

Demonstration At the Wall

by Starhawk

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The service, which is a cross between a bus and a shared taxi, winds its way through the hills behind Ramallah on the way to Budrus, where I am meeting up with the ISM team to go to today's demonstration at the site where work is progressing on the wall. The hills stretch before me in undulating curves, formed of white limestone, carved into ancient terraces lined with rock walls, studded with gray-green olives, their trunks thick and braided with age. The wildflowers are blooming in splashes of yellow and pink. We pass old stone houses with courtyards covered with grapevines and grind up narrow streets where every yard has a fig tree or an olive. I am enchanted, watching the land, the olive groves, the graceful combinations of olive, fig, grape, fava bean, and prickly pear. Agriculture has been practiced here for ten thousand years, and yet this land, which was never the most fertile to begin with, is still productive and abundant. Here in these villages, life still seems to follow an ancient rhythm. Should the ancestors return, they would feel right at home. And I feel their presence, here, again. This land would have looked much the same when Sarah or Rachel or Deborah the Prophetess walked these hills, and they would probably have approved my interest in just how those olives are pruned. I have just about seventy olive trees myself, on my land in California, and so I have a professional interest, even though I have to admit that I've been too busy to prune them at all the last few years. I'm so happy to be out on the land that I can almost forget what I'm here for, forget that just a couple of weeks ago four people were killed at a demonstration much like the one I'm heading for today.

Among the many things I was taught to believe that I now know are not true are the things I was taught about Israel and agriculture. I remember, on that Hebrew High School Ulpan trip so long ago, being taken a spot that in 1966 was on the border between Israel and Jordan--the border that is now the Green Line separating Israel proper from the occupied territories of the West Bank. The Israeli side was green: the Jordanian side was brown. "You see," our guide said. "The Arabs had this land for 2000 years, and did nothing with it. We've had it for twenty, and we've made the desert bloom."

I remember how much that argument impressed me as a young teenager. Many years later, in a museum in British Columbia, I found the same argument cited as a rationale for taking the land of the northwest coast First Nations--"they weren't using it, weren't doing anything with it." It's simply the justification the conquerors use to convince themselves that they deserve the fruits of conquest. Israel represents progress, science--Palestine represents stagnation, regression, superstition.

Now, looking at the land from the perspective of permaculture and ecological design, I find myself impressed by the elegance of Palestinian agriculture, so integrally suited to

the land and climate, frugal in its use of water, making use of the plants native to or adapted to this region, somehow preserving enough fertility in this stony soil after ten millennia of cultivation to produce figs and grapes and oil and bread. The "scientific" agriculture practiced in some of the settlements, with profligate use of water, energy, and chemicals, seems to me another form of assault on the land. And the Israeli side of the border was green, I now know, because they'd taken all the water, as the Sharon government is now confiscating the aquifers.

The service lets me off in Budrus, a village built in the twelfth century by a Crusader, where prickly pear fences outline small fields and flowers grow from the cracks in the old stone walls. I'm met by Perla, who will be the new Budrus coordinator. Born in Lebanon to a Palestinian father, she was raised in Canada and has the slim grace of so many of the women here, and a warm smile.

The group of internationals is seated in a courtyard overlooking the swelling mountains. Abu Akhmed owns the house, and he serves us tea. Red geraniums grow in a border, and banana trees hold clumps of ripening bananas.

We all talk for a while, then pile into another van for the trip to the nearby village of Deir Kadis, where a crowd has gathered in the square. We get out and join them on a march to the area in a village nearby where the soldiers have started work on the wall.

There are about two hundred people in the square, and the men lead off, carrying bright banners of different political factions. They are followed by a large contingent of women in white headscarves and their daughters, all chanting in a loud and spirited voice. I buddy up with Perla, who, like me, hangs toward the back. Normally I head for the front of the line, but today I want to observe first, and not to get arrested. And I'm taking pictures, which slows me down. A group of schoolgirls swarms around us, chanting and laughing in their striped dresses. The older ones wear headscarves, some of the youngest are in jeans and bright sweaters.

We get to the edge of the town, and the young and fast disappear into the olive groves. I am neither, but I shelter behind a young woman and head out over the rough ground. It's slow going--my knees and ankles just don't bend or take my weight the way they once did. Perla stays with me while much of the march fans out ahead, over a beautiful valley of grey-green olives, and up a far hill. The bulldozers are on the top.

Erik, who is up at the top with the soldiers, has been in contact with Perla by phone, and told her the soldiers are threatening to arrest internationals. But as yet they haven't. I am picking my way slowly down the rocks--just don't have the knees or ankles to move as quickly over this rough ground as I'd like to go. We are far back, with the women, as the front wave reaches the top and is pushed back. We see tear gas, the plumes oddly beautiful as they arc over the olive trees, trailing smoke, then land to diffuse clouds that hover among the trees like a sudden fog.

The villagers scatter, then gradually filter back. The soldiers are firing sound bombs, distinguished by their deep, stomach-rattling boom, and what sounds like live ammunition, which has much sharper crack that echoes through the hills. They are shooting rubber bullets at the clumps of people who gather. We make our way forward

to join the other internationals, who are sitting in the valley at the bottom of our hill, just below the rise of the hill topped by the bulldozers. Then teargas lands near us, and the soldiers start to come down. We run back, up the slope we've just climbed down, stumbling on the rocks and clambering over the stone walls. I am alarmed by how hard the run is for me. With all the hiking I do regularly, I am simply not fast going uphill at the best of times. I'd hoped adrenalin would compensate--but now I have to admit that it doesn't. Should some buff, eighteen-year-old soldier come bounding after me, I am not going to be able to outrun him.

We've put quite a distance between us and the soldiers now, and Perla and I stop and rest. A group of young girls joins us. Down below, some of the men are trying to get the others to regroup. The women go down and join them, and then head back up the hill to the bulldozers again. We should go with them, but I am frankly tired, and erring perhaps on the side of too much caution, for once. The plan, we learn later, is for the shebob, the young men, to race up the sides of the hill and distract the soldiers while the women come up the center. But the shebob head straight up, forcing the women to the side where they are stopped by rocks they can't climb. Up at the very top there is a small group of women and internationals and media right up by the bulldozers, which continue to work. Through Perla's binoculars, I see a woman remonstrating with the soldiers, sitting in front of the very bucket of the giant machines, that look, from this distance, like an attack of monsters.

And so the day goes, with forays and volleys of tear gas and scatterings, while the beautiful young girls around us try to teach me Arabic. They are ten, twelve, thirteen years old, some of them newly wearing headscarves, and they point out which one fainted from the tear gas at the first demonstration, and who was hit by a rubber bullet. We leave around four in the afternoon. Abu Akhmed is angry with the villagers--he's from Budrus, which is better organized and bolder, and some of our young men are also disappointed with the lack of coherence and organization. I'm not--or rather, I know from experience how little can be expected of a group who doesn't have training and preparation and a plan. I'm here to help prepare those trainings, and to help the ISM think about how to offer preparations, both for internationals and for Palestinians; so for me the day has been well spent, although I'm wishing now I'd been bolder and stronger and pushed up more toward the front, where I generally find myself. No one has been killed, or seriously injured. But no one leaves with a great sense of empowerment, either. The bulldozers continue to work. This lovely valley, with its ancient trees and its peace and its ancient way of life, will soon be ripped to bare rock, split with a giant fence that will cut the villagers off from their land, and we have yet to find the actions or the strategy that can stop it.

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