisoner in their own house by soldiers who took it over to use as a command post. Men, women, small children--for days they were confined to one small room, not let out nor allowed to have contact with the outside world, not allowed to go out for food or milk for a sick baby. While meanwhile, soldiers took their ease in the rest of the house, lay down their guns to relax for a moment, played cards, ate, relaxed. How could they, I wondered, with such misery locked away just on the other side of the doorway? But then I realized that in effect, that's exactly what we'd been doing to the Palestinians as a people, to the whole reality that this land was, in fact, occupied before we occupied it.

Whenever I write about this issue, I get a small but steady trickle of responses that say, in effect, there's wrong on both sides and if you want peace, you won't "take sides." What I say is, as long as we barricade that door, what is able to burst through from time to time will carry with it great destructive force--but that is not a reason to keep the door closed, but to open it, to look inside, to acknowledge the reality of what we have done, to face the guilt and pain and discomfort it brings up, and to begin to make amends. That is the only way I can see to begin the work of peacemaking.

So I'm looking at Damascus Gate and thinking about all the doors, all the portals, all the checkpoints, all the walls and barriers and fences and barricades that have divide this land. But as I turn and walk to the bus that will take me to one of them, I'm feeling at home. Men crowd around me, stopping at the storefronts still open or waiting to pick up a felafel. At one time I would have felt afraid to be alone in this crowd after dark--now I've traveled alone in Palestine enough to know that I'm as safe here as I could be anywhere. And I feel a sudden sense of gratitude. Hard as the work can sometimes

be, it allows me to walk these streets and stand at this gate without fear. It gives me a role I can play here with integrity, and so allows me to stand here in the presence of my ancestors, who are also the ancestors of the Palestinians, and be at home without needing to possess anything.

The van to Kalendia is full of tired, grim-faced men going home to their East Jerusalem homes. It winds through streets of concrete buildings and neon signs and the grime and dust of any shabby part of the Third World, and finally stops at Kalendia, the major checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah, and the central transfer point for busses and taxis to anywhere in the north of the West Bank.

Ramallah is the most open of the West Bank cities. Cars and taxis are backed up here, waiting hours in a haze of diesel fumes and dust, but no one stops those of us who are walking into Ramallah. I follow the men on the path that leads past the fences and the barbed wire. A young boy insists on taking some of my bags, and gets me a taxi. I give him five shekels, and the taxi takes me to meet Neta who has been at the candlelight vigil for Rachel in the town center, which I have missed. We buy felafel, and go back to her apartment.

I greet Nizar, her husband, who is lean and quiet but very sweet, and her baby, Nawal, whom I helped deliver just a year ago. Nawal is truly adorable, with big, gray-green eyes and lots of dark hair, one of those babies who seem to find everything in life funny. She has just learned to wave, and we wave at each other and smile and laugh and wave some more. Neta is big with her second child now, her belly round and low. The baby was due yesterday, but doesn't seem in a hurry to come out. Neta and I sit up far too late talking, and at last jet lag catches up with me. I fill my water bottle, charge my batteries, take note when I lay down where all my things are in case I need to grab them in a hurry. I'm back in the West Bank, where things can change without warning.

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