

# The Value of Land

by Starhawk

The demo Friday was back at Kharbata, the village next to Dir Kadis. I stayed overnight in Ramallah to be with Neta in case she went into labor--which she still shows no signs of doing. On a Friday, there are few busses or services going out to the villages, because it's the holiday. So I was forced to hire a private taxi, which proved fortunate. We wound again through the beautiful countryside, on our way to Budrus to meet up with the team. But we were stopped at a new checkpoint--just a few soldiers and a jeep, but they wouldn't buy my story that I was an academic going to interview women in Budrus--or maybe they did but had orders not to let anyone in. We



**Boy and Sign** (photo by Starhawk)

turned around, and went to another road, in the inimitable manner of Palestinian taxis searching to avoid checkpoints-- dodging down half-finished roads still under construction, turning into a farm road through the olive groves here and there, but finally being turned back at a second checkpoint. At that point I asked if it were possible just to go to Kharbata, and not try to reach Budrus first.

My driver asked another driver, then a man on the street in the village, and said that it was. I called Perla to double check that that was our destination, and she said it was, but then called me back just after we arrived to suggest we go to Dir Kadis instead, as they would be passing through and pick me up. My driver sighed, and took me there, leaving me in the center of town near a small roundabout.

A group of men immediately came over, welcomed me, asked if I were a journalist. I

said I was there for the demonstration. They looked concerned, said there wasn't one, then started asking others. One man especially appointed himself my caretaker, and set off to find someone who spoke English. I was not having any success explaining that the demonstration was in Kharbata but my friends were meeting me here. The first candidate was a young man who spoke a little English, but not enough to satisfy my Caretaker, who strode off, beckoning to me to follow and speaking in very simple Hebrew, which is all I can follow anyway. In Nablus and Jenin we were warned not to speak Hebrew on the street, because people were suspicious of collaborators, but here, where Israeli activists are collaborating with villagers on nonviolent demonstrations against the wall, it seemed ridiculous to make communication any harder than it already was.

I just surrendered to that slightly surreal state when other people are looking out for you and making decisions in a language you don't understand, and let myself be towed along. I was not surprised that a group of Palestinian men would not be able to bear leaving a lone woman waiting in what was evidently the wrong place, and would go out of their way to get me where I needed to go. I've traveled enough here, now, to know that is what happens. Last time, traveling alone up and down the West Bank many times, I learned that all I had to do was launch myself toward a destination, whether or not I knew how to get there, and I would keep meeting people along the way who would make it their business to help me. With all the shattering of culture and the tension and the constant assaults on the social fabric of this place, something is still very strong that ties people together in a weaving of mutual concern.

We began a brisk walk-through the village, where new concrete block houses stood cheek to cheek with crumbling stone walls that could have been first built in the Neolithic, small, cave-like dwelling with ancient arches and grass growing out of the tops of thick, stone walls, towers like archaic castles with big stone gates, domed huts with wooden shutters set askew. The odd flock of goats passed us by, being driven to the fields by small boys. Finally we reached the mosque, where another group of men were standing outside the entrance, including bearded identical twins fingering prayer beads who added to my sense of being caught in a surreal dream. At that point I decided to call Perla again, who could talk to them in Arabic, and who told me, laughing, that they were insisting on driving me back to Kharbata where the demonstration would be. So they took me back in a rickety car and I waited by the mosque with the old men in khaffiyas until the bus arrived with the ISM activists. A woman from the village let me use her bathroom, and I admired the fava beans growing in her yard. "Ful" is the dish they make from them, and I tried to tell her that I also grow them. She leaned over and picked me a handful, and I ate them raw as what I suspected would be all the lunch I was going to get. Perla came over and translated for the woman, telling her I grew ful and olives. "Ah, she is also a farmer," the woman said. "You know the value of land."



**Kids at March** (photo by Starhawk)

The demonstration was gathering on the street, and we all marched off together, back toward the fields where the Israeli military had been working the day before. Today we were able to walk on the dirt road that followed the ridge, making for much easier going. But when we got there, the work had stopped. We found only the skeletons of olive trees, dozens of them with branches and leaves chainsawed off, leaving stark silhouettes against the sky. The people of the village picked up the branches and began marching with them, waving them in anger and anguish against the sky. Young boys climbed the skeleton trees, holding the branches tall as if they could restore them to life. I kept looking from the thick-trunked, ancient, full-branched trees that were still intact to the black, bone skeletons, and filled with a slow,

simmering rage.  
Olive trees can live for a thousand years. Perhaps you need to have planted, pruned, and tended some to appreciate what a treasure an ancient olive represents, what a tangible gift of the ancestors, providing abundance, food, oil, and fuel from this stony land. To cut them down is to take away the very roots of these people's livelihood, to destroy what sustains a culture and a way of life, and life itself.

And I wanted everyone who has ever smugly said, "Why don't the Palestinians adopt the tactics of Ghandi and King?" to stand here and face these villagers and these stark, limbed trees, to look at this valley and join this procession gamely marching peacefully to nowhere and chanting to no audience that cares, and let them face the real, practical difficulties of those who are trying to do just that.

We went back to the village to meet with the city council and discuss plans for Sunday's demonstration, which I won't be able to come to as I'm scheduled to give a training in Beit Sahour. We all crowded into a small, domed room in an old stone building and drank grapefruit soda and ate chocolate wafers as we admitted how scattered the action of the day before had been.

"We want to be peaceful," one of the older men said. I am looking around at the faces here, thinking how the Palestinians and the Jews are often visibly indistinguishable. This old man next to me looks like my Hebrew School teacher from seventh grade in a khaffiyah, with the same stooped shoulders and ruddy face. And I know Sephardic Jews as dark and full bearded as this young man standing to my right, with the same full lips and aquiline nose.

"We won't use violence," the leader continues. "We will control the shebob, the young men, and stop them from throwing stones. But if they use violence against us, I don't know what will happen. If they use tear gas, we can take it once, or twice, but if they

beat the women...I don't know."

"Yesterday I was 50 or 60 meters away from the soldiers," says a tall man standing near me. "I kept the shebob from throwing stones.

There was no violence against them, and I was talking to one of them, negotiating, trying to make him understand. Then he walked away, and threw a tear gas canister at us."

I am trying to think if there is anything I can suggest that might help these people have a demonstration that will somehow feel like a success, in some small way. I ask if they ever use flags to gather people, to help them regroup.

"Yes, we do that sometimes," the man who seems to be their leader says. "That's a good idea."



**Double Tear Gas** (photo by Starhawk)

The Israeli Supreme Court will hand down its decision on Sunday at 11 a.m., determining whether it is legal for the wall to take the land of these villages without compensation and leave them cut off from the rest of the West Bank, isolated in a kind of limbo land, between the wall and the Green Line of the 1967 border that marks the boundary of Israel proper. I ask the council if they have a plan for how they will respond if the decision goes for them, or against them. They say they will hold the demonstration either way. "It's their courts," one of them shrugs. ""Their soldiers, their

military, their fence. We don't expect much. We have very little hope."

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