

The Heart of the Matter

Sandra Butler

1,842 words

In all my years of political activism, I never broke the taboo against criticizing my own people, my Jewish family. Yet my studies and the daily headlines left me feeling tentative and uncertain. I have been armed to the teeth most of my political life. Which side are you on? the song asks. I always thought I knew what side I was on and who was on it with me. I thought those on the other side were misguided or ignorant. So how do I condemn my own Jewish family?

My assessment of the imposed suffering of the Palestinian people, inevitably leading to the moral atrophy of the Jewish state, leaves me feeling alienated from those I love, casting me out onto the margins of the Jewish world. My grandmother says that just because I am becoming increasingly knowledgeable about ancient Jewish texts does not mean that I have the right to speak against my own people. My mother echoes her, accusing me of betraying Jews who have been oppressed, she sighs, since forever. Sticking my nose where it doesn't belong, my father adds. Yet perhaps my grandfather will understand. He is the one who taught me about injustice, educated me about poor and oppressed people, about the dignity of every person, and always, he added sternly, no matter who. I want to believe he would understand that most of the poor and oppressed people in Israel/Palestine are Palestinians living in refugee camps, and that I am acting in the name of his teachings.

To add insult to the internal dissonance, many American Jews condemn me as a self-hating Jew, and secular left-wing activists with whom I often find common cause incorporate anti-Semitic language and interpretations into their rhetoric against me, blurring the Israeli army and government with the Israeli people, and even more virulently, with Jews around the world.

Now I am 67 years old, all my ancestors are dead, and I am left behind to hear my own voice, to make my way through the underbrush of contradictions and sense of disloyalty, yet with an urgency to face squarely and unapologetically the Israeli re-enactment of our own oppressive history, now directed against the Palestinian people

All my life, I created stories to help me make sense of the world. I created the stories, then I believed in them. Inevitably, as life intervened, the stories dissolved, leaving me with more complex and often painful realities. My central story about Israel was based on the belief that there were parallel narratives, an equivalently urgent Israeli and Palestinian history, that there were real dangers Israel had to protect against. I was carefully taught that the state of Israel was a refuge for persecuted and tormented remnants of a vibrant and rich world of European Jews after World War Two. I saw that singular truth, and no other.

In these past years, I have immersed myself in this region of the world, its convoluted history and geography, and struggled over pages in hundreds of books, each of which

defined what it meant to be a good Jew, to create tikkun olam, mending, repairing, and restoring our broken world. As I studied, I deepened my prayer practice, reciting the central daily prayer of the Jewish faith tradition.

Sh'ma Israel. Adonai Eloheinu. Adonai Echod.
Hear O Israel. The Lord Our God the Lord is One.

Judaism affirms, through the repetition of the Sh'ma, the oneness of all life, all beings, and the earth itself. There is no duality between mind and body, between earth and person. It is all is Echod One. Feminist scholar Judith Plaskow urges us to glimpse the One in and through the changing forms of the many, to see the whole in and through its infinite images. Despite the fractured, scattered, and conflicted nature of our experience, there is a unity that embraces and contains our diversity and that connects all things to each other.

Now, as I listen and struggle to remember my dedication to the oneness of all things, I push against criticism, shame, as well as the sense of moral disappointment and personal outrage at the draconian oppression Israelis are carrying out against Palestinian people. How do I keep from arming myself with anger and judgment, separating myself from the Israeli government's actions and all its supporters? How do I ask my broken heart to stay open? How do I express my oppositional truth with fierce love?—like my grandfather taught me, no matter who or what!

I just returned from several weeks in Israel/Palestine, where I attended the 13th International Women in Black Conference on Resisting War and Occupation. We gathered, more than 700 strong, to vigil, to teach and study together, to extract from our many struggles in countries around the world, the lessons of peace-making and non-violent struggle against all forms of militarism and nationalism. While my trip provided only a snapshot of the constantly changing realities that both Israelis and Palestinians face, my eyes and my heart fill with an altered reality, requiring me to dismantle my remaining protective stories and see clearly what is.

What I saw was a series of concrete barriers separating people from land, past from future, a blank impassive wall straddling two worlds, the wounds of people echoing and magnifying one another. I saw violence done to the soil and to the people, as the knife-point edge of the ubiquitous bulldozer slices through land that has been at rest for centuries, carving up the ancestors and their memories. I saw Israeli soldiers guarding one small Israeli house on a naked hillside surrounded by Palestinian villages, in preparation for the expansion of Israeli settlements. I saw a concrete wall that divided a main street in a Palestinian village in half so that Israeli traffic could run more smoothly. I heard an Israeli, who when asked to move his car from the center of a narrow street in a Palestinian neighborhood in the Old City, reply contemptuously, "Why should I move my car? It's my street."

I saw Palestinian men and women walking along a dirt path to a checkpoint, vulnerable to the whims of the young Israeli soldiers on duty. I smelled the tear gas thrown at

Palestinian villagers at the end of a demonstration after the internationals had returned to the safety of their buses. I watched the smiling face of the young Palestinian woman, whose house was to be demolished that week, offer us sugar pita bread to thank us for caring about her life and the future of her neighbors. I saw the fury on the face of an Israeli settler as Israeli, Palestinian and international demonstrators vigiled at the entrance to the settlement of Ariel, his face clenched as he slammed on his brakes and flew out of the car to snatch the Palestinian flag from the hands of a local Palestinian activist proudly holding it. I watched as several police officers tried to subdue him.

And repeatedly, I saw the steady determined faces of villagers, activists, and internationals, many of whom have lived through two periods of intifada, the Palestinian protests against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. These are the women and men who are living their politics day after day, with heartbreaking losses and occasional small successes.

At the Conference, there were visible and invisible walls with the potential to divide women from one another—those who wanted to engage in demonstrations and those with concerns for personal safety. There were women whose focus was on issues relevant to the Israel/Palestine struggle, and women from all over the world with wide-ranging concerns. There were secular and religious Jews, conservative and radical Palestinians. Women who insisted upon lesbian visibility and those who wanted to honor and respect the slowly changing conservative Palestinian cultural norms. Complexity and paradox all scrambled together. Yet in Jerusalem, a city of so many overlapping loyalties and priorities, the walls dividing us fell as we sat in overcrowded small rooms and began to speak. Everyone was heard; each woman's perspective was respected and given space. There was no cross talk, arguments, interruptions, criticism. Each conversation was intricate, touching deep chords in women's histories and lives. There was great freedom in the way we listened, in the respect for multiple locations and ideas, patience with inexperience and delight in welcoming newcomers to international concerns. I stretched for the best in myself as I sat in circle after circle of women—from the former Yugoslavia, Italy, Britain, Palestine, Israel, Columbia, Guatemala and the U.S—and together we found our way through the thickets of identity, solidarity, nationalisms and feminist theory. We felt our way forward into the future of justice and of peace. As I listened, my breathing grew deeper, slower, more spacious.

Challenged by members of his conservative congregation about why he chose to march with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel responded, "My feet were praying." For me, standing in the street with Women in Black is my public expression of the Amidah, our daily prayer.

And, as women joined Palestinian, Israeli and international activists to sing songs of liberation in Bi'lin, a besieged Palestinian village whose land is being remorselessly confiscated for the expansion of the adjoining settlement, my feet were praying. We stood in silence before the concrete wall that bisects history and geography, facing the armed and jittery Israeli soldiers, our voices rising into the air over the rooftops of homes

about to be demolished. Beside us stood the children of the village, smiling, making peace signs and asking us their only English phrase, "What is your name?"

My feet were praying when we stood, hundreds strong, lining both sides of the Kalandia checkpoint as thousands of Palestinians moved between us, necessary papers in hand. Some met our eyes and nodded, others simply moved through the familiar dusty corridor of fence-lined passage.

My feet were praying when I joined international activists at the entrance to an Israeli settlement, joined by a local Palestinian woman, proudly holding her national flag. nearly enveloped by Israeli soldiers and a cluster of armored vehicles there to protect us from the settlers. We stood in the fierce noon time sun, eyes straight ahead as the cars streamed past us, drivers and passengers cursing, waving their fists, children peering out through the back window, looking bewildered.

In Palestine, standing before a demolished house, a carcass of concrete and rubble, I recited the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

I am growing lighter. As I approach the end of my 60s, I am finding the courage to release the heavy wrappings of my defenses. I feel the winds of possibility on my skin now, as unprotected as my heart. It has taken my whole life to reach this place.