

## Reflections from the HILLTOP (TANTUR) - Jerusalem/Bethlehem No. 3

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and - from 26/11/03 -  
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### **"I punched an Arab in the face... that's the only way they learn."**

*I've heard it said, spend two days in the Middle East, and you can write a book, spend two months, and you can write an article; but spend two years, and you will write only a paragraph.*

My time in Palestine is coming to an end. I will spend the last few days as a member of a fact finding international Pax Christi delegation. This will give me the opportunity to meet a number of representatives of local groups engaged in countering the ever growing culture of violence that is so pervasively devastating of the lives of countless Palestinians and Israelis alike. I look forward to the chance to verify whether what I see is what other people also see, and that I am not suffering from some sort of one-sided blindness that does not allow me to see the "positive" within the apparent madness that here goes by names such as "politics" - "nation building" or even "final solution..."

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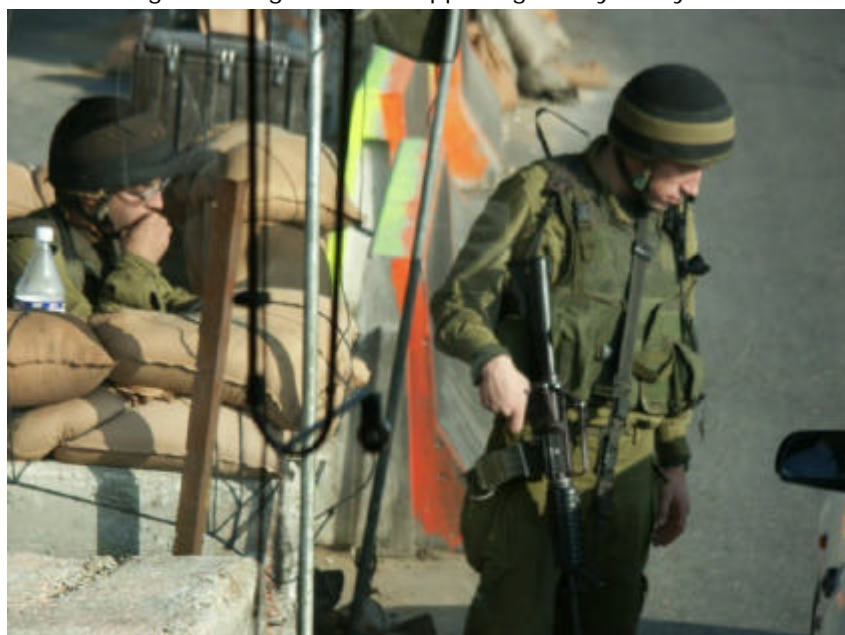
#### **Tuesday, 18 November – "Last words to a mother"**

At dawn today, a Palestinian gunman approached on foot the checkpoint on the tunnel bypass road next to Beit-Jala, pulled an automatic rifle concealed in a rolled-up prayer rug and shot two soldiers to death. Apparently, one of the dead soldiers was speaking to his mother on a mobile phone at the time of the shooting. Yes, even Israeli soldiers do have mothers. Their tears are also "Rachel's tears..." I wonder what "revenge" the other soldiers will take on the Palestinians in the coming days.

#### **Thursday, 20 November – "and the lesson is..."**

The Israeli army surrounded Bethlehem city and closed all entrances leading to the area and placed the nearby Al Kader village under tight curfew after the killing of the two Israeli soldiers on Tuesday. Overhead, the constant thundering by of F16s is an unequivocal reminder of what may yet happen. It looks as if this Ramadan will come to a sorry end.

I have just finished reading today's Haaretz newspaper and feel sick in the stomach. I know now – from a very reliable source – what the "lesson" is that Israeli soldiers are supposed to be teaching Palestinians at checkpoints... The source is "Staff Sergeant (res.) Liran Ron Furer who has just written a book titled "Checkpoint Syndrome" where he describes how he - a creative, sensitive graduate of the Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts, became an animal at the checkpoint, a violent sadist who beat up Palestinians because they didn't show him the proper courtesy, who shot out tires of cars because their owners were playing the radio too loud, who abused a retarded teenage boy lying handcuffed on the floor of the Jeep, just because he had to take his anger out somehow. What he calls "Checkpoint Syndrome" gradually transforms every soldier into an animal, regardless of whatever values he brings with him from home. No one can escape its taint. In a place where nearly everything is permissible and violence is perceived as normative behavior, each soldier tests his own limits of violent impulsiveness on his victims - the Palestinians." I felt a chill down my spine when I read the following and imagined that happening to any of my Palestinian friends:



*"I ran toward them and punched an Arab right in the face. I'd never punched anyone that way. He collapsed on the road. The officers said that we had to search him for his papers. We pulled his hands behind his back and I bound them with plastic handcuffs. Then we blindfolded him so he wouldn't see what was in the Jeep. I picked him up from the road. Blood was trickling from his lip onto his chin. I led him up behind the Jeep and threw him in, his knees banged against the trunk and he landed inside. We sat in the back, stepping on the Arab ... Our Arab lay there pretty quietly, just crying softly to himself. His face was right on my flak jacket and he was bleeding and making a kind of puddle of blood and saliva, and it disgusted and angered me, so I grabbed him by the hair and turned his head to the side. He cried out loud and to get him to stop, we stepped harder and harder on his back. That quieted him down for a while and then he started up again. We concluded that he was either retarded or crazy.*

The company commander informed us over the radio that we had to bring him to the base. 'Good work, tigers,' he said, teasing us. All the other soldiers were waiting there to see what we'd caught. When we came in with the Jeep, they whistled and applauded wildly. We put the Arab next to the guard. He didn't stop crying and someone who understood Arabic said that his hands were hurting from the handcuffs. One of the soldiers went up to him and kicked him in the stomach. The Arab doubled over and grunted, and we all laughed. It was funny ... I kicked him really hard in the ass and he flew forward just as I'd expected. They shouted that I was a totally crazy, and they laughed ... and I felt happy. Our Arab was just a 16-year-old mentally retarded boy... During my army service, I believed that I was atypical, because I came from a background of art and creativity. I was considered a moderate soldier - but I fell into the same trap that most soldiers fall into. I was carried away by the possibility of acting in the most primal and impulsive manner, without fear of punishment and without oversight. You're tense about it at first, but as you get more comfortable at the checkpoint over time, the behavior becomes more natural. People gradually test the limits of their behavior toward the Palestinians. It gradually becomes coarser and coarser... "

"The more confident I became with the situation, as soon as we reached the conclusion - each one at his own stage - that we are the rulers, we are the strong ones, and when we felt our power, each one started to stretch the limits more and more, in accordance with his personality. As soon as serving at the checkpoint became routine, all kinds of deviant behavior became normal. It started with 'souvenir collecting': We'd confiscate prayer beads and then it was cigarettes and it didn't stop. It became normative behavior."

What follows is the "lesson" for the Palestinians at checkpoints:

"...After that came the power games. We got the message from above that we were to project seriousness and deterrence to the Arabs. Physical violence also became normative. We felt free to punish any Palestinian who didn't follow the 'proper code of behavior' at the checkpoint. Anyone we thought wasn't polite enough to us or tried to act smart - was severely punished. It was deliberate harassment on the most trivial pretexts."

"...At the checkpoint, young people have the chance to be masters and using force and violence becomes legitimate - and this is a much more basic impulse than the political views or values that you bring from home. As soon as using force is given legitimacy, and even rewarded, the tendency is to take it as far as it can go, to exploit it much as possible. To satisfy these impulses beyond what the situation requires. Today, I'd call it sadistic impulses ... "

"We weren't criminals or especially violent people. We were a group of good boys, a relatively 'high-quality' group, and for all of us - and we still talk about this sometimes - the checkpoint became a place to test our personal limits. How tough, how callous, how crazy we could be - and we thought of that in the positive sense... The line of what is forbidden was never precisely drawn. No one was ever punished and they just let us continue. "

"The more complex picture of the long-term effects of this violent behavior is something you only become conscious of when you get away from the checkpoint. Today it's clear to me that that boy whose father we humiliated for the flimsiest of reasons will grow up to hate anyone who represents what was done to his father. I definitely have an understanding of their motives now. We are cruelty, we are power."

"It's impossible to be in such an emotional state and to go back home on leave and detach yourself from it. I was very insensitive to the feelings of my girlfriend at the time. I was an animal, even when I was on leave. It also sticks with you after your service... the way you react to a smile: When Palestinians would smile at me at the checkpoint, I got tense and construed it as defiance, as chutzpah... It sounds twisted now, but we really admired anyone who could beat up some guy who supposedly had it coming. The officer we admired most was the officer who fired his weapon at every opportunity. Out of everyone I've spoken to, I've been left with the most guilt feelings ... A friend from the army read the book and said that I'm right, that we did bad things, but we were kids. And he said that it's a shame that I took it too hard."

How will I look on the soldiers at the checkpoint tomorrow? Will I still be eager to chat them up in an attempt to "humanise" them or will I recoil in fear of what might happen to anybody that "smiles" at them?

**Friday, 21 November** – "The new greatest friend of Israel in Europe..."

9:30 AM - Lots of noise – shouting, chanting, police sirens and hooters – down at the checkpoint. During class break, I go to the terrace to observe what it's all about. Hundreds of people of all ages are pressing hard against the barriers protected by an unusually large number of soldiers attempting to pass through and reach "the" Mosque of Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem for this last – and most important – Friday of Ramadan. Not one is let through! So much for freedom of religion in Israel...

11:20 AM – Sudden silence falls all around – you can hear the wind whispering in amazement at the stillness. I run to the terrace once again. The vast crowd of "denied" worshipers are kneeling and bowing deeply right in the middle of the road - their backs turned to the soldiers - silent prayer in response to the call from the neighbouring mosques. Thus, the checkpoint, the place of constant harassment and humiliation is turned into the house of God...

1:30 PM – Just finished watching news on RAI24. Sharon, on an official visit to Italy, has been enjoying the sights of Rome, fêted by the highest authorities in the land. Italy, traditionally pro-Palestinian for as long as I can remember, has become the new voice for Israel within Europe – at least as long as there is a Berlusconi whose only measure for what is right or wrong seems to be whatever the USA does... I understand that Israel itself is not too fussy about any new friends as long as they close both eyes and ears to its oppressive methods of occupation: the Vice-Premier of Italy, Mr Fini, is coming to Israel on an "official" visit next week. He is of course the "repentant" contemporary leader of what "used to be" the very same Fascist party that sent thousands of Jews to die in concentration camps... So desperate is the current Israeli government to find any sort of support in Europe! The price paid by Mr Fini? To apologise for the past **and** to support openly the construction of the "Wall of Shame". The advantage? To him, to complete the "redecorating" of his party ready to take over from Mr Berlusconi. To Italy, the signing of a "strategic agreement of military and economic co-

operation" with Israel, thus becoming one of a tiny select number of countries that aim at bringing peace to Israel by flooding the area with more weapons... Today, I am utterly ashamed at being an Italian!

### Wednesday, 25 November

6:00 PM – About to go to the evening prayer after today's field-trip to Ben Guvrin Caves. Sadness in the area at the thought of soon parting from many friends made during the last three months. The sadness is momentarily erased by the appearance at the door of Pat, who has just arrived and is to be joined later by the rest of the Pax Christi international delegation. We shall have a couple of days for our common friends before the hectic round of meetings and journeys that will commence on Saturday.

Most of the following is Pat's journal and recollections from our time together.

### Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> November

A visit to a refugee camp on the first day of one's stay in Israel could have been a traumatic experience. Instead, it was an experience of resistance and grace. The Dheisheh camp near to Bethlehem is home to 11,000 people, 6,000 of whom are children. The camp has been present, in different forms, since 1948. It is *Id al-Fitr*, the 3-day feast at the end of Ramadan – something like Christmas to us – so there is a spirit of celebration in the air. A little disconcerting that the most popular 'gift' being enjoyed by children, as they run and play around, is a gun.

IBDAA, a community project based in the camp (it means *To Create Something out of Nothing*) hosts our visit. The story of the camp is told in striking murals painted on the stair-way walls. The first is the most poignant. Tiny black tents with painted numbers on them – 1948, 1967, 1987, 2000 – marking the different years of catastrophe for the people of the camp. The tents are surrounded by barbed wire from which hang keys – keys to the homes left behind in 1948 – to which many hope to return. We hear that in one place, where there were once three Palestinian villages, is Canada Park – a beautiful recreation area – but open only to Israeli families.



The project includes a cultural group – young teenagers who are part of a dance troupe. Although it is their holiday time, they are quickly gathered to perform for us. The grace and lightness of their movements – especially of the young boys – is surprising. Their dances tell of farming, marriage, fear and death. Their dance is an act of resistance. When asked what being part of the troupe meant, one young woman answered "We can tell our story. Yes, we suffer but... we will not give up... we are young and we will grow".

### Sunday, 30 November – "On the way to Bethlehem"

The first Sunday of Advent – a time of waiting begins. We are waiting at the checkpoint that links the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. It is 8:00 in the morning. Giovanni remarks: "I have been living next to the checkpoint for the last three months and I know that something is particularly wrong today..." The Bethlehem side of the checkpoint is awash with soldiers lining the road almost all the way down to Rachel's tomb. Nobody, nothing is moving. Sitting next to us on the pavement, a line of young Palestinian men – waiting for an opportunity to 'outwit' the soldiers. They know they will not make it through the official checkpoint – they will try to make their way across the field to the 'unofficial' checkpoint at Tantur into the Israeli side. Moving swiftly is no problem for them – but what of the elderly men and women, burdened with walking sticks, bags and parcels. A cat and mouse game begins. As we distract the young Russian soldiers by chatting them up, some of the old folk try to scurry into the field to scramble over the rocks and boulders. Imagine your elderly mother or father having to act in such a way, like children running away from sure punishment – what humiliation and harassment they face today, and every day. One elderly woman gestures to us "How can we get our food?" Her never-ending waiting goes on. These people know all about "waiting". There is a never ending "Advent".

Eventually we make it to Bethlehem – a town that feels as though it has lost its heart. No tourists, no visitors to encourage the people and support the economy. Signs of last year's invasion are still clear – demolished houses, damaged roads, abandoned shops. A distant cry from our postcard image of Bethlehem at Christmas!

Our Christian and Muslim friends have invited us on a mini-Advent pilgrimage – across another checkpoint – to Beit-Jala. The aim is to link a Muslim school in Bethlehem to a Christian school in Beit-Jala – the message is 'children should have the right to travel freely to school'. We 'internationals' lead the way, protected by our passports... thankfully our friends are also allowed through – young and old in a buoyant mood on this beautiful day. How do they maintain their spirit? The young men and women who have not been able to leave Bethlehem for three years? The children who have never visited Jerusalem. The newly married couple who could not even move to the next village for their honeymoon?

Arriving at the school the Choir of our partner group, the Arab Educational Institute sing for us.... "Joy to the World". With their open hearts and minds, with their hospitality and friendship, they remind us what it is to wait and hope for joy in a troubled world, "their" troubled world...

**Monday, 1 December** – "... and, yes, there are holy people in the holy land!"



We now know that the "Land is Holy" because there are "holy people" in it. We have met - and been awe-struck by – a "holy Muslim" today: the Mayor of Qalqilyah, a border town totally surrounded by a shameful 8-meter high wall that attempts to choke the life out of its 43,000 people. Access to the town is through a single checkpoint just opened a couple of days ago. The town is supposedly under Palestinian Authority. However, all the ordinary instruments of government seem to be stunted. Police are not allowed to carry weapons – in fact not even allowed to wear uniforms; no courts or any other forms of law enforcement. The Mayor is a remarkable man – gentle, composed, with a strong sense of dignity. He walks a tightrope. Both, extreme Palestinian groups and the Israeli authorities, would like him gone. He carries out a policy of nonviolent resistance which goes from engaging in dialogue as a means of reducing internal tensions, keeping open lines of communication with the Israeli authorities and other Jews is still counts among his friends and partners, to repairing immediately any damage done to the town by Israeli incursions. This repair work, and the fact that this is the cleanest, most beautiful town we visited, is a constant sign of hope to a people who live within this 'prison-town'. "They may tear down our houses, but not our spirits," he says. Nowhere else in Palestine or Israel have I had such a sense of being in the presence of a "holy person." And this, for sure, is the clearest indication that this is still a "Holy Land."

**Wednesday, 3 December** – "... when being just a radio is not enough!"

We almost missed our flight because of airport security.

The whys and wherefores of our visit, who we had seen/been with all totally intrusive questions. Giovanni's radio caused most problems – 30 years old (the radio, that is...) and world weary; something showed up but it took a whole security team over 2 hrs to discover that it was in fact just an old radio - unknown to the very sophisticated Israeli security equipment!... The young man taking care of us was gracious enough, constantly apologising for the delay. He kept chatting to us and us to him. How different from the young man of the night before. Arriving at 10.00 pm at Tantur our taxi was stopped just yards from the gate by a very aggressive young soldier. Having checked us, he then totally ignored us, focussing instead on our very young driver. He was made to get out, hand over his documents and wait and wait... all the time apologising to us for the behaviour of the soldiers. He attempted to persuade us to get out of the car and walk the 200 meters home, but we did not want to leave him alone with the soldiers. We waited with him for over 20 minutes on the dark road while they 'checked' his papers. And this was not even a checkpoint. Of all the things I had encountered in my short week, these two 'meetings' upset me the most and nearly had me in tears. Three young men, trapped in different roles, enslaved by the same 'search for security'.

As our young Israeli security man at the airport helped us through the final security check to get us on the plane, I remembered something I had heard earlier in the week and shared it with him: any encounter can be an opportunity to make each of us more human. He was at first a bit taken aback by the surprise remark, but then replied: "That is nice. I'll remember that". Perhaps this is the least – and the most we can all remember.

*Giovanni and Pat*

Tantur Ecumenical Institute 10/12/03

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Useful websites links/articles on Middle East issues on the Pax Christi website [www.paxchristi.org.uk](http://www.paxchristi.org.uk) - look in Middle East section