Compassionate Resistance

A PERSONAL/POLITICAL JOURNEY TO ISRAEL/PALESTINE

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ON BLOGS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

My 5-year-old daughter Nadia and I spent the last part of the summer of 2005 in Israel and Palestine. I documented some of our experiences in a live on-line journal, known as a blog.[1] A blog is not a substitute for a personal journal, nor is it a political manifesto. It offers space to fuse what is deemed 'personal' with what is 'political'. That's probably why I like it, because over the past twenty-six years, the timeless feminist slogan 'the personal is political' has been central to my transformation. I think that blogs can make an important contribution to conversations among feminists because they can capture complexities and contradictions, as well as document change over time, inspiring original insights that develop into ground-breaking theories.

Blogs, like any other aspect of human communication, reflect the tension between what we reveal and what we conceal. But there is also something quite impersonal about blogs; unlike a personal journal, they are in the public domain. I tried to write my blog with both a general audience and some special people in mind, opting for a clear language that did not require a prior in-depth knowledge of Middle East politics.

In this essay, I critically re-examine some of what I wrote that summer. After explaining what I mean by *compassionate resistance*, I unpack my relationship with my family, community and country of origin. In the essay's central section, I draw on my participation at the international conference of Women in Black in East Jerusalem to discuss alliances and solidarity between women. Last but not least, I reflect on the unique and at times unsettling experience of traveling through a place I used to call *home* with my daughter.

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WHAT IS COMPASSIONATE RESISTANCE?

> There is a will resisting resistance. We inhabit those spaces given up by ghosts we disinherit.
>
> (Lim 1980, cited in Lim 2004: 208)

> Compassion may weaken the will resisting resistance and disinherit the ghosts and fears that scare us into compliance and acceptance of the status quo.
>
> (Sharoni forthcoming)

The term *compassionate resistance* was born a few years ago, in March 2003, after my beloved student and friend Rachel Corrie was crushed to death by an Israeli-operated bulldozer in Rafah, a Palestinian town in the Gaza Strip. Rachel, who went to Rafah with the International Solidarity Movement, was trying to prevent the demolition of the house of her host family.[2] The term emerged as I struggled to reconcile my grief, frustration and anger with the empathy, love and compassion I felt for people who put their bodies on the line to resist oppression.

Because on the surface *compassionate resistance* appears to be a fusion of two contradictory concepts, I have tried to illustrate the organic relationship between compassion and resistance and the transformative potential that lies in blending the two concepts and utilizing them to inspire social and political struggles. My definition of resistance involves analysis and targeting of oppressive systems and policies. Compassion entails the expression of empathy, the building of relationships and attention to process.

In many ways the concept of compassionate resistance is a critique of the term 'compassionate listening' that had been employed by liberal Jews in the United States to frame the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.[3]

While both compassionate listening and compassionate resistance have been used to put a human face on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the Compassionate Listening Project, which includes tours to the region, fails to address the structural, systemic issues at the heart of the conflict. By focusing exclusively on individuals whose lives have been shaped, and who have to a great extent been victimized, by the conflict, the project reinforces the prevailing view that the Palestinian–Israeli conflict involves two parties on an equal playing field. In contrast, compassionate resistance seeks to humanize the conflict without overlooking its history, root causes and the unjust systems that have made it seem intractable. It involves the analysis and targeting of oppressive systems and policies. In the current context of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, one cannot speak about compassion between Palestinian and Israelis without explicit reference to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and to such oppressive practices as the Apartheid Wall, checkpoints and home demolitions. The focus on the people impacted by the conflict cannot be devoid of context; it should involve an analysis of the processes through which people become aware of their position in and relationship to

the conflict and how, if at all, they decide to act as a result. Such an analysis has the potential to highlight avenues for change and transformation that can be pursued by individuals and groups who choose to play an active role in eradicating the systemic causes of injustice.

REFLECTIONS ON A PLACE I USED TO CALL HOME

Nadia and I spent the first few days of our trip with my mom in Nazareth Elit, in the house in which I grew up. Nazareth Elit is a strange place to call home. Established in 1957, it overlooks the Palestinian town of Nazareth – the only Palestinian town that survived the 1948 *al-Nakba* [catastrophe]. Like most towns in Israel, Nazareth Elit was built on confiscated Palestinian land as part of an openly promoted plan to 'Judaise the Galilee' – which would no doubt have been viewed as ethnic cleansing if it had not taken place in Israel.

My family emigrated to Nazareth Elit in 1963 from Romania and we received state assistance to rent and later buy an apartment in a project, in a working-class neighborhood, across the street from the textile and chocolate factories. Most of the neighborhood's residents worked in the factories and continued to socialize with people who spoke the language they used to speak in their country of origin. The neighborhood was divided along racial lines between families that immigrated into Israel from Romania and Hungary (with a few families from Poland and the former Soviet Union) on one side and families from North Africa, mostly Morocco, on the other. I first became aware of racism in kindergarten. There was one kindergarten for both sides of the neighborhood but we were already taught by our parents to stick to our own and warned against mingling with the dark-skinned kids because they were 'dirty' and 'primitive'. The same derogatory terms were used extensively throughout my childhood and adolescence in Nazareth Elit to refer to Palestinian Arabs. Of course, Jews from the Middle East are culturally Arab, as a culture is a composite of a shared history, language, food and music even if political boundaries shape its expressions.

I remember feeling uncomfortable when my mom or my dad used overtly racist comments but I also remember buying into the stereotypes and not going out of my way to befriend the kids on the other side of the neighborhood – they were the 'others'. Marxists would argue that because this was, and still is, a classic working-class neighborhood, an opportunity was missed for class solidarity. This may be true but the Labor Party, which was the ruling party in Israel from its establishment until 1988, managed to co-opt, or more correctly dilute, the values of socialism, using differences between immigrants and Israeli-born citizens and among immigrants themselves to divide and rule. In many ways, Zionism was not a liberation project for many Jews. The version of Zionism that was prevalent in Israel while I was growing up fed my racist socialization.

Nazareth Elit is a great example of the workings of and resistance to a settler-colonial ideology. Many Palestinians who have lived in Nazareth for years still refuse on principle to use the name 'Nazareth Elit', which translates as 'upper Nazareth'. Instead they call it *Hashikun*, which means 'the building', thus refusing to accept the omnipresent sprawling city that has engulfed their beautiful town.

I developed a special relationship with Nazareth only after I completed my mandatory military service in the early 1980s and started working in a hotel in the city, where most other workers were Palestinians who lived in Nazareth. As I began to re-visit my internalized racism and right-leaning political views, I started to gradually overcome my fear of Arab people and culture. At first I hesitated to tell people that I had lived in Nazareth Elit. I moved to Haifa when I came into my own politically, so I didn't have to identify with this Nazareth Elit and its legacy. However, some of the Palestinians I have worked with over the years, especially those who grew up in Nazareth and the neighboring villages, have encouraged me not to hide where I come from, arguing that my story, because it is fairly ordinary, gives them hope.

On a hot afternoon in August 2005, I went with Nadia, my mom and my 9-year-old niece to the shopping mall nearby to buy some things. The mall has become a hangout for many Palestinians from Nazareth and the neighboring villages. Some of these Palestinians now reside in Nazareth Elit (despite serious discrimination in housing, lack of opportunities for schooling in Arabic, etc.). There is a little play-area in the mall and I noticed right away that most of the families there were Palestinian. I could tell that my mom and my niece were a bit reluctant when Nadia asked me if she could go play with the kids and I encouraged her to do so. They seemed even more uncomfortable when I taught Nadia how to introduce herself to the Palestinian kids in Arabic, so they would know her name and could play together. The Palestinian families were clearly unaccustomed to this simple gesture of acknowledgement. My mom and my niece watched with a mixture of curiosity and discomfort when a Palestinian man approached me saying that his wife's name was Nadia and insisting on introducing his Nadia to mine. What stood out for me in this encounter was the fact that Nadia had met Palestinian kids and enjoyed playing with them because I encouraged her. Racism gets internalized because parents choose not to engage in such simple acts of humanity. Perhaps these acts are not so simple in a world where we've all been paralyzed by our fears and de-humanized in the name of security.

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF SOLIDARITY IN PALESTINE AND BEYOND

> We take ourselves seriously only when we go 'beyond' ourselves, valuing not just the plurality of the differences among us but also the massive presence of the Difference that our present planetary history has installed.
>
> (Mohanty 2003: 119)

I designed our summer Middle East trip around my desire to attend the international conference of Women in Black (WIB). I was among the founding members of WIB in Haifa in 1988 and I subsequently wrote my doctoral dissertation and a book on WIB, among other examples of women's organizing against the Israeli occupation. WIB is primarily a vigil of women dressed in black, calling for an end to violence.[4] The conference's theme in 2005 was 'Women Resist Occupation and War'. While the organizers expected between 200 and 300 participants, the number of women pre-registered for the conference reached 650.

The conference included several plenary sessions on such topics as: 'A feminist perspective on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict' and 'Women's global challenges'. There were also several dozen workshops on such specific topics as 'The Apartheid Wall', 'Politics, effects and resistance', 'Settlements and the politics of colonization and transfer' and 'Boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel'. There were more general workshops as well, on militarism, violence and women's health, but I was very pleased to see that the conference organizers did not shy away from providing a forum to discuss and strategize around boycott, divestment and sanctions.

Contrary to my previous experience with/in the Israeli women's peace movement, there was no visible effort by the organizers of the conference to sustain the illusion of balance. The mere fact that the entire conference was held in East Jerusalem, which Palestinians and many in the international community consider an integral part of Palestine, was also very significant as in the past there was an attempt to 'balance' the program and allow participants more or less equal time in both communities and with both women's movements. However, it must be acknowledged that Women in Black as a movement was initiated by women in Israel and most vigils in Israel include mostly Jewish women, with only a few including Palestinian women who hold Israeli citizenship.

This was potentially a solidarity conference. The site of the conference, the outline of the program, the trip to Ramallah to meet with Palestinian women activists and the protest at the Qalandia checkpoint, of which more later, offered clear opportunities for expressions and acts of solidarity. The timing was significant as well, as the official Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip began a day after the conference ended.

Indeed, I heard the word 'solidarity' more during the conference than during the entire past year. In many ways, the frequent use of the term suggests a level of political awareness and commitment that goes beyond the liberal discourse of 'dialogue' and search for middle ground. At the same time, as I have become aware over the years, 'solidarity', like many other terms, is interpreted differently by people, in ways that reflect their own experiences and social locations. More specifically, solidarity in the context of the global women's movement has been defined mostly by those carrying out the act of solidarity rather than by the people whom one is in solidarity with.

I have to say that on one level, I was pleasantly surprised with the conference. Many in the Israeli women's peace movement seem to have reached a level of awareness and sensitivity to the different political and socio-economic realities facing Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women. This awareness was reflected in the program of the conference and the move beyond the discourse of 'dialogue', which presupposes a symmetry between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women. Still, there were very few Palestinian women from the West Bank at the conference. While the dominant Jewish explanation for the conspicuous absence was the Israeli checkpoints, Palestinian colleagues I spoke with offered a more complex explanation: they needed more than a conference at this critical juncture in the struggle against the occupation.

This discussion took me back to the many similar conversations I had had with Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women in 1990, at the height of the first *intifada*. Based on those discussions, I concluded that 'solidarity work is always collaborative, but it must begin with needs of the disenfranchised group rather than those of the more privileged'. Along these lines I stressed that 'the terms of solidarity need to be constantly negotiated', which 'implies that *before* a solidarity initiative is carried out, Israeli-Jewish women must consult with Palestinian women to determine their needs and priorities and their willingness to collaborate on a particular project' (Sharoni 1995: 146–7, emphasis in original). Since hosting an international conference was not a top priority for Palestinian women in 2005, one should not be surprised at their sparse attendance.

There was, however, one act of solidarity that many Palestinian women I spoke with viewed as meaningful: the protest at the Qalandia checkpoint. Even though I have mixed feelings about the overall impact of a one-off show of international solidarity at one of the many dozens of checkpoints, I could see the merit in the action, especially given that Palestinian women enthusiastically endorsed it. It is difficult to determine how many checkpoints exist, as the Israeli Army has been erecting checkpoints arbitrarily throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Most of the information about the checkpoints has come from 'Machsom Watch', an organization of Israeli women founded in 2001. The organization's main activities are observations at the checkpoints, and reporting and documenting random acts of harassment as well as gross violations of human rights.[5]

The Qalandia checkpoint has become notorious for daily acts of humiliation. The action there was closely coordinated with Palestinian women. According to the plan, one group of international women left the hotels early in the morning and crossed the Qalandia checkpoint to meet Palestinian women on the Qalandia side. The rest of the international group, with a large contingent of Israeli-Jewish women, departed Jerusalem later. Israeli women who were not allowed to cross because of their Israeli passports staged a protest in the square, while international women held hands through the crossing, eventually connecting with the group of internationals and Palestinian women who were crossing from the opposite direction.

A group of Palestinian children reacted to our display of solidarity by climbing on a hill and flying kites they made on the spot. My friend Gay, Nadia and I drove twice through the checkpoint in a UN car to take pictures of the action and to pass information from one part of the vigil to the other. I even gave an interview to a Russian television channel about the history of Women in Black and the conference. As far as I could tell, that was the only media present. It appeared that most of the networks had their reporters in Gaza, covering the pullout. But most women captured the action on both video and digital cameras.

The entire action was quite moving, especially when the Palestinian women came through the checkpoint, singing and proudly displaying Palestinian flags. A Palestinian man who passed by the vigil at the square while I was being interviewed looked the reporter in the eye and offered an unsolicited comment, sharing his view of Women in Black: 'These women are Israel's conscience!' I tend to respond to spontaneous statements like this with mixed feelings, amazed at the level of compassion that oppressed people in general, and Palestinians in particular, have for those who witness their suffering and take a stand, no matter how small, to end it.

COMPASSIONATE RESISTANCE AND CATS

In the first blog entry, written after our departure, I commented on the reactions of people around me to the fact that I was traveling to the Middle East at that time and taking my little girl with me. The most common reactions were: 'Aren't you scared?' and 'Please stay safe.' But I also was subjected to such comments as: 'I hope you don't plan to stand in front of a bulldozer!' and 'You are lucky that Nadia's dad lets you take her to those places.' To such comments, I responded by mentioning that there were actually human beings like us, and many kids, living in the places to which we were going. I also noted that I am more scared to drive on a US highway with Nadia than to travel to Israel and Palestine. Since many Americans take their entitlement to safety for granted, I've come to think about safety as an unearned privilege (similar to whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality).

Along the same lines, the fear that clouds people's ideas about the Middle East in general, and Israel/Palestine in particular, is but another example of fear of the 'Other' and as such it does have some racial undertones. Many people (mostly but not exclusively whites) think of unfamiliar far-away places as unsafe and, of course, when it comes to the Middle East, the mainstream media have contributed much to the image that the entire region is a large battlefield and its people are hostile.

Because of the stereotypical, often racist portrayal of Middle Eastern people in the mainstream media and in Hollywood movies, many Americans cannot tell the difference between facts and fictions when it comes to the Middle East. Few are aware that it is US foreign policy that has turned the rich civilizations

of the Middle East into battlegrounds and ignited fear, despair and hatred among some of its citizens. September 11 and the bombings in Spain and in London are tragic reminders that the safety of people in the western world is directly related to the security and living conditions of people in the Middle East. It is naïve, if not stupid and dangerous, for westerners to expect to be safe as long as our leaders are obsessed with maintaining access to cheap oil and other resources that guarantee their political and economic hegemony in the global arena. Finally, safety in the West is merely an illusion as long as the occupation of Iraq and Palestine continue.

Although I have to admit that I was more scared than usual because I traveled with Nadia, my fears were more about taking a 5-year-old on a long trip overseas than about taking her to the Middle East. I saw this trip as an opportunity to begin to share with Nadia the story of the troubled land that used to be my home, with some of the contradictions that she is old enough to understand. But I was also reminded at least once a day that she was only 5 years old. Indeed, one of the most amazing experiences of the trip was the opportunity I had to experience it from Nadia's perspective. Our photo essay on cats offers a glimpse of that unique experience.

Nadia and I had decided at the beginning of the trip to take photos of cats everywhere we went. Nadia told people that she was doing this to be able to share her photos and stories about other cats with our cat, Watan. I told myself that this was the apolitical component of our trip, thus calming the part of me that was a bit uneasy about everything that Nadia was being exposed to at such a young age. So, we took photos of cats and kittens in Nazareth-Elit and Nazareth and East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem and we marveled at the similarities and differences among them and at the fact that no one could tell whether a cat lived in a Palestinian or in a Jewish town. Watching Nadia connect with street cats across the Middle East made me think about compassion and care and how relatively easily kids let themselves share these human emotions with others, with strangers, with street cats.

My bragging about the photo essay on cats as the apolitical aspect of the trip came to an abrupt end the afternoon of our third day in East Jerusalem. While we walked through the Old City, we saw a cat running down the allies. A Palestinian shop owner told us that some Jewish settler kids tied an orange ribbon to the cat's tail (orange was the color that symbolized the refusal of settlers to leave Gaza). Nadia couldn't stop talking about the cat and the next day, as we were making the rounds through the market, she spotted the poor creature, the orange ribbon dangling from her broken tail. A few young Palestinian men had gotten some yogurt and other treats in an attempt to lure the cat to them so they could try and get the ribbon off and relieve some of the pain. The cat seemed pretty scared. She hid in a cosy spot and Nadia talked to her in a soft voice: first in English and then in 'cat language', which Nadia insists she can speak.

When we returned to the hotel and joined the conference participants for dinner, Nadia insisted that we tell the story to everyone. When I asked her

Source: Simona Sharoni, personal archive.

why she wanted people to know, she said 'because it wasn't right and we have to make sure that people know so it doesn't happen again'.

According to one shopkeeper, this inhuman act was not the work of kids but rather an organized action by older settlers. He insisted that they drugged at least a dozen cats and then tied the orange ribbons to them. Whether it was one cat or more, as the shopkeeper remarked, 'those who treat human beings as animals, treat animals even worse'. Somber as it is, this statement offers a more complex analysis of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict than the one prevalent in the mainstream media.

Nadia repeated the shopkeeper's conclusion on many occasions as she told and retold her cat stories. When I took Nadia to Israel and Palestine I was worried about the potential impact of the trip on her relationship to the region and to my family. I wanted her to begin to acquire memories that would allow her to resist the dominant discourse on the conflict. I tried to create ample opportunities for her to relate compassionately to both Jews and Palestinians and to not be scared to go back. It is hard to contemplate the long-term impact of such a trip. Nevertheless, my precocious 5-year-old made many people smile in both Israel and Palestine as she stopped at busy street corners and back-alleys to feed, pat and talk – in cat language, of course – with the local cats. Witnessing Nadia's ability to relate to and care for stray cats in Palestine and Israel, and the impact her compassion had on everyone with whom we came into contact, re-affirmed my decision to take her to the region.

Traveling through the troubled land that I used to call home with a 5-year-old added a new dimension to my theorizing about compassionate resistance. I have always been puzzled when asked how many Jews in Israel share my political views. While I understand the question and what's behind it, I think we should pay closer attention to how people change than to numbers. My own life story is but one example; there are countless similar stories of people who have transcended the restrictive boundaries of identity labels they no longer wish to identify with. The people I have in mind are not only in Palestine and Israel; they include, among others, anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, men who are involved in challenging sexism and heterosexuals who struggle against homophobia. All of these groups are comprised of individuals who pay a personal price for challenging systems of oppression. Some, like Rachel Corrie, may lose their lives in the process. Others, myself included, suffer broken family ties and a deep identity crisis that makes it impossible for us to ever talk about 'home', 'culture' and 'nation' without telling long-winded, complex stories.

Perhaps resistance is not as widespread as it could be, especially among people who enjoy the power and privilege that allows them to take risks, because people are scared. It is the same fear that made it difficult for people in Olympia, Washington, to understand why I was taking a 5-year-old to Palestine and Israel that makes it possible for people to ignore the toll that oppressive systems take on humans around the world. Our care and compassion have become bounded, reserved for those we know. This wasn't the case for Nadia; she felt compassion for the cat with the orange string because it was in pain, not because she had a prior relationship with it. But once she saw the cat, she felt a sense of responsibility, an urge to act, both to ease the suffering of this particular cat and to stop such an occurrence in the future.

At the same time, Nadia didn't view her compassion toward the cat as an act of resistance. She has been fortunate to have a childhood that has nurtured her ability to empathize with and relate to others, pets included, with an open heart. Nadia's sensibilities and compassion seem extraordinary because so many open hearts have been filled with fear. Racism, sexism, homophobia and oppressive political systems, like the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip, take a heavy toll not only on the people they target, but also on those implicated in upholding them. Blending compassion with resistance can be the basis for authentic solidarity, but it is first and foremost an act of restoring our own humanity and ability to live and act in the world with an open heart, rather than with fear.

Notes

1 My travel blog is at http://www.simonatravel.blogspot.com

2 To read more about Rachel Corrie, see http://www.rachelcorrie.org/

3 For more information about the Compassionate Listening project, see http://www.compassionatelistening.org/
4 For more about Women in Black, see http://www.womeninblack.org/
5 For more on Machsom Watch, see http://www.machsomwatch.org/

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Palestinian women's march at Qalandia checkpoint in the West Bank, August 2005
Source: Simona Sharoni, personal archive.

Women in Black vigil, West Jerusalem, August 2005
Source: Simona Sharoni, personal archive.