

In Nablus on the Eve of War

I am writing from Nablus on the eve of war. Everyone expects the war to start tonight, but no one is sealing their windows here, or buying duct tape. The Israeli government has not issued gas masks to the Palestinians, nor to us, the internationals who are here as witnesses and nonviolent interveners between the Israeli forces and the Palestinian civilians.

Today was a day of rainstorms, cloudbursts, sudden claps of thunder. My friend Jean, who has joined me here, says they sound like explosions. She wonders if they scare people.

I assure her that the people here know the sound of explosions well, recognize the subtle differences between live ammunition and rubber bullets being fired, the thunder of shells and the shock of houses being blown up.

In fact, the people here seem calm, though sad. They are, perhaps, less anxious about the war because they are already at war. They know well that the U.S. attack on Iraq could trigger massive repression here, or even transfer, but they don't seem to waste energy in anxiety about it. Some stock up on food. Tanks have already rolled into town tonight--people avoid them and hurry home, but here in the Balata refugee camp the shops stay open, the TVs on. "Bush"-thumbs down, a shopkeeper smiles at me. "War tonight--Bush bad!" we hear from people on the street. Some, who speak English, offer condolences on Rachel Corrie's death. They know who we are: there are no tourists here.

Rachel was killed three nights ago, on the 16th of March, standing in front of a bulldozer down in Rafah, in Gaza. She was trying to prevent the Israeli forces from destroying a home. The bulldozer operator saw her: she had been talking to him earlier, negotiating, trying to use the power of nonviolent persuasion to get him to back off. Finally she simply stood in front of him, on a mound of dirt, in a red vest, talking through a bullhorn. She made the same gamble we all make here or anywhere when we choose nonviolent resistance: we bet our lives on the possibility of some humanity in our opponents, some spark of conscience that would prevent, say, a soldier from running over a twenty-three-year-old woman with a bulldozer.

Every bone in Rachel's body was broken. Her skull was cracked open. Nevertheless she was conscious, as her friends ran to hold her head, as the bulldozer and tanks drove away, leaving the activists to call an ambulance. A grim version of hit and run.

Rachel died, you could say, because six weeks in the occupied territories had not erased some deep belief she still held in the ultimate decency of human beings. Perhaps she died because her parents loved her enough that she never learned to imagine such callousness could dwell in a human heart. Her death was not an accident. She was deliberately murdered, by a soldier who made a choice. That choice seemed reasonable to him because a regime of repression requires the oppressors to become callous, to

dehumanize the people they control, to refuse to see them, acknowledge their suffering, respect their humanity. Having practiced that callousness for so long on the Palestinians, he apparently simply transferred it to Rachel despite the fact that she was an American.

I find myself in the exquisitely painful position of being a Jew and an American in the occupied territories, here to offer support and solidarity to the nonviolent resistance and the civilians of Palestine. Painful because too many of the people who are my own, my family, my culture, my heritage, have turned into someone who could crush a young woman's body with a bulldozer. Painful too because that machine was paid for by my tax dollars to enforce policies promoted by my government. Exquisite because I have found much warmth and friendship and love coming from those I was taught to see as my enemy. But painful because I can't simply say, "Oh, now I'll just shift allegiances-- Palestinians all good, Israelis all bad." I can't abandon my heritage as Jew or as American. And I cannot dehumanize the Palestinians by turning them into one monolithic image of noble suffering any more than I want to see them as one monolith of hate and terrorism. I have to open my eyes and see them as full human beings, capable of love and hate, creation and destruction, choice. Above all, if I stand for justice for Palestine or anywhere, I have to open my eyes and let The Other become visible to me in all the fullness of their complexity.

I am sitting in the home of the family of a suicide bomber, which over here they call a martyr. We are here because the Israeli policy of collective punishment means that they arrest the families of suicide bombers and blow up their homes. This policy has not prevented suicide bombers: in fact, one could argue that it has increased them, increased the pool of rage and despair that leads to choices that have also taken the lives of innocent young women and men and children, spilled their blood and bodies on the streets. From where I sit, I can't forget or overlook that. And yet I also can't let it become an easy equation: Israelis bad but Palestinians bad too equals all accounts balanced. The accounts are not balanced. In this Intifada, three Palestinians have died for each Israeli. But it's not a matter of numbers, it's a matter of policies that assault the possibility of ordinary life and hope for an entire people. It's children never knowing when they'll be able to go to school, it's workers never knowing whether their trip home through a checkpoint will be an annoying ordeal or a few months of arrest and torture. It's ambulances not allowed to get to patients or families not allowed to cross a border to visit each other. It's homes searched by soldiers breaking through walls and smashing all your worldly goods one night. It's daily, ongoing, relentless tension and humiliation and despair.

The Titi brothers both fought for justice for Palestine. One blew himself and innocent people up. The other worked with the ISM, the International Solidarity Movement, the group that Rachel and I are both part of, that supports nonviolent resistance. He is now in prison. Almost every Palestinian who has chosen the path of nonviolent resistance is in prison or dead or exiled. When good liberals ask, "Why don't the Palestinians adopt the tactics of Martin Luther King or Gandhi?" that's part of the reason why. Another part is that some of them do, in spite of facing an opponent daily growing more ruthless.

The day after Rachel's death, the Israelis killed nine Palestinians in Gaza, including a four-year-old girl. Those deaths may have made the news briefly, but they elicited no

great public outcry. We expect Palestinians to be killed, regularly. Rachel made an heroic choice to risk her life. The four-year-old girl, whose name is not splashed over the Internet, had no choice.

Palestine is that girl, and this family whose house I'm protecting, and both Titi brothers. To refuse to see that complexity is to participate in the murders that become thinkable when a whole people is made invisible.

I am thinking about Rachel on the eve of war, as my country prepares to make a murderous choice on a vast scale. I and others have done everything we possibly could to stop it. I have marched and organized and written and called and emailed and risked arrest for months. We have built the largest, most unified, global peace movement that has ever existed. Millions and tens of millions have stood up for peace. Diplomats have resigned and country music singers have risked their careers. Republicans have broken ranks and even Democrats have registered mild objections. It hasn't been enough. Against my will, and in spite of all my efforts, I am about to be made complicit in a mass murder of human beings who have been rendered invisible to us by our government and our media and our own discomfort with difference.

But I'm not angry tonight. I'm not sad or grieving. I've gone into that territory which underlies the stony ground and cracked cement streets here, that place where you go when you've been angry so long and seen so much and grieved until you're empty, that place I think of as the zone of deadly calm.

That zone is a kind of a numb place, where nothing scares you any more, and you can do just about anything. It's very close to the place where you give up, as Rachel never did, your faith in something basic and good in human beings.

It's not a policy of security to push an entire people into that place. It's a place that breeds acts of desperation and revenge. And I have much company here. It's quiet here, on the eve of war. A few tanks: a few bursts of gunfire. Nothing to get upset about yet.

-- *Starhawk*

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