

On the Quest for Raw Sewage

by Starhawk

We had a short training with the women this morning--about twenty altogether today, but many had to leave early. Still I managed to cover action planning and a fairly extended role play, as well as practice in scattering and regrouping.

Afterward Fatima took me out to go see a valley called Wadi Cana, where she said settlements were dumping their raw sewage onto the land and polluting the water supply of the land below. Fatima has a favorite driver, a young and cheerful man named Mohammed, and we set off in his low sedan over some of the worst roads in Palestine. Down steep slopes of limestone scree, up hillsides of terraced olives, over bumps and ruts and places where the road seemed to be barely more than an old rock riverbed, and all the while Mohammed just laughed at every bump and kept on driving.

Eventually we got beyond the terraces to even wilder mountains of gray stone covered with scrub. Round a bend, and there on the road is a shepherd cradling two baby kids in his arms. We stop and have a conversation, and he decides to come along with us for a while. We deposit the kids in the trunk, and creep along the rocks and bumps. At the end of the road, we get out and walk along the valley. The shepherd takes us to the watering holes carved out of limestone shelves, and Fatima points out the settlement above us: just two houses and some prefab structures--just enough to close this route, such as it is, and to prevent Palestinians from being able to build houses or improve their land. The settlers come down and tell him to leave, the shepherd says, but he's not leaving.

We drive him and the baby goats back up the hills to the village, then set out down another road. This one begins in much smoother condition, and takes us by an ancient well, with steps carved into the rocks leading down into the bowels of the mountain. The water below is deep and clear. Fatima finds a bucket on a rope, and we take turns dropping it down and drawing up sweet water.

Then the road goes on, through a charming landscape of wild hills and hidden vales where green wheat is planted. A herd of goats covers the hillside across the valley, swarming like ants over the rocks. Further on, we meet another shepherd, with a big, long-faced sheep who follows him as devotedly as Mary's little lamb. It's a handsome sheep, with the aquiline nose of all the Semites, and a slightly wrinkled brow. The shepherd tells us that the settlements pipe their raw sewage into the valley, polluting the water. They shoot at him sometimes when he goes out to tend the sheep, or come down with their guns and tell him to leave, that this is their land. But it is his land, and he's not leaving.

We drive on, past his large flock of sheep that is grazing the hillsides, following the path of a hidden stream through brush and willows. A young man sits under a beautiful,

spreading, thick-trunked carob tree. He tells us he is the son of a shepherd, who now goes to the university. On the hill above us we can see the barbed-wire fence and stone wall that mark the settlement, and a collection of prefab houses and trailers. We drive on, bumping over stones and dipping down into ditches. A man on horseback holding his small son before him drives a donkey and corrals a herd of cows. White egrets take wing and then land to follow the cows, picking insects from their dung. The land in the afternoon light has a timeless, magical quality. We could be here in Jesus' time, with these same shepherds, or in the days of the ancient Canaanites long before Abraham came down this way from Ur. These same white pincushion flowers might have dotted the stones; the yellow broom would have been in bloom then as now, filling the air with its sweet scent. The beauty of the land and the magic of the warm, afternoon light lull me into a sense of peace and contentment. As long as I don't look up, to the barbed wire and the red-roofed stucco houses and the guard towers up above.

At last we come to the pipeline leading down from one of the settlements above us. A big sewage pipe ends in a small tank, then disappears. A clear spring gushes from the mountainside next to it, but where the pipe enters the water there's a foul smell and the stream no longer runs clear.

As we drive on, we pass three settlers, a young man in a skullcap and two women in long dresses. They are unarmed, just taking a holiday walk, but they look uneasy and scowl at us. I am wondering how they can live in this place as the beneficiaries of outright theft, walk these roads uninvited and unwanted, justify a life of barbed wire and machine guns in the name of religion. I am thinking about the bible story where two women come to Solomon claiming the same baby. Solomon offers to cut the child in half--whereupon the true mother cries out "no!"

It seems to me that Israeli policies are cutting the child in half, literally, with walls and fences and the apartheid wall. And the settlers belie their own claim to this land by the utter contempt with which they treat the actual land itself--dumping their sewage and garbage onto the Palestinians' fields, guzzling its water, uprooting trees, gouging the hills along the route of the fence. "Holy land" does not seem to translate into any real conception of sacred earth.

Farther along, deep pools are carved into the limestone rocks. Here, Fatima says, children used to swim. Families used to come and camp for the weekend. Now the pools are black, and no one can swim there because of contamination.

At the far end of the valley there are groves of orange and lemon trees. Their blossoms perfume the air, and again I have the sense of having stumbled into a magical, timeless world of unexpected warmth and abundance. But behind the grove the stream stinks of sewage. A fast, paved road crosses our road here, leading out of the valley. But we cannot take it; it is reserved for settlers. We stop and talk to the farmer who owns some of the groves. Last week, he tells us, the settlers came down and threatened him as he was trying to tend his trees. They told him he should leave, that it would be better if he would go away. "This is our land," they said. "Did you see what we did to Sheikh Yassin? We can do the same to you."

But the farmer is not leaving.

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

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