

Last Update: The Israeli Activist Festival

by Starhawk

I'm home again, back to my comfortable bed, my burgeoning garden, my friends and family. In fact, I've been back for a week, but various other commitments have kept me from writing. More than that, I find myself having a very hard time putting these words down on the page. I am almost too heartsick to write.

Writing, for me, is what I do in the worst moments of my life. When I've really, really badly screwed up, or when I've been trapped in some situation of utter helplessness, caught in the Indymedia Center in Genoa watching in anguish as stretchers are being carried out from the building across the street, when I'm asking myself, "Oh Goddess, what can I do? What can I do?" the answer is always, "I could write something." Writing is my way of screaming--better than beating on pillows as my therapist used to advise me to do. It makes me feel better, and there's always the hope that what I write might do some small good.

But for me to personally feel better, now, almost seems like a betrayal of the awfulness of the situation. To enjoy my garden, to sleep in my own bed, feels like I'm abandoning my friends whose own gardens are about to be destroyed or sequestered behind the Wall, who can't escape the situation, or who have chosen to stay, getting up every morning and going out to demonstrations where they know there is a chance of being killed. Moreover, writing inevitably puts me into the center of the story, if only because it is being seen and described through my eyes--and this is not about me.

I know that it is just this kind of thinking that leads to burnout and post traumatic stress, or maybe is a form of post traumatic stress--except nothing happened to me on this past trip that would seem to justify a good case of PTSD. Hell, I was there for nearly a month and didn't see a single tank! I was only rarely and briefly in physical danger, and most often in beautiful places, surrounded by warm and welcoming people, albeit with the underlying knowledge that those places were doomed to destruction and those people at risk of the same. If I were counseling someone else, I'd tell them: relax, renew yourself, don't stop enjoying what there is to enjoy, treat yourself as a precious resource so that you have the energy to carry on. And the roses are beautiful, the fruit trees laden with marble-sized apples and apricots and plums, the birds are making their own territorial claims with song instead of bullets, proclaiming the glory of the spring morning and their ardent desire to mate. But my heart is heavy.

Two weeks ago, I left Ramallah and the West Bank to spend a few days in Israel proper, at a "festival of activism." It seemed a good chance to meet up with some of the Israeli activists I knew, meet some others, and see a different aspect of the political scene. My friend Rena was also planning to go, with her family, and kindly offered to translate for me, as the workshops were all in Hebrew.

The festival had been planned for a forest site, but hassles and restrictions from the authorities forced it to move to the grounds of a peace center near Haderah. Around 2000 people attended, camping or staying in dorms or simply coming for the day. There were workshops on everything from resisting the Wall to permaculture, and I gave two presentations on some of the organizing I've done this year in the global justice movement, trying to link it to the resistance to the Occupation, and on the ways we've brought permaculture into our mobilizations.

For the first day, I wandered around in a state of mild culture shock. After a month on the Palestinian side, it felt strange to see so many people who looked just like any crowd of activists back home, to see bare arms and legs and uncovered midriffs, and such a preponderance of flowing, curly hair! A group of young soldiers camped near us, and my body went into a moment of visceral shock. But I took a breath, reminded myself that almost all Israelis do their year of military service, that many soldiers are also resisters, and that it was a good thing they were here to participate in the festival. I saw a few familiar Palestinian faces from last year's peace camp at Mas'Ha, where the nonviolent resistance to the Wall was kicked off, and we greeted each other warmly. One woman from the International Women's Peace Service had spread out a blanket and was doing outreach, but I was the only representative from the ISM--in part because all of the workshops except mine were in Hebrew. Next year, I think, we should have an information booth.

I attended workshops on the Wall, and two given by the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions (ICAHN). I was interested--and a bit surprised--to learn what background information the presenters needed to give about the Wall, how little even this group of people progressive enough to attend this festival knew about it, how many basic terms of the Occupation had to be defined. The Israelis who are involved in the day-to-day resistance are incredibly committed and courageous. Many of them said to me that they know it is only a matter of time before there is an Israeli "shaheed"--a martyr of the Occupation. Being Israeli is no longer a protection against the violence of the military. One Israeli, Gil Na'amati from Kibbutz Re'im in the Negev desert, himself just weeks out of the army, was shot in the legs with live ammunition. Etai Levinsky was shot by a rubber-coated steel bullet right between the eyes while he was lying on the ground, talking to the soldiers in Hebrew through a bullhorn. Jonathan Pollack was nearly run down by a jeep, but managed to leap onto the hood and save himself. Many of the activists are young, and go home from the demonstrations to families who do not support their politics or their actions.

I met other Israelis taking action on many fronts. Jeff Halper, head of the Israeli Committee on Home Demolitions, together with Salim Shawamre, told the story of Salim's house, which had been demolished four times by the Israeli authorities and rebuilt five. Eleven thousand Palestinian homes have been demolished since 1967, as part of the ongoing program of control and dispossession. Salim, who is an Israeli-Palestinian, was unable to get a building permit to build a home for his family on his own land in the outskirts of Jerusalem. Israeli policy prevents Palestinians from building or expanding their living quarters within Israel proper, leading to overcrowding and public health hazards in Palestinian towns and neighborhoods. Those who take matters into their own hands risk soldiers coming in the middle of the night, ordering the family out of their house, and bulldozing it. In the Occupied Territories, homes are destroyed

because they are in the path of the Wall, or too close to the border, or because someone in the extended family is accused of a bombing or simply organizes even nonviolent resistance to the occupation. Last year, I'd gone to a demonstration at Salim's house to represent the International Solidarity Movement shortly after Rachel Corrie was killed trying to prevent a home demolition in Rafah. Then, they were beginning to rebuild the house as a peace center. "But how many peace centers can we have?" Salim asked. "Eleven thousand? People need a place to live."

Halper outlined how the Wall was a long-planned strategy of Sharon & Co., conceived back in the 1970s. The expansion of settlements was a deliberate strategy to claim territory with "facts on the ground." During the Oslo peace process, the number of settlers doubled, undermining the Palestinians' belief in the good faith of Israeli leaders. Now the Wall would consolidate the settlement blocs, annexing them to Israel proper. The new Trans-Israel highway, running close to the West Bank, was part of the plan. It would open up new population centers in the relatively empty eastern spine of the country. Currently, most Israelis live close to the coast. The road would transfer population eastward, integrating the settlements into huge urban blocs extending out from Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Modi'in. The most fertile and productive land of the West Bank, and the prime aquifers beneath it, would become a de facto part of Israel. Any real two-state solution would become impossible: there would not be enough of Palestine left to form a viable state.

Halper spoke eloquently of the need to reframe the issue. As long as the right wing can frame the conflict as a security issue, they control the dialogue and the parameters of the solutions discussed. If we could succeed in reframing it as a political struggle, then political solutions, dialogue, and negotiations become possible. But sadly, he ended by saying that all of their work--the resistance to demolitions, the rebuilding projects, the media work--had so far had little or no impact on overall Israeli public opinion.

You can find his excellent article on Israel's Matrix of Control, and a map of the settlement blocs at the ICAHD website, www.icahd.org/eng/. And for a map of the Wall, see www.gush-shalom.org/the wall/.

And I found myself embroiled in many arguments, that often started when someone asked how long I'd been in Israel. "I've been in Palestine for almost a month," I'd say, "but here just for a couple of days."

"As soon as you say the word 'Palestine' you've lost them," Rena said. The basic frame of the story, from the mainstream Israeli point of view, is that there are no "Palestinians," only an undifferentiated mass of Arabs that could conveniently move on to some other Arab country; there never was a Palestine, only "a land without a people for a people without a land," as the Zionist slogan went. So even to say the word is to challenge the frame, to stake out a side, to reveal your alliance--and for many Israelis, that alliance alone immediately discredits anything you have to say.

Then Rena and I drove to Tel Aviv for dinner with friends, on the beach, in a restaurant which serves calamari (very unKosher) but by law cannot serve pasta or bread during Passover. Then I grabbed a taxi to catch my flight home.

What happened at the airport is another story, which maybe I'll tell someday. Suffice to say that the authorities made it known that I will not be welcomed back. So I write now with the consciousness of exile, as the news worsens, as Bush has apparently authorized the Wall and its annexation and given the green light to another political assassination, as another nonviolent demonstrator is shot and killed in Buddu, as tanks and Apaches menace Rafah, as internationals and journalists are ordered out of Nablus, as even Ramallah is under some kind of closure and the Israeli forces appear to be mobilizing for some new massive incursions. Here the roses are exuberantly blooming and the greenhouse overflowing with lettuce and kale. The hills are dotted with wild iris and blue-eyed grass. A heavy stone of fear sits in my belly--fear for Neta and her newborn and laughing one-year-old Nawal, for wry Monsour and generous, macho Mohammed, fear for sixteen-year-old Shams playing the doumbek and singing, fear for Fatima whirling round in the fields, arms outflung with the exuberant joy of spring, proclaiming, "This is our land! This is our land!" Fear for my friends in the ISM, for serious, responsible Gabe, for red-haired Becca, and calm, quiet Shoura, fear for the battle-hardened men and the shy, determined women struggling to forge a nonviolent movement under fire in the midst of a combat zone.

Exile, a small taste of the experience of generations of Palestinians and diaspora Jews, an experience which would, in a better world, draw us together, not lead us to build walls of separation. As in a better world, our history of oppression would lead us to oppose injustice and alleviate suffering, not perpetuate them.

But even a short sojourn in the West Bank teaches that the world is rarely better, that justice does not always win out in the end, that good may not prevail, that those of us who stake our lives on the possibility that compassion, creativity, and love might be stronger in the end than domination and force can lose, bigtime. And still, in the face of that knowledge, with five people already killed in peaceful protests in their town, the women of Biddu are preparing to march on Sunday, into the lines of soldiers, the hail of sound bombs, tear gas, rubber-coated steel bullets and real bullets, to sit in front of the bulldozers and try to protect their land. Aisha, who fed us the wonderful feast, her daughters-in-law, who proudly showed their wedding pictures and kept urging me to dance, the tiny woman who lent me her bee suit so I could watch them work their hives, the young volunteers with the ISM, and the grandmothers will be there.

And the only way that I can accompany them, now, is with the unglamorous but real support from afar, the phone calls, the letters, the emails and petitions, the pressure on those governments who fund and supply the bullets. If you've read these stories, if you now know more than you did before or care more, it's time to hammer at the doors of Bush, Sharon, and all their supporters, to say:

No to political assassination as a policy.
Stop killing nonviolent protestors.
No to the Wall and the annexation of the West Bank.
No to legitimization of the illegal settlements.
Yes to a real peace process, that leads to reconciliation and justice for both peoples.

Ariel Sharon, Prime Minister pm_eng@pmo.gov.il
Shaul Mofaz, Minister of Defense sar@mod.gov.il

George Bush president@whitehouse.gov
Israeli Embassy in Washington DC 202-364-5500

For more information about the International Solidarity movement, see
www.palsolidarity.org.

Copyright (c) 2004 by Starhawk. All rights reserved. This copyright protects Starhawk's right to future publication of her work. Nonprofit, activist, and educational groups may circulate this essay (forward it, reprint it, translate it, post it, or reproduce it) for nonprofit uses. Please do not change any part of it without permission.