

Crumbs From The Master's Table

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Palestine Chronicle, 24th October 2005

Ben White is a freelance journalist currently based in Cambridge, UK, who recently returned from three months in Palestine. Much of the following article draws from emails he sent during the summer.

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July 20

The withdrawal of the Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip has led to many ironies. This week we had the sight of anti-disengagement Israelis complaining at how inconvenient the checkpoints were to their desire to reach the Gush Katif colony. Another irony – Israeli military officials suggesting that soldiers need psychological training to evict Jews from their homes, because it is such a traumatic experience for the evictors and evictees.

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August 16

To understand Gaza, one must look to the West Bank. Here, Israel continues to build the Separation Wall, encircling cities, destroying livelihoods, and transforming yet more of Palestine into fragmented, unsustainable ghettos. Meanwhile, the major colonies continue to be expanded, and that Sharon has been clear in his intention to never relinquish. Sharon is unilaterally executing a plan that cuts off Palestinian Jerusalem from the West Bank, creates several Palestinian 'bantustans' or ghettos (e.g. Gaza Strip, Northern West Bank, Southern West Bank) – all with the aim of grabbing as much land as possible with as few Palestinians as possible.

A catchphrase of the anti-disengagement movement is 'A Jew doesn't expel a Jew'. A commando conducting some of the removals commented on how tricky it was to remove people from their homes safely when they are used to killing everyone inside. A Supreme Court judge, when ruling against protestors blocking roads, said that nothing justifies preventing a pregnant woman reaching hospital. Tell that to the dozens of Palestinian women who have given birth at checkpoints. And the whole drama (I use that word intentionally) stands in bleak contrast to the demolitions of thousands of Palestinian homes that take place with swift brutality, without international media coverage, without Newsweek special editions, and without mass protest rallies by Israelis.

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August 19

Waiting at a bus station in Afula. My friends are coming to pick me up from Nazareth but they're running late. After about 20 minutes, one of the security guards comes across and asks me what I'm doing. A few minutes later he returns, and this time he wants to search my bag and check my passport. He asks me where my friends live, and I tell him Nazareth. He says, 'So they're Arab?' I say, 'yes they're Arab. Is it a crime to have Palestinian friends?' He says it's not, but that they have security problems. Then he abruptly changes topic, and asks me what I think about the bombings in London. I tell him they weren't a surprise, given the Anglo-American occupation in Iraq. He shakes his head, and tells me that the train bombings killed children and the Americans are just killing terrorists, though I query the accuracy of the latter assertion. 'In the same way', I add, 'as the Israeli army kills innocent Palestinians'. He tells me I'm wrong, and that he has served in the 'territories'. He gives me his email to continue our discussion, and then moves away to another part of the station.

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August 24

From the outside, the ageing couple and their comfortable, middle class home in a pleasant neighbourhood of Ramallah would not look out of place in any suburb in Britain. The kind of people who would be considered upstanding members of the community; perhaps involved in some local charities, hosting the occasional dinner party. The retired wife enjoys the challenge of a large jigsaw, or a good book. The husband busies himself seeing friends and continuing some business interests.

But this is not Britain. Its Occupied Palestine. The woman, who walks slowly, and is prone to staring off into the distance while speaking, spent a number of years of her youth in an Israeli prison, undergoing torture, for her membership of a political group that supported the Palestinian resistance. More recently, while teaching at the nearby university of Bir Zeit, she was forced to join fellow professors and students in crossing mounds of rubble where the road once lay, in order to get to work. During one attempt by Palestinians to clear the road, she was standing next to a man when he was shot dead by Israeli soldiers. The father, for his part, once represented a leftist Palestinian party at a conference in Cuba. The eldest son spent time in Israeli prison during the first intifada of the 80s/90s. Terrorists? Middle-class family who have contributed to the political and educational life of their community? Trouble-makers? A people resisting foreign military rule? What would we do if faced with occupation and colonization? Resist? Collaborate? Despair?

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September 8

Visited a village called Mas'ha in the Salfit region of the West Bank, where one family have found their house entirely encircled by the Separation Wall. In some places this is an enormous concrete structure, in other places a series of fences and gates. But this one house is completely boxed in, and the family of 8 relies on the whim of the Israeli

soldiers as to whether they can get in and out of their own little prison. On the other side of the fence are settlers' houses, whose residents the other night threw rocks at the Palestinian home. When internationals come to visit the home, Israelis army patrols will often demand that the visitors leave in half an hour or the consequences for the family will be dire.

Later in the day we went to a Palestinian valley called Wadi Qana, surrounded on the hillsides by illegal settlements. Over the years, these settlements have pumped their sewage and waste down into the valley, corrupting the natural springs and wells, and rendering the village's water supply undrinkable. In recent times, some of the plants and trees have begun to change colour as a result. We spoke to local farmers whose generators are repeatedly destroyed by groups of settlers who come down the hill on missions of destruction.

These are glimpses into the everyday lives of Palestinians living in the West Bank. And it is when you witness these things, when you walk through hot and dusty checkpoints, and when you meet those whose livelihoods are stolen or destroyed before their very eyes, that the sheer of imbalance of power hits you. The reverse is ridiculous to imagine. There are no Palestinian soldiers raiding and arresting Israelis at will. There are no Palestinians confiscating land from Israelis, protected by Palestinian soldiers. Israelis are not trapped in their towns by Palestinian checkpoints. Israelis are not subjected to humiliation by foreign soldiers in their own homes, and the Palestinians are not building a land-expropriating barrier around Israeli cities.

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September 17

For this week's email I want to make a few comments on Ariel Sharon's speech at the United Nations yesterday. The (entirely expected) spin of the event was that here was a man, formerly known as the Bulldozer, now offering the hand of peace. Rather than spend time on pointing out how his claim to peace is entirely undermined by the accelerated land confiscation policies in the West Bank, I wish to draw attention to a more subtle aspect of the ideology that permeates Sharon's approach.

"The right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel does not mean disregarding the rights of others in the land. The Palestinians will always be our neighbors. We respect them, and have no aspirations to rule over them. They are also entitled to freedom and to a national, sovereign existence in a state of their own."

At first glance, this sounds not only reasonable, but even laudable. You can check off all the key words of 21st liberal democracies; rights, respect, freedom. But note the opening phrase, and a more disturbing reality emerges.

This can be summarised by the difference between "to" and "in". According to Sharon, and those who share his Zionist ideology, the Jewish people have a 'right...to the Land of Israel'; in other words, theirs is the right of ownership and possession - in practice and in

principle. All others, or more exactly, the Palestinians, have "rights *in* the land". The precise nature of these 'rights' is not developed; it could be the right to work for a pittance in an Israeli industrial zone, or the right to a Palestinian prison-state. But Palestinians do not, it appears, have any right *to* the land of Palestine itself.

Now, much of the rest of the speech makes sense. If the right *to* the land belongs only to the Jews, then the 'aliens' in the land must be grateful for whatever crumbs are dropped from the table. The Palestinians are then the ones with the burden of proof, needing to show that they are ready and able, like a maturing child, to take responsibility for themselves.

And an end to occupation, home demolitions, land seizure, and an end to humiliation, all become something to be earned.

"We don't want to eat crumbs from the master's table. We want to share in the banquet."

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September 26

On the plane home, I am sitting next to an Orthodox Jewish man from Brooklyn. After a few introductory remarks, he tells me that his parents were survivors of the Holocaust. His parents, having both endured the Auschwitz concentration camp, married after the end of the war. He tells me that he doesn't like Israelis very much; they are too violent, and just live for pleasure. 'We shouldn't have taken this land by force in the first place', he added, 'God took the land away, and it is for him to give it back'. He picks up his book of the prayers of David – something he takes with him whenever he travels – and reads a few passages.