

Jesus Wept

— *Elias Amidon, "Letter from the Road," 2003*

Violence is never far from anyone's awareness here. Beneath its surface, Jerusalem (in Arabic *Al-Quds*, "The Holy") is a city of violence, and an icon for the whole world of the violence at the heart of our claims of righteousness. Here, everyone's righteous. The Jews are righteous. The Muslims are righteous. The Christian Zionists are righteous. Ariel Sharon is righteous. Yasser Arafat is righteous. The settlers are righteous. Hamas is righteous. Jerusalem has been invaded and destroyed 18 times in the past 3000 years, its inhabitants raped, enslaved, and massacred, all by righteous, angry men. The holy stones would weep if they could.

*As Jesus drew near and came in sight of Jerusalem he shed tears over it and said,
"If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace."
— Lc 19, 41-42*

Jesus wept. A professor once told me this was the most profound sentence ever written. More than once during my journey here I've wanted to weep too, drop to my knees and pray to whatever God there may be or whatever tenderness may still exist in our hearts that the shock we feel at the horror of violence would tear through our claims of righteousness, all of us, whether we're pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian or pro-whatever, and teach us a different kind of claim, a claim of forgiveness and kindness and dedication to joining together in the creation of beauty rather than its destruction.

But forgiveness and kindness can't grow in the conditions of separation and distrust that dominate here. It astonishes me how little either side knows of the other. As a foreigner I've had more access to people and conditions on both sides of the conflict than nearly every Israeli or Palestinian I've met. It's illegal for Israelis and Palestinians to cross the line into each other's realms. Israelis have little idea how much suffering their government's policies are inflicting on Palestinians living in the occupied territories. Palestinians have little idea how toxic the militants' acts of violence are to Israelis, and to their own quest for freedom. Each side is caught in a repeating cycle of ignorance, fear, and demonization of the other. Each is convinced the other wants to annihilate them.

Of course, the conflict is not symmetrical. Israel has immensely more military, economic, and organizational power than the Palestinians have. But with all that power, the Israeli side is continually weakened and made more vulnerable by its own self-destructive policies. It's

painfully obvious to me that Israel's greatest enemy is not the Palestinians or the Arab world, but themselves.

For example, last week I traveled to the besieged city of Hebron. It's a difficult journey. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has blockaded the road in three places so buses and taxis have to stop at each one. Everyone gets out and carries their babies and shopping bags up over two berms of rock and rubble and along a 200-meter stretch of road to another congested area where taxis and buses wait. This is repeated three times. People are subject to harassment and hours of waiting. It's hot and there's no shade. Old people and mothers with babies especially suffer. I was told in winter it's much worse when rains turn these areas to mud. These checkpoints, called *maksums*, are in place all over the occupied territories. There's little freedom of movement, which results in economic paralysis, unemployment, broken families, and suffering from lack of medicines and medical care. It's a breeding ground for anger.

Once I arrived in Hebron, one of the largest cities in the West Bank, I was shown where the IDF arrived two months earlier with bulldozers and tanks and crushed all the market stalls in the two central shopping districts. They pushed all the rubbish into a schoolyard, and then proceeded to dig wide trenches across all four roads leading to the market, going deep enough to break through the electrical lines and water mains. I asked what the provocation was — was there an attack or bombing? No, no attack, the Palestinians told me. "The IDF just wants to make life difficult for us. There's no military purpose to this destruction. They harass us until we hit back, so they have an excuse to move in with force, take more land and buildings, and impose 24-hour curfews for weeks at a time."

One evening, the curfew having been lifted for that day, I went to an open square filled with Palestinian children and parents enjoying the summer night. I spoke with a Palestinian man there who told me how, three years earlier, a settler had driven his jeep right into this man's coffee shop. The settler jumped out of his vehicle and said it was his shop now, that this was the land of Israel and it was for Israelis only. Then he hit the owner in the face. Soldiers arrived and arrested not the settler but the shop owner! Since then, his shop has been closed, and, he told me, "Now I work in a leather factory, but there's not enough money to feed my children. What hope do I have? You see me smile at you, but if you could see inside my heart, it is black."

What's going on? Why do the Israelis persist in building settlements within the limited areas of the West Bank when there are large tracts of open land in Israel? Why do they continue to punish all Palestinians because of the violence of a few?

“We are the Jews of the Jews!” the Palestinians say. “They put us in ghettos, they control every part of our lives, they hate us and kill us! Of course, people resist in whatever way they can. In the history of the world there is no example of an occupied people who did not resist.”

I’ve asked every Israeli Jew I met why Israeli policy seems to be aimed at provoking Palestinian resentment. I’ve talked with ultra-orthodox rabbis, politically progressive rabbis, secular leftists, rightists, and academics. Though each person has their own particular bias, their views ultimately refer to the same trauma: the history of Jewish persecution and the Jews’ determination not to be subjected to it any longer.

A typical conversation is like the one I had with the Israeli director of the Yakar Center for Social Concern in Jerusalem. He was a thoughtful, well-spoken man with a deep commitment to justice. When I asked him why Israel seems to incite Palestinian wrath in so many ways, he responds, “Yes, I know, I know, terrible things are being done by Israel to the Palestinians. Israel is in danger of losing her soul. But you must remember there are no straight lines. As soon as we attained statehood in 1948 we were attacked and if we hadn’t resisted we would have been destroyed. The experience of the holocaust and 2500 years of persecution demands that we hold onto this state, a haven for Jews everywhere.”

Most of the Israelis I spoke with seem conflicted by this same dilemma: their unshakeable faithfulness to Israel’s survival and the recognition that their presence in this land has made others homeless and hopeless. It seems to be the unspoken equation that the Israeli government, and many Jews world-wide, has accepted: the existence of Israel requires the oppression of the Palestinians.

To me, this equation reveals a tragic failure of imagination. If Israel’s survival necessitates oppression of others then it has indeed lost its soul. And if it has lost its soul, what is surviving?

One evening I was invited to a dinner with five Israeli professionals in their mid-thirties. The conversation was intelligent, articulate, and troubled by this same contradiction. During the meal, Moshe, a sensitive young man born into an ultra-Orthodox community, spoke about how he was raised to distrust and hate Arabs because they only wanted to destroy the Jews. He was taught the only thing that Arabs respect is force.

Then he hesitated a moment, as if the truth wasn’t quite being spoken.

“There is something else you should know,” he said. “From what I’ve been saying you might think ultra-Orthodox Jews are hate-filled bigots with cold hearts. It’s not true. If you were to walk into the community where I grew up, you would meet saints. I mean it. The same people who are militantly anti-Arab are the most compassionate, caring, and generous people I know. If I had an accident or got sick, God forbid, they would give selflessly of their time, energy, and money to help me. Whatever I might need, they would be there for me.”

His comment made me wonder. The imperative of Israel’s survival and the continuity of Jewish identity has created an insular, inward-directed ethic. For these Jews, and it seems for much of the Jewish State, kindness of heart is nurtured within the community, but not offered outward.

“If this is so,” I asked them, “isn’t the greatest challenge for Israel the need to break free from this insularity? Wouldn’t Israel’s best strategy be to love their neighbors rather than defend against them? Ending the occupation, removing the settlements, taking down that wall, helping Palestinians build homes and jobs, sharing the water instead of keeping it for themselves, wouldn’t these actions ensure Israel’s survival, body and soul, more than its present course?”

Moshe answered. “Yes, they would. But we need help. Think of a woman who has been sexually abused in her earlier life, and who now is in a relationship. If her partner wants to gain her trust, he has to help make the whole context of the relationship safe for her. Only then may she trust him.”

It was a prescient comment. And yet, a few days later I was speaking with a veteran Palestinian peace-worker whose life had been severely compromised by the occupation. When I spoke to her about this need for Palestinians to acknowledge the history of Jewish suffering, she said, “I know. We’ve done that. But I’m tired of accommodating the psyche of my oppressor.”

Both these lovers, locked in their unavoidable embrace on the same land, need each other to offer safety first, and neither can.