



KAEAL ALFORD

The Boy Who Kissed The Soldier

STARHAWK

In the ruins of Jenin, an old friend of mine is digging bodies out of the rubble where Israeli bulldozers have flattened houses, burying people alive. She describes the scene to me: Blackened, maggot-ridden corpses are displayed to anguished relatives for identification. A teenage girl unearths an infant's arm and wonders what to do with it. A Palestinian father cries over the dark smears of flesh that were once his two little daughters.

Another friend, a Jew, leaves a distressed message on my cellphone: "I'm in downtown Washington, D.C. There's a huge pro-Israel rally going on. I don't understand it. How can Jews support this? I know you must have something inspirational to say. Send me what you write."

She doesn't know that for weeks I've been trying unsuccessfully to write about the situation. I'm overwhelmed with accounts of the atrocities. Yet I am also haunted by images

of bodies shattered at a Seder meal or at a cafe, of a Passover drenched in blood. I'm frightened and saddened by the real resurgence of anti-Semitism, by swastikas carried in peace marches, synagogues attacked.

A third friend, a deeply spiritual woman and longtime ecofeminist ally, sends me a copy of a letter she wrote to President Bush titled "Standing Firmly with Israel."

In no way can I stand with her. And yet I cannot simply stand against her, either.

I cannot stand with an Israel that tortures prisoners, an Israel that has mounted a restrictive and dehumanizing occupation, that assassinates rival political leaders as a matter of policy, that has cut down ancient olive groves to destroy the livelihood of the Palestinians, that is daily committing war crimes, refusing medical care to the wounded, firing on journalists and peace demonstrators, bombing civilians, destroying homes. Nor can I stand in the bloody remains of the Seder meal, nor among the corpses in the cafe. Yet to say,

Parts of this essay originally appeared in Whole Life Times.

“Both sides are wrong; both sides should give up violence,” is to ignore the reality that one side, the Israeli side, is the fourth-largest military power in the world. That the suicide bombers are a direct response to a brutal occupation that has made life untenable for the Palestinians. That, for more than fifty years, the State of Israel has failed to guard the Palestinians’ rights, aspirations, and hopes for independence.

On the one hand, it is incomprehensible to me that my friend could stand with such a regime; that a Jewish community composed of people I know to be caring, compassionate, and good can stand behind the tanks, the bombs, the brutality. On the other hand, I understand quite well the wrenching emotional journey that many Jews must make to admit the reality of what Israel is doing. No other issue is so painful and sad for those of us who grew up saving our pennies to plant trees in the Galil; who, snowbound in blizzards, celebrated the New Year of the Trees when the almonds blossomed in the Judean hills; who ended every Seder with the prayer “Next year in Jerusalem.”

I am a Jew who has spent her adult life as a voice for a different religion, a blatant Pagan whose spirituality is attuned to the Goddess of Regeneration, not the God of my fathers. To Orthodox Jews, I’m a heretic, which gives me a certain freedom to say what I think. I was born into, raised in, and acculturated by the postwar Jewish community, but I have not been immersed in that world for many years. I speak from the margins of the community, but I am still a Jew, and the view from the edge can sometimes be clearer than that from the center.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* runs a front-page story about a school in Gaza where Palestinian children are taught to hate Jews. I have no reason to doubt the truth of the story, although I question why the paper ran it with no balancing report about, for example, the International Solidarity Movement, a group of Palestinians and Jews who together risk their lives in non-violent interventions for peace.

The *Chronicle* story causes me to look back at what I was taught in ten-plus years of Jewish education, including a summer spent on a kibbutz as a teenager. We never chanted, “Kill the Arabs.” We were never told in so many words, “Hate them.” Rather, we learned a more subtle discounting, a not-seeing, as if the Palestinians were not full human beings but a minor obstacle to the fulfillment of a dream, something to be moved aside, that didn’t really count.

We were taught to be proud of the brave Zionist settlers and pioneers, the idealistic youth who fled the ghettos and pogroms of Europe to build a “new” land. And I am proud, still, of their experiments in new ways of living, their awareness of women’s rights, their courage in leaving home and family to escape oppression. But I understand now that they did not come to an empty place, and that they were not capable of truly seeing the people who were on the land. They came out of a Europe that held an unshakable belief in its own cultural and racial superiority and had for centuries been appropriating the lands of darker peoples. They came as the settlers came to the so-called New World, saying, “This land is ours

by right. God gave it to us.” The Palestinians who lived there were an impediment. And so began the long litany of justifications: that the land didn’t really belong to them, but to the Turks or to the British; that they weren’t doing anything with it, had not made the desert bloom nor drained the swamps; and above all, that they hated us, were raised to hate us with an irrational, implacable, and unchangeable malice.

The word for this sliding-off of the glance, this not-seeing, is *racism*. Less blatant, perhaps, than chanting, “Kill, kill!” but with the same insidious results.

Yet simply to condemn Zionism as racism without acknowledging the centuries of anti-Semitism that preceded it is to absolve others who have blood on their hands. Worse, it is to support the Jew-haters and fascists who are emerging into the open again. Israel has indeed served the interests of the Western powers in subjugating the Arab world. But Israel also arose out of an oppressed people’s dream of liberation. To discount that oppression, to deny the strength and beauty of the dream, is to miss the full tragedy of what is happening now. Unless we understand the dream, we cannot truly comprehend the nightmare.

I know what Israel meant to my family in the fifties. My parents were still reeling from the revelations about the gas chambers and the ovens, still searching for news of lost relatives. Israel was restitution for all the losses of the Holocaust. It restored some meaning and hope to a world utterly shattered by evil. It was proof that Jews were not just passive victims but actors on the stage of history, capable of fighting back, of taking charge of our own destiny. It was the one safe place, a refuge in a hostile world. And for some, it was the answer to the question “How can I believe in a God who allows such things to happen?”

To acknowledge the truth of what Israel is doing now is to face a grief so deep and overwhelming that it seems to suck away all hope. It is to gasp again in the gas chambers, to cover our faces with ashes from the ovens and know that there is no redemption, no silver lining, no happy ending, no good and noble thing that emerged to give dignity to these deaths. There is only the terrible cycle of victims becoming victimizers, of the abused perpetuating abuse. It is to look down and see the whip in our own hands, the jackboots on our own feet. It is true that the Israelis have not built extermination camps. It is true, although not immediately relevant, that other countries in the world are guilty of oppression. But it is also true that to attempt to erase a people, to destroy their culture, livelihood, and pride, is genocide.

At a justice-for-Palestine rally, a wan young woman, looking depressed, wanders through the crowd carrying a sign that says: “My father survived Auschwitz. His parents didn’t. Orphaned, he fled to Israel.” Part of the horror of Jenin and places like it lies in her father’s new kinship to the teenage boy dug alive out of the rubble of his house, in which his parents and brothers and sisters now lie dead. That kinship is a dark mirror revealing how easily we become what we most despise. All we need is to feel threatened, and to let that fear define our enemy as less than fully human, and the horrors of hell are

unleashed. We must remember that the Nazis played on the Germans' sense of deprivation and loss after World War I. We must admit that our own victimization has not elevated us to some realm of eternal purity and innocence. We can grow beyond the propaganda we were taught and the myths of our childhood and the comfort of our chosenness and see the Palestinians as the full human beings that they are — even if to do so requires us to walk out into the wilderness again with no hope of a promised land to guide us.

For if we admit the Palestinians' full humanity, if we admire their knowledge and appreciate their culture and cherish their children, then all the justifications of conquest fall away. No God, no superior virtue, no inherent right has granted us dominion. We have the land because we were able to take it. And while that admission might seem to threaten Israel's very right to exist, it is not nearly as much of a threat as clinging to the justifications and rationalizations that prevent us from seeing the Other as fully human. For full human beings, placed in a situation of utter despair, may turn to suicide bombs and retribution. Full human beings, humiliated beyond belief, may seek revenge. But full human beings are not mere mindless agents of hate. Given hope and dignity and a future to live for, full human beings will tend to choose life. And full human beings can be reasoned with, bargained with, made peace with.

Since writing the above, I have gone to Palestine as

a member of the International Solidarity Movement. "Which side's story do you believe in order to create peace there?" a friend wrote when I came back. I have no answer, only my own story:

I am in the Balata refugee camp in occupied Palestine, where the Israeli Defense Forces have rounded up four thousand men, leaving the camp to the women and children. The men offered no resistance. The camp is deathly quiet. All the shops are shuttered, all the windows closed. People hide in their homes. The quiet is shattered by sporadic bursts of gunfire and explosions.

All day I have encountered soldiers who look as if they could be my brother or my cousins or the sons I never had, so young they are barely more than boys with guns. I have stood with the terrified camp inhabitants as the soldiers searched their houses. I have walked the sick and wounded, who are afraid to be on the streets alone, to the UN clinic.

Earlier in the evening, eight of my friends were arrested. It is now nearly dark, and Jessica, Melissa, and I could be caught at any moment. We are hurrying through the streets, worried, looking for a place to spend the night. We need to be indoors before the curfew. "Go into any house," we've been told. "Anyone will be glad to take you in." But we feel a bit shy.

From a narrow metal staircase, a young woman with a beautiful smile beckons us. "Welcome, welcome!" Her name is Samar, and she gives us refuge in the three small rooms that house her family: her mother, big-bodied and sad; her small nieces and nephews; and her sister-in-law Hanin, round-faced and pale and six months pregnant. We sit on overstuffed couches,

and the women serve us tea. Pine paneling adds warmth to the concrete walls, and porcelain birds and artificial flowers decorate a ledge. The ceilings are painted with simple geometric designs. These women have poured love and care into their home, and it feels like a sanctuary. Outside we can hear sporadic shooting, the deep *boom* of houses being blown up by the soldiers. But here in these rooms, we are safe — at least, as safe as we can be in this place. "Inshallah" ("God willing") follows every statement of good fortune here, every commitment to a plan.

"Yahoud!" the women say when they hear explosions. It is the Arabic word for Jew, and the word used for the soldiers of the invading army. It is also a word of warning and alarm: "Yahoud!" Don't go down that alley, out into that street.

But no one invades our refuge this night. Around us, young men prowl with guns, houses explode, lives are shattered, but here we sit in an intimate world of women. Hanin brushes my hair and ties it back to control its wildness. We try to talk about our lives. I show them pictures of my family, my garden, my step-granddaughter. I think they understand that I am my husband's third wife. I'm not sure they understand that those wives are sequential, not concurrent, but maybe they do. The women of this camp are educated, sophisticated. Many are professionals: teachers, nurses, students — when the occupation allows them to go to school.

"Are you Christian?" Hanin asks us at the end of the evening.

Melissa, Jessica, and I look at one another. All of us are Jewish, and we're not sure what the reaction will be if we admit it. Finally, Jessica speaks for us.

"Jewish," she says.

The women don't understand the word. We try several variations, but in the end we are forced to be blunt: "Yahoud."

"Yahoud!" Hanin says. She gives a little surprised laugh, looks at the other women. "Beautiful!"

(end of excerpt)