

Death and Birth in the Occupied Territories

by Starhawk

On Death:

First, a correction. Sheikh Yassin, assassinated on Monday by the Israeli military, was only 67 years old, not 92. That's the last time I take the word of an eleven-year-old informant!

Regardless of how old he was, regardless of his responsibility for deaths or his culpability in suicide bombings, regardless of whether you loved or abhorred him, assassinating him was morally, politically, and strategically indefensible. If you make assassination a tactic in your political program, you become something vile, something that will taint every good you claim to stand for. However dangerous you might perceive Yassin's ideas to be, you can't destroy his ideas by killing him, you can only strengthen their appeal. You can't kill hate: you can only create more of it by killing. Had Sharon and company hired a PR firm to tell them how to create the ultimate Hamas martyr, they couldn't have done a better job: an old man, in a wheelchair, murdered coming out of a mosque after praying.

In fact, assassinating Yassin was not a program of security, it was a program of deliberate provocation, aimed not at gaining peace and safety for Israel, but at undermining any serious attempts at peace, negotiation, or concessions to the Palestinians. That is his pattern: any time another step toward peace is made, he stages another assassination or a provocation, and that takes care of the threat that he might actually have to give something up or make some meaningful concession. Assassinating Yassin will surely bring death to Israelis. That means to someone like my cousin, who regularly studies at a Yeshivah, or to my friend Dana, newly pregnant, or to one of the young Israeli activists who are regulars at every demonstration against the wall. Hamas cannot be absolved of responsibility for those deaths, but neither can Sharon.

And the revenge that will inevitably come will surely draw reprisals. The Palestinians, who already have their freedom of movement restricted, their land and water resources confiscated, their economy destroyed, their houses regularly searched and trashed, their schools periodically closed down, their men arrested en masse, their women humiliated, their children terrorized, who have suffered three times as many deaths as the Israelis in this intifada, will suffer some more. That means the death of someone like my friend Hanin in Balata camp, young mother of a baby girl, or the young boy who thought Yassin was ninety-two, or the old man I stayed with in Rafah who urged me to "eat, eat!" in the same tones my grandmother used.

And it means the death of any possible new round of negotiations, any peace process, any road map. Be clear: Sharon does not want peace. He wants the land, all of it. The assassination of Yassin was a move on his part to gain the land. And if you find some

part of yourself in sympathy with that aim, be honest with yourself and recognize that to gain all of this land, the Palestinian people must be destroyed. The name for the destruction of a people is genocide, and the assassination of Yassin was part of that policy. Not the overt genocide of gas chambers and mass executions, but the slow starvation of everything that furthers the life of a people, the constant attrition of a killing here and a killing there, the unrelenting pressure to pick up and leave a land that is held like a prison.

For three days everything was shut down in Ramallah, stores closed, cafes shut tight, streets empty. On the third day, the walls of the town were covered with Yassin's shahid poster. When someone dies in the struggle here, in whatever way, a child shot by soldiers or a fighter gunned down in a clash, the family or the political organization he or she belonged to makes a martyr poster. Hamas has made one for Yassin that depicts him in glowing white, flanked by two black silhouettes of armed men. In Arabic it says, "We accept the challenge."

On Birth:

Because of the assassination of Sheikh Yassin, my friend Neta couldn't go to her brother's wedding in Tel Aviv. Neta is married to a Palestinian, Nizar, who cannot legally be in Israel proper. Neta, as an Israeli, cannot legally be in the West Bank, but she lives here anyway. In calm times there are ways Nizar might come to a family occasion safely but these days everything is tense, roads are closed, and it seems too risky. Our trainings for this week are also postponed as no one can get out of Nablus or Jenin, so our trainees can't come. Also they are afraid that Hamas will take revenge for the Sheikh and Israel will avenge the revenge, and tanks will roll back into Ramallah, and they could get stuck here. We've postponed the trainings until next week, although there's no guarantee the situation will be better and it may well be worse. In the meantime, although I can feel Neta's frustration and disappointment at not being able to be with her family, it turns out to be fortunate that she doesn't go. For in mid-morning, her water breaks and she begins to get mild contractions. We've been worried that the baby is late: the doctors she's seen have been making noises about inducing labor, and she very much wants to have a natural childbirth, so this is good news.

We spend the day walking. Walking helps bring on the contractions. We walk around the shuttered town, looking for stores with their doors open a crack where we can slip in and buy food. We go out later with Nizar and their one-year-old daughter, Nawal, who is truly adorable, one of those happy babies who finds life delightful and funny, laughs a lot, and waves bye-bye on every occasion.

On the outskirts of Ramallah are terraced hills still planted with olives, some of them so ancient they are called "Romim," Roman. Olives can live for a couple of thousand years, and some of these have trunks so braided, swollen, and thick that they could indeed have seen Herod pass by, or Jesus climb these hills. I put my hands on one of them, thinking that these trees have seen empires come and go, have seen betrayal and brutality and assassination, and still they endure. Someone long ago carved this terrace, stacked these stones one on one atop each other, carried the weight of each stone on his back and placed them with his hands, and the stones endure. Pink cyclamen and wild iris and tiny, magenta orchids peek out from among them, returning

to bloom in the spring as they have always done. And though we all feel as if we're waiting in the pause, the indrawn breath, that will blow the candle of the world out, maybe this empire too will pass and the beauty and the blossom yet endure. Neta's contractions grow stronger, she pauses and leans on Nizar: a new life is about to be born and who could not feel hopeful, in spite of everything?

We return back to Neta's house. Her friend Ream comes to watch Nawal, and Nizar goes to fetch the midwife. She is an older woman, dressed in a long coat and headscarf, and she has a beautiful, strong face. Ream and I find her a bit intimidating: clearly the housekeeping and the appointments of this house are not quite up to her expectations. I've put Neta in a warm bath to relax and Um Ali, the midwife, takes the one chair in the house into the main room and prays. Neta and I have had a running competition for the chair all week: between her nine-months-pregnant bulk and my bad knees neither one of us is all that happy on the floor. But we're very good, we don't fight, in fact we keep politely offering it to each other. "You take the chair." "No, no you take it." Neta and Nizar have actual furniture but it's in Nablus, where they used to live, along with boxes of baby clothes. It's simply not possible to transport furniture between cities in the West Bank, because of the checkpoints and the roadblocks.

But now, clearly, the midwife needs the chair. She tells me to tie my hair back. Something about my hair is deeply disturbing in this culture where women keep it covered--probably the fact that there's so much of it and it's so fluffy and wild. I somehow don't think she likes me much, but after I find a rubber band and pull it back into a rough French braid, she nods approval.

She sets up a birth bed for Neta on the coffee table, spreads some plastic, requisitions some old clothes and towels, and Neta comes out of the bath and into full labor. Nizar and I both support her, rubbing her back, sitting behind her so she has something to lean on. Um Ali, from time to time, rubs her belly in clockwise circles while whispering verses from the Koran. I am murmuring my own prayers to birth Goddesses but do so quietly as I'm not sure how much English Um Ali understands and she's already a bit scandalized. Nizar goes off to put Nawal to sleep. He's a wonderful father, patient, affectionate, nurturing, and kind, and it's a very beautiful sight to see him holding the baby on his knees, patting her and singing in a low croon as she drops into sleep. I don't know if he's typical, but in the patriarchal culture, he nurtures the baby, cooks us food, does dishes, cleans the house, and grows window boxes full of plants wherever they have room, dreaming of compost bins and gardens.

Labor always seems endless but hers is not long, as births go. Um Ali tells her to push, and I hold her from behind, Nizar from in front, as the hard, painful work begins. Somehow I sense I've now slipped into Um Ali's favor. We are all working together, calm and strong, and Neta is a lion, roaring and pushing and moaning and bearing down, until that great moment of transformation occurs, and the shape in her stomach becomes a wrinkled prune of a skull that squeezes through the gates of life and blossoms into a new human being. A beautiful baby girl, named Shaden, who fills her lungs with air, cries, looks up alertly and smiles at me. I know newborns don't smile, but I swear she does.

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