Land Day in Beit Duqu

by Starhawk

I am deeply relieved that no work is going on at Beit Duqu on March 30, Palestinian Land Day, as for me the challenge of the demonstration is simply keeping up with the others on some of the steepest terrain in Palestine. The olive terraces are carved into nearly vertical hillside, and drop down ten or fifteen feet, so that the roots of trees on the upper terraces are level with the branches of the terrace below. Grape vines line the stone walls that buttress the carved earth, and ancient, thick-trunked olives hug the rocky soil. Our march follows a road that snakes gradually down one hillside and up the other, and I am enchanted by the charm of the place: this perfect, sculpted valley, where donkeys still climb the rocky terrace paths and an ancient spring pours forth water. The Wall will come through here, scarring the land, cutting a path of destruction through this perfect place.

We’re a sizeable march of several hundred people, followed by cars full of media, moving at a pace that keeps me trotting to catch up every time I stop to take a picture. On the other side of the hill, we pause halfway up at the end of the road, where we are supposed to rally. But the shebob swarm up the even steeper hillside above us, and everyone follows, climbing up the white rocks and moving through the scrub to the zone where work has been going on, and huge gouges have been made in the hillside, leaving a barren zone of crushed rock, rubble and limestone scree. I make it up, slowly, helped by Mohammed, our coordinator from Biddu.

No work is going on today. We reach the top, an ugly gash of a road, and the shebob light some tires on fire and we face the military post across the valley, chanting and shouting. The soldiers come out, stand at attention at a barrier, point their guns, but they are far away. They don't shoot, and we hold a rally. Shoura makes a speech; she has been anxious about it, claiming her English is not good enough, but she does well, and I tell her the speech is everything such a speech should be: short, to the point, clear, inspiring. She is Iranian/Swedish, and speaks Farsi, Swedish, and English fluently.

After the rally, we clamber back down the hillside. Mohammed and his cousin Monsour from Biddu want to take us to the spring, and I am eager to go. We head down the road and cut off on a small path that takes us up the hillside to the ruins of an old stone house whose deep-arched rooms form underground caverns. Beyond, ancient stone steps lead up from a small spring set into the side of the hill. We stop and drink, and wait for the others, talking and laughing. A young boy comes by with a handful of fresh-picked peas and Mohammed and Monsour tease him into giving us half. They are delicious, fat and green and sweet. Mohammed is the handsome ladies' man; Monsour the clown, very slim with a wry smile that breaks into a laugh easily, always joking and teasing. An old man tethers a donkey, and I start to wander up the hill to look at the terraces and the small gardens near the spring. Mohammed follows and approaches the
donkey who swivels around and aims a kick at him. I know this spring must be an ancient sacred place and I murmur some secret prayers to the Goddess of water. "It is good to come to the spring," Monsour says in a serious moment. "To be here, and to know what we are fighting for--just the freedom to come to this place, to our own land." We climb the ancient donkey path up the hill, that slants through the terraces; a path that the farmers of this land have walked for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. Mohammed is pointing out herbs and flowers and edible plants. If it weren't for the knowledge that this peace and beauty are slated for destruction, I would be perfectly happy.

While our demonstration is quiet, the sister demo at Beitunya is not. Jonathan, one of our Israeli friends, is nearly killed when a military jeep tries to run him down. He is able to leap onto the hood, and is carried halfway down the hill--like a bad action movie, he tells me later. Hella, the Danish medic who has been working with the Unite Palestinian Medical Relief Committee, is shot in the head with a rubber bullet and knocked unconscious as she attempted to carry a seven-year-old boy to safety during a demo, and then is shot four more times as her fellow medics carry her to the ambulance. The level of violence with which the Israeli military is meeting these demonstrations is extreme. Nothing now seems to restrain them. I just read a report that the UN Commission on Human Rights has cited the Oakland police for firing wooden plugs and bean bags at peaceful demonstrators protesting the war in Iraq a year ago. But here the Israeli military is daily assaulting nonviolent demonstrations with rubber-coated steel bullets, sound bombs, tear gas, and the occasional live round of ammunition. Four Palestinians were killed in Biddu just a few weeks ago. And yet the villagers and the small but dedicated group of international and Israeli supporters keep coming back, mounting a persistent opposition to the Wall. I have a lot more thoughts about the role and the limitations of nonviolence under these circumstances--but we've just gotten word that there is a demo tomorrow back at Biddu, and we'll be getting up at 5:30 a.m. to go, so I'm going to send this off and go to bed. Inshallah, as they say here, or Goddess willing, as I'd say myself, I'll continue tomorrow and write about the last five days of training.

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.

[Back to Starhawk's Israel/Palestine Page]

[Back to Starhawk's Home Page]