

Last Year at Mas'Ha

by Starhawk

Tonight is the first night of Passover, the Jewish festival of liberation that ends, traditionally, with the ritual phrase, "Next year in Jerusalem." A year ago, I spent this night at the peace camp at Mas'Ha, after returning from Rafah where I'd been supporting the team that was with Tom Hurndall when he was shot a few days before. I wrote, then, that I could not say "Next year in Jerusalem" ever again, because the pain I felt at the injustice and violence my own people were perpetuating in the name of that dream.

But I also wrote about the hope I felt at that camp, where Israelis had responded to the village's request for support, and how good it felt to see young Palestinians and Israelis simply hanging out together around the fire. Today I'm thinking about the fruits of that camp. I'm not far away. I'm in the International Women's Peace Service house in Hares, just down the road. We got up at 5 a.m. this morning to go to another demonstration in Bid'du against the Wall. Bid'du is the village in Jerusalem's hinterland where a few weeks ago four people were killed in a peaceful demonstration. Today we march with about 50 villagers, a small group of internationals, and some of the Israelis who are now regulars at these events. We climb a hill where yesterday a bulldozer scraped a raw path, and plant olive trees. The men have brought 15 trees and they are fast and efficient with pick and hoe at digging a hole and putting them in. They ask a few of us to plant a tree. Jonathan, the tall young Israeli who, with his curly black hair, looks like my brother when he was young, scrapes with the hoe. A few days ago he was nearly killed when a military jeep tried to run him down. He was able to leap onto the hood and was carried off downhill, but survived. I take the hoe away from him and swing it, chopping away at the rocky ground just to show these shebob that I know how to swing a pick. Then we plant the tree, packing the earth around it. I pull out a small bottle of sacred water, waters of the world, we call it, from my pocket, and sprinkle the tree. "This is water from my land," I tell the crowd, "where I also grow olive trees, and I want to water this tree with it as a symbol of solidarity." They all applaud, and then bring a big jug of water to wet the tree's roots. This is my Passover blessing, I'm thinking. This is probably the last demo I'll attend on this trip and it seems right and hopeful to plant a tree.

The bulldozers aren't working today, it turns out, and the soldiers don't appear. We hang out in the sunlight, chant, make speeches. A sheikh leads a group of the men in religious songs. Mohammed goes off to town, brings back tomatoes and cucumbers and flat bread covered with zata, thyme, and sesame seeds for us all. This is my unleavened bread, I think. Rebecca, the tall, red-haired ISM volunteer who is also Jewish, is standing beside me and I point to the bread. "It's our matzoh," I say, "Happy Pesach."

For the past five days or so, I've been doing trainings of various kinds, with groups ranging from the internationals who come, to the Palestinian coordinators of the ISM, to

women from the villages who are organizing actions. It's not that I'm actually *training* anyone to do anything, I'm more facilitating a process of collective thinking about strategies and action planning for the incipient nonviolent movement that is trying to gain ground here. And I'm learning a lot.

Palestine actually has a long, rich history of civil resistance, from the strikes and protests of the Mandate years to the first intifada, which was a primarily nonviolent uprising that drew participation from all sectors of society. There were massive boycotts of Israeli goods, strikes, demonstrations, a tax revolt in Beit Sahour, and people perceive that the strength of that resistance drove the Israelis to the bargaining table that resulted in the Oslo agreements. They won the recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; the problem is that the PLO failed them. Oslo contained no teeth, nothing to guarantee the establishment of the Palestinian state, and while negotiations dragged on, the Israeli government continued to support new settlements that took more and more strategic land from the already tiny area that could have been Palestine. The settlements pushed deep into the core areas of the West Bank, took vast stretches of fertile land, began to ring Jerusalem--and meanwhile each "offer" of each succeeding Israeli government granted less autonomy and reserved more land for security buffers. Barak's so-called "generous offer" actually claimed another huge chunk of the West Bank and again contained no real guarantees. So many people lost faith--in negotiations, in the peace process, in nonviolent tactics, and that deep despair is part of the grounds for the greater focus in this intifada on armed struggle and bombings.

But now some of the Palestinians are beginning to lose faith in armed struggle. And many are beginning to remember the successes of the first intifada, and to look for forms of resistance that can involve the vast majority of people who will not take up arms or become suicide bombers. And especially in the villages where the Wall is being built, a movement of mass, nonviolent resistance is growing. Up until now, the villages have not been as brutalized as the camps and cities. Many had, until recently, commerce with Israelis and, while many have experienced attacks and harassment from settlers, others have had friendly relations with the settlements in their midst. A year ago, when Mas'Ha set up the peace camp in the path of the bulldozers, they called for aid from both internationals and Israelis, who responded by helping villagers maintain a presence there for months. Mas'Ha lost all of its farmland to the Wall, but the movement has now grown and expanded to almost daily demonstrations and direct actions wherever the bulldozers are at work. And between the Israelis and the Palestinians there's the respect of comrades who daily face a common danger.

Still, I wish all those people who so blithely say, "We call on the Palestinian people to adopt the tactics of Martin Luther King and Gandhi" would just come here and face the immense difficulties of doing so in a combat situation, when you are faced with a military who has no compunction about shooting unarmed demonstrators. And where success, when it comes, means stopping the bulldozers for a few hours, but knowing they will eventually take your land, your water resources, your ancient trees, your way of life. Try getting up every day and going out to face tear gas and rubber bullets aimed at heads and eyes. You rack your brains trying to figure out how old women can protect themselves from soldiers willing to beat them bloody, how mothers with small children should respond to tear gas, how leaders can emerge when to stand forth puts your life,

your home, and your freedom at risk.

Nonviolence isn't some magic formula that guarantees success. It works in specific ways, all of which are fraught with special difficulties here. Nonviolence can reach the hearts of an enemy and transform them, and that has happened with some of the soldiers, but many of them are so fortified by their own sense of victimhood and righteousness that they are impervious to shame, guilt, or any sense of the humanity of these people. Nonviolence can reveal the inherent violence in an unjust system, and arouse the public against it. Well, here the violence is overt and clear, but so far the world's public doesn't seem to give a damn--or if it does, it has yet to impact Sharon or Bush. Nonviolence and noncooperation can raise the costs of unjust policies--but many of the usual methods of noncooperation can't work here. The Palestinians can't go on strike: they are already locked out of the work that many once depended on in Israel proper. They can't block roads: they are the ones who are blocked, continually, every time they need to leave their village or travel more than a few miles in any direction. They can't even demonstrate where the Israeli public can actually see them, because they can't get into Israel proper.

Nevertheless, these people are determined and courageous, and we make plans and do role plays and come up with new ideas for campaigns. And over the course of the days we spend together, the mood shifts from frustration and despair to optimism and hope--perhaps only because activists everywhere share a temperament that is happy and optimistic as long as we have something, anything, we can do.

The trainings take place under some difficulties. We ask everyone to turn off their mobile phones. But Palestinians and ISM coordinators simply can't bring themselves to do so. An emergency might arise: they might miss a call. And indeed, during the course of the first three or four days of training, emergencies arise. The home of one of the leaders of nonviolent actions in Kharbata is demolished, and six of our Israeli friends are arrested trying to prevent the destruction. Our coordinators from Nablus, who have reached the training under great difficulties, get word on the last day that there is an incursion, the city is sealed even more tightly than before, and tanks are rolling in.

When the trainings in Ramallah are finished, I go back with Fatima who is organizing women in the Salfit district. We arrive at her home after a winding journey in the hills, passing a checkpoint and being interrogated by soldiers who accept my story of university research and let me through. While waiting for our car, just beyond the checkpoint, we are harassed again by the soldiers who drive up just as the hired car arrives, and force us to open our bags. But we get in, and arrive at Fatima's house on the edge of the village. We climb the stairs, and hear her five children singing behind the door. "They are singing about how much they miss their mother," she says, and opens the door to be engulfed in a tidal wave of children throwing their arms around her in octopus hugs.

We spend a slightly surreal evening, eating together from trays on the floor in Middle Eastern style while Oprah Winfrey interviews Arnold Schwarzenegger on cable TV. The older girls, Shams and Mais, ask if I can sing. I ask if they have a drum and they pull out a big doumbek and I play and sing for them--then Shams takes it and sings a popular song of resistance in Arabic in a true and beautiful voice. The younger kids are

teaching me how to cross my eyes and look goofy while Mais grabs my computer and begins opening every file looking for the games I don't have. Finally, to quiet them, I put on my Lord of the Rings DVD and explain the whole plot to Shams so she can translate to Arabic.

"Sauron, he's the evil lord, he's made this ring to rule all the others and give himself incredible power, so he can rule the world."

"Like Bush," Fatima says. "Like Sharon."

It's a long movie and before it's over we are all asleep on top of each other in a giant pile. Then we rouse ourselves up to go to bed.

In the morning, I do a training for the women. When I talk about fear, each one has a story to tell--a midnight knock on the door, a husband or brother killed, a terrifying encounter with the soldiers. For them, the beatings, the rubber bullets, the violence they face in demonstrations is just a seamless continuation of the ongoing violence they face in every aspect of their lives. And yet they are here to strengthen their ability to resist that violence without returning it. I look into their strong, smiling faces, and feel hope.

It remains to be seen whether this movement will grow, whether it can swell into a mass, popular nonviolent resistance, or whether it will burn out in despair or blow up in acts of desperation as the Wall claims more and more ground.

But I know one thing--it can't succeed unless it has support, unless all of us who deplore violence find a way to constrain the violence of Sharon and the military and the governments, including our own, that support them. If we join these villagers in demanding justice, if we stand together as a world community as we did against apartheid in South Africa, then maybe next year or some year we can stand, not in Jerusalem as it is, or Mas'Ha as it was, but in that better place we sense could be, when we see the hands of Palestinians and the hands of Israelis and American Jews and internationals from all over share a piece of the common bread on the land they struggle for together.

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

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