

## **Sights I Did Not Want to See; Feelings I Did Not Want to Feel**

By Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman

A few months before the second intifada began, I traveled to Gaza. I was studying for the year in Jerusalem and wanted to see the Israeli occupation with my own eyes. I had a clear idea of what it meant for Israelis, but I wanted to try to understand what it meant for Palestinians.

To understand the Israeli occupation meant to open my eyes to sights that I did not want to see and to open my heart to feelings that I did not want to feel. Having grown up with the myths of Israel as the state that can do no wrong, this is an acutely painful process.

As I walked through the cramped, filthy refugee camp, I felt despair, anger, and shame. This was not part of my childhood stories. This was not part of my childhood dream that had seemed so simple and absolute. This was the harsh reality of occupation – of desperation, hunger, and relentless military rule.

Gaza can best be described as a prison – one million people locked up on a tiny scrap of land. One million people with nowhere to go. I walked into one of the dismal dwellings – two small rooms and home to 13 people. I sat on the floor as my hosts told me stories of Israeli raids, of indiscriminate shooting, of family members taken away: stories of closed borders, checkpoints, and curfews. Fear and anger hung uneasily in the air. A young woman passed me a piece of paper with her name and telephone number scrawled on it. “Help me get out,” she whispered.

I loved living in Israel, and I feel a strong connection to the land and people. But I no longer feel defensive when I hear criticism of Israel. My experiences in Gaza moved me past that all too easy reaction of shutting down in the face of that criticism. It is deeply uncomfortable to open my eyes to sights that I do not want to see and to open my heart to feelings that we do not want to feel. But how can I do otherwise?

Both Israelis and Palestinians have perpetrated violence against the other, and both have endured terrible losses. But there is no parity between the two. There is no symmetry between the occupier and the occupied. Israel has occupied Palestinian lands for 40 years. It has systematically violated international law. It has built illegal settlements, demolished homes, confiscated land, destroyed the infrastructure, shattered the economy, and engaged in widespread torture and assassinations. For this we must hold Israel accountable. And from this we must not turn away.

On this fortieth anniversary of the Israeli occupation, we can accept the myths of our childhood, or we can see things that we do not want to see and feel things that we do not want to feel. We can challenge orthodoxies and put forth new visions. It is time to move beyond what is comfortable and commit ourselves anew to ending the Israeli occupation.

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