

“Land Without People for a People Without Land”

Growing up Jewish in the United States, albeit within the Reformed Jewish movement, the narrative of Israel as a “Land Without People for a People Without Land” was sold to me early. We studied maps of Israel, learned about the Holocaust and sent pocket change off to plant trees in the deserts of Israel. After my *Bat Mitzvah* I can't say I gave much thought to Israel, other than knowing of a distant relative or two who had moved there.

It was not until I lived in Italy as a young adult that I began to identify myself with being Jewish. For the first time I was exposed to the Palestinian cause, and to criticism of Israel. Many people asked me about my views on Israel, and I came to understand that being Jewish directly connected me to that land I had never seen.

In 2001 I moved to Israel, not as a religious or ideological return to the Promised Land, but because my husband had a postdoctoral fellowship in Archaeology. I lived on the beautiful, peaceful, and safe campus of the Weizmann Institute for more than a year before I made my first journey into the occupied territories. But I wanted to know what existed on the other side of the Green Line. For months I researched the various Israeli and Palestinian peace organizations, and participated in my first peace action in December 2002 with the organization Ta'ayush (Arab-Jewish Partnership). Our group of about 20 Israelis and internationals left from Tel Aviv and entered the West Bank through an Israeli checkpoint. Yacov, our leader, pointed out the rubble of the Baqa Al Gharbia market stalls that had just been demolished to make way for the soon to be built wall. We drove through the Palestinian countryside until we reached the gates of the Mevo Dotan Israeli settlement. Yacov greeted the Palestinian leader, a group of about two dozen farmers began to emerge from the olive groves below us, and we descended into the groves to meet them.

Picking olives side by side we learned the farmers' story. They were from

the nearby village of Arabeh. The previous year they had lost their entire olive crop - the mainstay of their livelihood. They had attempted the harvest many times, but each time they were attacked by the settlers of Mevo Dotan. Afraid that the same would happen this year, they had asked Ta'ayush to assist in the olive harvest - not only to help with the actual picking, but, more importantly, to act as a buffer between the Jewish settlers and the Palestinian farmers. Fortunately, the plan succeeded, there were no altercations with the people of Mevo Dotan, and the day turned out to be surprisingly peaceful.

During the next two years I underwent an intensive learning process as my eyes were opened to what was going on around me. Ideas linked to my own cultural identity, as an American and a Jew, were now being challenged. It was an emotional yet exciting experience as I began to understand that almost all I had learned about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was a load of rubbish. This not only angered me, it also empowered me to get out there to photograph and tell this story.

As I worked with a number of joint Israeli/Palestinian organizations I learned that there were two distinct narratives of history. In Israel I met some Jews who were so identified with the tragedies of history and the need for a homeland and for security that their hearts had no room to consider Palestinian claims or Palestinian humanity; they had no understanding of Palestinians except as enemy. But when I went to the occupied territories those Palestinians - the people whose very existence was denied in the myth of "a Land Without People for a People Without Land" from my childhood, welcomed me - a Jew, an American, living in Israel - into their homes and their lives. There I learned of the tragedies of their history, of their need for a homeland and security. And there too I met many Israelis who call these Palestinians friends, and who call Israel their only home. As a peace activist and photographer traveling between Israel and the West Bank I began to weave the two histories into my own narrative.

This is a book about the wall that separates Palestinians and Israelis.

When I began photographing the new barrier, in December 2002, little was known about the construction, either within the Israeli public or abroad. Only the Palestinians whose land had been confiscated understood its importance. They found land confiscation notices – not delivered in person, or by mail, but pinned by the Israeli Army to their trees. And then they watched as those trees were cut down, burned, bulldozed, or uprooted - as the groves which their families had cultivated for generations - some trees planted in Roman times and still bearing fruit - were destroyed in a single day.

Now, more than four years later, 400 plus miles of electronic fencing combined with 5-8 meter high concrete wall slabs make up this Barrier. Although it is still not complete, the Barrier has affected the life of every Palestinian, separating them from loved ones, schools, land, markets, universities, jobs and medical services. Not only has the Barrier affected contact among Palestinians, it also has made the already difficult contact between Palestinians and Israelis nearly impossible.

As we go to press Israel and Palestine have seen two years of cataclysmic changes: the death of Yasser Arafat, the Gaza disengagement, Ariel Sharon's departure from the Likud party and soon thereafter from politics, and the election of Hamas. Each event has opened windows of opportunity and hope, albeit briefly, to many on both sides of the conflict. But the question remains -- what has changed on the ground for the average people of both sides? The suicide bombings continue to occur on streets of Israeli cities. The Palestinians are no closer to having a state, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land continues, settlements are rapidly expanding, restriction of movement within the West Bank has not lifted. The immense project of the Barrier continues to level hundreds of miles of land, bulldozing the trees, houses, livelihoods, and histories in its path.

This new enormous physical barrier between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples has made the other, older, wall that separates them all the more apparent - the invisible wall of fear, distrust, paranoia and separation. This is

the wall that is the subject of my photographic work. This is the wall that fascinates me -- this wall, and the courageous people on both sides who continue to penetrate the barriers between them.

-Rebecca Heyl
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