

OCCUPATION DIARIES

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The variety of wild flowers in the Palestinian countryside even with the scant rainfall is astounding.

13 DECEMBER 2009

I'm just back from a lovely day spent in Wadi Qelt, the ravine on the way between Jerusalem and Jericho. This is one of the few places in the West Bank where you can be sure of finding water even after the drought of the past eight months.

I was with a mixed group of Palestinians and foreigners, photographers and teachers, all of us living and working in the West Bank. Turned out we were not the only ones who had had the idea of an outing there. Just after we put down our rucksacks and stretched out on the rock in the sun a Palestinian family of nine arrived. They were disappointed to find us there but settled for the second-best slab of rock on the opposite side of the pool. Their smaller group comprised two bearded men, two young women with the *hijab* (headscarf) and another of indeterminate age with the *niqab* (face-cover), and four children. All the women wore long black skirts. As soon as I saw them I wondered how they had managed the rocky path without falling in the water. The women in our group invariably wore jeans and colourful shirts.

I had been thinking as we passed the Israeli checkpoint of how clothes distinguish the various groups in our tiny land. The female Israeli soldiers wore tight khaki trousers, the low waist emphasizing the contours of their hips, and were bedecked with mobile phones. They looked at us through their dark sunglasses, giving orders with their hands while exchanging flirty looks and sexual innuendoes with the male soldiers, with whom they conversed in loud Hebrew. To them we were mere specks on the terrain that belonged

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exclusively to them and they could move us around with a flick of their little finger like pieces on a chequerboard. They lived in their own world, operating the highly technical security apparatus that they seemed to believe entitled them to an exclusive place in the advanced western world.

From the way we appeared and dressed, the sombre-looking family must have suspected that we were Israelis. But there was only a short distance between us. The ravine we were in was deep, with high rock walls bordering it and a pool of water between the slabs on which we spread out that was fed by cascading water from the Fawwar spring, so called because of its sporadic flow. Our fellow picnickers were within earshot and could easily hear us speaking Arabic, so they must soon have realized the nationality of most members of our group. Unfortunately, we did not do what would have been normal a few years ago, perhaps because we drew an imaginary line between us, with them, the suspected Islamists, on one side and us seculars on the other, with the water in between. No one from our side either greeted them or went over to their side to invite them to join us on our rock, which was large enough to accommodate them as well. So a distance was established between us from the beginning, much wider than the natural divide, the small pool of water that separated us.

We spread a red and white checked cloth over the rock and placed on it the different salads and vegetable dishes we had brought with us. We ended with a colourful display, all entirely vegetarian. There was beetroot salad, *baba ganoush* [an aubergine dip], goat's cheese, a bowl of carrots, tomatoes and broccoli, different kinds of patties and fruits. As we settled down to eat, the men from the group opposite left the women and children to search for dry wood for their barbecue of *kufta* and lamb chops.

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I looked at the women who were left behind and couldn't help wondering whether they were feeling uncomfortable being in the open dressed as they were. Wouldn't it be normal to resent the lightly clad women on our side? Of course it would be, no question about it. And yet perhaps they feel they are pious, and will be rewarded in the afterlife, as our group would not. Was it so?

As I was having these thoughts, I saw one of the young women go over and stand facing the rock wall behind the slab on which they sat. She then proceeded to write on it with a piece of charcoal left by a previous picnicker, 'God leads astray whomsoever He will, and He guides whomsoever He will.'

As soon as Saba, our husky historian, saw what the young woman was doing he stopped eating, stood up and, turning to her, cried out across the water, 'What do you think you're doing? You're defacing the rock. This rock doesn't belong to you. Stop what you're doing immediately.'

She stopped at once and returned to her group. The older woman said something to her that we could not hear and she sat down again.

As I waited to see what was going to happen when the men returned I thought of a conversation I had recently had with a young man at Silwadi's, the juice shop in the centre of Ramallah.

I had noticed that he offered dates along with the citrus and other fruits he was juicing. I asked him how he used the dates. 'With milk,' he answered. 'It's a good mixture. After all, dates were the preferred food of the Prophet, peace be upon him.'

I then spoke to his assistant, the intense, silent one with a neat beard and large, drooping eyes that were downcast yet watchful and alert. I had often wondered about him.

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He had once asked for my help in obtaining a permit for his sister-in-law, who was not being allowed to visit her husband in an Israeli jail. He thought I could help through the human rights organisation Al Haq, with which I'm associated. I didn't think Al Haq could help with this, but I did refer him to other organisations that I thought could. Today I asked him about the outcome. He told me that his sister-in-law now has a permit to visit but only once every six months. When she visits they stamp the permit and allow no other visit for another six months. He said they didn't want to stir the pot until after she visits.

'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'Five years.'

'And how long is he in for?'

'He has eight life sentences.'

'Wow,' I exclaimed.

Immediately I regretted it. I knew I shouldn't have reacted in this manner. I should have praised his commitment or invoked God's blessing or implored Him to grant his family the ability to endure. Mine was definitely the wrong reaction. The man looked away, shutting me out and concentrating on his juicer.

In his essay 'The Last Temptation of Ivan Karamazov' Ariel Dorfman, the Argentine-Chilean novelist, playwright and essayist who wrote the famous play *Death and the Maiden*, states that torture 'presupposes ... the abrogation of our capacity to imagine someone else's suffering, to dehumanise him or her so much that their pain is not our pain. It demands this of the torturer ... but also demands of everyone else the same distancing, the same numbness, those who know and close their eyes, those who do not want to know and close their eyes, those who close their eyes and ears and hearts.'

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The bearded men now returned from their foraging, carrying bundles of twigs and some logs for burning. The girls must have immediately complained about what had just happened and explained how Saba had stopped them from writing on the rock. The men commanded them to go back and cover every rock with holy graffiti large enough for all to see. They began to scrawl 'Allah, Allah' on every rock on their side.

This infuriated Saba. 'You want to show that you are more pious than we are, is that it?' he shouted across the water. 'Let me tell you that the Qur'an teaches, do not use the name of God in vain, do not write it where you cannot protect it. You're behaving in this way because you know we are Arabs, but when you face Israelis at a checkpoint you stand before them with bowed heads.'

'You don't know what you're talking about. You'd better not make stupid assumptions,' one of the men responded, ordering the girl to go on scrawling on the rock.

Saba began to move towards the water, wanting to cross to their side and confront them face-to-face. He was screaming now, 'This rock does not belong to you. You have no right to ruin it. It belongs to all of us. You have no right, no right whatsoever, to write on it. Do you hear me? No right.'

We were concerned that our hike would end up in a brawl, so we went after him and held him back.

After Saba calmed down, one of the bearded men guarding the rock on the opposite side spoke slowly and quietly: 'Have you now finished? Should I applaud you? Very well. But let me assure you, you know nothing. You don't know my contribution to the struggle, nor what I've done for the cause or how I behave towards the Jews.' Then he added, 'Don't think you can hide behind these foreigners you have brought with you. Just look at the clothes they're

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wearing. They're produced by those who exploit us and repress our people.'

Hearing this, I thought how appropriate that the screaming match should come down to the issue of clothing. Certainly our side was more colourfully dressed, with both men and women in jeans and red, yellow or orange T-shirts, while those on the other side wore depressing grey and black clothes as though they were in mourning.

I much preferred how our side looked and could not think that in wearing these colours we were contributing to the western domination of our region by supporting global capitalism any more than those on the rock on the other side of the water were doing.

I thought of the different worlds Palestinians now inhabit. One group is devoutly Islamic, while another is demonstratively secular, liberal and ever more concerned about being dominated and not allowed to get on with its way of life. The minority of remnant Christians assertively wear ever larger crosses around their necks or pinned to their lapels to counter the increasing numbers of more observant Muslims, both groups thus inadvertently sharing the same sort of religious extremism. It felt as though the small bit of Palestine left to us was being pulled apart by the opposing sides, with Israel situated in the middle, itself equally torn. This was all so unlike the tolerant Palestinian society of my younger years.

When I consider that to arrive at the site of the picnic we had to sneak in like thieves, rather than feeling that the place was ours to enjoy; that we had to suffer going through the numerous checkpoints in order to make it, and put up with being humiliated by the arrogant and chauvinistic behaviour of Israeli soldiers ... how can we not be on our guard, and not resort to self-righteousness, to

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holier-than-thou attitudes, to making claims of superiority and picking fights with each other?

We managed to calm Saba and an uneasy, temporary peace was made between the two sides, with neither coming any closer to a better understanding of the other though we could now proceed with our day. We all sat in a silence so deep that we could once again hear the water cascading down with great force from the Fawwar Spring and collecting in the pool that stretched between us as we continued with our picnics on our respective rocks, each soon becoming oblivious of the other. Then, after we had eaten and as we stretched our bodies, so differently clad, over the rocks in the sun, we listened to the water gurgling down the wadi on its way to the ancient city of Jericho.

18 DECEMBER

Today I had to go to the Jacir Palace hotel in Bethlehem for a meeting of the Independent Commission for Human Rights. The building, which had been turned into an Intercontinental Hotel in the late 1990s and opened for business just before the Second Intifada began, had once served as a boarding school where my aunt Mary was sent after her mother died during the First World War. I was not confident that I could manage to get there on my own after all the changes in the roads Israel has introduced. So I asked Hani Belbasi to drive me.

Hani was born in 1970, three years after the beginning of the Israeli occupation, and is blessed with a considerable measure of patience and resilience, both of which he needs to be able to survive as a driver during these sad times, when the road systems change constantly and are often blocked or made perilous. These qualities of his so impressed one of