

What will Happen? A Reflection on Occupation

By Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb

What will happen to those men, the long line of Palestinian men kneeling on concrete over there, under the glare of a yellow flood light while Israeli soldiers take their time with orders, light a cigarette, laugh? What will happen to these bone-weary men detained after dark at the Bethlehem checkpoint, men who risk illegal passage from dying towns in the territories to work construction, chisel stone, haul heavy loads, harvest crops, clean floors, drive taxis, wash dishes, mix cement for the Separation Wall now snaking through their villages, separating them from their fields?

What will happen to those indistinct images on the canvas of the occupation, forms shrouded by misperception, shivering in the cold winter night, waiting for their worthless identity papers to be processed on a checkpoint computer, hoping to return to their families who wait for them on the ever shrinking archipelago of Palestinian lands behind the Wall? Will they end up in prison because their names are on a list? Will they pay a huge fine for crossing borders to work in places they once inhabited as free men? Will this be the final measure of humiliation that hurtles them into the thing Israel fears the most?

Our warm tourist bus drives past them, through the Separation Barrier that features an enormous stencil of Israeli spies carrying grapes and eases on down the system of Jewish-only roads built to avoid encountering this reality.

And tell me, what will happen to those Palestinian women? The ones dressed in long black robes and white scarves squeezing by one by one through an opening between the massive concrete Barrier and a ragged swatch of barbed wire fence strung across the monastery at Abu Dis? Will they make it through with their children and their packages on their way home to what is now a distant country? Or will soldiers suddenly appear, set up a flying checkpoint and prevent them? How will they bake the evening flat bread, wash floors, mend clothing, tend the animals, run grassroots organizations, study and teach at universities, manage shops, and prevent their children from getting shot? Will they submit forever to a system that causes their children to abandon hope?

The delegation gets off the bus, buys juice from a forlorn shop owner, and moves on to our intended destination, a talk by an Israeli peace activist on the impact of the Wall.

And the children, what will happen to them? The children who play soccer in the dusty streets of Hebron in spite of the latest curfew. Children who see the world of Jews as a people of uniforms and guns, a people who scream fierce and frightening commands, drive tanks, strip their fathers naked in the street, overturn market stalls, break into their houses, piss on the food, arrest and torture their brothers, demolish their homes, uproot their orchards, prevent them at gun point from going to school, shoot rubber bullets that blind the eye and cripple the body. What will happen to these thousands and thousands and thousands of children who refuse to sleep alone, who pee in their beds, who live in traumatized families with no papers, no civil or national rights and nowhere to go to avoid violence? Will they pick up stones, learn how to set explosives, join a militia, go to university, join a dialogue group, leave the country, dedicate their lives to non-violent resistance, blow a hole in the Wall?

"Don't smile," Doug tells me as he tries to take a picture of a rabbi on the roof of this family's twice-demolished home. "You're sitting on a destroyed house, look serious." But I've been laughing with Jamila and her seven children on account of a funny incident involving a large sandwich that her youngest son stuffed so full that the contents spilled to the floor on the way to his open mouth. In the land of ruined houses, moments of laughter are protected with the same fervor as a queen guards her precious jewels. I survey the ruins around me and it is not difficult to recall my sorrow.

Rodney King asked the world, can't we all just get along? A Palestinian friend of mine reflects on his question as she inhales her ever-present Camel cigarette and sips the thick black coffee scented with cardamom that can take you to heaven. "Of course we can all get along. Why shouldn't we get along? Are we not human beings? We can be nice to each other. But not under the strain of occupation. It's hard to be nice when you're being occupied."

As in times past, I accompany another delegation through the maze of earth barriers, concrete blocks, sniper towers, electric fences, pointed guns, Apache helicopters and tanks trolling for trouble along the vast serpentine barrier that divides the universe into free and not free. Before long I will return home to face all kinds of audiences with whom I will try to share 40 years of witness to Palestinian struggle for human and national rights from the time I first encountered Atallah Mansour in June of 1966 in the city of Nazareth until now. Amidst the healthy barrage of questions, someone will ask me about the Wall that has become the central symbol and reality of occupation and I will share Rami's response to that same question.

Rami's daughter was murdered in Jerusalem by a suicide bomber, as she ate pizza with a friend. Over time, he joined the Bereaved Families Forum, a group of Palestinians and Jews whose loved ones were murdered as a result of occupation. Rami believes the occupation itself is responsible for the death of his daughter.

"There is no wall so high that can prevent people who want to kill each other from doing so," he said, "and there is no wall so thick that it can prevent those who choose to, from loving each other. I choose to love."

The price of loving is gaining an excruciating view of the occupation, to truly see the men, and the women, and the children on the other side of the Wall. But how can we turn away? What will happen to the future if we do?

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