

Beit Leqiya

by Starhawk

Anna, the International Women's Peace Service volunteer, and I arrive at Beit Leqiya for the demonstration after an early morning journey from Hares, up in the Salfit region. The last "service" we take winds down a dusty, bumpy, unpaved road for miles and miles from the small town of Biddu, where ISM has an activist house. We are worried that we will be late for the demo, as the trip from Hares has taken us close to three hours, but we arrive to find a group sitting somewhat dispiritedly in the heat and dust, still waiting for the demo to begin. Feraz, a smiling young man in his twenties, takes me off in a car full of men to leave my pack at the municipality, and when we come back, the march has finally begun. A small group of maybe a hundred young men and boys marches through the town, waving Palestinian flags and chanting. They come toward us and pass us, and we join back in.

I am feeling tense. I want to go to this demonstration: I need to go and experience as much as possible if I am to train people effectively for these situations, but I am aware of the responsibility of all those trainings lined up, and I really, really do not want to get arrested. I really don't particularly want to get hurt, either, much less killed, which is always a possibility at these things. This is a smallish crowd, with hardly a woman to be seen and not great organization--not the best situation. But we are here to support these people, and I take a deep breath and go on.

Soon my main concern is, as always, just keeping up. We're climbing a steep hill in the blazing sun and I drop behind the pace of the internationals who are mostly younger and slimmer and more fit than I. But I am chagrined to fall behind the French couple who seem to be in their seventies or eighties--until later I see the old man sitting down for a rest as I continue gamely gasping and panting on. At last we reach the top of the hill, looking down at the valley below and the slopes beyond where giant cranes and bulldozers have been working. Feraz comes running back and tells me we have defeated them--the bulldozers have stopped, at least for a time. We all march down the hill. At the bottom of the valley, a line of soldiers and Border Police has blocked the march. The elders of the village and a few internationals go up and negotiate. The rest of us stand and wait in the sun. I am wondering why I spend so much of my life organizing, training people for and participating in demonstrations when actually I hate them, I hate marching in the blazing sun, standing around staring at a bunch of armed men: I hate that deep feeling of futility that so often hits you in the pit of the stomach when you come up against brute force. But I remind myself that I always feel this way at some point in every demonstration, and the feeling will pass. The soldiers seem relatively calm, not on the verge of arresting anyone as yet.

Some of the younger shebob, the boys, have stayed up on the hill. They are lobbing stones down toward the soldiers but they are a good quarter of a mile away and can't actually do any damage. Some have slings--through the lens of my camera I can zoom

in and see them whirling stones around their heads like a present-day David going after the Goliath of military force. A couple of soldiers move up the hillside. We hear the high-pitched crack and zing of rifles firing live ammunition--warning shots, we hope. The stone throwers continue, undaunted.

Some communities are able at times to control the shebob, and keep them from throwing stones so as not to give the soldiers an excuse to shoot. They may shoot anyway, of course. But stone throwing is mostly seen as a legitimate and not terribly violent form of resistance by young men and boys. Often, in the cities and refugee camps, it's stones against tanks. Here, where soldiers are out in the open, there is some potential for damage, but the shebob are so far away that the action is mostly symbolic--as if they were saying, "You want our land--here's a small piece of it back."

And Palestine is well supplied with stones: every field is covered with them. Ten thousand years of collecting them into piles and building them up into walls have not begun to dent the supply.

When the shebob start throwing stones, we generally move away. We don't get between the stones and the gunfire: there is nothing productive we can do in that situation. Here, however, we are down with the village leaders in the valley, and the shebob are far up the hill. We stay.

A small group of Israelis is with us, and they take a bullhorn and begin to speak to the soldiers, telling them that this is a peaceful demonstration, that they have nothing to fear. One of the hopeful things about the mobilizations in these villages is that they have welcomed the presence of supportive Israelis, and small groups of them regularly brave both the dangers of the actions and the disapproval of their own community to come. A few more sharp rifle cracks split the air, but the soldiers facing us look relaxed. Eric Asherman, from the Rabbis for Human Rights group, joins us and goes up and begins negotiating with the soldiers. They have given us five minutes to leave, threatening that there was going to be a big explosion and rocks would be flying. We are skeptical--until *they* leave, we won't be too worried about flying rocks here. On the hill behind them, the cranes and bulldozers have resumed work. They carve an ugly scar in the green terraces. I am trying to find shade to stand in that still leaves me an open exit route where I can run on relatively flat ground. Suddenly the soldiers appear more tense. They form up a line and raise their guns.

The air explodes with the dull boom of sound bombs. They are landing among us, bursting into fragments that can burn or wound. The young boys are running away and the internationals are moving back quickly but trying not to run. Boom! Boom! They are landing all around me, and I'm trying to cover my ears, protect my face, and keep moving. My hearing is already so bad that I can't afford to lose any more of it. A fragment hits me on the arm and bounces off. It hurts, but not horribly, and I keep moving. It sounds like a major bombardment, but aside from the risk of flying fragments and hearing damage, the major effect of the sound bombs is simply to produce fear. They are shooting tear gas higher on the hill, and clouds of it billow upward, but I manage to stay out of it.

Eventually, the soldiers stop firing. We pull back, regroup, and Asherman and the village elders and a few internationals go forward to negotiate again. The rest of the

Palestinians have retreated back toward the village. We wait, in another standoff. I'm not terribly happy in such a small, isolated group but I'm not terrible worried, either. Behind us we can hear the thud, thud of "rubber" bullets--really rubber-coated steel pellets the size of a small marble, being fired at the shebob on the hill. We get a call from above--the soldiers are shooting at the shebob, a few internationals are up there and a lot of media, which means they are unlikely to shoot live rounds. Some of us want to go up, others to stay down. It doesn't seem that there is much we can do up there that is productive.

We wait on the road, negotiating, moving back as the soldiers push forward. Finally we overhear them make a call on the radio for a woman border police, presumably to arrest Becca who has been close in negotiating and challenging them for quite a long time, now. We all decide to move back, and follow the road up the hill.

The road leads us straight into the line of fire between the soldiers and the shebob, so we veer off onto the terraces and climb among the rocks back toward the village. We're hearing constant fire of the rubber bullets, and the shebob are all around us, dodging among the stones and laughing. Most are young enough that death or injury don't yet seem real, although all have known death. But they are like boys playing a wild game of "Capture the Flag" with real soldiers.

We find a sheltered spot to regroup and decide what to do. The heat is intense, and I ask if there's any plan to regroup or to try another march. The others shake their heads. "This is how it always ends up," Shoura says. "The shebob throwing stones and the soldiers firing, until they get tired and go away."

"Then if we can't do anything productive and there's no reason to stay here, why don't we move to a position of greater safety?" I suggest, as we're still hearing fire fairly close to us. We wait until the last members of our group come up from below, try to track down one person who has been wounded in the leg and has disappeared. He later turns out to have been taken into a house in the village, given coffee and set in front of the TV to watch the soccer match.

It hasn't been the most successful demonstration in the world, but no one has been killed, seriously wounded, or arrested. The village can at least feel that they have done something; they have not just sat by and let their land been taken without protest. And there will be more demonstrations--not tomorrow, but the day after, which is Palestinian Land Day.

We go back to the village, sit in the municipality for a while, during which I demonstrate my ability to go to sleep sitting up and have a refreshing short nap. Then we go back to Biddu, the large village or small town where the activists are based.

We are invited to have dinner at the home of the woman who is head of the Women's Organization here in town. Aisha, a grandmother who seems to be about my age, lives in a big house on the far side of the village, and we take a long, pleasant walk down in the twilight. We are brought into a sitting room furnished with red plush overstuffed couches and big armchairs, and decorated with an amazing collection of artificial flower arrangements, stone tables, hanging foil decorations, vases, and religious symbols. I

count at least ten actual arrangements, some still encased in plastic wrappings, and many more vases with one or two artificial flowers. I had thought we were going to meet with the women's committee, but actually we are just being treated to a feast. The men set up a table in the entrance porch, and we sit around it as the women bring out plate after plate of magnificent food: hummous and felafel and tabouli, roast chicken and meatballs and pita bread, big dishes of saffron rice with carrots and peas, and big bowls of soup. Some of our group are vegetarians, but I am thrilled to eat the chicken, which has been marinated in spices and is just about the best I've ever tasted. Monsour, who is a cousin of Aisha's family and our contact in Biddu, eats with us--he speaks English and has a great deal of charm, laughing and joking and teasing. We eat and eat, and then move back into the big sitting room to drink Turkish coffee and share the narghileh, the water pipe that passes around. Aisha joins us, and the two young daughters-in-law come out with their children and we talk together. But Shoura, Becca, and Monsour have to leave for a meeting with the council, which removes our major translators.

Aisha's husband now directs Mark's attention to the mosaic stone tables that hold the flower arrangements. He is a stonecutter, and has made the mosaics and the pedestals. He brings in catalogs of stone for us to look at, and more of his mosaic projects. The women, in turn, bring in albums of wedding pictures. The youngest daughter-in-law who is holding the sweet, seven-month-old baby boy who smiles at us all, was married in a full, white, Western-style wedding dress. Her mother and Aisha and the other older women were in beautifully embroidered, traditionally styled dresses and headscarves. We see pictures of them dancing, and then we all go into a back room to see the video tapes. It's a joint effort of all the men present, the various sons and husbands and cousins, to get the VCR working, but they succeed. I can't help but think of the last time I visited my Orthodox cousin Steven and his new wife, how they also pulled out the wedding pictures and the videos, how just like in a Jewish wedding the groom is hoisted up to be carried on the shoulders of the men in a dance, how when Jews let loose at a wedding we become positively Middle Eastern, dancing in lines with arms upraised, and how congenial we would all find each other if the barriers that separate people could by some miracle be dissolved. We see the young bride led out in a veil, brought into the wedding area. Her husband lifts the veil, and reveals her hair, elaborately curled and dressed. And everyone dances: women and men together, clapped and waving arms from side to side, lifting the groom and the bride up on chairs.

I am feeling a bit nostalgic for my drum, which I didn't bring on this trip, but I look up and see a drum on top of the closet behind the TV. Monsour and the others return, and he is able to translate some of their questions, about whether we think Bush will win the election, and why doesn't America press for an investigation into the killing of Rachel Corrie?

When the conversation winds down, I ask if I can see the drum. Here they call it a tabla--I know it as a doumbek, the hourglass-shaped drum of the Middle East. They hand it down to me and I begin to play a baladi beat--dum-doum tek-a-tek doum-tek-a-tek- teka. Everyone begins to clap and smile, and then the one of the men jumps up to dance, grabs Peter, the slight, blond Swede, and tries to get him to dance. Everyone is laughing and one by one they badger each of the men to dance--and then start in on the women. Sarah, the tall English activist, is shy; red-haired Becca claims she can only

do disco. Shoura, who is Iranian/Swedish, very beautiful with her rose-blushed almond skin and dark eyes, looks perfect, moving her hips to the beat and her hands and arms waving in the air. Aisha joins her--she laughs and says she's old and fat but all the boys insist she is a wonderful dancer, and she is, her feet and hips swiveling to the beat, her hands graceful. Then she takes the drum and they make me dance. We are all laughing and filled with the joy of the celebration. It's been a long day, that for me began at 6 a.m., getting up to guard the farmer ploughing the fields below the settlement. I've had a long journey and a march in the blazing heat and a confrontation with military force, and faced the painful, ongoing destruction of the land and way of life in these villages. But in spite of all the pain and the losses, it's a day that ends in friendship and dancing.

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