

Violence Against Palestinian Women

A Jewish Response

BY LILITH

As someone who identifies as both a cultural and spiritual Jew, I often reflect on my early Jewish/Zionist education. As a child, I was taught that the Israeli flag symbolizes two very important concepts: the Star of David celebrates the victory of David against Goliath—the weak against the strong; the two blue horizontal stripes are a reference to the tallit, the ritual prayer shawl worn traditionally by Jewish men.

It appears to me now, in retrospect, that the very purpose of flags is to misrepresent the insidious power relationships inherent in the nature of the nation state. Flags make political statements and deceptive comparisons, and distort reality. The cherished Canadian maple leaf, for example, makes invisible the many trees clear-cut by multinational corporations and the subsequent destruction of aboriginal lands.

Today, the Star of David is a symbol of oppression to Palestinians. It flies above their homes as the occupying force stands, gun in hand, on their rooftops. The tallit is now associated with the vigilante settlers involved in groups like Gush Emunim (Block of the Faithful) and Kach (political party of the Jewish Defense League), which, citing biblical references to messianic redemption, advocates a “transfer” of the Palestinian population to Jordan.

And what on earth does the Star of David and the tallit have to do with violence against Palestinian women? They are symbols of Judaism, my Judaism, used and abused to justify hatred against another people. The flag of Israel does not represent me.

At the egalitarian synagogue that I sometimes attend, I also wear a prayer shawl. During the Sabbath morning prayers, there is a particular point during which each congregant lifts up their tallit to cover and shelter their neighbour. It is a gesture of spiritual communion, a meaningful Judaism. It is this aspect of the tallit that I wish to take with me into the world.

As Jews, we often perceive of violence against women as a social phenomenon occurring outside our own communities. Jewish men, we insist, are neither batterers nor rapists. This ignorance continues despite reports from our own social service agencies and demands for assistance from Jewish victims of violence.

Recently, I submitted an article of my experiences as an incest survivor to a mainstream Jewish publication. The editor stated that although the piece itself was well written, the subject under discussion, i.e. incest, was not relevant to the readers of his newspaper. Sexual abuse, he claimed was a rare phenomenon in the Jewish community.

This “not in my house” myth continues to make invisible the

physical, emotional and sexual abuse of Jewish women. This silence pervades the synagogues, the auxiliary “sisterhoods,” and certainly the public discourse of North American Jewish life. Fighting the scourge of anti-semitism is considered respectable work. Advocating on behalf of the legal rights of orthodox battered women, for example, is considered “divisive.”

The “not in my house” myth is also used to deny the numerous social ills present in Israeli society. North American tourists are often horrified to discover Jewish murderers in jail, Jewish drug addicts in detox centres and Jewish homeless begging in the central bus station in Tel Aviv. Some North American Jews of European descent blame these less desirable aspects of Israeli life on the “oriental” influence. “Those shvartzes are the hookers” one Ashkenazi woman told me, in reference to some Moroccan Jewish women standing on a street corner. The woman commenting did not seem to notice their white-skinned male clientele.¹

If we, as Jews, experience such difficulty admitting the abuse we perpetrate against one another, how much more difficult is it then to acknowledge the horrors we perpetrate against the Palestinian people. “Violence against women”² is not just about “out there” but about “in here”³ — in our homes, in our synagogues and Hebrew schools, and in the state we established forty-three years ago.

The current proposed legislation formulated by the Likud and Agudath Yisrael (two right-wing political parties), to ban abortion is yet another example of the attempts of the Israeli government to control the bodies of Israeli women. It is well known that if legal abortions are not permitted, illegal abortions will increase, and many women may die as a result.

Stricter adherence to religion is only one of a number of motivating factors operating in favour of the abortion bill. The “War of Demographics” as it is referred to in Israel, objectifies Jewish women as the creators and procreators of the Israeli soldier. A poster produced by an Israeli feminist group shortly after the invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, portrays on one side, rows of pregnant women attached to machines and on the other, rows of young boys shown as infant soldiers. The accompanying quote by Bertolt Brecht states: “You shall bear us cannon fodder; so you are commanded by nature, and it is also the law.”

Despite the massive influx of Russian Jewish immigrants, Palestinians still comprise over 26 per cent of the total Israeli population and 98 per cent of the population living in the West Bank and Gaza. Some regions within the pre-1967 borders also have heavy concentrations of Palestinians. In fact, just recently, and announcement was made in the *Jerusalem Post* indicating that Jews had finally become a majority of the population in

Galilee! As a result of these demographic considerations, Israeli women have become a political pawn in the hands of their own government. Nonetheless, if Jewish women suffer oppression as a result of their gender, Palestinian women suffer doubly.

Feminist researcher Nahla Abdo noted in a recent article, ("Women of the Intifada: Gender, Class and National Liberation" in *Race & Class*, 32, 4, 1991) that Palestinian women have a significantly higher rate of Caesarean births than do Israeli women. She attributes this partly to the government's desire to curtail the number of Palestinian children being born. Having Caesarean births limits a mother to a maximum of three children. While there are no statistics available on the number of children born to an average Palestinian family, one can safely assume that it is more than three.

Palestinian women living in the West Bank and Gaza have been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. They have been subjected to numerous forms of harassment and repression including but not limited to the following:

1) Blanket Curfews — If the military governor of the West Bank or Gaza decides that there is a "security risk," he can issue a blanket curfew, which means that all inhabitants are required, without exception, to remain within their homes 24 hours per day until further notice. Most recently, these curfews were implemented during the Gulf War.

Unfortunately, emergencies occur. Women have children, individuals run out of food, become ill. Palestinians run great risks during such curfews in their attempts to obtain medical supplies and food. Of course, this is not a new tool of repression. In 1956, the Kfar Kassem massacre took place when 49 Palestinians were murdered while returning from work, unaware that a curfew had been instituted.

2) House Arrest — Palestinian organizers are forbidden to leave their homes and are required to report to the local military office at regular intervals. People can live under house arrest for many years without having committed any crime. This is, of course, an attempt to deactivate prominent members of the Palestinian leadership.

One woman, Zahera Kamal, was under house arrest intermittently for over four years. Her "crime" consisted of her in-

volvement in the various women's organizations. It was only due to international political pressure that Zahera was finally released from house arrest.

3) Administrative Detention — Laws regarding administrative detention were initially created by the British during the Mandate (1917-1948). These laws allowed them to detain Jewish terrorists, i.e. Zionist activists, without having to actually charge them with a particular crime. Ironically, these same laws are now being used to detain Palestinians without charges.

4) Forced Deportations — Palestinians convicted of "serious" crimes can be deported upon conviction. From 9 December 1987, the beginning of the Intifada, through 30 April 1991, 62 people have been expelled under the emergency defense regulations; 111,529 have been injured and 942 people have been killed.⁴

5) University Closures — Universities are perceived as centres of incitement by the military government and therefore have been opened and then closed rapidly. Gaza University is the one post secondary institution still functioning regularly. Interestingly it is also an Islamic stronghold, and is supported primarily by Hamas, the Islamic Fundamentalist Party.

Of course, Palestinians who wish to pursue academic work in other than a religious setting are forced to go abroad to continue their studies or forego any opportunity for further education.

6) Collective Punishment — If a member of a particular family has been convicted of any crime, the Israeli military officials can and do destroy their home. Unlike North America, where there are numerous single-person dwellings, Palestinians live in large extended multiple-family units. Therefore, when the home of a convicted "criminal" is destroyed, it is most often also the home of her mother, father, sisters, cousins, grandparents, etc.

7) Expropriation of Lands — When Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, it attempted to expropriate land as soon as possible. Any individual who was not at home during the war in 1967, for whatever reason, was deemed to be "landless." Their property was subsequently determined to be owned by "absentee landlords" and was turned over to the Jewish National Fund to be cultivated by Jews.

This expropriation of land continues today in various forms. Farmers, for ex-

ample, are not allowed to dig new wells without a special license. As a result, their soil is irrigated inadequately and the quality of their agricultural produce suffers. In total, 369,275 dunams (4 miles equals 1 dunam) have been confiscated since the beginning of the Intifada.

Some may claim that these effects of colonialism are suffered by both Palestinian men and women. Therefore, such a discussion is not properly placed within the context of a feminist journal. On the contrary, feminism must redefine itself to encompass not only the gender-specific realities of North American society, but also the national struggles of colonized women in the so-called "Third World." Given this understanding of feminism, this commitment to the liberation of all women, it is instructive to note the specific ways in which the Israeli state perpetrates violence against Palestinian women.

Because Arab culture focuses almost obsessively on "women's honour," Israeli soldiers often terrorize Palestinian women, harassing them, assaulting them sexually. The soldiers hope that by threatening to rob women of their virginity, the fathers and brothers will discourage their daughters, sisters and wives from being politically active against the Occupation.

In Neve Tirze, the only women's prison in Israel, as well as in Moscobiya (the "Russian Compound"), and Hasharon prison and others, Palestinian women are incarcerated under horrendous conditions. Felicia Langer, formerly a noted lawyer and Israeli activist, details many cases of human rights abuses and torture in her book *An Age of Stones*.

Ms. Langer describes one prisoner: "Zahra has asked me to help her. She waits hours for them (prison guards) to bring her a little water. When she needs the toilet, they say: Use your drinking cup." In another circumstance "Halima" is imprisoned because she asked too many questions about the corpse of her beloved. "They denied her sleep, or washing facilities or a drink. They stubbed out lighted cigarettes on her body. They shut her in a cell swarming with insects and rats. They sent in female soldiers to grind her wounds with salt." In yet a third case, Ms. Langer describes two prisoners having their heads shaved and then numbered.

Because many Jewish women are outraged by these human rights violations and therefore oppose the Occupation,

numerous groups have been organized in solidarity with Palestinians both in Israel and in North America.

In Israel, Palestinian and Israeli feminists have organized the Women's Organization for Political Prisoners. This group supports all political prisoners by mobilizing public opinion, organizing demonstrations, lobbying members of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) and by keeping in close contact with the prisoners' lawyers and families.

Women in Black is another group of Israeli feminists, explicit in their opposition to the Occupation. Each Friday afternoon, they stand vigil in major intersections of various cities, protesting the policies of the Israeli government.

Jewish women in North America support these social change activists by forming solidarity groups. Many of us call ourselves "Jewish Women Against the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza." In Toronto, we stand monthly outside the Israeli consulate, protesting the regressive measures taken against the Palestinian Intifada (uprising) which started in December 1987. As feminists and as Jews, we are committed to fighting violence against women at home and abroad.

¹ The term "shvartzes" is used derogatorily here to describe Jews of colour in Israel. "Ashkenazi" in its current colloquial usage refers to Jews of European origin.

² "Violence Against Women," when used as a term among feminists, typically refers to wife battering, incest and rape, all of which occur with frightening regularity in the context of the family. Physical and sexual abuse do take place within the nuclear family where men continue to wield power over women, and adults continue to exercise control over children. However, it is also important to expand the definition of "violence against women" to include an analysis of colonialism, which reinforces state violence and uses the power of the occupying force against women in particular and deliberate ways.

³ The focus of this article must be perceived in its current context; there is no desire here to suggest that Jewish women are free from the violence of the Israeli state. They certainly are not! Despite equal

rights legislation, Israeli women are still governed by religious law in civil matters. Thus, a woman cannot obtain a divorce without the express permission of her husband. Many battered women leave their assaulting husbands, knowing full well it is unlikely they will ever receive a "get." These women are unable to remarry in Israel. Any children born as a result of a second relationship are considered "mamzerim" (bastards) and, therefore, are also ineligible to be married as Jews.

⁴ Statistics from the Palestine Human Rights Information Centre, Jerusalem, Israel, 1991.

Lilith is a lesbian feminist and long-time activist in support of the Palestinian struggle. Living in her myriad of contradictions, she is also a committed spiritual Jew.

For more information contact: Jewish Women Against the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, P.O. Box 810, Station "P", Toronto, ON M5S 2Z1 Canada, or Women's Organization for Political Prisoners, P.O. Box 31811, Tel Aviv 61318, Israel.

Send donations to: Bank Hapoalim, Branch 532, Account 260643, Tel Aviv 64078, Israel.



Irene Kindness, "She Walks Alone III" (1990). Exhibited in *Healing Images*, Toronto.