Voices From Israel/Palestine: A Documentary Video Exhibition

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

Voices from Israel/Palestine: a documentary video exhibition was presented in Columbus, Ohio May 7-9, 2010 at the Wild Goose Creative arts center. The exhibition featured stories told by nineteen Palestinians and Israelis living in Columbus and Israel/Palestine. The stories were collected and filmed by Talia Weisz between April-September 2009. A meditation on the human dimensions of the Middle East conflict, the exhibition offered an intimate view of diverse lives in this disputed territory.

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Publications

When Flying Over Water. Fairfax: Plan B Press, 2009.

"Kupe's Voyage and other Stories." in *Navigating Customs: New Travel Stories by Twelve Writers <25*. Dana Bath and Taien Ng-Chan, eds. Tendril Anthology Series #3. Montreal: Cumulus Press, 2007

"'An it Harm None do What Thou Wilt': Neopagan Individualism," in Talia Weisz, Rachel James, Isabelle Amy LeGoff, eds. *Stories from Montreal 3: Ethnographic Accounts of Life in North America's Francophone Metropolis*. Montreal: Tulip Press, Concordia University, 2007, pp. 90-115.

Fields of Study

Major Field: Comparative Studies

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Artist Statement

As a child, I attended a Jewish day school where we sang the Israeli national anthem every morning. At school, in my community, I was saturated with exotic and idyllic images of Israel. Palm trees and biblical deserts, courageous soldiers, and an ancient sense of entitlement to the place, connecting me to it like an invisible umbilical cord. At that time, I didn't know who Palestinians were. I had never heard of them.

In creating this exhibition, I have evaded the very question that torments the region: To whom does this territory really belong? This is not the question I want to be asking. What concerns me is whose stories we tell and do not tell, what we allow or do not allow ourselves to hear and know. If my grade school teachers did not allow me to know the Palestinian version of our story, was it because they could not allow me to feel sympathy for the 'enemy'? Indeed, was it better to pretend that the enemy did not exist?

I cannot make claims about what constitutes 'truth.' The stories featured in this exhibition reflect multiple, conflicting truths. They are the stories of Palestinians and Israelis living under vastly different circumstances. Their stories are like images in a holograph, appearing and disappearing as you shift your angle. These are, as Susan Bibler Coutin puts it, "incompatible realities that are true simultaneously."[1]

Between April and June 2009, I interviewed five Palestinians and six Israelis living in Columbus, Ohio. Some had grown up in the Middle East, others in the United

[1] Coutin, Susan Bibler (2007). *Nations of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States.* Ithica: Cornell University Press, p. 6.

States. All of them felt a deep connection to their country of origin, whether or not they had ever lived there. I wanted to know how the conflict had affected their lives, their sense of themselves as individuals, and their concept of 'home.'

A typical interview would last about an hour. At some point during that hour, a story emerged, breathtaking in its clarity and vividness. Those stories were like gems plucked from a murky rock bed. They were impossible to forget.

Everyone tells stories. Some would argue that narrative is the backbone of human consciousness. We tell stories to make sense of our experiences, to gain command of our own voices. And the more stories I heard, the more I realized what I was really looking for. While I had initially set out, as an interviewer, to explore the abstract concepts of 'home' and 'diaspora' in participants' lives, I very quickly became focused on the visceral power of the stories themselves.

Playwright/performer Anna Deavere Smith once wrote that "everyone, in a given amount of time, will say something that is like poetry."[2] Every one of those stories had its own poetic sensibility, its own style of rhythm and intonation, its own canon of gestures and expressive nuances. These were things that revealed something of the speakers, something of their character. They offered windows into the intimate, tangible realities of their lives, realities that our news headlines don't even begin to capture.

A friend of mine, who knew about this project, asked me if I was verifying the accuracy of participants' stories. Was I sure that what they were telling me was the full, unfettered truth? The answer is, of course, no. I am less interested in the actual events described than I am in the meaning attributed to them by the storytellers. A story is an interpretation, not a replica, of lived experience. And when a person shares a story with me, they are inviting me to enter their interior world - a world

[2] Smith, Anna Deavere (1993). "Introduction." *Fires in the Mirror.* New York: Anchor Books, p. xxxi.

shaped continuously over the course of a lifetime, each experience reflected through the lens of changing circumstances.

As residents of Columbus and/or citizens of the United States, my interview participants lived very different lives from those residing in Israel/Palestine. However connected they felt to their country of origin, they were, to varying degrees, removed from the daily realities of the conflict. Frustrated by my own sense of remoteness from the region, I decided to pack up my camcorder and travel on my own to Israel/Palestine.

In the summer of 2009, over the course of seven weeks, I interviewed twenty-four Israelis and twenty-four Palestinians across the region. I met them through various online networks, community organizations and through each other. Because I speak no Arabic and very little Hebrew, some of the interviews required the help of an Arabic or Hebrew interpreter.

As an American travelling back and forth across the Green Line, I remained a foreigner wherever I went. At checkpoints I was interrogated by Israeli security ("What were you doing in Anata? Why did you want to go there? Do you speak Arabic?") In Palestinian villages I was eyed suspiciously, if anything because I was a Western woman travelling alone. Yet as an American or anyone with an international passport, I had a greater degree of mobility than most Palestinians and Israelis. While Israeli civilians are forbidden from entering the Palestinian Territories, and most Palestinians are barred from entering Israel proper, I crossed from one to the other with relative ease (with the exception of Gaza, which I could not and did not enter).

As a foreign traveller, I occupied a privileged position. As a Jew, I occupied a minefield of ambiguities. Since childhood, I had learned to equate 'Jew' with 'Israeli.' And for some of the Israelis I interviewed, my Jewishness cemented a common bond between us, a shared vocabulary, a mark of kinship. Yet Palestinians frequently told me, "We don't have a problem with Jews. It's Israelis who are the

problem." Or "We don't have a problem with Israelis, it's the soldiers and the settlers who are the problem." Who I was in this web of animosity - or who I was perceived to be - was constantly shifting. Yet nearly everywhere I went I was treated with overwhelming hospitality.

I must emphasize that I do not define myself as 'pro-Israel' or 'pro-Palestinian.' My work has drawn various criticisms from acquaintances who are unnerved by my refusal to privilege one perspective over another or take a public stand on the central political issues of the conflict. I have been accused of betraying my people and my heritage by refusing to dismiss the perspectives that run counter to the one I was taught. By the same token, I have been accused of legitimizing Palestinian oppression by refusing to withhold compassion for their oppressors.

For every story that gets told to us, there are millions of others that do not. The stories that comprise this exhibition are like drops in an ocean of human experience. My work should not be taken for a comprehensive analysis of the Israel/Palestine conflict (nor an attempt at one). What I have tried to create is a space for multiple (albeit select) voices to be heard, a space where one can enter into all of these lives – if only partially and temporarily - and simply listen.

Defining Some Contentious Terms

Israel/Palestine

The Israel-Palestine conflict is, at its core, a conflict between two peoples' claim to the same piece of land. Although it has gained new layers of complexity over the decades, it was and remains a clash between a Jewish national movement seeking to establish and maintain a Jewish state in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), and an Arab/Palestinian national movement defining the same territory as *Filastin* (Palestine). Both national movements define this territory as the ancestral homeland of their people.

As political scientist Alan Dowty concedes, some observers might define the conflict's core issue as the refusal of Palestinians and other Arabs to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of a Jewish state in their midst; others might define the core issue as the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian people by Jewish state-builders, and the violation of Palestinians' right to self-determination in their own land. Yet however one formulates it, it remains that *Eretz Yisrael* and *Filastin* are the same piece of land. And "just as two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, so two sovereign states cannot govern the same territory at the same time." [3]

Like Dowty, I have chosen to use the label of *Israel/Palestine* in order to avoid privileging one national claim over the other. Yet the country's shifting and ever-contested borders complicate this label.

[3] Dowty, Alan (2008). *Israel/Palestine.* 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.5.

Israel and the Occupied Territories

Although the terms *Israel* and *Palestine* are competing synonyms for the same piece of land, that land is often referred to as the sum of two distinct parts: "Israel" and "the Occupied Territories."

In 1947, amid escalating clashes between Jewish and Arab militants, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to partition the land into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The Partition Plan was vehemently opposed by the Palestinians and surrounding Arab states, but on May 14, 1948 the Jews acted unilaterally and declared the independence of the State of Israel in the territory allotted to them.

On the following day, five Arab states declared war on Israel. Israeli forces took the offensive and captured strategic areas beyond the partition lines. Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip, and Jordan (then called Transjordan) annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The Palestinians were left with nothing. About half became refugees scattered in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Some remained in the territory under Israeli control, where they were granted Israeli citizenship but were cut off from contact with the rest of the Arab world. The rest were inhabitants of Gaza and the West Bank who fell under Egyptian and Jordanian rule. The 1948 war, celebrated by Israelis as the War of Independence, was for the Palestinians *al Nakba*, the catastrophe.

In 1949 the UN brokered a peace settlement between Israel and the surrounding Arab nations. The 1949 armistice line, often referred to as the 'Green Line,' has since become the standard point of reference in distinguishing between 'Israeli territory' and 'Arab territory.' The latter included East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, territories that Israel later captured in the Six-Day war of 1967.

On most maps created outside Israel, the West Bank and Gaza (and sometimes East Jerusalem) are defined as 'Occupied Territories.'

Israeli Settlements

In the years following the 1967 war, Israeli communities - or settlements - were established in the Occupied Territories. Although Israel forcibly removed all Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005, settler communities in the West Bank continue to proliferate. Jerusalem's municipal boundaries have been expanded to accommodate Jewish neighbourhoods beyond the Green Line, and plans are underway to build new settler homes in the predominantly Arab East Jerusalem.

Proponents of these settlements maintain that East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza are part of the Biblical Land of Israel and are thus integral to the Jewish State. Not only should any Jew be allowed to live there, but to relinquish any of it to the Palestinians would undermine Israeli security (the election of Hamas following Israel's disengagement from Gaza, and the resulting eight years of rocket attacks on southern Israel is often cited).

To construct new settlements and expand pre-existing ones, the Israeli government has confiscated large portions of Palestinian property. Homes have been demolished and olive groves uprooted. Critics of West Bank settlement argue that the settlements and the military infrastructure surrounding them disrupt Palestinian life and undermine the potential for Palestinian sovereignty.

To protect the settlements from attack, the Israeli government has set up roadblocks and checkpoints. Palestinians must endure frequent security checks even when travelling between their own communities. Settlers, by contrast, can travel freely between the settlements and into Israel proper by way of by-pass roads that are

forbidden to Palestinians. Many villagers have been separated from their farmland by one of these by-pass roads. The majority of West Bank water resources are diverted to the settlements and denied to Palestinians. As author Dorothy Drummond observes, Israeli settlers and Palestinians have almost no communication despite their close proximity: "They speak different languages, and their children learn different histories and different religions in separate school systems."[4] There is mutual distrust and mutual resentment.

Tripping Over Terms

A month before travelling to Israel/Palestine, I emailed an Israeli cell phone rental company. *I would like to know if your cell phone plans cover both Israel and the West Bank (including the Palestinian territories).*

I received an irate reply: *Dear Ms Weisz, when you rent a cell phone for use in Israel you will get service in all of Israel. From the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, also known as the state of Israel.*

My terminology had implied that Israel and the West Bank were two separate territories. This had offended my correspondent, who viewed the West Bank as part of Israel – even the areas under Palestinian jurisdiction. My terminology had dismissed her claim to those areas, just as her terminology dismissed Palestinians' claim to the territory they inhabited.

It was my introduction to the ins and outs of navigating a land with deeply contested borders. From that moment on, I knew I had better watch my tongue. In this country no place name is politically neutral, no matter how innocently it is

[4] Drummond, Dorothy (2004). *Holy Land, Whose Land? Modern Dilemma, Ancient Roots.* 2nd Edition Revised. Terre Haute, Indiana: Fairhurst Press, p. 23.

uttered. Each name signifies a claim, a birthright. Each negates the other, subsumes the other. Names embody violence.

They also embody compromise. An Israeli woman I met referred to Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank as 'Palestine.' Even though it was not an established state, she explained, she liked to refer to it as though it was, as though it could be someday.

For many of the Palestinians I spoke with, the existence of Israel was an accepted reality. For them, the establishment of a Palestinian state need not interfere with the existence of a Jewish state.

Yet all these names unnerved me because I was never sure what they meant to a given person. During interviews, I tried to follow people's lead and adopt their vocabulary as best as I could. I juggled words. Sometimes I said the wrong ones and caused discomfort. Sometimes I said the right ones and wondered if that amounted to deception, since I doubted that most people realized how readily I adjusted my vocabulary to accommodate everyone.

The bottom line, though, was that I wanted to accommodate everyone. Once participants understood my goals as a researcher, I wanted them to feel comfortable speaking. I wanted them to know that their words mattered to me - no matter which ones they used.

Part One

Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem

On August 2, 2009 Israeli security forces evicted the Hanoun and al-Gawi families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem. Their homes were immediately inhabited by ultra-orthodox Israeli families.

The eviction was ordered by the Israeli High Court following a long legal dispute over the ownership of the contested properties. The eviction order is part of a court-sanctioned plan to increase Jewish settlement in this predominantly Arab neighborhood.

I visited the Hanoun family two days after the eviction. Members of the family, their friends and neighbors, and an array of Israeli and international supporters were gathered on the curb across the street from the confiscated house. This was as close to their home as they could get without being harassed by police. And this was, in effect, where they had been living for the past two days.

Mattresses and plastic chairs were arranged in the shade of a nearby tree, with people sitting, reclining and milling about. Across the street, an Israeli police officer casually surveyed the area. The house was cordoned off from public access, and only the new residents were permitted to come and go freely.

All 28 famlies of Sheikh Jarrah are refugees from the 1948 war. Their homes were given to them by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the Jordanian government, who built the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in 1956 as part of a

program to house the refugees. At that time, East Jerusalem was part of Jordan, while West Jerusalem was under Israeli control.

In 1967, Israel conquered East Jerusalem. In 1972, a religious settler group registered a claim of ownership over the land on which Sheikh Jarrah was built. Their claim is based on an Ottoman-era document stating that Jews had purchased the land in the 1800s from its Ottoman owner.

Following a decision by the Israeli Supreme Court, the Hanoun family was evicted from their home in 2002, but moved back in 2006 when the Israeli Land Registry agreed to revoke the settlers' registration of the land. Following a protracted legal battle with settler groups, the Hanoun family received a second eviction notice in March 2009. Although their lawyer presented new evidence from the Ottoman archives indicating that the settlers' document was forged, the Israeli High Court upheld the eviction order on the grounds that this evidence was presented too late.

The 53 members of the Hanoun and al-Gawi families are among the first Sheikh Jarrah residents to be forcibly evicted from their homes. At the time of my visit, one other family had also been evicted, and three additional families had received eviction notices. The entire neighbourhood faces imminent eviction as settler groups endeavour to transform the area into a new Jewish settlement.

Anata, West Bank

Salim Shawamreh grew up in the Shuafat refugee camp. In the early 90s, he and his wife Arabiya bought a small plot of land in the village of Anata, where they planned to build a house for themselves and their children. They applied to the Israeli Civil Administration for a building permit, but were denied three consecutive times - each time for a different reason. With a plot of land and no permit to build on it, they found themselves with no choice but to build their home illegally. Four years later, their home was demolished because they had violated

zoning laws. It was demolished again after the Shawamrehs rebuilt it, and a third time after they rebuilt it again.

The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) is a non-violent, direct-action group that opposes and resists Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. ICAHD is comprised of Israeli peace activists who work closely with Palestinian communities and international volunteers. Over the years, ICAHD has organized the multiple rebuildings of the Shawamreh home, as well as the homes of other Palestinian families.

ICAHD estimates that 24,145 Palestinian homes have been demolished in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem since 1967 (as of April 2009). Twenty-six percent of these demolitions are not linked to terrorism or security, but occur because the homes do not have a building permit.[5]

On the surface, such a statistic may appear reasonable; one should not build without a building permit, and any state has the right to enforce this. But while any Palestinian is free to apply for a permit, very few are actually granted one. As a result, thousands of Palestinians are forced to build their homes illegally.

As Salim and the members of ICAHD argue, this "Kafkaesque" system aims to restrict Palestinian construction in large portions of East Jerusalem and the West Bank in order for Israel to maintain control over these contested areas. As Palestinians are confined to smaller islands of land, Israeli settlements can expand and effectively claim the areas on which they are built.

Israeli authorities have publicly denied that their policy is discriminatory, and have claimed that Israelis and Palestinians have equal access to building permits.

[5] The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (2009). "Statistics on House Demolitions (1967-2009)." http://www.icahd.org/eng/docs/ICAHD's%20updated%20House%20demolition%20statistics.pdf.

ICAHD coordinator Jeff Halper disputes this: "You will never see an Israeli (Jewish) family living in a tent because its house was destroyed. If the authorities sent a bulldozer to destroy a Jewish house, there would be a revolution--this is absolutely unthinkable."[6]

Hebron, West Bank

Hebron is the only Palestinian city in the West Bank with four Jewish settlements located in the heart of it. One of the most difficult, complex areas of the West Bank, Hebron is home to roughly 165,000 Palestinians and 800 Jewish settlers.

Hebron has long been the site of violent clashes between the two populations. In the 1929 Hebron massacre, Arab rioters killed 67 Jews and wounded 60. Although hundreds of Jews survived as a result of being sheltered by their Arab neighbors, their community was decimated and they fled to Jerusalem. A permanent Jewish community was not re-established in Hebron until after the 1967 war, when the city came under Israeli control.

Supporters of Jewish resettlement in Hebron view their project as a reclamation of their ancient connection to the city, a connection that had been disrupted by the 1929 exodus. Critics, including some descendents of the 1929 refugees, decry the Hebron settlements as an obstacle to peace. Citing the fact that many Israelis live in homes that belonged to Palestinians before the 1948 war, they have argued that "claiming Jewish property inside the West Bank could set an awkward precedent, encouraging Arabs to reclaim their ancestral property inside what is now Israel."[7]

Because the settlements require the constant presence of the Israeli military, the Palestinian population of Hebron has dropped significantly as a result of extended

[6] Bishara, Ghassan (2000). "Destroying Houses and Lives: An Interview with Salim Shawamreh and Jeff Halper." *Middle East Report Online.* http://www.merip.org/mero/mero040500.html.

[7] Sipress, Alan (1997). "Hebron descendants decry actions of current settlers. They are kin of the Jews ousted in 1929." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. http://www.angelfire.com/il/FourMothers/Yona.html.

curfews and mobility restrictions, the closure of Palestinian businesses near settler areas, and settler harassment. While the IDF is trained to suppress Palestinian violence against the settlers, they are not trained to protect Palestinians from settler violence. As settler attacks have increased in recent years, Israeli soldiers and police are frequently called upon to suppress the very people they are there to protect. The resulting dynamic between these groups is charged with hostility and confusion.

Increasingly, discharged soldiers like Eran and Yehuda have spoken publicly about these difficult encounters.

Gush Katif, Gaza Strip

> *You know the wildebeest, in Africa, you see a huge herd standing and grazing – that's the only thing that they're interested in. And then the lion comes. And he attacks. And everybody moves … a bit, right and left. And the lion finds the target. And then he sits there and he tears the victim to pieces. And the victim is bleeding. And two meters from there, the wildebeest just go back and graze, like nothing happened. Cause today they're safe. The lion is not hungry anymore.*
>
> *And that's how I felt – the lion is tearing me to pieces and I'm bleeding to death ... And all my friends, all my fellow man, all my country is just standing there grazing, and shitting. And they really don't give a damn.*
>
> ~ Datya Itzhaki, Gush Katif Evacuee

In August 2005, the Israeli army forcibly evacuated 8,000-10,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza Strip. Most of their homes were located in the Gush Katif settlement bloc and had been built in the years following the 1967 war.

A historic Jewish community existed in Gaza City until it was evacuated in 1929 following Arab riots. In 1946, the Jewish village of Kfar Darom was established, but it was evacuated following an Egyptian siege during the 1948 war. The Gaza Strip remained under Egyptian rule until 1967, when it was conquered by Israel.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the communities of Gush Katif were established, most as agricultural cooperatives. Although most of them were built on barren sand dunes, the settlements were considered vital to Israel's security. Their presence was believed to cement Israel's control of the area by disrupting the continuity of Arab communities in northern and southern Gaza.

Anita Tucker and her family arrived in Gush Katif in 1976, and were among the first ten families to inhabit the agricultural village of Netzer Hazani.

> *We stood on one of the sand dunes while they were starting to put in the foundations for the houses and the greenhouses. And of course, all we saw was sand. And suddenly we see an Arab coming up from under, behind a sand dune, from nowhere. And in the other direction we see another Arab coming out from nowhere from under the sand dune, and they were walking towards us and it was a little stressful for a second. And then all of a sudden we see that they have bread and salt in their hands in the Muslim tradition, and ... they came to welcome us and say, "baruch habah" ... And they were hoping that there would be some work for their people who were really in bad financial straits since the time that the Egyptians ruled the area.*

The men were the Mukhtars, or religious leaders, of Deir Elbalah and Khan Younis.

> *The Mukhtar of Deir Elbalah ... turned out he had studied in Oxford University, and he spoke a wonderful English, much better than my South Brooklyn English. And he looked down at the sand and he said, "You know, you guys are crazy." He says to me, "You guys are crazy, you can't grow anything here. In our tradition, this is the cursed land ... and the last guys that ever grew anything here or lived here were Abraham and Isaac, our forefathers." So from this Arab Mukhtar, I learned about my Jewish connection to the place.*

Datya Itzhaki participated in the rebuilding of the Kfar Darom settlement. Almost immediately, she developed a warm relationship with the El Azaiza family of Deir Elbalach. The El Azaiza family had also had good relations with the Jews who established Kfar Darom in 1946. During the Egyptian siege of 1948, they had supplied the beleaguered Jews with water.

"We were really really good friends. We were part of the area. It was our country."

Many Arabs were employed by Jews, not only as laborers but as lawyers, architects, Arabic teachers and driving instructors. "People in Gush Katif were

working with the Arabs for twenty, twenty-five years. You know, they went to each others' weddings."

But the presence of the settlements was also deeply resented. When Datya and her husband began building a house in Kfar Yam in 1998, they could not hire Arab workers because those who worked for Israelis were increasingly threatened by the Palestinian police. So Datya and her husband hired workers from India.

> *And when they were working, the Palestinian soldiers came and started shouting at them and threatening them. And [the workers] understand only English. So they asked my husband, "What do they want from us?" And my husband said, "Listen, they're encouraging you. They say it's very good that you're building."*

When the second Intifada broke out, three of Datya's neighbors were murdered by Arabs - two of them were murdered by Arab employees they had known and trusted. Another friend of hers, who had been close with the El Azaiza family, was murdered in Kfar Darom.

> *When his wife was sitting [shiva[8]] after he was dead, they had a few people that came from Deir Elbalah, to say they were sorry. But later on, the relations were very hard for them … We understood that the pressure that is made on them – even though they would like to be friends with us and even though I really believe that they like me and they see me really as part of the family – they cannot allow themselves to be beside me.*

Palestinian attacks on Gush Katif intensified during the second Intifada. Between 2000-2005, over 5000 mortar bombs and Qassam rockets were fired on the settlements. Israel, in turn, intensified its military presence in Gaza. IDF security measures such as increased checkpoints and mobility restrictions for Palestinians were increasingly seen by many Israelis as an impediment to peace and a drain on IDF resources.

On June 6, 2004, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced his plan to evacuate all Israelis from the Gaza strip and dismantle the settlements.

[8] *Shiva*: A week-long period of mourning in Jewish custom, in which the bereaved gather in one home and receive visitors.

For the Gush Katif communities – and especially the generations who had been born and raised in the Gaza Strip – the news was devastating. And to Anita, incomprehensible.

> *When we were in Gush Katif towards the end, there were many [Israeli] groups that would come – leftist groups that believed that this was the right thing to do, to evacuate and give the Arabs this part of the Gaza Strip. And they would come to us to try to convince us that we should leave without too much violence, that we should leave easily. And one time I participated in such a forum, and I said to the people, I said, "you know, I don't understand, I'm gonna move two kilometres from here over the Green Line … And the terror is gonna continue. And then what are you gonna do?"*
>
> *And they said, "oh, then it's no problem. We'll bring planes and we'll bomb the place out. You won't be there, it won't be a problem."*
>
> *And I said, "Are you crazy? You're gonna bomb out my friends? I have people that I know for thirty years. Are you crazy?"*
>
> *And they looked at me like I said the wrong line, I said the wrong mantra. Like I'm not supposed to be saying that - I'm the settler.*

Part Two

Shelley, IDF reserve soldier (1976-1989)

I was very emotional about my first day in the army. As the grandson of four grandparents who all were murdered in Auschwitz, I was the first generation in my family for many many many generations to literally be able to hold the means of my own self-defense.

My first day in the army, we were taken to some little base out in the middle of nowhere. And the people I was drafted with were similar to myself – many of them were new immigrants, and many of them were people around my age [30] or even older. And they gave us each a duffel bag containing all kinds of equipment – we formed a large circle and we were ordered to empty our duffel bags on the ground. And there it was, there was the uniform, the uniform of the Israel Defense Forces. And I was quite moved to see it. Of course when I got up close to it I discovered that … it wasn't very fresh, it wasn't very clean, it didn't smell very good, but okay, that was the uniform. Then as I was ordered, as we all were ordered, to put on our uniforms, I discovered something else, which is that it was probably made for somebody about a foot shorter than me – in other words, it was far too small. I couldn't get it on. And so I mentioned this to the sergeant, who was supervising us all, and he said, "Where do you think you are, a boutique? If it doesn't fit you, go trade with somebody else and find something that does." So one of my first experiences in the army had to do with walking around the circle – and I wasn't the only one doing this – saying, "Do you have a pair of pants that are too big for you? Could I trade?" And it was all quite funny, actually. I found myself chuckling at myself. So finally I got a shirt and pants that fit, put them on – as I said, they didn't smell so great, they weren't so clean. But there I was. I looked at myself in this olive green getup, which has the Hebrew letters on the pocket – Tzvah Lehaganah Israel, "The Israeli Defense Forces" – and with all the anti-climax, I cried tears. Because it was an overwhelming moment. Here I was in a position that many many generations of Jews before me did not have access to.

Eran, IDF Soldier (2006-2009)

I finished the army, and my brother was back from Burma. He was back in Israel … for me, because I finished the army. And we were supposed to do a trip across Israel, like a really nice hiking trip crossing from south to north. I went to get him from the airport, and I told him, "You know it's amazing that you're coming all this way because I finished the army. It's really touching, I feel like I've got a family again."
[We were] on the way home from the airport. And he told me, "well I knew how you would be when you left the army. I know what feelings you've got. So I felt I have to be here with you."

I said, "What do you mean, you know what feelings I've got? How do you know? You weren't in Israel in the last few years. We almost didn't talk."

And he said, "Well, when I left the army, I was crazy. All my friends also. And I had to run away from here. Like not be in this country anymore. And I'm guessing you feel the same."

He finished the army before I joined, he's 28. And I told him, "you knew what I was going to go through?"

He says, "well, yah."

I said, "And you didn't tell me nothing? Like you didn't stop me or prepare me, or tell me how it's gonna be, or try to talk to me during the process?"

He said, "well everybody's doing the same fucking process. You know, it sucks and you do it."

I said, "What are you talking about? I'm your brother! Couldn't you tell me it was going to kill my soul?" Doing the same shit every day for three years. In the guard, in the checkpoints. And it sucks your soul.

So I was really mad at my brother. And I decided to call some guys, to see if it's true, if everybody's feeling the same. So of course I called only specific guys, who I'm close to. Everybody in my group are lefties, they're not a reflection of all of Israel of course, but …

I called my cousin. He was a pilot. And I asked him, "do you remember when you left the army?"

And the first thing he said was, "woof! Man, it was the worst two years of my life! I had dreams about children all the time, that I was bombing them …"

I told him, "didn't you think about telling me something?"

He said, "Oh. I don't know, everybody does it."

And something hit me. Everybody knows something. But nobody's really talking about it. Everybody's feeling something not good, but maybe saying, "okay, it's for security, it's for Israel, it's for … I don't know." It's right to do this stuff, the government has to do this stuff, the army has to do this stuff. But everybody knows there's something wrong, because you're controlling the life of other people.

Anyway, after that, I told my brother I didn't want to hike with him in Israel. He said, "hey, man, you don't have to be like that. I'll help you come out of it."

I said, "no, I don't wanna hike." I had to do something else, I had to fix something in myself. And after less than a month, I joined Breaking the Silence.

In 2002, in the midst of the second Intifada, a group of 50 combat soldiers from the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) published a statement that came to be known as The Combatants Letter. In it, the soldiers pledged their commitment to the security of Israel, but declared their refusal to serve in the Occupied Territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

- *We, who sensed how the commands issued to us in the Occupied Territories destroy all the values that we were raised upon,*
- *We, who understand now that the price of Occupation is the loss of IDF's human character and the corruption of the entire Israeli society,*
- *We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.*

The Combatants Letter was signed by 628 members of the 'refusenik' movement, 280 of whom served jail sentences of up to 35 days as a result of their disobedience.[9]

These individuals embody deep ruptures in Israel's political self-image. They challenge the very foundations of Israel's militarized existence. For a large number of Israelis (and Jews), a Jewish state defended by a Jewish army is the ultimate manifestation of Jewish survival in the face of continuing persecution. Military might is seen as a prerequisite for survival. And in light of continuing Palestinian attacks, Israel's oppressive military policies are not only necessary, but morally justified.

Israeli authorities, and many Israelis themselves, continue to assert that the IDF conducts itself in an exceptionally ethical manner. Reported cases of soldier abuse towards Palestinian civilians, looting, and destruction of property are excused as military necessities, or explained as unique cases of an individual soldier's misconduct. In this view, Palestinian suffering occurs in spite of the army's efforts to minimize it. The real blame lies with terrorist groups who force the army to adopt harsh military policies against Palestinian civilians.

> *We had once an ambulance with a pregnant [Palestinian] woman. I was standing in a checkpoint. And they wanted to pass the checkpoint. And of course it's an ambulance with a pregnant woman, they want to get to a hospital. Of course we should let them go. But we checked the ambulance. And she was pregnant, that's for sure. And she had to get to the hospital. But … in that ambulance, there were weapons.*
>
> ~ Avi, IDF reserve soldier (2002)

Testimonies like this one highlight a common viewpoint: That it is the army's moral imperative to protect Israeli lives, even at the expense of Palestinian ones.

[9] http://www.couragetorefuse.org/english/movement.asp

For a small number of Israelis, including the signatories of the Combatants Letter, such a claim overlooks a darker side of Israel's military occupation.

The initiators of the Combatants Letter, Captain David Zonshein and Lieutenant Yaniv Itzkovits, had served for four years in compulsory service, and another eight years as reserve soldiers. During their reserve service in Gaza at the height of the second Intifada, the two began to feel that the commands being issued to them had nothing to do with the defense of the State of Israel but were, rather, intended to systematically dominate, humiliate and disempower the Palestinian population – the majority of whom posed no threat to Israeli security.

Their claims have been echoed by Breaking the Silence, an organization of veteran Israeli soldiers that collects and publishes testimonies of soldiers who have served in the Occupied Territories. According to the group, these testimonies "demonstrate the depth of corruption which is spreading in the Israeli military" - corruption that is inevitable in situations where one has disproportionate power over another people.

> *We used to do false arrests. I mean, when you want to practice how to arrest someone, you practice it on real people .. Going into a village, choosing one house, doing exactly the thing you want to do in the terrorist's house ... Getting in, catching the man of the house, taking him with you – you don't say a word. The women are screaming, and he says, "What have I done? What have I done? I didn't do nothing, what do you want from me?" The children are seeing us taking their father away, taking him into the car, the army car. Doing a few laps. After like an hour, set him free. And we can't really tell him we're just doing it to practice, so you tell him, "We will let you go now, but if you do something like this again, we will get you." He doesn't know what we're talking about. We used to do it a lot. They're still doing it all the time. Nobody will say it, obviously. If you will ask some commanders or some officer in the army, no one will say. [They'll say,] "Nooo, we stopped doing it years ago." No. Everybody's doing it right now.*
>
> ~ Eran, IDF soldier (2006-2009)

Testimonies like this one reveal regular incidents of power abuse by the IDF, as well as the silence and deception surrounding IDF conduct in the Occupied Territories. While Israeli authorities have condemned Breaking the Silence and

dismissed their testimonies as lies and exaggerations, the group urges Israelis to critically examine their country's military policy and consider its effects on the future of the conflict.

And yet what is at stake? Even the harshest critics of the IDF agree that Israeli citizens have a right to security, and that it is the army's responsibility to protect them from Palestinian terror attacks. What is lacking is a consensus on how to accomplish this in a "moral" way. What security measures are justified, and what measures are superfluous, symptoms of excessive power? Should Israel maintain or relinquish control of the Occupied Territories? Ask ten people and you'll get twenty different answers.

Whether or not one supports Israel's presence in the Occupied Territories, it cannot be denied that Palestinians suffer from it. For soldiers who consent to serve in the Territories, this is the basic reality they must confront.

It is a reality that has prompted some soldiers to reflect on what it means to be a moral "occupier."

Part Three

Yatta, West Bank

The taxi driver didn't know where Yatta was. I had to put Raed on the phone with him so he could give the driver directions. We were in the South Hebron Hills, a parched and rolling landscape. Yatta was the village where Raed's family lived.

After some meandering and backtracking, and with Raed on my cell phone coaching the driver, we finally found the place. Narrow, dusty roads. Sun-bleached stone houses. People meandering. Lingering. Everything seemed to move slower.

"Why would anyone want to come here?" The driver seemed amused by our surroundings. He was from Bethlehem, which was more of an urban hub. What did he think I saw when I looked out the window? A hick town? "What is there to do here? Nothing!" He grinned at me. "Don't tell your friend I said that."

Raed was waiting for me outside his family's convenience store, and together we walked up the street to his parents' house. He was thirty-seven and had grown up here. Now he lived in Ramallah, another urban center, but he came home to visit regularly. He had invited me here for the day.

We'd met the week before, when I interviewed him. In the empty dining hall of a restaurant in Ramallah, and with the help of an interpreter, he had told me the story of his life. He'd been tense that day, lighting cigarette after cigarette. When the story was over, his face betrayed a deep tiredness.

Today he was different. Warm, serene. Happy to be home. We chatted as we climbed the stone steps to the house, making the best of his limited English and my non-existent Arabic. A young boy greeted us, Raed's youngest brother. Their mother was outside on the porch, and when Raed introduced us, she took my hand in hers and squeezed it.

She was younger than I'd expected, her face broad and smooth, framed by her hijab. When she smiled, tiny creases appeared at the corners of her eyes.

Inside, she brought me a heaping plate of chicken and rice, pita and a bowl of white chicken broth. Raed explained how to spoon the broth over the rest of the food. As I ate, Raed's sisters drifted in and out of the room. One was fourteen, the other twenty and engaged to be married. Struggling to speak with me in my own language, they asked me questions. Where was I from? Where was my family? What was my goal in life? What kinds of names did my classmates have?

When they left the room I found myself alone, listening to the others' voices drifting through the doorway. My belly was full. I wondered what would happen next.

And then Raed's mother entered, carrying a chair. Carefully, deliberately, she set the chair down across from me and sat in it. And we just looked at each other. Smiling. Expectant.

We tried to speak. But when she spoke Arabic, I could only shrug sheepishly. When I spoke English, she just shook her head. We tried again and again, as though our efforts might awaken us to a secret common language. Finally, there was nothing to do but laugh at ourselves.

When Raed misbehaved as a child, his mother would warn him, *I'll get the Jews to come after you*. He was not entirely sure who *the Jews* were, but they petrified him. An entity from another, sinister world.

One day, his uncle was beaten and killed by a settler living in the area. Raed and his friends began to commit small acts of revenge against that settlement. Cutting wires. Burning motors. When the first Intifada broke out, he was fifteen and joined a Fatah youth group. They hung Palestinian flags, which were illegal at the time, and organized demonstrations. Threw rocks at Israeli Jeeps.

He and his friend were leaving school one day when they were confronted by a convoy of Jeeps. His friend threw a rock at them. “Of course these rocks are harmless,” Raed told me. “It didn’t even reach halfway.” One soldier fired at his friend, and killed him on the spot.

After that, there was no backing down.

He and a group of other boys built a homemade bomb. When they tested it, the bomb exploded and blew off one of the boy’s fingers. Israeli security tracked him down at the hospital. Inflicted pain on his injured hand until he confessed the names of his friends, including Raed. For one year, Raed was wanted by the Israeli army.

“I wasn’t sleeping at home,” he said. “I was sleeping in different places. Sometimes we were sleeping in the mountain.”

One night he slept at his sister’s house. Israeli soldiers broke into his room and beat him savagely. He spent forty days under investigation.

He was made to sit, hands tied behind his back, for three days at a time. He was exposed to extreme heat followed by extreme cold. He was beaten. “Several times a day, I thought I would die during the investigation.”

Three years later, he was released from prison, more determined than ever to see the occupation overthrown. After graduating university, he began working for the Palestinian Authority.

Then the second Intifada broke out.

"One day, there was curfew in my village, in Yatta. My cousin was sitting in his house. He heard something outside and went outside to see what was happening. A soldier shot him in the head and killed him."

Everywhere he turned there was bloodshed. The Oslo peace negotiations had failed. What good was an armed Palestinian resistance, he thought, when it would only instigate greater violence from the Israeli army?

In 2004, a friend of his invited him to visit a joint Palestinian-Israeli summer camp. Curiosity compelled him to go. It was the first time he would set foot outside the West Bank – and the first time he would meet unarmed, civilian Israelis.

One of them was Elik Elhanan, a former soldier who had served in the Occupied Territories. During his army service, Elik's 14 year-old sister was killed in a suicide attack. His commander ordered him to open fire on a Palestinian neighbourhood. "Get revenge," he was told. "Kill as many of them as you like."

Elik left the army and refused to serve any further.

"My sister didn`t die so that Israel would be safe. She didn`t die because Arabs are naturally bad or because Islam is an evil religion. She died because of a political situation, man made and solvable ... If you want people to stop trying to kill you and themselves you should give them a reason to live and a soldier can`t do that ... The recent events of our time show us that there is *no* violent solution to violence."[10]

Elik's story shocked Raed. "I thought that all Israelis supported the occupation … And this was like a wakeup call."

Elik invited him to a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian ex-fighters. It was to be the first meeting of an emerging peace group of former Israeli soldiers and Palestinians who had been involved in violent resistance.

[10] Elhanan, Elik. "My Sister Died Because There is an Occupation." http://www.kibush.co.il/show_file.asp?num=16005.

"When we first sat around the table, we were staring at each other in a strange way. Everyone was feeling weird. We didn't know how to begin the conversation with them. We're talking about Israeli officers and soldiers. They've searched us at checkpoints, and caused us hardship. To sit with them at the same table was ... not easy. At the beginning, we were suspicious of them. Maybe [it was a trap] and they wanted to get information from us. Maybe they thought we were going to kidnap them."

That was how Combatants for Peace was established. Since that first meeting, the group has swelled. According to Elik, "we have three goals. We try to bring together Israeli and Palestinian fighters to talk peace. We speak with Israelis and Palestinians at schools, community centers, private homes. Even if three people in a room want to hear us, we will talk to them. We protest the destruction of Palestinian homes, the Separation Wall ... and the occupation. Everything we do, we do together."[11]

"It wasn't easy," Raed told me, "for other Palestinians to accept that we were meeting with Israeli soldiers. We faced some resistance from the local communities where we lived. But gradually they accepted the idea, when they saw that we were working to achieve freedom for the Palestinians, acquire an independent state for the Palestinians."

Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem

Sulaiman Khatib is Raed's friend and a co-founder of Combatants for Peace. Originally from the West Bank village of Hizma, he spent ten and a half years in prison for stabbing and wounding two Israeli soldiers at age fourteen.

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[11] Hirschfield, Robert (2007). "Israeli Elik Elhanan and Palestinian Sulaiman Al Hamri: Two Combatants for Peace." *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. http://www.washington-report.org/archives/April_2007/0704056.html.

Our interview took place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, where he was co-coordinating a twelve-day training seminar on conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation. Participants included Israeli, Palestinian and International students.

We met in the lobby of the Institute, and I could tell he was tired. He had work to do in preparation for that evening's program, a lecture and discussion forum with an Israeli settler from the West Bank. Earlier that week, the group had met in a similar forum with a member of Hamas. The students' candid encounters with individuals like these were meant to expose them to the multiple perspectives of the conflict.

Like Raed, Sulaiman has renounced violence and devoted his life to Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and reconciliation. His journey from child militant to adult peace activist spanned the course of over two decades.

The evolution of his principles reflects an ongoing debate within Palestinian society: is violence an effective means of achieving sovereignty? In a conflict where Israel maintains overwhelming military superiority, is Palestinian violence productive or self-destructive? It is a question that cuts through the core of Palestinian unity.

Jerusalem, Gaza and Cyberspace

On June 25, 2006 an Israeli Jerusalemite named David[12] discovered a two-day-old message on his yahoo messenger account. It was from Mohammad,[13] a young man in Gaza with whom he had been corresponding online.

[12] Not his real name

[13] Not his real name

Please call me. Events are going to happen that are not good for you and not good for us.

What ensued was a harrowing morning of phone calls and online messaging as David, at Mohammad's urging, attempted to contact and warn the Israel Security Agency of these 'events.'

It is perhaps fitting that I met David in same place he had encountered Mohammad: cyberspace, the only location that transcends all geographical borders.

I had posted an ad on mepeace.org, an online network of Israelis, Palestinians, and anyone else concerned with Middle East peace. My ad included a description of this project and a call for participants to share their stories. David responded.

He had a story, he told me, that he knew I would want to hear. When we eventually met in person, I could feel it percolating inside him.

"There were two sentences [Mohammad wrote] that were very important to me: when he said, *I know, I have knowledge about this*, and *I cannot stay silent*. And *I hope that these fools are stopped*. It means that he wanted to prevent the event from happening."

The event turned out to be the now well-publicized abduction of Gilad Shalit, a nineteen-year-old Israeli soldier who was captured by Palestinian militants in a cross-border raid. In spite of military and diplomatic efforts to release him, Shalit has remained in captivity since 2006.

"Unfortunately I saw the message too late. I saw it, actually I know now, exactly at the moment it happened. So it was very hard for me for a long time to know that if I had opened the computer a day before or two days before, I might have prevented it."

Initially in shock following the events of that day, David eventually came to wonder how Mohammad had known about them.

“He told me that he was asked to help in the planning. And he refused. Because he thought that it was wrong. Wrong in every sense. Wrong to kidnap someone, and wrong for Gaza, for him, for his friends’ lives, for other peoples’ lives.”

As Mohammad had clearly anticipated, the abduction triggered a series of IDF military operations in Gaza which resulted in hundreds of Palestinian casualties. Mohammad’s efforts to sabotage the plans of his fellow Palestinians stemmed from his conviction that their actions would reap no benefits and would only set the stage for further violence.

From his continuing correspondence with Mohammad, David conjectures that he had been involved in Palestinian militant groups as a youth, perhaps in planning other attacks against Israel. “I learned later on ... that he had contacts with lots of people. Really *lots* of people, from Fatah, from Hamas – from Fatah *and* Hamas. Especially at times when there was infighting, he lost friends from both sides. I know it, he told me.”

David can only guess at the complexity of Mohammad’s inter-factional loyalties. Given the immense danger of publicizing Mohammad’s identity, I have concealed all names and faces. The text included in the video is excerpted from David and Mohammad’s chat conversation on the morning of the abduction.

Part Four

Sderot, Southern Israel

In Sderot, an Israeli city that borders Gaza, I interviewed a mother with three rambunctious little girls. They were full of beans, those kids - darting back and forth in front of the camera, giggling, vying for my attention as their mother patiently described to me the eight years they had spent living under Palestinian rocket fire.

> *On a Shabbas night, a Saturday night, a rocket fell right in our parking lot at 1:00 am, and the building was shattered, the windows were shattered. There was - talk about miracles – there was a child sleeping right under the window. His whole body was covered with glass and he didn't get one scratch. And the cars were burnt, there was a big fire here in the parking lot. And be-emet[14], with miracles, God looked over us and no one was hurt.*

According to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1,750 rockets and 1,528 mortar bombs fired from the Gaza Strip struck southern Israel in 2008 alone.[15] Each time a rocket is launched from Gaza, an alarm sounds and residents have 15 seconds to reach shelter before it hits.

> *You have to be prepared at all times. You have to have the car window always a tiny bit open – even with the air conditioner on – to hear the siren go. You have to know every minute where every child is. You have to make sure that wherever you go, in town, there's a safe place to run to within fifteen seconds. You always have to be aware.*

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[14] Really

[15] Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Missile+fire+from+Gaza+on+Israeli+civilian+targets+Aug+2007.htm?DisplayMode=print#statistics.

As she spoke, I noticed one of the girls grinning at me. I grinned back. She must have been about seven or eight, and didn't seem to understand English.

"How do you explain all this to your kids?" I asked her mother.

"We have to explain the truth. That we are in the Jewish land and there are Arabs that are trying to hurt us and trying to get rid of us. They don't want us in the *whole* world, especially not in Israel." She paused to gently chastise her daughter, who was murmuring in her ear, trying to wrest her attention from me. "And then you get in the whole dilemma of explaining to children 'enemies,' and 'good people' and 'bad people.' And for me it's very sad my children have to go through this. It's not a movie, it's their real life."

Children growing up in Israel/Palestine learn very quickly who their enemies are. The world is starkly divided between 'good people' and 'bad people,' and those categories are difficult to disrupt.

Some parents work hard to disrupt them

Rabbi Arik Ascherman, an Israeli peace activist and the director of Rabbis for Human Rights, regularly encounters Palestinian parents who are deeply concerned about their children's dualistic worldviews:

> I don't know how many times, when I've gone to rebuild a demolished [Palestinian] home, Palestinian parents have insisted on bringing out their kids to meet with us. And it's like déjà vu, the same conversation, time after time: *Our ten-year-old son has just seen his home demolished in front of his eyes, he's just seen his parents humiliated in front of his eyes. What do we say to our ten-year-old child when he says, 'I wanna grow up and be a terrorist'? We want our son to know that not every Israeli comes with guns to demolish our homes, but that there are Israelis who come to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us, to rebuild our homes.*

Hosni Abu Saifan lives in Hebron with his wife and children. His home lies in the Wadi Nasara valley and is overlooked by the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba. When, in December 2008, he was shot in the chest by a Jewish settler[16], Israelis

[16] The attack was filmed by Hosni's brother, Jamal Abu Sai'fan, and the footage appears in the exhibition.

from all over the country flocked to his hospital bed to offer support. Many of them were human rights activists who had befriended his family over the course of previous visits. One visitor was a religious man from Kiryat Arba, a settlement known for its hostile relations with local Palestinians.

"There are good people among the Jews," Hosni insists. He is dismayed by the recent behaviour of his children, who saw him get shot and have since then shunned all Israeli visitors - even those who had been their friends and supporters.

Teaching children tolerance in an atmosphere of perpetual violence is an uncompromising challenge. This is especially true when they have little or no contact with the so-called 'enemy,' either because of mobility restrictions between Israel proper and the Occupied Territories or because Jewish and Palestinian populations remain largely segregated even within Israel.

The YMCA International Peace Preschool in Jerusalem is among several joint Israeli-Palestinian educational programs working to build bridges within the boundaries of Israel proper. Founded in 1981, the preschool is currently attended by 118 Muslim, Jewish and Christian children between the ages of 1-5.

Walking through the preschool hallway is almost surreal. Children's backpacks hang from wall pegs with bilingual labels, each child's name written in both Arabic and Hebrew letters. In every classroom, you'll find children playing together, or eating together, or singing together. Classes are run bilingually. And when you see the kids, you can't tell who is Arab and who is Jewish.

The idea, of course, is to make coexistence a normal part life for these children and their families. As Rabbi Ascherman argues, any kind of sustained cross-cultural relationship is vital for creating bridges of empathy, eradicating dualistic thinking and mitigating violence. This is especially true when those relationships transcend the Green Line.

"I've had bombs gone off not far from my house," he told me. "And I have two little children at home. The best thing that *I* can do to protect *my* children, and *my*

friends, and *my* family, and *my* society, is to break down those stereotypes … We're gonna live here together or we're gonna die here together. And those of us who are sane would rather live here together."

Epilogue

Much of my inspiration for this project came from the documentary or verbatim theatre work of Anna Deavere Smith. In 1992, Smith wrote and performed *Fires in the Mirror*, a multi-character solo performance investigating the events of the 1991 Crown Heights riots, which erupted in the Crown Heights neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York after a seven-year-old Black boy was killed by a car in a Rabbi's motor procession. In retaliation, a group of young Black men fatally stabbed a twenty-nine-year-old Hasidic scholar in the neighborhood. Racial tensions between the Black and Hasidic communities exploded in violence.

Fires in the Mirror is a series of monologues excerpted from Smith's interviews with Crown Heights adversaries, victims and eyewitnesses. Performed by Smith herself, the play explores the events leading up to and following the Crown Heights conflict, as described by a diverse array of individuals from the Black and Hasidic communities. Their conflicting voices and perspectives are juxtaposed in a *Rashomon*-like portrait, with no one voice gaining precedence over another. Her dramatic renderings of these characters highlight the complexity of their interrelated identities, and deflect oversimplification:

> *On the surface this picture was Black and White. When one looks more closely, one sees something much more interesting than the stark lines of Black and White. One sees motion, and one hears multiple symphonies. The Black people didn't all come from one place, and neither do the Hasidim. One looks closely and one sees that not every hat is the same kind of black hat and not every yarmulke is the same kind of yarmulke. Multiple languages are being spoken.*[17]

For Smith, *how* a person spoke was as important as *what* they said. Speech, with its inherent rhythms, tones and accompanying mannerisms, was "a design around

[17] Smith, Anna Deavere (1993). *Fires in the Mirror.* New York: Anchor Books, p. xxxvi.

identity."[18] It offered a window into the innermost core of a person's character, revealing something "authentic" of them:

> *I wanted to get people to talk to me, in a true way. Not true in the sense of spilling their guts. Not true in the sense of the difference between truth and lies. I wanted to hear – well – authentic speech, speech that you could dance to , speech that had the possibility of breaking through the walls of the listener, speech that could get to your heart, and beyond that to someplace deep in your consciousness.*[19]

Smith's concept of 'authenticity' presupposes an ability to transcend racial and ethnic lines, to disarm the listener of her/his prejudices and inspire empathy in spite of those prejudices. Yet her language ("speech that has *the possibility* of breaking through the walls ... speech that *could* get to your heart ...") suggests that this presupposition is merely the *desired* outcome. As Jill Dolan remarks, Smith is "not trying to get audiences to love the characters," she simply works to "make them willing to hear these lives and perspectives juxtaposed against each other."[20] *Fires in the Mirror* and her subsequent work (*Twilight: Los Angeles,* 1994*)* are "embodied chronicles of ever-shifting positionality," chronicles that highlight the impossibility of omniscience.[21]

Like Smith, other playwrights have used verbatim theatre approaches to investigate the complexities of political, social and ethnic conflict. *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* deals specifically with the Middle East conflict. In 2003, British playwright/actor Robin Soans traveled to Israel and the West Bank with directors Tim Roseman and Rimi Brihi - the one Jewish and the other Arab - to interview over seventy Palestinians and Israelis about their lives amid the ongoing conflict. Like Smith, Soans aimed to theatricalise his research, and he sought to avoid conventional

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[18] Smith, Anna Deavere (2000). *Talk to Me: Listening Between the LInes*. New York: Random House, p. 50.

[19] Ibid, p. 51.

[20] Dolan, Jill (2005). *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 87.

[21] Ibid, p. 84.

structures of antagonism: "I was looking for a way into the centre of people's lives. Every debate on the subject I had listened to, and even some of the drama I had seen, had started rationally but after a matter of only seconds had plummeted into accusation and counter-accusation. The theatre can do better than that. We know that people are faced with almost impossible situations, but how do they cope?"[22]

Reflecting on his participants' common passion for food, he decided to structure the interviews around the subject of cooking. "If they were talking about food," he reasoned, "it would stop them getting propagandist."[23] Sharing food and recipes initially served as an icebreaker. It also provided an entry point for candid discussions of the conflict and its effect on daily life: "It was impossible for these people to discuss their recipes without also talking about how difficult it is to get the ingredients during a siege, or the daily challenges of negotiating through checkpoints, or the terror when an unattended bag is discovered at a falafel shop, or how an ordinary trip to the supermarket was anything but ordinary when a suicide bomber attacked it."[24] The act of eliciting recipes deflected "propagandist" impulses and provided the conceptual foundation for the play, which included a non-linear sequence of food-related monologues and scenes, and real cooking on stage.

Like *Fires in the Mirror, The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* was scripted directly from interview excerpts and structured as a tapestry of voices and perspectives. Rob Chambers, who directed the 2009 production of the play, stated: "We chose to produce the play because it does not take sides about who is right or wrong in the conflict, but rather it gives a voice to the everyday people who are usually

[22] Soans, Robin (2004). *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook*. Cambridge: Aurora Metro Press, pp. 12-14.

[23] Ibid, p. 14.

[24] Chambers, Rob (2009). "The People Behind the Headlines." DCA Theater website. http://www.dcatheater.org/blog/entry/the_people_behind_the_headlines/, ¶ 2.

neglected in the news accounts. These are not statistics or political positions; they are real people ..."[25]

Voices from Israel/Palestine adapts this approach to representing and interrogating the human dimensions of the Middle East conflict. In my own interviews, I sought to elicit not *accusations*, but *stories* – stories immersed in the nuances of each person's language, stories that revealed how each person coped with the difficult circumstances of the conflict. Like Smith and Soans, I wanted to feature those stories in a space that would allow them to coexist, to play off of one another without subsuming one another. And like the characters in Smith and Soans' plays, the individuals featured in the film speak directly to the audience; their stories are made to implicate the audience because they evoke the encounter of interviewee and interviewer, of storyteller and listener. By virtue of having spoken to me and my camera, these storytellers appear to address the audience as though the audience were itself a compassionate listener[26] – one who attempts to listen across cultural, political and geographical boundaries.

The film thus inhabits a performative space that is "by definition utopian."[27] The film venue, like the theatre venue, becomes a "no-place of possibility," where audiences might find themselves able to "listen differently, from a position of embodied imagination in which other people's lives become meaningfully detailed

[25] Chambers, Rob (2009). "The People Behind the Headlines." DCA Theater website. http://www.dcatheater.org/blog/entry/the_people_behind_the_headlines/,, ¶ 3.

[26] Compassionate Listening is a tool for conflict resolution and reconciliation that was originated by Gene Knudsen Hoffman, an International Peacemaker. The objectives of Compassionate Listening are to develop skills of reflective listening and non-adversarial questioning in order for individuals in conflict to deepen their understandings of one another's perspectives and suffering. Knudsen Hoffman is noted for stating that "an enemy is someone whose story we haven't heard." For more information, see http://www.bermanhealingarts.com/3_compassion/index.htm.

[27] Dolan, Jill (2005). *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 88.

alongside [their] own."[28] Such an outcome is, of course, hypothetical. As theatre scholar/practitioner Bruce McConachie asserts, "No performance by itself can alter the routines of everyday life, but ... theatre can provide 'what if' images of potential community, sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits."[29] *Voices from Israel/Palestine*, along with *Fires in the Mirror* and *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook,* can be defined as "utopian performatives" offering 'what if' images of intersubjectivity across lines of conflict. The film screen, like the stage, provides a "new common ground"[30] for polarized voices to be heard, and presents them *as if* they embody lines of communication and empathy.

[28] Dolan, Jill (2005). *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 88.

[29] McConachie, Bruce (1998). "Approaching the 'Structure of Feeling' in Grassroots Theatre." *Theatre Topics* 8.1, p. 38.

[30] Dolan, Jill (2005). *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 87.

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