

# Village and Settlements

by Starhawk

Yesterday I woke at dawn to accompany a farmer out to plow the fields of a woman from the village of Hares, where I was staying at the house of the International Women's Peace Service. IWPS is a sister group to the International Solidarity Movement, the group I'm with. They are based in Hares, in the Salfit region, and besides the ongoing work of human rights monitoring and documenting, they have a special interest in women.

I'd come here to meet with two of the women, Fatima and Um Fadi, who are organizing women's demonstrations against the wall. When I'd told Fatima on the phone I do trainings in nonviolent direct action, she'd said, "We need you!" Both women are probably in their forties and fifties. Fatima comes from Gaza and has traveled outside Palestine. Educated and sophisticated, she discards her headscarf and wears slacks and a leopard-patterned sweater under her outside coat. She talks with her hands, as everyone does here, and her long, slender fingers move in such a graceful dance that I am mesmerized watching them. Um Fadi is quieter, a bit shy. Both speak some English, but mostly Karen, a young German volunteer with IWPS, translates.

Supported by IWPS, they are organizing explicitly nonviolent women's resistance to the Wall in the Salfit region. I am moved by their courage and excited to work with them. They face enormous obstacles: at minimum, tear gas and sound bombs and rubber-coated steel bullets from the Israelis--but also the threat of severe beatings, arrest in a situation where as Palestinians they can be held indefinitely without trial and tortured, and even lethal force. As well, they face interference and obstruction from men in their own community who may be threatened by women finding their power. But they are undaunted.

I don't have any magic to impart that can protect them against all that, but I do believe that training and preparation can help them find ways to act coherently, support each other, and make the demonstrations as empowering as possible. We schedule several days of it for the end of my stay.

Then Angie and I sit down and go over the agenda for the coordinators' trainings. Angie is a long-term IWPS volunteer, a solid woman in her early fifties, who is an experienced and committed peace activist. In Britain, where she comes from, she founded Trident Ploughshares, a disarmament group that has done everything from road blockades to dumping into a lake the computers that guide missiles. She's been in prison many times for her beliefs, and she has a calm, solid, grounded presence that inspires confidence. She immediately identifies the places in the agenda where I've been overly optimistic about time. We sit and talk over tea about the challenges in the women's organizing, and then I go out for a walk through the village.

Hares stands on the slope of a hill, with olive groves and small fields stretching out below. It's idyllic and peaceful, climbing up from the IWPS house past the small gardens and olive terraces to the main street. But just across the valley, on the crest of the hill facing us, stands Ariel, the largest of the illegal "settlements."

"Settlement," to me, implies a lonely, crude outpost in some hostile wilderness, populated by intrepid frontier folk dressed in rude skins and carrying muskets. But most of the "settlements" are actually gated communities: modern suburbs that could have been airlifted straight from Southern California, complete with all the amenities--red tile roofs, ample bathrooms, swimming pools, guard towers, razor wire, and an armed security force backed by the Israeli military. They are built on land confiscated without compensation from Palestinians, and the vast majority of them have been built since the Oslo accords were signed. Currently, settlements and their reserve lands occupy 42% of the West Bank--and comprise only about 10% of the population. They also use 80% of the water. In Gaza, the situation is even worse: 6,500 settlers occupy 54 square kilometers out of a total of 365. What this translates to is a population density of 665 people per square kilometer for settlers, over 25,000 for Palestinians--and in the refugee camps, where a third of the people live, the density is over fifty thousand people per square kilometer.

Not only that, but the settlements are linked by special roads that bypass Palestinian villages and towns and carve up the West Bank and Gaza into isolated fragments. Palestinians are not allowed on most of these roads, and they are protected by soldiers and checkpoints and closures. The Israeli government spends four billion New Israeli Shekels a year on added military security for the settlements alone--not counting the billions spent on construction, infrastructure, grants, and incentives for settlers, and more, totaling over fifty billion NIS since 1967.

If you want to know why Palestinians lost faith in the Oslo process, why they distrust the Israeli government, and why they are wary of new negotiations, just step outside your door and look around at the place where you live. Imagine what it would feel like to have a hostile population plant themselves on the next ridge over, taking land without paying compensation for it. Imagine if you had to stand in line and present documents in order to leave your town or visit the next one, if the shortest route to visit your best friend was blocked by a roadblock, if you had to be searched by soldiers every day on your way to work or coming home, and could be detained and made to wait for no particular reason, if your kids had to pass a checkpoint to get to school, and if at any moment your house could be entered, searched, or even blown up with no warrant or due process, and you'll start to understand the frustration that built to this current intifada.

Ariel is built on the land belonging to Hares village. It was here that Neta Golan, my Israeli friend who is now home in Ramallah nursing her new baby, began her campaign of solidarity. Settlers from Ariel would come down to the entrance of the village, taunt the young boys and provoke them until they began throwing stones, and then shoot live ammunition at them. But when she began living in Hares and coming out to talk with the settlers and stand between them and the shebob--the young men--they were less likely to shoot.

A group of small boys are sitting outside a house, playing cards, and they surround me, asking "What's your name?" and "Where are you from?" We have a slightly hilarious conversation in which I try to remember how to say "Bush is crazy" in Arabic but succeed only in saying "Bush is a checkpoint," and they try to teach me how to say "Bush is a donkey." I walk on, up along the main street and down past the mosque. Hares stretches on along the crest for a long way. Eventually I reach more fields and olive groves, and then turn back.

Two men are sitting in front of a house, and they wave me over and offer me water. I join them and we sit and talk. One speaks some English, and later two of the teenaged boys come out. They are smiling, handsome, curly-headed shebob of fourteen and sixteen, who tell me they are good students. The oldest wants to be an engineer. The mother joins us when one of the men leaves, and they bring out tea. They want to know where I'm from, and whether I have children, and why the American people elected Bush and whether I think Kerry will win and be any better for the people of Palestine. I try to explain that we didn't \*elect\* Bush and that many of us don't support him or his wars or policies and are trying very hard to defeat him. But no one has a common language nuanced enough for the finer points of the discussion. And I can't offer them any hope that Kerry will be better on this issue.

Angie calls, worried about me, and I assure her that I'm fine, but decide to head back to the house. I share dinner with the five women who are currently based in the house, and work late on revising the trainer's manual for ISM.

We wake up at six to go out to the fields with the farmer at seven. He drives a horse and donkey, and Aisha, the woman who owns the field, follows along with us. We snake down through the olive terraces and he sets the donkey to graze and hitches up the horse with a big, padded collar. The horse pulls a small, metal plow, and we watch while he drives it back and forth, clucking with his tongue and calling out commands in Arabic. The fields are small and stony, edged with stone walls. Every bit of land that can be terraced is, the hills themselves are hand-sculpted over ten thousand years of cultivation. Now many of the terraces are falling apart, however. It's hard for the villagers to work these fields or pick these olives as they are often harassed or attacked by the settlers who live in the walled suburb which looms just above us. That's why we're here--to intervene if these quiet people are menaced.

Ploughing is their method of weed control: it keeps the terraces from turning to scrub, and aerates the soil. I pick up a handful of soil, sniff it, rub it between my fingers, drip some water onto it and feel its texture. It's clay soil that stains my hands, but has very little organic matter in it. Olives do not need high fertility. Neither do wildflowers, which abound on these terraces and fill every crack between the rocks: pinks and blue true geraniums and little cyclamen and daisies. The plough digs through the soil, turning it, and Aisha follows with a hoe to get the last weeds too close to the rocks for the plow to hit. The horse plods and turns, plods and turns. This scene could be thousands of years old, as long as I don't look back over my shoulder to the red-roofed buildings of the settlement above.

The Jewish religion is deeply tied to the agricultural cycle of this land. It's one of the reasons for the fanaticism of some of the settlers, their insistence that God gave the

land to Jews, their assumption that Palestinians are just some sort of temporary mistake God has not yet rectified. It can make them irrational and vicious toward farmers and families simply trying to work the land their grandparents have farmed for generations.

But when I stop and think about it, the Jewish religion has little to say about olives, considering how they cover every cultivatable meter of these hills. There are three major harvest festivals: Shavuot, in the fall, which celebrates the fruit harvest and the returning rains; Pesach, in the spring, the holiday of shepherds and herders and the beginning of the harvest of winter grain, and Shavuot, in early summer, the end of the winter grain harvest. The New Year of the Trees is celebrated in January or February when the almond trees and fruit trees blossom. (All these dates move around because the calendar is lunar, readjusted periodically to catch up with the solar year.) As a child in Minnesota, I never understood why we were celebrating the blossoming of trees when everything was generally buried under five feet of snow--but in California, with its mild, Mediterranean climate, the timing is perfect. The olive branch is a symbol of peace, and olive oil figures heavily in the Temple rituals, but there is no olive harvest festival in November, nothing that suggests the overwhelming importance olive cultivation has today. I wonder if the soil was not more fertile in ancient times, if grain cultivation was not more central and important, and if the olives have gradually taken prominence as the soil's condition worsened.

Now a soldier comes down. Angie walks up and talks to him. He says he is new here, only a week. "They don't mind him ploughing," the soldier says, "but a terrorist could come up from these fields. We have our land: they have theirs. My job is to keep the peace." Angie points out that Ariel is built on "their" land, and that peace requires justice. When the conversation starts to veer toward Sharon, she diplomatically ends it. One of the successes of ISM and IWPS in campaigns where volunteers have accompanied villagers to plough or plant or harvest olives has been to sometimes force the military to protect villagers from violent settlers instead of simply standing by as they attack farmers. This place is generally peaceful, Angie says, and this soldier seems decent. He walks away, and we go back to ploughing. Later a settler drives up in a jeep, stops on the dirt road that runs by the field, watches us. We move onto the stone wall that separates the field, and watch him. Just then I get a call from Anna, back at the house. There is a demonstration today at Beit Lequiya--do I want to go? Yes, I do. The demonstration is probably two hours away, and starts at eleven. But should we leave, just at this minute? The soldiers come down and get in the car with him, and they drive off. We wait for a bit, but it seems okay. Angie also has to leave, but Barbara, another IWPS volunteer, seems content to stay by herself.

We go back to the house. I grab my stuff, and Anna and I head off on the journey. Anna is a young, South African volunteer, with a sweet face and a voice that sounds like birdsong. We are lucky to catch a service on the road that takes us to the Zatará checkpoint, the crossroads where we can go either north to Nablus or south toward Ramallah and Jerusalem. On this road, settlers and Palestinians actually mix. A settler with a mean-looking machine gun is standing at the crossroads, waiting for a bus with his wife, her head covered and skirts long in Orthodox style. It strikes me again that there are deep similarities between Jews and Muslims--the more orthodox of both agreeing completely on just which parts of women need to be covered in public. We get

another shared taxi that winds through the hills toward Qalendia, the checkpoint outside Ramallah where every route seems to begin and end. Winding through the terraced hills, I have a sudden vision of an archaeologist, digging through ruins a thousand or more years from now. "These red tiles--they represent the Settlement Period," she says. "You'll always find them on the tops of hills, generally in association with a round guard tower, and remains of weapons. But in the same time period, you'll find unfortified villages with a somewhat different material culture...it seems there were two different populations here. We refer to them as the Six-Pointed Star people and the Star and Crescent people. Some authorities speculate that those were religious symbols, but others maintain they were signs of sports teams or simply national identities. Genetically, the two populations are identical, but the Six-Pointed Star people seem somewhat better nourished, and the Star and Crescent people have, in some phases, an inordinate number of graves of young men...."

I find this fantasy oddly comforting. It reminds me that no matter how stuck and entrenched and immutable this current situation seems, it will pass. Systems of injustice are inherently unstable. Empires overreach themselves, and fall. But I fear what they may take with them as they come crashing down, and who they may fall upon: those least able to protect themselves, or to cushion the blows.

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Statistics quoted come from: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs. OCHA-UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Military spending on settlements--Ha'Aretz Special Report, 9/25/2003.

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