

I srael, Palestine: Warring Children of Abraham

by Johanna Ceapach Choinn

*There was a great Menorah
whose lamps reached up toward Heaven
so high that it attracted
all of the firmament's
explosive lightning fire
In its twisted black-gray ashes
there remained some scattered embers
a puff of flying sparks
Alone each cooled to gray and black
Until there came a breath of wind
that warmed the sparks to points of blazing light
and sent them flying toward each other
blazing in the air a glowing wholeness
a fiery shape
a new Menorah
made of sparks and light
All light*

—Arthur Waskow



Photo: Peter Moore

December 1994 found me in Auschwitz-Birkenau scuffing through the place of twisted gray-black ashes. It was freezing cold, the flames of the place long dead. The Pilgrimage found its first form there, where we came like scattered sparks from all over the world, hoping to create a little flame of light. There we were in the place that, to a Jewish ear,

Statue at Yad Vashem
of Dr. Janusz Korczak
who chose to die with
his Jewish orphans
rather than escape the
holocaust without them

has become synonymous with Hell. Two months later we would again scatter and regroup, this time in Jerusalem—the place that, from Jewish lips, is likened to Heaven.

Like those who settled modern Israel, we arrived with some of the ash of Birkenau clinging to our boots. That ash still floats in the air of the Holy Land, creating a permanent haze through which everything is viewed. Victim/ oppressor dynamics inform nearly every aspect of Israeli/ Palestinian relations. Like a mad teeter-totter, the Jewish Israeli population embodies the radical identity swing from the archetypal victims to foreign colonizers, like those of previous centuries.

On a spiritual level there also lies conflict. The Jewish State of Israel is, ironically, a place of religious oppression for Jews who observe in any way other than Orthodox.

A Vietnam war combat veteran acknowledges soldier at Gaza checkpoint.



A Reform marriage is not recognized in Israel; it is in fact considered an act of civil disobedience in some situations. Children born to those who choose a Reform wedding are considered *mamzerim*, bastards, and in some cases *goyim*, non-Jews—without rights and protections afforded to “real” Jews. A Conservative Rabbi is not recognized as a religious authority in Israel; a woman Rabbi is an abomination. Twenty percent of the population is Orthodox and controls all of the Rabbinic courts, while eighty percent of the population is secular. Many secular Israelis have disengaged from their Judaism altogether. I stayed with a woman in Tel Aviv who said, “Look, I’m sorry, but I am an Israeli not a Jew.” It is a schizophrenic society to say the least. And I wonder, “What kind of flame has been blown to the Holy Land....”

Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, is rocky, intense and resilient, like her people. On the bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, I looked out upon the shoeleather-like old land and mumbled to G-d, “You promised us this? Some promise!” It gave new meaning to the troublesome notion of being “the chosen people.” All I could see were plains full of wizened shrubs and a few hills with some scattered, stubborn pine trees relentlessly holding their ground. I could not see what the eyes of those who fled the Nazi oppression saw. I could not feel what those escaping their concentration camp nightmares felt. I couldn’t hear the promise that the settlers still hear. I rode toward *Yerushalaim* somewhat dazed.

Arriving in Jerusalem, I felt a little tingle of excitement. At long last I was in the place I had pledged to go every year at Passover and Yom Kippur. I managed to drag my loaded backpack onto a crowded bus and experienced my first miracle in the Holy Land: I actually got off at the right

stop and found the scattered sparks of the Pilgrimage reunited in the Faisal Hostel.

After a few hours of settling in and catching up on pilgrimage gossip, a few of us set out to explore the old city. The Damascus gate was swarming with well-armed Israeli soldiers and thousands of Muslims returning from afternoon prayer. The Festival of Ramadhan had just begun and tensions were running high. I kept thinking, “Welcome to Jerusalem, home of the oldest dysfunctional family in the world.” Issak and Ishmael, half brothers and the forebearers of Judaism and Islam, still acting out their familial disappointments.

We pilgrims met with several people at the *Palestinian Center for the Study of Non-Violence*. It was my first taste of Palestinian anger and bitterness. That taste would turn bilious over the next several meetings with several other Palestinian spokesmen. The mayor of the Palestinian town of Beit Sahour said, “Hitler committed the crime and the Palestinians are paying the price.” Later another Palestinian man “joked,” “Well if Hitler had done a better job we wouldn’t have this problem today!” These comments shattered my naive image of the “noble victims,” in the same way that I was shocked when I had learned about Jews who stole from other Jews in the Nazi concentration camps.

The conditions the Palestinians were living in were terrible, this was true. It was also true that the speakers we heard were painfully reactionary. I found it almost impossible to be sympathetic to them. Harder still was hearing the unknowing, anti-semitic remarks made by some of my fellow pilgrims. I felt I was becoming a right wing Zionist in defense of my people. Fearing my anger would escalate, I talked to Sasamori about one of the speeches I found most troubling.

“Sasamori, what did you think of yesterday’s presentation?” I asked.

“I thought it was great!” he chimed enthusiastically, a quizzical grin playing on his lips. I nearly exploded.

“I hated it,” was the most neutral thing I could muster in response.

“Really, why Jhos?” he asked.

“Because it was manipulative and prejudiced and ugly and full of lies, that’s why!”

Sasamori breathed and thought for a few seconds and then he looked me square in the eye and said, “Jhos, you cannot judge this situation. We didn’t come here to judge. We came here to listen and offer our prayers. I thought it was great because those people showed us their pain and suffering. Their rage and bitterness is their truth. We didn’t come here to hear what we want to hear, we came to hear their stories. Listen to their suffering, not their words. We came to offer our compassion for the suffering of all the people in Israel and Palestine.”

We had walked and talked and now Sasamori was throwing down the ultimate gauntlet: Walk your talk! Humbled, with a mumbled, “Thank you, Rebbe Sasamori,” I wandered off to meditate on this advanced challenge.

It has been one of the guiding teachings of the Pilgrimage for me to “walk my talk.” It is easy to have compassion for those suffering remotely or quietly. It is marvelously difficult to be compassionate towards those whose suffering has them snarling, spitting, hissing and biting. It



Photo: Bill Ledger

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—Reverend
Gyoshu Sasamori



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words and recognize their pain.

We spent two hectic days in Gaza being mobbed by villagers wherever we walked, meeting with officials from the Palestine Liberation Organization. We heard speeches about peace countered by words of anger and propaganda against the Israelis. Our final night in Gaza found us being feasted and then swooped up in endless chaotic dancing. In contrast, our time with Palestinians in the West Bank was calmer. They were more agrarian—people of the fields—but they were no less dedicated to the Palestinian cause. Our Pilgrimage stance of neutrality was tested strongly in the Holy Land, with its passions and contrasting views of justice.

We were blessed to be in Galilee for a few days where the land was more fertile, and it was a further blessing to meet some of the gallant ones who are building institutions of peace and understanding. We had an enlightening workshop at the Rapprochement Center in Beit Sahour (“the Shepherds’ Field” near Bethlehem) where both Israelis and Palestinians told us of their search for the ways to peace. In a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, a Rabbi told of meeting with extremist Muslim leaders: they agreed spiritually,

is especially hard when they are trying to sink their teeth into you. I could listen to the Croats rage at the Serbs with deep compassion. I’m not a Serb. But as a Jew, it took all my spiritual strength to hear a Palestinian’s harsh

although not politically. We visited *Ulpan Akiva*, a Jewish/Arab language center run by Shulamit Katznelson (a Nobel nominee); *Neve Shalom*, a center for peace and the breaking down of barriers founded by Fr. Bruno Hussar (another Nobel nominee); and *Yad Vashem* and the *Children’s Museum*, memorializing forever the Holocaust.

We walked to *kibbutzim*, settlements, Palestinian refugee camps. We met with families, organizations, refugees, soldiers, professors, workers in the fields, the holy and the not so holy. There were so many profound experiences on the Pilgrimage in *Eretz Yisrael*: in the West Bank, in Gaza, in Jerusalem... It is a place of such deep conflict that much of the land itself seems to be screaming. Those who are working for peace there—and there are thousands, on both sides of the conflict—are brave, beautiful souls. May they live to see their families at peace. May the sparks of the exile return with the wisdom and compassion to illuminate the redemption of that embattled and embittered country.

*Oseh shalom bim romav,
Hu ya say shalom aleinu,
V'al kol Israel, v'ishmael, v'ha olam, v'imru amen.*

*May the one who makes peace in the heavens
make peace for Israel and Ishmael and all the world
and let us say: Amen.*