

Witness for the Defenseless

BY ANNA BALTZER

Every time I think I have understood the Israel/Palestine conflict, something will remind me how much more I have to learn. My first breakthrough came during a trip to southern Lebanon, where for the first time I heard a narrative about the state of Israel altogether different from the one I had learned growing up as a Jewish American. My grandmother, who had fled Europe and lost most of her family in the Nazi Holocaust, had always spoken of Israel as a tiny victimized country that

(Continued on page 2.)

Anna Baltzer is the author of *Witness in Palestine: Journal of a Jewish American Woman in the Occupied Territories*.



—Photo by Bud Hudson

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About This Issue

I first met Anna Baltzer in a Congregational church in Old Lyme, CT. The high-back pews were filled mostly with older people; a few in the balcony leaned over the rail to see and hear her.

The questions following her talk were polite, except for one woman in the balcony who lashed out at her for criticizing Israel.

After the talk, in a meeting room behind the sanctuary, she stood at a card table with copies of her book and DVDs of her presentation. Several came up to purchase them or just to speak with her.

In this issue of *The Link* Anna writes about many of the things she spoke of that day: her experiences in occupied Palestine, the questions most frequently put to her as she crisscrosses America, and, yes, how she responds to her critics, like the woman in the balcony.

Anna's presentation that day was one of the most engaging and effective I have ever seen. Her DVD version of it is available from our video catalog on page 15. An updated edition of her book is due out this August and is listed in our book catalog on page 13.

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director

(Continued from Page 1.)

simply wanted to live in peace but couldn't because of its aggressive, Jew-hating Arab neighbors. Then, while traveling through the Middle East, I was taken in by a family of Palestinian refugees who told me their story of being violently expelled from their homeland, never allowed to return. They told me stories of past and present military attacks, colonization, house demolitions, imprisonment without trial, torture, and government-sponsored assassination.

At first, I didn't believe them.

So I did my own research, and soon I realized that the stories of my friends in Lebanon were true. I realized that it was largely Israel's aggressive actions and policies—and U.S. unconditional financial support for those actions and policies—that were precluding a just peace in the region. I felt responsible for the role my tax dollars and government were playing in the violations of international law and human rights, and I felt doubly responsible as a Jewish American, since Israel's abuses were being carried out in the name of Jews everywhere.

Determined to see the situation for myself, I traveled to Palestine in late 2003 as a volunteer with the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS), a grassroots solidarity organization dedicated to documenting and nonviolently intervening in human rights abuses in the West Bank, and to supporting Palestinian-led nonviolent resistance to the Occupation.

In spite of my research, nothing could have prepared me for witnessing firsthand the injustices that characterize Israeli rule in the West Bank, including the expansion of Jewish-only colonies on Palestinian land, the virtually unchecked brutality of soldiers and settlers against Palestinian civilians, and Israel's Apartheid Wall, separating hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land, jobs, hospitals, schools, and each other.

I met one family whose house was com-

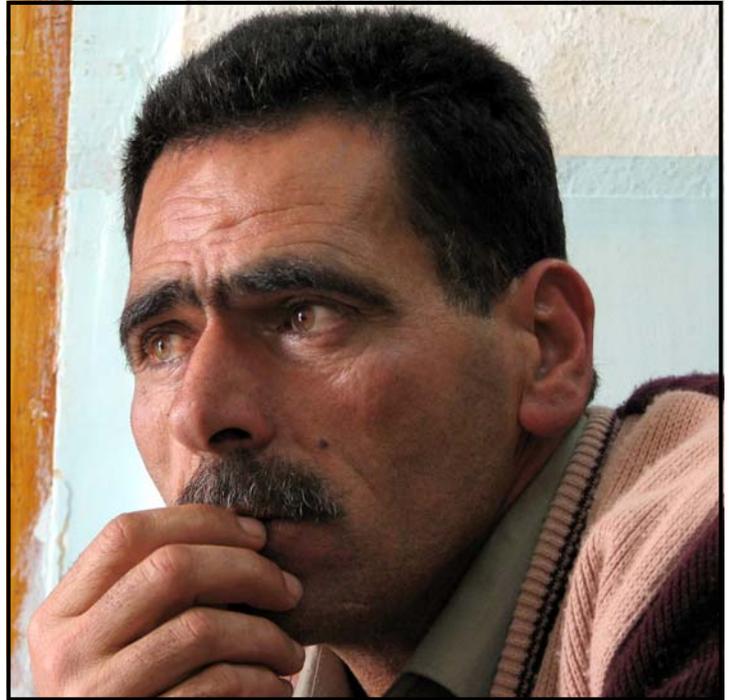
pletely surrounded by the Wall—a one-family bantustan. I met Palestinians who had spent their lives in prison never having been told what crime they were accused of, nor given access to a lawyer. I helped villagers pick barley seeds boiled in rat poison out from shrubs where settlers had planted them to deter shepherds from grazing their sheep on their land. I watched soldiers uproot olive trees in the middle of the night as collective punishment on entire villages. I took reports about extrajudicial assassinations and torture. I met the family of a six-year-old boy who inhaled poisonous gas that had been shot by soldiers into his home when he was less than a year old, and he hasn't been able to walk, talk, or eat on his own since. I saw soldiers shoot at unarmed nonviolent protesters, including internationals and Israelis. I documented a week-long invasion into Nablus, including the systematic obstruction of medical services, and the extensive use of human shields, including an eleven-year-old girl.

Those “Benign” Checkpoints

Perhaps the biggest surprise about the Occupation for me was the nature of Israel's military checkpoints. Of all the institutions of the Occupation, checkpoints had always seemed to me the most benign. Wasn't it natural that people be stopped to show their IDs when crossing between Israel and the West Bank, just as travelers between the U.S. and Canada have to stop on their way from one to the other? I quickly realized that the hundreds of checkpoints and other road obstructions in the West Bank were not on its border with Israel, but concentrated on Palestinian roads between Palestinian towns and villages. Also, unlike normal border crossings, not everyone had to stop at these checkpoints. Jewish settlers, their cars distinguishable by their yellow (Israeli) license plates, would breeze by hundreds of Palestinians waiting at checkpoints in their vehicles with white and green (West Bank Palestinian) plates.

During my eight months in the West Bank, I documented countless abuses at these checkpoints. I interviewed Hessa, a woman who was stopped by soldiers at the checkpoint between her village of Deir Ballut and the nearest hospital in Ramallah when she went into labor with twins. Unable to reach the hospital in time, she lost both of her babies.

Soldiers stopped my friend Dawud and his wife



Dawud, whose six-month-old son died at an Israeli checkpoint when soldiers denied the family passage to a hospital in Ramallah.—Photo by Anna Baltzer

at Atara checkpoint as they were rushing their six-month-old son, who was having trouble breathing, to the hospital in Ramallah. Despite the parents' screams as they watched their son begin to choke, shake, and eventually pass away, the soldiers refused to let the family pass.

I met Jaber, who was stopped at Huwwara checkpoint on his way home from the hospital in Nablus. Sick with meningitis, Jaber had strict doctor's orders to rest in bed but was held by soldiers for ten hours in the sun without food or water.

Not all of the violations were health-related. I watched soldiers manning checkpoints beat and humiliate Palestinians. I documented additional checkpoints set up during Jewish holidays and following threats of violence from Jewish settlers. I saw the way checkpoints prevent the efficient transport of Palestinian goods. I witnessed first-hand the way checkpoints block Palestinians from reaching their homes and holy sites, in addition to their land, hospitals, and schools.

Each year that I returned to the West Bank, I found these checkpoints more and more entrenched. At Huwwara checkpoint, the sheltered pens where Palestinians would wait to enter or leave Nablus

were replaced by metal turnstiles to keep Palestinians waiting in a controlled line. The army redesigned Zatarah checkpoint between Ramallah and all points north with separate lanes for Jews and non-Jews, and they installed a huge menorah—a symbol of the Jewish people—at the center of the junction. Certain checkpoints were replaced altogether with new terminal-style buildings.

I first encountered one of these terminals in January of 2006 after visiting a women’s cooperative in Tulkarem to purchase embroidery for friends in the U.S. Because there are no reliable postal services in the West Bank, and because I did not want to risk the products being damaged or confiscated by Israeli airport security if I transported them in my luggage, I knew I would have to send them to the U.S. from a post office in Israel. I had traveled from Tulkarem to Tel Aviv once in the past by taking a shared taxi to the nearby Einab junction, where I had walked from the Palestinian road to the Israeli one and caught transport into Israel.

This second time, I was traveling with my backpack and six plastic bags full of embroidery, and I assumed the trip would be as straightforward as it had been in the past.

When I arrived at Einab junction, I found a large new building, fortified by several layers of metal fences, walls, and gates. The first layer reminded me of rural parts of the Wall—wire fence reinforced with electric sensory wire and razor wire with a heavy iron gate. The gate was open but there was nobody to be seen on the other side. I walked through and came to two large iron turnstiles surrounded by a wall of iron bars. The turnstiles were locked. Frustrated, I put down my six bags to rest for a moment. Maybe someone would come back? I waited, but still there was nobody.

I called out. “Hello? Anybody out there?”

“Please wait a moment,” a staticky voice above me blared, and I looked up to find a speaker attached to the turnstile. I didn’t have much choice but to wait.

After five minutes the light above the turnstile turned from red to green and I picked up my bags to walk through. It was difficult squeezing into the tight rotating cage with all my bags, and by the time I’d made it to the other side, I was hot and cranky. I

had yet to see a human face.

In front of me was a metal detector, surrounded by iron bars. I began to walk through but the voice called out from another speaker above, “Stop!”

I stopped, wondering where he was watching me from.

“Go back and put down your bags.”

I sighed and went back through the metal detector and set down my six bags, which were feeling heavier by the minute.

“Now go through without your bags,” he ordered. I walked through. Nothing happened.

“Now, go back.”

I closed my eyes with a sigh, walked back, picked up my six bags, and walked through again before he could give me the order to do so. Somehow this seemed so much worse than the turnstiles and metal detectors I had seen at Huwwara and other checkpoints. At least there you could see the people humiliating you. Or maybe it was more upsetting because I wasn’t used to being the one humiliated.

Beyond the metal detector was another set of turnstiles, locked again. I took a deep breath and stared at the red light, hoping to see it turn green rather than let the guard hear my voice crack if I spoke. Thankfully, the turnstile buzzed and I squeezed through to reach the building itself. That was the end of the pre-screening. Now it was time for the *real* screening.

The inside of the building reminded me of an airport terminal—high ceilings and multiple floors, and multilingual signs for travelers. The ones here read, “Prepare documents for inspection” in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The signs didn’t clarify where one was supposed to go, however. There was a series of five doors with red lights on top, and I called out, “OK, my documents are ready... Now what?”

This time nobody answered, so I asked again. Again, nothing. Frustrated, I set my bags down. My back was hurting, I was sweating, and I didn’t know where I was or what was going to happen to me. I took a deep breath and yelled, “Is anybody there?!”

Eventually a second staticky voice came through from a speaker on the wall. “Please proceed

to the door.”

“Which door?”

“The one on the left.”

“Left of what? Where are you?”

“I can see you,” the voice said. “Walk backwards and go left.”

I saw a door behind me on the left and carried my bags over to it. Above the door was a red light, which I stared at. Nothing happened. I was ready to cry. “Now what?” I called out. Silence. I called out again, even louder.

“What am I supposed to do?!”

“Calm down!” yelled a cheerful soldier walking by on an upper level above me. He was finishing a conversation on his walkie-talkie, and put up his hand for me to wait. I glared at him. “Go there,” he pointed to another door near the one I was standing at, and began to walk away.

“No, please!” I blurted out, forgetting IWPS’s policy of not pleading with soldiers. “You’re the first human face I’ve seen and I’m starting to lose it.”

He motioned towards the door and promised that if I stood there, the light would eventually turn green. I picked up my bags, approached the door, set them down, and waited. Eventually, the light turned green, this time accompanied by a little buzz that unlatched the full iron door. I expected to find a soldier on the other side, but as the heavy door slammed behind me I found myself in a tiny room with white walls, no windows, and a second iron door. That door eventually buzzed as well, and I struggled to open it as I held my bags, settling to kick one in front of me instead.

The next room had three walls and a double-

paned window with a soldier on the other side. The soldier asked for my ID and I slipped it under the glass. He tried to make small talk and asked me what part of the United States I was from. I told him flatly, “For the first time in my life, a part of me wants to blow someone up.”

He must not have heard me because he let me through to the next tiny windowless room. The next buzzing heavy door led out into the other open-spaced side of the terminal, where I picked up the pace, hoping to get out finally, almost an hour after I’d arrived. No such luck.

One more soldier behind a window beckoned for my passport again. “Where’s your visa?” he asked, not finding the stamped slip of paper issued by Israel when the passport itself is not stamped. I answered truthfully, “They told me at the airport that there were none left and that it would be OK.”

As the words came out, I realized how absurd this sounded, and I kicked myself for falling for it when I’d flown in the week before. How could the airport run out of visa sheets? Wasn’t it more likely that they were deliberately trying to inhibit my travel in Palestinian areas?

It was hard to blame the soldier, since, for all he knew, I’d snuck in over the hills of Jordan. “Whatever,” I sighed. “Call airport security—I promise I’m in the system.”

I knew it would be a while, so I sat down again. I thought I was past the point of anger until I noticed a line of 25 or so Palestinians waiting outside to come in from the other direction, heading back to Tulkarem. Had they been waiting there all this time? Why weren’t they being processed? I asked the guard holding my passport and he said he’d tend to them after I left.



Palestinians wait to show their IDs and be searched at Einab terminal on their way home from work. —Photo by Anna Baltzer

It was one thing to feel frustrated and humiliated, but another to know that my ordeal had held up dozens of Palestinians from getting back to their homes and families. "Wait," I said. "Are you telling me that in your fancy new facility you can't process people coming in two directions? Don't let the problem with me delay these people any longer."

He told me not to worry, that the Palestinians were used to waiting. This made me even more upset. I insisted that I would rather wait longer myself, and eventually he beckoned the group forward. I marveled as they waited patiently and yet somehow not submissively, beacons of dignity next to my defeated and angry presence. I took out my camera and took a few photos. Within seconds, a guard appeared next to me—in person, nothing but air between us!—and said sternly, "Come with me."

The guard picked up my bags and I followed him back towards the section of the terminal from which I had just come. We passed through the windowless rooms and into a new room with crates on the floor. From there, the guard opened another, even heavier iron door, and motioned for me to pass ahead of him. Expecting the guard to follow me in, I turned and instead found him placing my bags into the crates. Realizing that soldiers were going to go through my bags, I expressed my preference to be present during the search to ensure that nothing would be damaged or stolen. "That's not possible," the guard said flatly, and the door slammed shut between me and my belongings.

I banged the door with frustration, realizing that all my contact information for Palestinian organizers and friends was still on my computer. I knew that implicating any Palestinians in resistance work could make them a target. It occurred to me that I still had my phone in my pocket and I quickly called my friend Kobi, an Israeli activist. I told him where I was and asked if he might call Machsom Watch—a group of Israeli women who monitor abuses at checkpoints—on my behalf. He said he'd do what he could and we hung up.

I looked around the room. It was empty except for a chair and an empty crate on the floor. There were no other doors, but there was a two-paned window with a soldier watching me from the other side of it. Eventually, he walked out of view and another soldier appeared, a young woman. She spoke into an

intercom so that I could hear her through the window. "Please take off your clothes and put them in the container on the floor."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Once they had, I looked the soldier straight in the eyes, and I began to undress. I removed each piece of clothing slowly, not once taking my eyes off hers. I watched her with a look of hurt, not anger. I wanted her to see that she was not just searching me—she was humiliating me. Several times she looked away. When I was down to my underwear, the soldier stopped me; she said that was enough. A part of me wished that she hadn't. Perhaps if I were completely naked, she would more likely recognize the extent of my humiliation and her role in it.

The iron door behind me buzzed and the soldier told me to place the crate containing my clothes and phone into the room where I had last seen the guard. My other belongings were long since gone, and I could hear soldiers in the next room going through them. When I got back to the room, the soldier in the window was gone. I sat down on the chair and waited. The soldiers next door were chatting and laughing. I imagined them examining my personal photographs and letters. I was too upset to sit still. I stood up and started pacing back and forth in the small room. I had to do something—anything—to express my emotions. If I could hear them, then they could hear me. I began to sing.

I sang an old song that I'd learned at summer camp as a child. Its words were meaningless, but I sang it at the top of my lungs. Within seconds, the female soldier was at the window, looking very alarmed. I waved. I sang that stupid song until my voice hurt. It felt good to sing—I felt empowered. It was easier to act like a crazy person than a prisoner. If I was unpredictable, then they had lost the power to control me.

Half an hour passed. Or was it an hour? My energy had worn off and I sat down miserably on the chair. I was so tired. The soldiers were gone from the next room now. What was taking them so long? It was cold in the room, and I had nothing to cover myself with. I began to shiver and rock back and forth on the chair. I had no more energy to yell. I began to cry. I cried for a long time. Eventually, the female soldier appeared in the window. I could tell she felt bad for me. I looked away. The door buzzed and she

instructed me to open it. On the other side was a jacket and a cup of water. I put on the jacket and drank the water to soothe my throat, but I was unimpressed. I didn't want a jacket or water. I wanted my freedom to leave. I wanted my dignity back.

Time passed. I stopped looking at the soldiers and talking to them. I stopped thinking of ways to pass the time or express myself. I didn't even feel like myself anymore. I felt empty, defeated. I just sat and waited, with a feeling of profound loneliness. I remembered all the checkpoints and terminals I had photographed and written about and read about. None had prepared me for the experience of being held at one myself.

After what felt like an eternity, the iron door buzzed and I opened it to find all my clothes and bags in a large pile brimming over the tops of the containers. The soldiers had emptied every single item separately into the crates. The papers from my notebook were strewn about loosely. Each piece of embroidery had been removed from its protective wrapper and crumpled into a pile. A can of tuna had been opened and left amidst the hand-sewn garments. Even the boxes of Turkish delight—a soft sticky candy covered with powdered sugar, which I'd brought for some Israeli activists in Tel Aviv—had been opened and rummaged through.

The only thing stronger than my anger was my desire to leave. I sat down miserably and folded everything back into my bags. I was crying uncontrollably, but I bit my tongue each time I was tempted to speak. When I was dressed and ready, I stood up, collected myself, and tried to open the door. It was locked.

"The door's still locked," I informed the soldier watching through the window.

"Yes, please wait a little longer."

"Why?" I asked, incredulously. "You saw everything I have. You know I'm not a security threat, and surely you know by now that I have a visa."

"I'm sorry but you're going to have to wait," she said.

I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I lost it. I opened up my bags and took out what was left of my canned tuna. With my fingers, I began to spread the oily fish all over the window.

"What are you doing?" asked the soldier, alarmed.

"You don't respect my stuff, I don't respect yours," I answered.

Next, I opened a box of Turkish delight. "I'm not going to stop until you let me out," I announced as I began mashing the gummy cubes into the hinges of

the iron door. I took out a black marker and began to write "Free Palestine" in large letters on the wall.

"OK, OK," said the soldier's voice over the intercom. "You can go now." The door buzzed.

I gathered my bags and walked out. A soldier was waiting for me on the other side. He gave me my passport and

said I was free to leave. I called Kobi as soon as I was outside. He said it was the U.S. Consulate that had helped get me released. The army claimed they were holding me because of the photographs I had taken inside the terminal. Interestingly, they hadn't bothered to delete the images from my camera when they had searched my bags.

I told Kobi what had happened to me and what I had done. I felt as if I had lost a part of myself inside that terminal as I had slowly lost control. Kobi reminded me that even the option of losing control was a sign of privilege—Palestinians who behaved



Zatara checkpoint was redesigned to provide separate lanes for Jewish settlers (left lane, yellow-plated cars) and non-Jews (right, white- and green-plated cars).—Photo by Anna Baltzer

as I had would not likely have been freed. I tried to imagine what it would be like to endure such an invasive screening every day of my life.

Kobi told me a story about his Palestinian friend, Sara, whom he'd met in Maryland. Sara would frequently travel back and forth between her home in Palestine and the United States, where she was studying. Each time she returned to Palestine, she was able to walk right through the checkpoints. She had enough confidence to just assert her will and go through, simply by the fact that she was used to being treated like a person. And each time, after a few months in Palestine, she would lose that ability.

In just a few hours I had gone from empowerment to craziness to submission to destructiveness. What would I become after months of such treatment? What about a lifetime of the even worse treatment that Palestinians experience? Everyone talks about the theft of Palestinians' land and resources. What about the theft of their time? What about the theft of their dignity?

If I had known that getting through Einab junction would be such an ordeal, I could have reached Tel Aviv via another route, one that is much longer but involves no terminals. In fact, there are alternatives to almost every route going anywhere in the West Bank. If Hessa had known it would take so long to pass through Deir Ballut checkpoint, she could have taken a different road to Ramallah, one that is much longer and bumpier but has no checkpoint, only a roadblock where an ambulance might have met her in time to save her babies. Had Dawud and his wife known their son would die waiting at Atara checkpoint, they could have carried him across the hills into Ramallah. If Jaber had known he would be held for ten hours at Huwwara checkpoint, he could have sprung for an expensive taxi ride to an alternative checkpoint ten miles north of Nablus that is scarcely monitored at all. The whole trip north and then around again would have cost him several hours and paychecks, but he could have exited the city with relative certainty.

No one who has personal experience with checkpoints could believe that they exist for the security of Israel. Anyone who's spent time in the West Bank knows that if you're desperate and you have enough money, you can get anywhere. There is always an alternative road, even into Israel, even with

the Wall, which is full of holes so as not to hinder settlers commuting to Israel.

I once stayed with a woman near Bethlehem who wakes up every morning at 3 a.m. to get to work by 6 a.m. at a place fifteen minutes away. The sole income-earner in a family of six, she has worked for several years as a nurse in West Jerusalem, illegally because people with her type of ID aren't legally allowed to go to Jerusalem. Every morning and afternoon she takes an elaborate roundabout route to and from work that involves switching vehicles, walking a long time, and changing the shape of her headscarf at one point to make herself look like a religious settler. The commute is absurd and costs her 40% of her income, but it's reliable. Again, *anyone* who wants to get from the West Bank into Israel can.

The army surely knows about all the alternative routes, so why do they bother installing and manning checkpoints and terminals? Checkpoints and terminals don't mean increased security for Israel. For Palestinians they mean more difficulty in getting from place to place. They mean longer distances that Palestinian goods have to travel to reach vendors, often rendering the goods more expensive than their Israeli counterparts—accounting for the added manpower and vehicles required to transport the Palestinian products—so that the cheaper Israeli products dominate the market. Checkpoints don't necessarily make going to work and school impossible; often they simply make them more trouble than they're worth.

So what does Israel have to gain from adding extra strain and stress to Palestinians' daily lives and accelerating the breakdown of Palestinian society?

The Inevitability of Zionism

The motivation behind Israel's mobility restrictions and other Occupation policies is made clear to me every day in the West Bank when strangers approach me desperate for help getting a visa to Europe or North America. They say they can't take it anymore. First Israel took their land, then their sons, and now their dignity. It isn't that Israel wants to harm Palestinians; it simply wants the Palestinians to leave. Israel is the first to admit that the "demographic problem" of too many non-Jews in an exclusively Jewish state threatens Israel more than



Non-violent resistance takes many forms. Here, a Palestinian boy builds a roadblock with rocks and wire hoping to deter the Israeli army from invading his village during the night.—Photo by Anna Baltzer

any suicide bomber ever could. The more insufferable daily life in Palestine becomes, the more Palestinians will leave “voluntarily,” and the fewer non-Jews will be left in Israel and the lands it occupies and gradually annexes with the Wall.

Long after I began working in the West Bank, I still clung to the idea of Zionism. I thought: Israel good; Occupation bad. I felt there must be some way of reconciling a Jewish state with the needs and rights of everyone in the region, only this could not happen with the Occupation in place. I felt institutions like checkpoints and terminals were a threat to Palestinians *and* to the Zionist dream.

With time, I have come to see that Israel’s Occupation policies are not a perversion of Zionism—they are a predictable symptom, even an inevitability of it. The exclusivist framework of an ethnically Jewish state creates a dilemma that has haunted Israel since its inception: How can you have a democratic Jewish state in a place where the majority of people with legal claim to the land are not Jewish? There are only so many possible solutions: there’s mass transfer (as was done successfully in 1948 and is currently advocated by Israeli Minister of Strategic Threats Avigdor Lieberman), there’s mass imprisonment (more than 10,000 Palestinians are currently being held in Israeli jails), there’s genocide, and there is apartheid. The

more humane alternative of Israel becoming a state of its citizens is not even on the bargaining table—yet.

I’m still somewhat surprised by how long it took for me to come out against Zionism. I felt guilty at first, as if my criticism was somehow an insult to my grandparents, great uncles, aunts, and cousins who had perished during the Nazi Holocaust. With time, I realized that old wounds were blinding me into condoning new mistakes. There was—and still is—no reasonable justification for reserving a country for people of one religion or ethnicity—many of whom, like

me, although born with the privilege, have never needed it—while millions of people from another background with legal and historical claim to the land suffer desperately next door.

Once I had acknowledged my opposition to Zionism, I was able to expand my documentation to areas outside of the Occupied Territories, including the Negev and other areas where Palestinians with Israeli citizenship live as second-class citizens. I saw that forced expulsions, house demolitions, and land confiscation were happening on both sides of the Green Line. I realized how crucial it was to shift from an anti-Occupation to an anti-Zionist framework, in order to address the root of the issue and all of its current manifestations.

The Question Most Asked

After my first five months with IWPS, I felt ready to write and speak publicly about what I had seen and learned in Palestine. I had never considered myself a writer, public speaker, or photographer before, but witnessing the Occupation has a way of turning almost anyone into a journalist. The stories and photographs that I was sending home were so well-received that I was advised to merge them into a book, which I called *Witness in Palestine: Journal of a Jewish American Woman in the Occupied Territories*. Writing a book required a larger investment of time,

effort, and money than I had imagined, but finally, after months of grueling work, the first edition of *Witness* was published by Paradigm Publishers of Boulder, Colorado in early 2006.

Shortly before *Witness* was released, I sent letters to anti-Occupation organizations and other peace groups listed online from around the country, explaining that I was prepared to share my experiences with any audience that would listen. I had borrowed a car and was driving around the country, ready to stop in any city where I was invited. Without a reputation or experience to hold me up, I hadn't expected more than a few dozen responses—I received hundreds. Within weeks, I was planning an itinerary fit for any rock star, and in February of 2006, I set off on a 16,000-mile journey around the United States.

I was invited to speak at dozens of universities, churches, and high schools, as well as various middle schools, bookstores, libraries, community centers, cafes, and personal homes. I was once hosted by a prisoners' creative writing class in Iowa. Everywhere I went, I gave some variation of a presentation I had put together called "Life in Occupied Palestine: Eyewitness Stories & Photos."

At first, I was quite nervous in front of audiences. I was no expert in politics or history and I was sure that people opposing my work would eat me alive with their tough questions, making me look foolish and undermining my message. I had never been much of a debater, plus there were several aspects of my understanding of the conflict that I was still piecing together.

I quickly realized, however, that there was one thing on which I *was* an expert: my own experience. I stuck to what I knew and did not profess to know more than I did. I simply showed photos and maps and explained what I had seen. People could call me a liar, but it's difficult to argue with photographs. It was very effective.

Of course, there were still many people who came to undermine my talk, but they mostly stuck to name-calling and repeating myths about history, since it was difficult to refute the current reality that I was presenting through firsthand stories and pictures. If anything, the presence of opposition was educational for the audience.

If the opposition began before the presentation,

it was great publicity. At my presentation at the University of Southern Indiana at Evansville, Zionist groups plastered the campus with provocative criticism several days before I arrived. They protested my arrival in the school newspaper, and picketed outside the event. More than 200 students showed up at the talk, many of them just curious what all the fuss was about. Local radio and television stations were also anxious to broadcast the controversy.

Occasionally angry audience members were so disruptive that I was unable to continue speaking. On two occasions, organizers called the police to have hecklers physically escorted out. In every other case, however, the opposition was manageable and even polite. I felt a kind of empathy with the protesters. It took courage to come and offer an alternative message, knowing that most people in the room would likely disagree. If I expected my nonviolent protests to be heard in Palestine, I would listen to the nonviolent protests by my opposition. I also respected them for feeling passionately about the subject and speaking their minds. To me, this was at least preferable to indifference.

Of course, as at the terminal at Einab junction, I received the "light" brand of harassment. Hecklers called me "young and naïve," or "brainwashed by Arabs," but never a "terrorist." As a young, white, Jewish American, even the most hostile audience member assumed I was well-intentioned. On the other hand, Arab or Muslim Americans giving the same talk that I gave would immediately be branded as anti-Semites and terrorists, and might find themselves in trouble with the FBI if not the recipients of outright death threats.

Apart from the modest opposition, I was quite well-received in every city I visited. My presentations were often packed and I received countless standing ovations and invitations to return. But something about all the applause made me uncomfortable. It struck me that it was somehow easier for people to hear the truth from a young Jewish American Ivy League graduate, rather than from the victims themselves. I was saying what Palestinians had been saying for 60 years, but few had listened to them. I encouraged audiences to reach out to Palestinians in their communities, the real experts on this issue.

That said, I took my success as a very good sign. More and more Americans seemed ready to challenge traditional perceptions of the conflict. I found this particularly true in the Midwest and the South, where many had never heard an alternative perspective, but were open to considering one if it was presented. Realizing the injustices previously unknown to them, they were often enthusiastic about taking action, particularly through their churches.

My audiences in the Northeast were more polarized, often composed entirely of those already in agreement with my message and those who had come to undermine it. It was exciting to be in anti-Occupation mobilization centers such as Boston, New York, and Washington DC, but I was less of a novelty and my audiences were often smaller and more set in their opinions.

Everywhere I presented, people were curious if I was giving my presentation at synagogues. They wanted to know if I was bringing the message to Jewish American communities. I had sent a number of outreach letters to synagogues, but only one had responded positively: Mishkan Shalom temple near Philadelphia. Although I had been welcomed by Jewish anti-Occupation groups and Mishkan, interest from mainstream Jewish communities in the U.S. had been virtually nonexistent. This had been a great disappointment to me, as my initial target audience had been Jewish Americans like myself.

With time I started to question my disproportionate focus on Jewish Americans. Was that really where change would come from? I was reminded of the famous words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Why were people so concerned with convincing the minority of Americans who were least likely to change their minds, often the very people sending additional contributions in support of Israel or the settlers? Did I really expect people who were actively supporting and thereby perpetuating Israel's actions to be the ones to realize the error of their ways and bestow freedom upon the Palestinians? Why wasn't I focusing on mobilizing Arab and Muslim Americans and their sympathizers? What about other people of color, non-Arab minorities in the U.S. who are also familiar with ethnic discrimination and the strategies required to fight it?

I started focusing on groups that I thought had a reasonable chance of being moved to take action against the Occupation. These included average Americans, who I assumed might have an initial pro-Israel bias because of a similar bias in the media, but not so much that they would not be open to anything else. In my presentation, I outlined Israel's Occupation policies as well as the everyday Palestinian-led nonviolent resistance to the Occupation. The latter was a response to questions I'd heard too many times to count: "Why are Palestinians always blowing themselves up? Why can't they learn to use *non-violent* resistance?"

Within hours of arriving in the West Bank, it had become clear to me that Palestinians do use nonviolent resistance. In fact, they use it constantly – almost every moment of every day – which I tried to convey in my presentation.

For many Palestinians, simply staying in their homes on their land and not emigrating is resistance. Farmers walk miles to harvest their trees because the old Palestinian roads have been demolished, blocked, or paved over with settler roads that Palestinians are not allowed to use. The farmers persist because they refuse to give up their right to go to their land – their own form of nonviolent resistance.

Nonviolent resistance is everywhere in Palestine: Children wait for hours at checkpoints on the way to and from school every day because they are determined to get an education despite the obstacles. Palestinians and Israelis camp out together as partners for peace in spite of widespread attempts to turn the war into one of Jews versus Muslims. A movement leader returns from prison after 13 and a half years and goes back to the nonviolent resistance for which he was arrested. An old woman, armed with only her voice and determination, confronts a bulldozer uprooting her trees and the fourth strongest military in the world protecting it. A shepherd grazes her sheep despite threats of poison and settler attacks. A young boy constructs a roadblock all by himself with rocks and wire in an attempt to prevent army jeeps from entering his village that night. Students paint murals on the Wall and young children dig tunnels to pass under it. I tried to make clear in my talks what had become utterly clear to me during my eight months in the West Bank: Palestinians are not strangers to nonviolent resistance; they are

champions of it.

People who came to my talks—even those with no previous knowledge of the situation—were outraged when they learned the details of Israel's Occupation policies, and moved—sometimes to tears—by the resilience and nonviolent resistance of the Palestinian people. After each talk, I wondered how people so visibly affected by what they had just seen could simply return to their daily lives rather than drop everything and dedicate themselves to ending injustice. I had to remind myself of how long it had

taken me to let another perspective in, let alone to speak out about it. I remembered the doubt with which I had first listened to the stories of my friends in Lebanon. I remembered the dramatic difference between hearing about the Occupation and witnessing it myself. I recalled the even greater shock of experiencing some aspect of the Occupation myself at the terminal at Einab. I reminded myself how long it had taken me to finally speak out.

I could not expect audience members to register the gravity of the situation nor to transform knowledge into action any more quickly than I had. I saw my role as sharing what I had seen and hopefully helping each individual along his or her path towards understanding and, eventually, action, wherever he or she happened to be at the time.

In addition to more than 30 states across the U.S., I also presented abroad in Europe and in the Near East. I saw firsthand that the movement to end the Occupation is developing not just in Palestine and the United States, but in many places around the world. The tour was an incredible opportunity to tap into the U.S. and international movements, and I am more optimistic than ever that an end to the Occupation is inevitable. My optimism comes not only from

experience doing international advocacy work, but also from solidarity work on the ground in Palestine. Sustained grassroots nonviolent resistance in Palestine has succeeded in getting the route of Israel's Apartheid Wall changed, in raising public awareness around the world about the Occupation, and, most importantly, in ensuring that Israel's policies aimed at encouraging Palestinian mass emigration have remained largely unsuccessful.

Palestinians are the first to tell me that although international solidarity work on the ground in Palestine is useful and appreciated, the most important thing internationals can do is work for justice in Palestine from our own countries. I did not think advocacy work in the U.S. could be sustainable until my tour proved me wrong. Although I required no fees for presentations, hosts and audience members were generous and the first 2,000

copies of *Witness* sold out within the year. The second edition is due to come out in August of 2007 in time for my next tour. The limiting factor is no longer money—it's time.

I will continue to write and present as long as I can. Not only do I love what I do, but it is exciting to do this work during a time when perceptions of Palestine are changing in the United States. I feel particularly lucky to have a job in which no matter how much I read, write, and experience, I never seem to stop learning. ▲



Palestinian women gather to demonstrate against the occupation. Israeli peace activists frequently join with Palestinians in these non-violent expressions of resistance.—
Photo by Anna Baltzer

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AMEU	Burning Issues	2007	439	\$16.95	\$12.50	The most relevant <i>Link</i> issues from the past 40 years.
Armstrong, K.	Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths	1999	474	\$17.50	\$16.50	Well written, critically acclaimed history.
Baltzer, A.	Witness in Palestine	2007	400	\$25.00	\$19.95	By the author of this issue of <i>The Link</i> .
Bamford, J.	A Pretext for War	2004	420	\$26.95	\$19.50	How the White House abused US intelligence agencies.
Baroud, R.	The Second Palestinian Intifada	2006	216	\$18.00	\$16.50	Palestinians respond to ethnocide against them.
Beit-Hallahmi, B.	Original Sins	1993	227	\$19.95	\$12.50	Reflections on Zionism and Israel.
Bennis, P.	Understanding the Pal.-Israeli Conflict	2007	196	\$10.00	\$9.00	Excellent primer.
Burge, G.	What Land? Whose Promise?	2003	286	\$23.00	\$17.50	What Christians aren't told about Israel & Palestinians.
Carter, J.	Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid	2006	265	\$27.00	\$19.50	A critical analysis of Israel's occupation.
Chacour, E.	Blood Brothers	2003	240	\$12.95	\$10.95	Updated ed. with introduction by James Baker III.
Chapman, C.	Whose Promised Land	2002	329	\$17.99	\$12.75	Zionism and role of biblical promise; updated edition.
Chapman, C.	Whose Holy City?	2004	253	\$15.99	\$12.50	Jerusalem and the future of Middle East peace.
Chomsky, N.	The Fateful Triangle	1999	578	\$22.00	\$16.95	United States, Israel, and the Palestinians.
Cook, J.	Blood and Religion	2006	222	\$18.00	\$16.50	Can Israel be both a Jewish and a democratic state?.
Cooley, J.	An Alliance Against Babylon	2005	258	\$26.95	\$17.95	Traces the Israeli factor in the US-led invasion of Iraq.
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Eddy, W.	F.D.R. Meets Ibn Saud	2005	46	\$25.00	\$20.00	A reprint of the 1954 edition; limited number available.
Ennes, J.	Assault on the Liberty	2002	301	\$30.00	\$25.00	Updated edition.
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Hroub, K.	Hamas: A Beginner's Guide	2006	170	\$18.95	\$14.50	Good introductory history.
Jayyusi, S.	Anthology	1996	754	\$22.00	\$17.50	Collection of modern Palestinian literature.
Karmi, G.	In Search of Fatima	2002	288	\$26.00	\$15.00	Poignant memory of Palestinian exile.
Khalidi, R.	The Iron Cage	2006	281	\$24.95	\$19.95	Why Palestinians don't have a state.
Khalidi, R.	Resurrecting Empire	2004	223	\$23.00	\$17.95	Analysis of the US role in the Middle East.
Laird, E.	A Little Piece of Ground	2006	216	\$9.95	\$8.50	A 12-yr.-old soccer-loving Pal. in occupied Ramallah.
Maalouf, A	The Crusades through Arab Eyes	1984	293	\$16.00	\$13.95	The event that shapes Arab and Muslim history.
Masalha, N.	Expulsion of the Palestinians	1993	235	\$11.95	\$9.50	Examines Zionist notion of "Transfer;" 1882-1948.
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Nawwab, N.	The Unfurling	2004	118	\$14.95	\$10.95	Saudi poet reflects on her country.
Neff, D.	Warriors Against Israel	1988	372	\$19.95	\$7.00	How Israel won the battle to become US's ally.
Pappe, I.	The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine	2006	320	\$27.50	\$19.95	Author is Senior Lecturer at Haifa University.
Petersen, E.	Israel and Palestine	2003	246	\$16.00	\$10.00	Well organized data for research and study projects.
Prior, M.	Zionism and the state of Israel	1999	304	\$75.00	\$59.50	A moral inquiry.
Prior, M. ed.	Speaking the Truth	2005	254	\$17.95	\$13.50	Ilan Pappé et al. on Zionism, Israel, and Palestine.
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- AJPME, **Imagine ...** (2005, DVD, 15 minutes). Palestinian education under Israeli occupation. Excellent for discussion groups. **AMEU: \$15.00.**
- ATFP, **Palestine-Israel 101.** (2005, 2 DVDs, 60-min. each). Surveys the conflict and suggests possible resolutions. **AMEU: \$20.00** for the set of two.
- Baltzer, Anna, **Life in Occupied Palestine** (2006, DVD, 61 minutes). Anna is the granddaughter of a Holocaust refugee. This is her powerful account of the occupation. **AMEU: \$15.00.**
- Common Ground, **The Shape of the Future** (2005, DVD, 100 minutes). TV documentary examines final status issues of security, Jerusalem, refugees and settlements. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- DMZ, **People and the Land** (2007 updated version of 1997 film, 57 minutes). This is the controversial documentary by Tom Hayes that appeared on over 40 PBS stations. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- FMEP, **Searching for Peace in the Middle East** (2006, DVD, 30 minutes). A film by Landrum Bolling. **AMEU: \$10.00.**
- Jordan Sandra, **Dispatches: The Killing Zone** (2003, DVD, 50 minutes). British correspondent reports on violence by Israeli forces against international aid workers and reporters in the Gaza Strip. Includes the bulldozer killing of Rachel Corrie. Widely shown on British TV, this powerful documentary has been aired on only a few U.S. public access channels. **AMEU: \$10.00.**
- Mennonite Central Committee, **Children of the Nabkah** (2005, DVD, 26 minutes). Why Palestinian refugees must be part of any peace settlement. Comes with useful study guide. **AMEU: \$15.00.**
- Munayyer, F. & H., **Palestinian Costumes and Embroidery: A Precious Legacy** (1990, VHS, 38 minutes). Rare collection of Palestinian dresses modeled against background of Palestinian music, with commentary tracing the designs back to Canaanite times. List: \$50.00. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
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