

Day of the Assassination

by Starhawk

Just as I grab my computer in bed this morning to write some thoughts about nonviolence, I get a call from Neta. I am in Beit Sahour doing a training for a small group of internationals and some of the core of those who will be trainers. She is in Ramallah. This morning, in Gaza, the Israelis assassinated Sheikh Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas. He was an old man in late sixties, confined to a wheelchair, coming out of the Mosque after morning prayers. A perfect martyr.

"Everything's going to go crazy," Neta says. "If Sharon wanted to set off a bloodbath, he couldn't have done anything better. People will be lining up to die." She's deeply upset, walking the streets of Ramallah with Nizar, her husband, still trying to encourage that late baby to get on with the process of being born into this rough world.

I've been lying here thinking about violence and nonviolence and struggle. I'm in a small hotel in Beit Sahour where we do trainings. It's being renovated, since last year, in some spirit of undying optimism that someday normality, and tourists, will return to this region. Bethlehem is a closed-up city, dying from economic starvation now that the thousands of Christian tourists can no longer come. Last year, right before Easter, another ISM volunteer and I got a tour of the Church of the Nativity--we were the only ones there, and it was eerie and quiet in the stone halls and the deep chamber where Jesus was presumably born. Only a few monks walked the halls, and up on the roof, we could still see the bullet holes of the assaults from the year before.

Yesterday, as we began the training, our friends in the village of Kharbata were sitting in front of the bulldozers again. I felt terribly torn--wanting to be there with them and yet having a commitment to be here. My focus for this trip is training--that seems to be the way I can make my best contribution. But my heart is always with the action. And it's anguish to be getting reports--twelve injured, twenty-five injured, one village woman shot in the eye with a rubber bullet, one ISM volunteer detained, possibly arrested, others shot in the leg, hurt--without being able to be there and do something. There's the stress, and the quite irrational but real guilt, and the less admirable but also real sense of somehow missing out on the excitement.

Which of those women I marched with lost an eye? Was it the old woman with the toothless grin who limped up to us over the rocks, raised a stick above her head and cried out "Allah Akhbar!" Was it the mother, grandmother of the sweet young girl who tried to teach me how to say "swimming" and "oasis" in Arabic? One young Israeli was shot between the eyes with a rubber bullet; I think that I met him last year at Mas'Ha peace camp. It amused me so much to hear the Palestinians hailing him, "Levinsky! Yala!!" Let's go!

These trainings are in the same place we were working last year. Tom Hurndall sat in

these chairs, did the role-plays, the active listening exercises, and then went down to Rafah. Just a few days later, he was shot. We were clear in the training then, and we are even more clear now--you can die doing this work. "It's hard for any of us to imagine our own death," I tell the group as we are role-playing out how to respond to tear gas, rubber bullets, sound bombs, and live ammunition. "But do think about it. Tell yourself that it really can be you, and ask yourself if you are still willing to do this."

On Saturday I went to Bir Zeit University, in a village outside of Ramallah, to speak to a group of students and show them our powerpoint slide show of actions around the world. There were about twenty students and a few teachers, including some of a small core group that wants to organize a Right to Education campaign. We had a good discussion after about strategy. Bir Zeit is a beautiful campus, high on a hill, with elegant stone buildings donated mostly by wealthy individuals, and modern facilities.

The student body, I'm told, are like most of the relatively privileged students around the world--deeply immersed in their own affairs, hard to mobilize. Riham Barghouti, director of public relations, who has organized the talk, told me how hard it is to motivate students to get active now.

"The first intifada involved massive noncooperation with the occupation," she said. "Everyone was involved, from all classes of society. People boycotted Israeli goods. They tore up their I.D. cards. It was primarily nonviolent, a massive popular resistance. And everyone felt together. We were clear about what we were struggling for. But then we got Oslo, this agreement with no teeth in it. We were split--some for it, some against. Even so, some of those who were against it at first, they were beginning to come around, to think, 'Well, maybe we can make something of this.'" But then came more settlements, more settlers' roads, more restrictions on movement, more land confiscations, more deaths.

The second intifada is more grim, more focused on armed struggle. "People think all Palestinians are the same," Riham says, "as if we were all one person, one terrorist.

But we're not. Most people don't want to be fighters. They want to find some way to struggle for their land, their rights, and they don't want to use violence. But it's much harder now, to believe that a nonviolent struggle can succeed. They say, 'We did that,' or 'Our parents did that, and look what it got us.'"

There's an ecology to repression. The closures and checkpoints and road blocks make movement within the West Bank extremely difficult. Each town is separated from the others by checkpoints. The Israelis have built wide, fast roads for the settlers to get to settlements, or for a tourist from Jerusalem to head up to the Lake of Galilee or down to the Dead Sea. But Palestinians cannot travel on those roads, at risk of being shot. "We used to go to Nablus or Hebron or Bethlehem, for a day or a visit," Riham says. "We could drink coffee, share ideas, discuss things. New ideas got spread around. Issues could be debated. Now, it's years since I've been to Nablus. I have no idea what they're thinking up there. And the kids come from the villages or the more conservative towns, and go to University here. They used to go back, and bring more of the progressive ideas with them. Now, they don't go back. They can't find work there, and they can't live in that atmosphere. So they stay in Ramallah. Ramallah is 'Occupation Lite,' there's more openness here. You can get to Jerusalem. They've allowed more money to flow into here, there's more development. But it can't absorb all those new

doctors and engineers. And then the other places grow more closed, more conservative, and the split between them and Ramallah deepens. I know with people dying every day and houses getting demolished, it's hard to care about the stifling of intellectual life, but that's part of it, too."

Sharon and his supporters, with their policies of repression and closure and isolation, are in fact creating exactly the conditions that foster the kind of narrow fundamentalism they profess to fear. At least they fear it in Islam: they pander to it in Judaism.

In the morning it is my turn to negotiate the checkpoints. I wake up before 6 a.m., take a taxi to Kalendia where I wait in line with the women and the young teenagers going to school. We are the fortunate ones: our line moves relatively quickly and in fifteen or twenty minutes I am facing a bored young soldier who directs me a second bored young woman soldier. She looks at my passport and waves me through. But the hundred or so men waiting next to me seem to move slowly if at all, and I wonder how long it will take them to get to their morning's work.

I catch a service on the other side, with a bad exhaust system that fills the back, where I am riding, with fumes. Halfway into Jerusalem, we are stopped by yet another soldier, who demands our passports and wants me to open my bag. He glances at the video camera, then lets us go. The man in front of me shakes his head. "They are bad people," he says. "You see!"

I abandon the service a little too early and walk a few blocks on the outskirts of the Old City, back to the Faisal where I meet the group that will go through the training together. We take another service to the outskirts of Bethlehem, to the road block that has no real checkpoint but a guard tower with soldiers who generally don't appear. We walk up the hill, and get into taxis that have been ordered on the other side, which take us to Beit Sahour.

The first day of training goes well; it's a small group, about seven trainees, three from Britain, one from the US, and three Swedes. Four of the longterm ISM activists who are learning to be trainers also come, to observe and support. By the end of the day, I am tired, and after dinner I drop into bed and sleep deeply until Neta's call wakes me. It's a struggle to concentrate. Everyone is upset about Sheikh Yassin. The assassination is seen as an assault on the entire community and on Islam itself. And those who think in terms of policy see it as a calculated move on Sharon's part--to provoke more suicide bombings, to open the door for major incursions again, to forestall any pressure toward a peace process.

The young boy who lives in the hotel, about eleven years old, looks at me with shocked eyes. "He was ninety-two years old," he says to me, shaking his head. And then, "Have you seen 'The Passion of Christ?'" I tell him I haven't. He says it is very good, he has seen it twice, on DVD. "But why do they want to kill such an old man," he asks. "Soon he'll be dead anyway."

We're getting reports of demonstrations in Ramallah, Nablus, even right here in Bethlehem, of more killings and more martyrs. Rumors of death. At our morning check-in, everyone is restless. "It's part of the quality of being here that you always feel

you should be somewhere else, that the real action is happening elsewhere. But we're here, and we're doing something that will make our work more effective in the long run, so let's just be present here and focus." I'm really saying it to myself, of course.

But we do, in spite of the ongoing doubt about whether or not we can get out of Beit Sahour and back to Jerusalem or Ramallah. Neta calls and says she has been to the doctor and they are considering whether they need to induce labor that afternoon. Hisahm tells me he has not ordered cars yet, that there are soldiers at the back way out and the checkpoint is closed, and fighting at Kalendia. Ramallah is closed. I work a bit harder to stay focused.

We are careful to end early enough that we can begin our travel back before dark. And, in the way things can change here, suddenly the cars are here and the soldiers are gone and we are picking our way up the hill and out of Bethlehem. Back to Jerusalem, where I say goodbye to the others and head around the corner to grab a bus to Kalendia, which seems to be leaving just as usual. Back to Kalendia, where soldiers walk above the checkpoint but no one stops us from entering. Back to Neta's house, to spend a quiet evening and a quiet day today, working on the training manual while Neta makes a hundred phone calls trying to decide whether to reschedule our coordinator's trainings, as the roads are closed from Nablus and Jenin. No one can get in or out. We don't know if they will reopen by the weekend, or, if we postpone until next week, if something else won't happen that will close them again. Today everyone is on strike, the shops are closed, the streets eerily quiet. This is the Palestine I'm familiar with, the shuttered doors and windows, the silence. Everyone seems sad today, and tired, the very streets steeped in sorrow. It's a strike, today, however, not a curfew--there is no fear of soldiers rounding a corner with guns ready to fire, no tanks. Yet. The fear is deeper, more endemic. Somewhere someone is planning revenge. Someone is alive today who will soon be dead, because of this assassination. And after the revenge will come the retaliation, the tanks, the demolitions, the closures. It feels like the calm before the storm.

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