**ISRAEL-PALESTINE TRIP**

(May 21 – June 3, 2011)

Interfaith Peace Builders (IFPB)

By Arlene Halfon

**Introduction**

***Why I went****.* I had become interested in the Israel-Palestine situation when Al and I spent several weeks visiting Israeli relatives in the late 90s. Prior to that trip, I knew there were discrimination problems but I assumed they were similar to pre-Civil Rights Southern US. During that trip, I noted the rationalizations, hate and fear in Israeli voices and statements when discussing Palestinians, even among those theoretically on the left. I realized there was a lot I didn’t know. At the time I didn’t even know how much money the US gives to Israel, which is used to enforce the occupation; that knowledge came later. I was told by Israeli and American relatives that Israel was such a beautiful country but it had to protect itself from the Arabs (including Palestinians). As time when on, and I learned more, I pointed out that none of the statements I was hearing from Israeli or American relatives included any Palestinian viewpoints. No-one expressed the Palestinian side or even knew what it was. None of these people had ever even been to Palestine to see for themselves or even spoken to a Palestinian-American at home. Their stereotypes were horrendous, especially since they came from Jews who should know about stereotypes: “All Palestinians are terrorists” and I was therefore admonished for bringing one into a relatives home when there are “children who live here”; “Palestinians teach their children to hate Jews,” spoken with no sense of irony, when the only hate speech I was hearing was from Jews with their Palestinian stereotypes, etc. I was told that I believed what “anti-Semites” told me and never saw it for myself. So, I had to “see for myself”, which is why I went. It didn’t take long after I got to Israel/Palestine, however, to realize that the same people who told me to “see for myself” would be telling me that I was seeing a biased view (and indeed several of the people on my trip who wrote blogs reported receiving those comments within the first week). As of this writing, I haven’t been told that yet, but I have no doubt I will be.

***The tour****.* Al and I always traveled alone when possible. As we aged, we hired private guides in non-industrialized countries. We didn’t want to be shuttled around in a bus without choices. This bus trip was like the ones I said I’d never go on. I went anyway, but everyone was compatible and considerate. I was by far, the least physically fit person but was well taken care of. I especially appreciate how all the young people took the time and made the effort to help me out, whether carrying my things, holding my hand when going up and down steep places, slowing their pace, etc. It was definitely worth going with a “mob” in order to get this amazing experience and I highly recommend it to anyone. The trip started with meeting some moderate political activist organizations in Jerusalem as well as seeing typical tourist sites and slowly segued to more political and, finally, the unbelievable; that is, harassment that could not in any way be explained by security or any other actual goal. Just plain meanness.

***The group****.* There were 29 plus two leaders (Anna Baltzer and Adam Horowitz). Both leaders are known in peace circles, with many books and articles between them. They both conducted this tour before. I understand that this trip had more people than ever before and that IFPB turned down many applicants in order to maintain a reasonable size. There were close to half older people, a good size group of young people (college students and recent graduates) and a few in-between. Including both leaders, about 25% were Jewish (although for most, Judaism was more cultural than religious), four who were at least partially Palestinian (one fully whose parents lived in Jordan), two men from Veterans for Peace who hadn’t know each other. nine from an inter-religious peace group in Rochester, NY, and a few others. Among the Jews were: the daughter of a Holocaust survivor who lived in Israel many years and whose husband could not understand her changed views; a man who grew up in Israel, moved to the US and then back and forth as he decided that Israel’s actions were untenable; a religious man who took this trip several years ago and it changed his thinking so he brought his son with him this time to give him the experience; and a young woman who had visited Israel previously and spent a college year there, and had relatives in Israel as well as living in settlements, but only recently started to question what the country was doing (and whose father was hostile to her new point of view).

There were several threads that ran through a lot of the activities and discussion. I will discuss each the first time it became salient for me and try to discuss each one in total either at the first mention, or if an issue that changed in my thinking over the trip, as we went along. Despite the fact that I have refused to discuss the trip with anyone before writing this report (to avoid saying the same things over and over), I will be more than happy to discuss with anyone any issue that you raise after reading the report.

Finally, every country I’ve ever visited has turned out to be different than I anticipated. I actually *hoped* that would be the case this time, but it wasn’t. There were some things I previously “knew” or “believed” that were actually a little better than I had been lead to expect. It makes me wonder why anyone exaggerates when it causes those who learn the truth to find everything you say suspect. On the other hand, there were no real “surprises” when I discovered some Israeli actions that I hadn’t known about before. Nothing surprises me any more when done by any government, although some of what Israel has done and Palestinian (non) reaction totally blows my mind. Many of us in the group had at least one episode of uncontrollable crying; mine came when I actually was in the same room as child victims. There was a group meeting almost every evening to discuss and integrate what we had seen and heard. Some of the discussions were very emotional.

**Orientation and Getting there**

We spent Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning at the William Penn House in DC discussing the trip: what to expect, and how to pass through passport control and other obstacles getting into the country. It was a good idea to not mention that we were visiting Palestinian peace groups; we were told to stick to mentioning the usual tourist spots (which weren’t lies since we did visit them) and not offer any information we weren’t specifically asked for. We were told not to bring any political literature with us or even to have the itinerary; they gave us new itineraries when we arrived. We were also told what to wear for mosques, churches, synagogues, home stays, etc. There were also suggestions for what to wear on the street, even if it wasn’t required. I always carried “cover up” with me but it was so hot, I frequently forgot to use it. I did always have appropriate attire for mosques, etc. We did some role-playing; groups like ours were threatening to Israeli authorities. One college student (Lucas) and one recent graduate (Kim) spent Saturday night at our house. We flew out on Sunday night.

Both ways, flights were on time and the seats were the most comfortable I can remember on any airline, airline information was perfect as were airport directions. After the airline fiascos in Spain last year, this was wonderful. I will fly British Airlines whenever I get a chance. We arrived about 3:30 PM on Monday.

After the warnings about getting through security, it was Anna that was stopped and interrogated (and ignored) for over three hours. She had no idea why. After several hours, we left for the hotel and Anna was released a short time later. Our luggage was under the bus and when we got to the hotel, mine wasn’t there. Fortunately, Sasha (my 9-year old grandson) had made me a yellow luggage tag with a picture of a giraffe. I walked into the lobby and spotted it immediately. I’m sure the “taker” would have been shocked to find my underwear. I met my roommate, Amy, who teaches in a college in Missouri (I think). We had the hotel’s usual buffet dinner, had group discussion time and went to sleep. The hotel was in East Jerusalem, the Palestinian side of the City, and almost directly across the street from Herod’s Gate to the Old City. It wasn’t till I got home that I realized how safe I felt on the streets, whether asking directions, buying fresh squeezed orange juice or just walking. The only time I felt uncomfortable when walking alone was when I was in the (Orthodox) Jewish area. I didn’t feel threatened, just not wanted there. Our local guide was a man named Said (a Christian Palestinian) who provided a lot of information while we were on the bus, as to things we were passing.

**Tuesday, May 24**

***Old City:***  I was glad we went to the Old City. Our trip to Israel 12 years ago was made primarily to see the Old City. The Introduction to David Shipler’s book, “Arab and Jew” talked about this one square mile with Fundamentalists from four traditions in their traditional garb: Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox. Even though they are in different quarters, their rhythms interact; e.g., church bells and calls to prayer. Problem was, the reason for that trip was almost voided because my Jerusalem relative was so afraid that we’d wind up dead in the Muslim area that she wouldn’t let us out of the car as she drove us from site to site in Jerusalem. Finally, in response to our protests, she took us to the Jaffe Gate and pointed out that there were no parking spots left. We jumped out of the car as she forcibly warned us to stay away from the Damascus (i.e. Muslim) Gate. We wound up calling her from Damascus Gate with a Palestinian helping us to use our phone card and actually placing the call for us. We did get to see the other sectors that day, but the Temple Mount was closed for prayer by the time we got there, so we hadn’t seen it. The same relative took us to dinner at the apartment of her nephew who lived in an apartment house settlement (either in the extended Jerusalem or just outside. I don’t know which one.) She told us that her brothers worried about her frequently driving through this Palestinian area by herself—on the virtually empty road.

I thought Temple Mount would just be the Mosque and some land around it, but it’s an amazingly large area (about 200 acres, I think they said) from which Mohammed was supposed to have descended to heaven. The women in our group and other groups we saw were putting on long sleeves and covering our heads as we went up. There was one group I noticed because I had just read about their tour in a Toronto student’s MA Thesis (that the Toronto City Council had tried to rescind); they were English speaking HS kids on a “Birthright” visit to Israel. They wore shorts, short tops, long hair, etc. with no attempt to try to dress appropriately for the site. They certainly portrayed the “privilege” (or “brattiness probably encouraged by the tour itself) the author had described. While, in the past, the mosque was open to everyone, only Muslims are allowed to enter now so we didn’t see the inside.

The Old City was as I remembered it, bustling with people and stores in four distinct areas. There is the Wailing Wall with its segregated praying area and the Temple Mount overlooking it. Our guide said that no-one can build without a permit, which are impossible for Palestinians to obtain. Israel bulldozes the “illegally-built’ homes. However, Israeli settlers live where Palestinian homes had stood, with Israeli flags flying, crushing Palestinians into smaller and smaller areas of the Old City. Even Ariel Sharon had a large house there but never lived in it, making it part of Israel. There were about 70 settlements, for about two families each, scattered throughout the Muslim quarter. They are guarded 24 hours a day in addition to fences and barbed wire for protection. Most visitors, including tours, don’t notice the settlements or understand what they signify. We had lunch in a restaurant and walked back to the hotel.

***Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions (ICAHD):*** Founded by Israeli, Jeff Halper, some of whose articles I’ve read and agreed with, I only recently heard of ICAHD. I read that Pete Seeger used phrases from the Old Testament in his song “Turn, Turn” and paid royalties to the authors of the words. He paid it to ICAHD because it represented the interests of Jews and Palestinians, the original authors of the Old Testament. Then several weeks ago, I read that due to his friendship with Halper, Seeger had signed a boycott statement by performers (I’m not sure which one—whether those who won’t perform in settlements or in Israel or BDS, or what), but following his lead Zero Mostel and other performers followed suit. I was therefore surprised when Itamar Shapira, from ICAHD, who met with us was strongly against BDS (the boycott of settlement products and weapons manufacturers who provide products to Israel; divestment from stock and pension funds with an emphasis in the US on TIAA-CREF; and sanctions). He said that boycott would only hurt the Palestinians who lose jobs. I learned a long time ago (actually by women’s groups who worried about poor women who couldn’t get abortions but didn’t seem to care about them getting food or shelter or clothing or child care) that “it will hurt them” generally means “I can’t think of a good rationale for my position”.

Itamar gave a bus tour of Israeli settlements built on land from which Palestinian homes had been demolished, both in larger Jerusalem and in the West Bank (e.g., outside the Green Line), thus expanding the Jerusalem boundaries. Expansion is for several reasons: maintaining a Jewish majority and confiscating land being the most salient reasons for this area near Jerusalem. Israelis (which includes any Jews who move to Israel from elsewhere) receive subsidies to live in these beautiful settlements, complete with swimming pools (while most Palestinians have limited water supplies). We stood on a road overlooking a valley with a new Israeli settlement, with modern buildings, children's playground, and wide road. The settlements receive huge amounts of money from Jewish-Americans who receive tax deductions for the contributions.

Itamar showed us a map indicating how this settlement's construction would meet other construction to hem in the Palestinian populace and cut the center of East Jerusalem off from one of the few remaining areas in which a Palestinian capital city could be built. Most amazing was the Wall that hemmed in a village but left one house standing by itself outside the Wall for no apparent reason, totally isolated from the village, roads, and everything else. I still can’t get that house out of my mind.

The publicized rationale for the Wall was for security; Gaza’s Wall was used as the example. However, the Gaza Wall, on the actual boundary has proved not to be a security barrier at all, yet Israel keeps right on demolishing and building in order to steal more land, more water, and expand the Jewish population throughout the area. About 65% of the Wall has been built thus far. Between 10,000 and 40,000 Palestinians go from the West Bank to Israel daily (crossing the Wall) to find work but there have been no suicide bombings in years. But driving in the bus and looking out the window, there was no landscape. No matter where you looked, you saw a wall up close or in the distance, unending and ugly. You also see lovely settlements, impoverished villages (based on the condition of the homes) and terraced farm areas and groves.

The difference between the many beautiful gated settlements and the surrounding collapsing Palestinian areas is exactly what I’ve seen in non-industrialized countries. The difference here is that this wasn’t the fault of a dictator, and elite class and a poor class, or international banking (IMF, World Bank) and other imperialists; this is imposed by occupiers from another country. They keep stealing more and more land and squeezing the population into smaller areas, taking away their homes and livelihood.

**Some threads*:*** There were issues raised this first day that became threads throughout the trip.

***Israel and Jews:*** A group member from NYC told me he was surprised there were so many Jews on the trip. He said that all his Jewish friends considered any criticism of Israel to be anti-semitic. I told him that there was no cultural or religious reason for that sentiment. The Israeli Government does terrible things just as the American Government does. Not all Americans and not all Israelis are responsible for these actions. Certainly, not all Jews are responsible for what Israel does. Whether a Jewish or non-Jewish person assumes that “Jews” do or should support the Israeli Government, that view (as far as I’m concerned) is anti-Semitic. The Israeli Government does what the Israeli Government does, they do it with American money, they couldn’t do it without American money and it has to be stopped. So long as you speak about the Israeli Government and not about “Jews,” no one should be criticizing you. One man from Rochester said that the Jewish people he knew were very frightened by Palestinians and the prospect of Israel being destroyed. Yet, I never heard any Palestinian (here or there) even hint at that outcome. Many said that they understand that the Holocaust was horrible; they don’t blame the original survivors for doing what they did since they were so desperate at the time, but they (the Palestinians) are paying the penalty for the Holocaust still and it never was their fault.

I discovered long ago that bigotry is not based on what a few, some, or even many people in a group do. There are people who have unexpressed bigoted feelings that they finally verbalize when a member of the group they hate or stereotype does something wrong. Just like the attacks on the WTC “allowed” some people to express their anti-Arab/anti-Muslim feelings, what Israel is doing “allows” some people to express the anti-Jewish feelings that they’ve been harboring. None of this makes any sense. But what I find frightening is the extent to which Jews and Israel are conflated in people’s minds. If Americans ever really learn how much money the US has spent for Israeli atrocities when the US is having financial problems, and how that has added to our long-term risks, the backlash against Jews (as it was against Muslims) could be horrific.

***Ethnic Cleansing vs. Genocide:*** Having read Ilan Pappe’s book and skimming the most horrific parts, I’ve insisted for years that the “Nakba” was genocide, not “ethnic cleansing.” Not that it was a lark, but the truth is closer to the latter. From what I can tell now, after all these discussions, is that Israel didn’t go into most of the villages in 1948 and kill massively. It did happen, but what was more common was that they went into a village and killed a few people. They put a ring of soldiers around the village with an open space, so everyone could leave in that one direction. Or in some cases, they put people into trucks and drove them out. Those that didn’t leave were killed. Three quarters of a million people were driven out of Israel at the time and scattered around to refugee camps, keeping deeds and keys and expecting to return. Over 60 years later, many are still waiting (see discussion of “Right of Return” below).

***Taking the Land:*** Israel claims the demolitions and subsequent settlements were to enhance security, but it doesn’t. It just makes the oppressed more desperate. In the past, we thought it had to do with water. They built the settlements along the aquifer (in that crazy zig zag pattern) and then put the Wall along the settlements ensuring that the aquifer was on the Israeli side of the Wall. But the water is being used so fast, it doesn’t matter anymore. Under Israeli law, if a home isn’t occupied or land isn’t worked for two years, it’s forfeited to the Jewish National Fund (the same organization I used to collect money for as an adolescent—“Plant a tree in Israel.” So, there’s an ethnic cleansing purpose to the multiple arrests of people who eventually are released without charges or convictions after several years and to cutting people off from the farmland and groves. Some who left in 1948, moved two miles away to the West Bank. When they tried to return they weren’t allowed to. After two years, their land had been forfeited. Now, many can’t get to their groves because of the Wall. After two years, their groves can be confiscated because they were ‘abandoned.”

**Wednesday, May 25**

***United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs***. This was where we got a lot of statistics and facts. About 40% of the 6 to 7 million refugees from Israel live in Palestine, and 30% of all Palestinians are refugees. In the West Bank, about 95% of Palestinians live in the 40% non-contiguous areas, since the settlements and roads between Israel and the settlements and the settlements from each other, bisect the Palestinian areas, making a trip across the street, possibly five miles and a five mile trip, possibly all day. About 150,000 Palestinians, mostly Bedouins, live in the remaining 60%. There are over 500 barriers for Palestinians in the West Bank, including 63 complete checkpoints. Waits sometimes go on for hours. The Wall is 450 miles long, twice as long as the Green Line because of its many twists and turns around Jewish settlements. About 60% of the planned wall has been constructed, making the idea that it’s for security ridiculous. Palestinians can’t get building permits and homes built without permits are demolished with the owner paying for the demolition.

The UNOCHA considers a Humanitarian Crisis to exist in the West Bank due to the systematic denial of human rights, and Israel is guilty of collective punishment, which is illegal under international law. The UN criticizes Israeli detention and torture and the lack of impartial courts and defendant representation.

What we were told about Gaza interested, and angered, me since I had received conflicting information in the past from friends who visited Gaza. Isn’t the situation bad enough without people exaggerating? There has always been enough food allowed into Gaza to feed the population. (NOTE: We know that it isn’t necessarily what Palestinians want to eat and that some of the restricted items (e.g., herbs and spices) are listed just for harassment. Building supplies have not been allowed in). The problem has been that, without jobs, the Gazans can’t buy the food. There is serious malnutrition that leads to death. The UN person said this without a bit of embarrassment; like it was the most natural thing in the world. (NOTE: I’m surprised I kept my mouth shut, not about Israel, but the insane economic system that allows children to die of malnutrition when there’s enough food to feed them. WHAT’S WRONG WITH THIS WORLD?) At one time, Israel wanted to cut Gaza off completely so it would join Egypt, but they’ve given up on that. Given the economic idiocy, if there were not millions of dollars of aid going into Gaza, there would be a humanitarian crisis.

The UN considers the Goldstone Report to be 100% valid, as written, both for Gaza and the West Bank. The reports Israel was alleged to have completed are just white washes. The UN also agrees that the Hamas has nothing to do with Israel’s recalcitrance.

***Thread: Hamas*** There was not a single person we spoke with, Palestinian or Israeli that liked Hamas. If you would like an excellent article on why Hamas was elected in Gaza, ask me to send you Chris Hedges article. Basically, after 40 years of brutal occupation, the Gazans were willing to try anything, even being governed by a Taliban-style government.

***Bus Rides:*** In riding from place to place, we saw a lot and Said gave us a lot of information. This seems like a good place to discuss that. The waits at the checkpoints do seem to be reduced; I haven’t heard of childbirth at the checkpoints in a while, but the checkpoints seem to be operative or not on a random basis, so one never knows when they may have to wait hours. (NOTE: As in the case of most oppressed people, Palestinians seem to have great sense of humor. I want to recommend a terrific and funny Palestinian film built around checkpoints as well as other human rights and social issues—“Rana’s Wedding.” The checkpoints and other social issues are treated as “background” instead of primarily as “in your face” conditions in what I would think of as a standard “Uncle Remus” type story.

I couldn’t follow all the discussion on the Zones (A, B, and C) but Zone C are military areas and other public land such as Nature Preserves, and cover 18% of the West Bank. When a Zone C is declared, everyone (Palestinians) must move out. Mostly it’s been Bedouins who have been affected. Palestinians are not allowed in the Israeli zones and theoretically Israelis, except for police and soldiers are not allowed in Palestinians Zones. But you see the soldiers and police all over. I never heard anyone suggest this, but I wonder if they keep Israelis out of Palestinian areas because the government doesn’t want average citizens to see what is happening. They want them to believe what they’re told. However, settler attacks (i.e., the equivalent of *pogroms*) harassment and intimidation are prevalent. (NOTE: I’ve been recommending for several years, Saree Makdisi’s book, “Palestine Inside Out.”) When settlers attack Palestinians, such as at peaceful demonstrations, the military protects the settlers. (NOTE: But then you read in American newspapers that the “demonstration turned violent.) It’s rare that any settler is investigated, let alone indicted.

The Wall is 700 km long, twice as long as the Green Line as it zags around settlements. It’s ugly; no matter where you look, you see the Wall, but I was prepared for anything and expected even worse: thicker, taller, moats, barbed wire, so what I saw was almost a relief. Massive amounts of West Bank land fall between the Wall and the Green Line. Even the UN has trouble getting past the checkpoints in the Wall to deliver aide. People can’t access their land on the other side of the Wall to prune trees, etc., although by walking long distances, they can generally harvest their crops. Israel’s two-state solution is to follow the current settlements and bisecting roads and leave the rest for Palestinians, including in Jerusalem. This is all considered illegal by the UN.

Palestinian citizens from East Jerusalem can drive on the same roads as Israelis, but at checkpoints they wait in a separate (slow moving and long) line to get through, unlike us and the Jewish Israelis. Their other option is to walk through the checkpoints. This is also a long process but better than with cars. Walking through means having arrangements to get to the checkpoint and other plans for getting where they’re going after crossing the checkpoint.

When the army attacks, most deaths are civilian. There’s abuse, torture and military courts (West Bank is under martial law with requirements being at the whim of the commanding officer). Most never see a lawyer before trial (if there is a trial). Sentences are generally longer when attorneys insist on mounting a real defense, such as requesting information and evidence. Most convictions are forced confessions.

***Bethlehem:*** Only 13% of Bethlehem is available for Palestinians to use. It was once entirely Christian, but now Christians comprise only 30%. Since many residents can’t get to their groves, after two years, the groves may be taken by Israel. Residents have access to water once a week, and must retain their week’s supply in a cistern. With the recent dry weather, Palestinians have been told that they may have access to water only once a month. The settlers have access to water continuously. The Palestinians pay four times more for their water than the settlers do.

***Holy Land Trust:*** I’ve know about Mubarak Awad for years. About 30 years ago, he tried to be the Palestinian Ghandi. Sharon, at the time the “Defense (sic) Minister” had him deported for life (even from Palestine) saying that the only kind of Palestinian resistance Israel couldn’t defeat was non-violent resistance. Well, Israel is fighting the non-violent resistance now, with US money. Mubarak Awad is in the US and heads an NGO named Non-Violence International.

The director of the Holy Land Trust is Awad’s nephew, Sami Awad, who shared his family story. His grandparents and parents lived in Jerusalem in a town, like many, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together in peace. During the 1948 war however, Sami's grandfather was shot by the Israeli army as he was trying to put a white flag over his house. The military forced the Arabs to leave even though their Jewish neighbors fought against this racial expulsion. Although her husband was killed, Sami's grandmother fully believed in non-violence and taught that principle to her children. The family fled and the children were sent to different orphanages. Sami's father was adopted and brought to the United States, returning in the 1970s to marry a Gazan where they settled. Sami grew up learning about non-violent resistance from his uncle, Mubarak Awad. During the first intifada, Mubarak organized non-violent civil disobedience acts. For instance, the Palestinians kept different times than the Israelis in order to metaphorically resist the Israeli control. Israeli soldiers beat up and arrested people that refused to change their watches to Israeli time. That was the resistance that got Mubarak deported. Sami went to the US to college and then came back and started Holy Land Trust. He started to understand the Jewish mentality about the Holocaust when he visited Auschwitz and got permission to sleep one night in one of the beds. He realized that to fight against the occupation, he has to also protect the human rights of Israelis, to liberate people in both groups. To get peace, they must help heal the pain of both groups. Personally, I have problems with that analysis. I can see it for my parents’ generation and for some members of mine. But this was not during the lifetime of my children and there’s something sick about holding on to an old oppression in order to oppress others. However, I admire Sami and everything he said. He doesn’t care whether it’s a one-state or a two-state solution; he just wants the same equal rights for everyone. Now, 22% of Israelis live in West Bank settlements.

He also told us that the Palestinians were more restricted after the Oslo Agreement than before. There were more restrictions on movement. At check points, they kept people and their produce until the produce was rotten. As a result of the harassment, Palestinians began engaging in suicide attacks again. Groups like theirs tried to quell the violence, but each peace offering brought more violence from Israel. When the Arab League offered to recognize Israel at the Green Line, Israel responded with the slaughter at Jenin and the siege of the Church in Bethlehem. They are trying to develop some Palestinian leadership that won’t wind up as a puppet for Israel, but it’s been hard. They’re hoping that the Arab Spring will have a major effect and provide non-violent examples. He feels strongly that BDS, used as one of many strategies is and will be very effective.

Those who wanted to went to the ***Church of the Nativity***. The rest of us wandered around the town and had lunch separately. I was involved in a comedy of errors that I won’t get into here, but Anna and I had each separately miscommunicated with one of her Palestinian friends in Bethlehem, and we wound up in a tiff until we got the miscommunications straightened out. We got resolved but I got the feeling that Adam was wary of me for the rest of the trip. Too bad; I really like his serious but relaxed manner.

***Thread—Feelings about Jews:*** Sami mentioned how hard it is to keep the children non-violent; we heard that a lot during the rest of the trip. The only Jews or Israelis the children see are soldiers and settlers, members of groups that harass, beat and arrest them. We consistently heard, however, that the adults meet the Israeli and the International Jewish peace activists who take part in their demonstrations and help with other actions. They know they can’t blame “Jews” or even “Israelis.” It’s the Israeli government that commits the despicable acts and the US Government that supports it. As an American, I am always surprised at this attitude in other countries, where the US has done terrible things (e.g., Vietnam) but the people can separate Americans from their Government. It’s something Americans don’t seem to be able to do, so the US kills people all over the world because our Government has something against another Government, even if they are unelected dictators.

***Badil: Palestinian Center for Residency and Refugee Rights:*** The organization works on issues of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons. He discussed how 750,000 people were driven out during the Nakba in 1948. More than 500 Palestinian villages were depopulated and later destroyed. After the 1967 war, more than 400,000 Palestinians (35% of the population of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza) were expelled. They have all been denied the right to return. The land was bulldozed, so no-one could find or recognize their old homes. They were replaced with settlements/Jewish homes, parks, malls, and Ben Gurion airport. Today, there are 6 to 7 million people who consider themselves refugees, about 350,000 of them in Israel itself.

The focus of this group is the Right of All Refugees to Return, based on UN Resolution 194. Many people were moved from their homes to places within Israel and/or Palestine. But after two years, their homes were determined to be deserted even if the refugees were not allowed to return. If they tried to return, they were shot. Refugees outside of Palestine are not represented by Fatah, Hamas, or the Palestinian Authority. They worry that negotiations will not maintain the right for all refugees to return, as stated in International Law. That means freedom to return to their homes and not just in Palestine. The refugees know that 90% of the houses from which they were driven no longer exist but they want the “right”, all the while knowing that they can’t move back into homes that no longer exist or are occupied by somebody else. Palestinians make up 30% of all refugees in the world. Talk of Statehood frequently ignores the refugee issue. In addition, being a refugee increases your chances of being displaced repeatedly because the homes, including refugee camps, are meant to be temporary.

There were 45 “unrecognized” villages left. They weren’t destroyed, but there is no recognition they exist. They get **no** services and because the villages don’t exist, any home can be demolished any time. If you listed all the items that make up “apartheid,” you’d learn that Israel commits every one of them.

***Thread: Right of Return.*** This was the issue on which I id a 180 degree turn in my thinking, but like most people, I had no idea what it was about. Under the Geneva Convention, refugees are entitled to return home, receive restitution, compensation, and have their homes restored to their original condition. The UN Resolutions first required that with the partition, no-one would be displaced. Then came the Nakba. Two more UN Resolutions (recognizing Israel as a state and admitting it to the UN) specified that granting these statuses were contingent on allowing Palestinians the right of return. Israel took the benefits but never met the ‘return’ contingency. In all the talk about states and borders and land, right of return is always ignored. When the issue was raised, I always said you couldn’t count on the Palestinian negotiators to defend the rights of those in the Diaspora and could wind up bargaining it away, so everyone should concentrate on borders and States and when that was resolved allow an international body to enforce the Right of Return. But consistently, I was hearing that the right of return is sacrosanct and many of the speakers thought it had to take priority over borders and State creation, whether one-state or two. At the same time, they were saying (including speakers from agencies and refugees themselves) that they want the “Right of Return.” Of course, they wouldn’t want to displace Israelis from the homes they’ve been living in or destroy an airport or school, they wanted the “right.” They wanted to go see where they or their relatives had lived, walk where they chose, and if they chose to, buy or build a home nearby. Or maybe not. They wanted the “right.” I couldn’t understand why this attitude wasn’t discussed so Israelis, Americans and others would understand that their major fear wasn’t going to happen. I couldn’t understand why people got so angry when I suggested that. Adam finally discussed the issue at one of our group meetings. There’s a difference between recognizing a “right” and understanding how it would play itself out. The important thing was being guaranteed the right. It finally occurred to me that what I was saying would be the equivalent of stating that in the US racial or ethnic minorities can’t be discriminated against for housing even if they decide to stay where they are. They have a right to live wherever they wany. But then passing a law that said no discrimination so long as the minorities agree not to move into White neighborhoods. I felt like a total fool, but I certainly support the “right of return” whether it’s to Israel or Palestine.

***Bloggers:*** In the evening, we met with three young Jewish journalists from Tel Aviv who have developed a blog about Israel-Palestine politics and social issues. There are about 20 bloggers on the site. They all write in English and want to let the world know the truth about the Occupation. One of the major issues that was raised is one that I constantly make. Many people tell me that Israel “won it” in a war and therefore it’s theirs. But they’re talking about land; what they forget is that it’s people that are being controlled. The bloggers felt that many Israelis act as if they don’t know that Palestinians exist and are human. This group tries to educate people, especially Internationals, by means of their blogs, but they don’t know how effective they are.

**Thursday, May 26**

We had a free morning. Most people went back to the Old City. I wanted to find an arts center that Al and I had been to when we were in Israel 12 years ago. The front desk told me to walk along the Old City wall and make a right on the street directly across from the Damascus Gate. WRONG!! But the people in that area were very helpful, asking others, and trying to figure out where it was. Then I asked someone who looked like an artist. He told me that I was supposed to make a right on the street directly across from the Jaffe Gate. Even though the two gates were only about a quarter mile apart, it looked like two different worlds. I didn’t feel at all comfortable in that area; not unsafe, but feeling that people didn’t want to help. I finally found the street I was looking for, but it was time to get back. I felt much better once I got back to “my neighborhood” and I stopped at a stand to buy fresh squeezed orange juice. I was proud of myself for not getting lost.

***New Profile:*** After lunch we went into Tel Aviv and met with New Profile, the organization from which I get massive mailings of newspaper and other articles daily and pass some on to other people. It is an anti-militarist organization and Charter on their website has the best anti-militarist statement I’ve seen. They discussed how the entire school curricula is geared to militarism and hate. They said from the time they start school, Israeli children are taught that Arabs are dirt, and it would be good to be rid of them. Israel has a universal draft when the children finish HS. New Profile tries to encourage HS students to make a conscious choice concerning whether or not to go into the army. Declining means spending some time in jail but then being declared to be mentally unfit for military service and released. I know over the years, New Profile has been investigated by the Israeli government which has tried to accuse them of convincing young people to be conscientious objectors, but are very careful about what they say and the Government has not yet shut them down. One of the speakers was a dynamic young woman who refused, along with several friends, to join the army. This woman, and her friends, all had to serve jail time for their refusal to serve. She said that some of her friends were disowned by their parents for shirking their responsibility. Speakers also spoke of taking part in “Machsom Watch,” a “checkpoint watch,” to witness and document what goes on and occasionally try to intervene, when necessary. One speaker was the woman we read about in the Washington Post who commits civil disobedience by driving to the West Bank to pick up Palestinian women and their children who have never been able to see the ocean, and drive them illegally to spend a day at the beach. The Palestinian women remove their headscarves and change their appearance to look like Jews so the car can get through the checkpoints.

[***Boycott from Within***](http://org2.democracyinaction.org/dia/track.jsp?v=2&c=gO56756C3R8CedHNz%2F62Lf%2Fbp2vzilRj)– We met with this Israeli organization that supports and encourages BDS among Israelis and around the world. Israel is considering passing a law that would fine any Israeli who participates in a boycott or encourages one. Boycott from Within doesn’t care if the result is one-state or two-state so long as result is freedom, equality, and justice for everyone.

Our bus driver took a long route home, driving on an expressway built especially for settlers in the West Bank. A few Palestinians are allowed to use the expressway, but they don’t, because they would have to wait a minimum of two hours for their car to be torn apart for inspection at the checkpoint. Instead they drive on alternative dirt roads that go up hills and down valleys. These settler expressways go right through the middle of Palestinian communities causing residents have to drive around them (sometimes for miles) in order to go short distances.

**Friday, May 27**

***Holocaust Museum:*** I had been to the Holocaust Museum in DC and had been to the small museum in Auschwitz, which described the events leading up to the Final Solution. I didn’t feel that I wanted to see it again. One of the young women spoke a lot (at group meeting and her blog) boutt the layout. I don’t remember exactly what she said, but the museum has a very confusing lay-out, where you have to wander back and forth, but are also forced to follow everything chronologically. While no-one can force you to look at everything, you must pass by everything and so at least note it. This woman spoke of how the exhibit ends with the formation of Israel and then you open the door and you’re in the bright sunshine. Brilliant.

I saw people taking it in, but my mind carried me back to Auschwitz. The cells and bunk beds, the names inscribed on the walls, etc. While there, there was an Israeli HS group walking around, literally wrapped in the Israeli flag like massive shawls. After seeing the interior of the buildings, I was thrilled to see these kids, despite the flag-wrapping. I thought, “we beat them; we got a country of our own.” I was delighted. But then we got to the museum where we saw the events that lead up the “Final Solution:” the ghetto, the ever-decreasing space, the restrictive laws that got more and more restrictive. I was sure the HS kids would recognize the parallels; after all, they had older brothers and sisters who served in the military and must have told stories about what was going on. But, no, I saw no sign of recognition on any of their faces; I saw none of them pointing out similarities. There went the delight; no-one learns from history. All that happened did not stop Israelis from following the same route. I don’t know whether most of the people at the Holocaust Museum the day we were there were Israeli or tourists, but looking around at the people, I saw little sign of anyone making any connection. The only description I could give about the Museum when we left is that it could be used as a course curriculum to be followed by Israel in Palestine.

***YMCA Director:*** One of the older Jewish men was friendly with the Jewish Director of the local YMCA. I was ready for some non-Palestinian food and went along with him for lunch, as did my roommate. This was really the first non-primed person we had spoken to on the trip. Like most Israelis these days, he started with “yes, it’s terrible what we’re doing to the Palestinians, but…” In his case, the “but” is that every country reserves its country for members of its own nationality and Israel is no different. We can’t let these “others” overrun our country. He seemed to forget that Palestinians weren’t the runs who “overran” the country. Anyway, the only reason I mention this here, is that we heard almost the same thing again when we met a representative of ex-Gazan settlers later in the week.

***Women in Black:*** Fridays at 1 PM, Women in Black holds an “End the Occupation” rally in a central square in West Jerusalem. We had free time after lunch and many of us joined the demonstration. We got the usual smattering of peace signs, hecklers, and in your face insults. I had the feeling that a large percentage of people in our group had never been to a demonstration before, by the way they talked about what they said the hecklers were saying.

**THE TRIP HEATS UP.** The trip started out easy and became more horrific as we went on. We didn’t see Netanyahu’s speech to Congress, but it seems like everyone in Palestine did. I can’t remember who first mentioned seeing Congress give Netanyahu 29 standing ovations, but after the first time, every person who spoke mentioned it. I predict that years from now, the video of that is going to be the equivalent of the Leni Reichenstal film.

***Dheisheh Refugee Camp:***  We arrived in the afternoon to spend the night at the Phoenix Center, which is a hostel/guest house at the refugee camp. Dheisheh has a population of 15000, which includes 3,500 children. It began as a tent community by people who were displaced by the Nakba but now it looks more like any very poor village in third world countries, and is made of cinderblock. It is very crowded. But all apartments have indoor plumbing (with poor plumbing and insufficient water). The U.N. provides medical care (a single doctor), basic food twice a year, and separate schools for boys and girls. The concrete buildings were falling apart. Israel had tried to demolish the camp several times and the residents rebuilt each time. Many people were just sitting on their porches or in the windows looking out looking as if all the life had been drained out of them. In the midst of all of this, there was one house, with a beautiful wood door. I had noticed it and hadn’t paid attention, but I needed to go to the bathroom and our guide took me into that house. The husband and wife looked western and were well dressed the woman wearing small heels. Inside was beautiful with granite kitchen counters and tile floors. They spoke English without an accent. I never found out who they were or what this house was doing in the middle of the camp (not separated in any way), so I never found out why this affluent family was living there. Everything around it was such a shambles.

When we first got out of the bus, we met a woman who coaches the camp’s boys basketball team. They are the West Bank champions. On our tour of the camp, people greeted us and were friendly and pleasant. Our guide told us that the Israeli army held night raids at the camp, in order to train the troops. We were warned that it could happen while we were sleeping there. While in general, Israelis aren’t allowed in the camp, Israeli soldiers with guns are all over the place. There were several speakers in the camp; mostly men. One told what the camp was doing to ensure that the children were educated and developed skills. There were sports leagues and craft workshops and many people worked hard keeping these activities going. Another man spoke about what it’s like to be totally confined and controlled. You can’t go anywhere without authorization. People spend their whole lives in one place. He demanded his right to return to his home. In response to questions, as stated above, he said he had no desire to make anyone else leave their home so he could have his house back or to bulldoze a library, but he wanted to know that he had the ***right*** to go home. This was very confusing for several of us until Adam explained it, as I stated above. The speakers were in their 40s (born after the Nakba) but they still had the keys to their parents’ homes, knowing that they probably don’t exist anymore. The “right to return” to these homes, whether they choose to or not, is their prime concern. As anguish-producing as this was, nothing could compete with the woman (Suheir) who spoke next. First, I was interested in how her husband introduced her. You could tell he was really proud—he said something about her not liking the way he introduces her, so she rolls her eyes at the things he says. But she was dynamic. In addition to talking about the constant control, she talked about the constant fear for her children: not being able to sleep worrying about night raids; worrying all day when the children were in school (in neighboring Bethlehem), not knowing when the army would come and beat the kids up. It was heart wrenching to listen to and even now, though I don’t remember her exact words, I remember the fervor with which they were delivered. There is never a bit of privacy. The army sends its recruits to the refugee camp for training. The mother works in a hospital in Hebron, and to get there she must go through four or five checkpoints, depending upon which are manned. One son is a college student in Jerusalem, and he must plan on 1½ hours each way going through a single checkpoint. The guards, who are the same age and have not been to college, seem to take pleasure ordering the students out of their cars and taking their time meticulously inspecting the students and their car. Another son has just been accepted by Brown University for the September 2012 term. An International working at the camp, became aware of the son’s grades and test scores and got him admitted.

***Thread:*** In talking about the children, one of the men stated that the kids are told from the time they’re little, that they should NEVER CRY in front of outsiders. You never let the Israeli military or the settlers see you cry. That just tells them that they are succeeding. I heard this over and over from many speakers and saw it in action in Bilin.

On one floor of Phoenix Center guest house, there were about 10 rooms with six bunk beds to a room. There were several bathrooms with open showers in the middle (like we saw in some European countries over 20 years ago). I had never slept in a hostel and didn’t know to bring my own towel. All I had was a hand towel for washing my hands in public bathrooms; little bigger than a washcloth. I dried what I could and then drip-dried. Then I was too stupid to remember to buy a towel for the home stay. (I had to shower more than many people, because I sweat so much; the sweat had been pouring off me all day.) There was a buffet supper and breakfast. Since the Phoenix House was near the entrance to the camp and the entrance was near a village, the young people went out to smoke shisha (sp?). I don’t know all the experiences they had, but they did meet Palestinians their age and I think a few wound up in a Palestinian home smoking.

**Saturday, May 28**

***ITTIJAH, the Union of Arab Community-Based Organizations***. We left Palestine and spent the day in Nazareth, where we were staying for the night. After the night before, it was good to have a real shower. At the hotel we met with the founder of the organization. He described himself as a “Nakba survivor” who is a physician who was a public health official in Israel, until he had to resign because of his involvement with the new organization. He founded it because he couldn’t achieve much through the government, such as sewers for Palestinian villages. He provided statistics on the differences in the lives between Jewish and Arab Israelis; whether it was acreage per person, rate of poverty, infant mortality, etc. New racist legislation is constantly being passed: Street signs can no longer include Arabic names; communities may decide who may live there; if a citizen doesn’t recognize Israel as a “Jewish Democratic State” they can have their citizenship revoked as can commemorating the “Nakba” (the equivalent of Native Americans’ commemoration of “Columbus Day”).

He introduced the wife and brother of Ameer Makhol, the president of ITTIJAH. The police broke into Makhol’s home at 3 a.m. to arrest him, tied him to a chair for 72 hours without food or sleep for interrogation, at the end of which time Makhol signed a statement. That statement was the only known evidence for his conviction for passing information to Hezbellah in Lebanon. Meanwhile his family and lawyer had no information about him at all for two weeks. The Israelis took his phone and computer, but they could find no evidence whatsoever connecting him to Hezbellah. Yet his lawyer finally advised him to plea bargain for a nine-year sentence to avoid a life sentence.

Makhol’s brother is known as the Palestinian Vanunu, the scientist who disclosed that Israel had nuclear weapons and spent years in jail. The reason Makhol’s brother wasn’t arrested was that he had been a member of the Knesset, and they protect their own, but that was a possible reason for his brother being arrested. Makhol’s wife lost her job as a social worker when he was arrested. As a security (political) prisoner, he does not have the same rights in jail that criminals do. He cannot have a cell phone, no direct contact with visitors, and no government salary for dependants and for himself in jail. (Their jails sure sound better than ours, don’t they?)

***Demolished (Unrecognized) Villages:*** We visited the site of a former Palestinian community in Northern Galilee. The residents fled to nearby towns in 1948 when the city was bombed. The community then consisted of 1,300 Muslims and Christians, who owned 17,000 acres for cultivation. Once they fled, Israel quickly confiscated the village and its land under its “present absentee” law, even when the owners are nearby. Israel bulldozed the buildings, and the land is being cultivated by a kibbutz. The former residents and their descendants are refugees in Israel, many living in nearby communities. The guide took us on a tour of what remained and a discussion of what was destroyed.

We next saw the remains of a larger Palestinian community, whose land is now an Israeli park (with a much-littered picnic area). Finally, we went to a small extremely poor trailer park, which served as a Bedouin community, with no water or heat or cooling for the trailers.

**Sunday, May 29:** This day was the meat of the trip for me; it was the most emotional day and the experience was what this trip was about. I had a lot of information before (although some of it was wrong), but the first person experience this day made the entire trip worthwhile. However, there was more, the evening was the “***funnest***” time of the trip and certainly the funnest that I’ve ever had in a poverty-level area. I now have great ammunition to counter the stereotypes of Muslims/ Arabs/ Palestinians among many people.

We spent the morning in Nazareth, a city of 200,000, about 40% Christian and 60% Muslim. Those who wanted to, visited the Church of the Enunciation, a holy site for Christians. The rest of us had time to wander around.

We drove down the Jordan Valley, along the Jordan River, the border with Jordan, which is all Israeli military territory. Palestinians are not allowed to build in the Jordan Valley. There were several very poor Bedouin communities, but they are illegal in Israel so they get no water, and their buildings are listed for demolition. The Jordan Valley is totally desolate except for some flourishing farms, established by Israeli settlements, which obviously do get building permits and adequate water. But the settlements cut the Palestinians off from any resources. For instance, Ahava (the cosmetic company that is made in a settlement, and so a target for boycott) uses the Dead Sea water, so Palestinians have no access to it.

***Nabi Saleh Popular Committee:*** We visited a family in a Palestinian village in the hills – Bilal Tamini. The village is surrounded by Israeli settlements and they have been denied the right to farm their land. Although Israeli courts have ruled that the land belongs to the villagers, when the villagers tried to farm the land, the settlers shot at them and threw rocks. The villagers asked for the army to help them, but the soldiers also came and shot at them and threw rocks. The land is obviously being targeted for confiscation under the “absentee” law.

The villagers began having nonviolent demonstrations several years ago. They showed us videos of solders in full riot gear standing in their way and firing tear gas from 100 to 200 yards away. Soldiers arrest teenagers from age 11 up, hit them, arrest them, and keep them for a day or two to stop the demonstrations, but it doesn’t work. Sometimes the soldiers torture them to tell the names of demonstration leaders. The soldiers often come in the middle of the night, bang on or break through the doors, and take pictures, so they know where every boy, 10 and older lives. They can then arrest them in the middle of the night. Their raids terrorize the children.

Villagers were in and out of that house that day. The kids watched the video of them being beaten and arrested, with us. They were laughing and pointing to themselves and each other, exactly as any kids would do if they were watching a video of a party and finding themselves and their friends on the screen. I’ve seen movies like this before but never seen the kids involved. My “mother” feelings came to the fore and I cried all the way to Bilin.

One of the hosts’ children, a college freshman, was hit with a tear gas canister, that smashed his leg and requiring surgery. A window in their living room had also been smashed by a tear gas cartridge. Other children were arrested and so was the mother for trying to take her children away from the tear gas. The father wore a cast because soldiers had broken his arm in two places. At times the soldiers declare a curfew in the village, but the villagers ignore curfews en masse, as a method of non-violent resistance. It hasn’t worked but they keep trying. IFPB had arranged for the family to provide us with a “light lunch.” Lunch was an incredible banquet.

***Bilin:*** Bilin is the town that has a demonstration every Friday and where Emily ? (from Bethesda) lost her eye and Tristan Anderson was left in a coma by being hit by a tear gas canister. The village, with some 4,500 inhabitants, originally covered about 1,000 acres. Israel then designated over 65% of the land as “Area C,” in which Palestinians are not allowed to build without a permit, and Israel will not issue any permits. Israel then established a large settlement there and built a separation barrier that prevented the villagers from reaching their land/olive groves. The villagers sued, and the courts ruled that the separation barrier has to be moved returning to the village about 20% of its original acreage. But the villagers’ olive trees were bulldozed, and there is no water.

In this village, we also saw videos of soldiers beating and arresting demonstrators. Children are targeted for the abuse. But not having them in the demonstrations doesn’t good any good, because if they aren’t arrested and beaten in demonstrations, the soldiers come at random times and do the same thing. We saw one video where the village had been sprayed with tear gas. They had all the children go to a second story in one of the buildings where they felt the kids would be safe from the tear gas. The soldiers went right into the building and hurled a tear gas canister upstairs and they had to evacuate the kids from a second-story window by ladder. There was one scene where a two-year old was handed out of a window to someone on the ladder. So, the kids take part in the demonstrations and chant and sing and dance, knowing that it could lead to attack at that time vs. attack at some other time. One villager was killed when he was hit in the chest from close range by a canister. We walked to where he was hit, and the ground was littered with tear gas canisters. Printed on each of them was “Made in U.S.A.” Another 16-year-old is in serious condition, as we could see clearly from the video that there were 10 or more rubber bullet holes in his chest. The soldiers also used power sprays of “shit water” that stinks for several days. The middle-of-the-night raids are common. More of their people have been murdered in the last six years than in the 30 years prior. Children are suffering from PTSD.

The speakers talked about trying to work their land and settlers driving them away, both sides knowing that after two years, they would lose their land. They totally support BDS because Israelis suffer with the loss of anything they have. Think of the contrast between the ways they treat their thousands of prisoners (not in accordance with Geneva) with the fuss over one prisoner, Gilad Shalit. What I heard here and elsewhere was basically, “WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS.” One of the videos was of demonstrators be tortured, shackled to poles, with a noose around his neck. Someone threw something and a soldier was hit and fell. There was sheer terror among the Palestinians, ‘He killed an Israeli.” The word just spread. They were probably anticipating a slaughter. Seeing the fear was horrible.

The speeches were passionate. They want to be able to plan their lives for more than an hour. The speakers reiterated what other speakers had said about teaching children not to hate, since they started to act non-violently, Israeli violence increased. The Palestinians just want to be free to move around freely and lead real lives.

Our group was divided among four local families for the night. I had hoped to be sent with the older people; the group from Rochester. I figured they’d be given something slightly better than the others. I got lucky. I didn’t go with them but with six other women, mostly young. The family was fantastic. I knew, though that my little hand towel was not going to get me through a shower. I asked Anna if I could ask someone at the house to sell me a towel. She said I should just ask to borrow one. That’s part of the next stage of this adventure.

***Home visit:*** The positive highlight of my trip. The house was quite small and at one point I asked how many people actually live there and I was told 12 (they may not have understood the question). But the seven of us (all women) slept on mats on the living room floor; there was one bathroom for the people who lived there and us. The house was filled with welcoming “young people”; late teens to late 20s in age. I learned there were 5 brothers and 5 sisters in the family. There was also a grandfather to the young people and their mother. Several young children were running around and I never could find out who were the parents of whom. There were also spouses of the younger people. Everyone was friendly. Anna had told us that Bilin is fairly conservative and we should be prepared to cover up. However, in all the meetings anywhere, no woman who spoke to our group wore a head scarf (and every man we met shook hands with us), so I was surprised to see most of these young women with scarves or other head cover. I think I learned why they wore them: a young man, who I think was one of the boyfriends (not yet an in-law) came in and the mother ran up to a young woman without a scarf and put one on her. I’m guessing, but I don’t know, that they only wear their scarves when mom’s around. Among the Muslim women I come into contact with in the US, it is frequently the activists and feminists that wear scarves but I assume it’s different in the more traditional country. The young women were in charge of hospitality and dinner, which, as at lunch was an enormous banquet of delicious food (the ingredients were the same as at lunch, but they were put together differently so that even the chicken and rice main dish tasted different). The young women invited us into their shared bedroom for “girl talk.’ I was asked the same questions several times: How old are you? Are you married? For how long? How old are your children? Etc. I think the long white hair was very unusual. There was one young couple that sat together on the sofa and couldn’t seem to take their hands off each other. She told me they had only been marred a couple of months. She’s 19 and he’s 25 and they’d been engaged for five years. They were waiting for her father to get out of prison (purported crime, if any, unspecified) before getting married because they wanted him to be there. The women never stopped laughing and the men were goofing around with us. The young couple invited us to their house next door to see their wedding video; five of us went. She removed her scarf as soon as we got into her house (of course, there were no men there but her husband, so that says nothing). It looked like a Jewish wedding on amphetamine. Her wedding gown was Western style; sort of like Kate Middleton’s (but there was a wedding gown in a shop window near our hotel, that had a bodice top attached to a flair skirt with strips of fabric so that the entire middle section was bare). I knew it wasn’t a Jewish wedding because the circle dance was not a Hora but a circle dance to Arabic music. Other than for the ceremony the bride’s head was never covered; this despite the many guests of both sexes. In fact, she had an elaborate hairdo. Then came the climax for me, the bride and groom dancing around each other doing a belly dance. He moved; she did the Dance of the Seven Veils, without disrobing; just suggestive and really sexy. I didn’t think I had stereotypes; but after that evening I realized I do (did, I hope). I love being proved wrong!!!

Anyway, back at the house, I was the only one needing a shower (sweated all day). As Anna had suggested, I asked if I could use a towel. The one I was given was obviously the family towel; I drip dried (and had probably used more water than was allotted to me). I guess because I was old, I was offered the sofa bed in the living room; I saw the sheet and opted for the floor mat. And Arlene, the klutz, lives up to her reputation. We had been told to bring total cover ups for sleeping at the refugee camp and homes. I had a “dress” that Al had bought himself in Egypt: thick cotton, down to my ankles, long sleeves and buttons to the neck. At the refugee camp, one of the women pointed out to me that the button was hanging by a thread and didn’t close, so I put my nightgown under it. I couldn’t check but assumed it was alright. I was wearing that combination and one of the older sons started dancing around me singing, “That’s the way ah ha ah ha, I like it ah ha ah ha.” Stereotype? Right!!!

Once more, I was reminded of the things I take for granted. These people have so little, but despite whatever they were paid to have us there, they share so willingly more than is necessary. Breakfast was another banquet and we left Bilin; I was sorry I was flying out on Friday and wouldn’t be there for the Bilin demonstration. But it was also good to know we’d be back at our hotel in E. Jerusalem that night and I could take a real hot shower and use a real towel to dry off.

**Monday, May 30**

***Birzuit University***  We met with a group of students. The school has 9,000 students, 57% of them women. The university had been closed 15 times, once for three years, by Israel. Some of their textbooks have been banned by the Israeli government. They were more interested discussing their problems (which, of course are also political) than the more global ones we were asking about; no money to go to school and not being able to take early morning classes because you never knew how long you’d be held at checkpoint during your commute. They gave us a tour of the campus and we left.

***Ramallah:***  This is the capital of the Palestinian Authority and the town where, in the early 2000s, Arafat was living and had his offices when everything around him was destroyed and he was left with no electricity. There is still a lot of rubble in the central areas but also a lot of rebuilding going on. Ramallah is different from other cities in Palestine: It is modern and affluent; there are shops and sidewalks and it looks like any major city anywhere in the world. Prior to the second intifada, it is where Israelis were streaming on weekends for the nightclubs and casinos. Now, it is a neutral meeting place for business people from Europe to meet with those from Iran or Iraq, because they can’t meet in each other’s countries. If you see a Palestinian film that takes place in a modern city, it is likely Ramallah and in my favorite Palestinian film, “Rana’s wedding,” the traveling takes place between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Ramallah has also been the home of Palestinian theater and film making.

 ***Omar Barghouti:*** Anyone familiar with the Israel-Palestine situation has read Omar Barghouti’s writing. He spoke in the Quaker Meeting Room in Ramallah. He heads the Palestinian campaign for global boycott of settlement goods and of many global companies that do business in Israel. The program decides which goods and companies should be boycotted. Decisions are not influenced by the Palestine Authority or any other political organization. He is confident they can follow the South Africa model with equal success.

These days, borders and one-state vs. two-states is the International debate. However, initially, they weren’t discussing Statehood but rather the end of the occupation and discrimination as well as the major UN goal of refugee return Now, right of return is treated as the least serious issue. It is the occupation, and not Israel that is being boycotted. Palestinian agriculture has been systematically destroyed in order to sell Israeli/settlement products. Even the West Bank cannot import products from Gaza. Companies in many countries are losing business because they have contracts with settlements. When organizations join this umbrella organization, they are thoroughly vetted. Any organization that is basically built on bigotry, including anti-semitism, cannot join the umbrella.

Someone asked the usual question. What if someone is living in their own house or if there’s a school or airport there. He said what everyone else has; no-one intends to do anything crazy; they are not planning to kick people out of their homes or tear down schools. They want the “Right to Return.” I asked the dumbest question I asked all trip. Everyone agrees that the Palestinians are not planning to take over en masse and move back to their old homes. Why is this not explained. You talk about right of return and frighten people but if you explained what you really mean, it may not be such a hot issue. Barghout’s eyes flared and he exclaimed (!) “THEY HAVE THE RIGHT TO SELF DETERMINATION. That is not open to discussion.” It was that evening that Adam explained what I discussed in a ‘thread’ above: The “right” is inviolate in International Law; how it plays out; how it’s implemented will be different, but you can’t water down the “right.” I agree!! I just hadn’t thought it out and I don’t know how to explain it any better than anyone else does. And news that I enjoyed hearing, the US Agency that they consider THE BEST, is Jewish Voice for Peace, the one I consistently recommend and whose Muzzlewatch feature I frequently forward to many of you.

He talked about organizations that get Palestinians and Israelis to “play nice” together and help to understand each other’s viewpoints. He said, and I’ve long thought about this, that equal amounts of “tolerance” is not equal under oppressor/oppressed conditions. The Nazi or rapists’ point of view is not the equivalent of the point of view of their victims. All these programs support the status quo; they are “enablers”. I don’t know if I agree or not; I agree that Palestinians should not be accepting Israeli rationale for oppressing them, but sometimes if an oppressor actually meets and knows the “other,” they realize how horrendous and irrational they themselves have been. He strongly made the same statement about their humanity that other speakers had made. And news that I enjoyed hearing, the US Agency that they consider THE BEST, is Jewish Voice for Peace, the one I always recommend and whose Muzzlewatch feature I frequently forward to many of you.

He also mentioned that studies have looked at the reparations given to Jews after the Holocaust and it will probably become the basis for the international standard. I was really interested in hearing about that, because I knew a young Swiss historian who was working at the Holocaust Museum in DC for a semester, doing that research. She had said that it was to establish the reparation standards in other cases.

***Sandy Tolan:*** I was probably the only one on this trip who had never read Tolan’s book, ‘The Lemon Tree” (totally unrelated to the movie of the same name). It’s about a Palestinian who left his home during the Nakba and the Bulgarian Jewish refugees that moved into it during the Communist era in Bulgaria. (The Bulgarian population defended Jews from the Nazis and no Jews were killed in Bulgaria during the Nazi era.) Tolan told about a meeting he had had with a man in a refugee camp. Sandy asked the man if he ever thought about the right to return. The man looked at him and said, “I never think about it, *I live it*!”, broke into tears and left the room.

***Checkpoint:*** On the way back to the hotel we went through the Qalandria checkpoint. We were going to walk through it, rather than take our privileged drive through. This was mid-afternoon and there was no-one there except us. (During rush hour, it would have been insane.) I’ll start by saying that it took 31 of us, 45 minutes to get through. While we were on line someone yelled from a guard house, that a second window had opened. Half our group rushed to the other window, but it wasn’t opened. They streamed back to our line. Then the announcement came again, but no-one left our line. Then our gate was closed and we did have to go to the other line. Supposedly, these are the kinds of games they play with the Palestinians walking through the checkpoint and it can take hours to get through. But supposedly, going through by car, if you’re Palestinian, is even worse. Not only is it possible for everything you wear and carry with you to be searched. They occasionally dismantle your car completely: tires, brakes, steering wheel, whatever and leave it for you to put back together on the other side.

***Hebrew University Students:*** If this wasn’t so serious, I would have thought of these four as a comedy routine; it sounded like they were all being satirical. Unfortunately, we were probably hearing the words of average Israelis.

One of the students had been asked to put together a panel. They came to our hotel to speak. The organizer commented that he had never been “here” before. I wondered why he would have been; this was certainly not a major hotel. Then he said he’d never been to “this place” before. I suddenly realized he meant East Jerusalem; he was scared. He went on to say he was asked to put together the panel since he was so involved with the NGOs on campus. I asked him what he did with the NGOs and it was analyses of demographic and census data; nothing “political.” A member of our group said she’d been reading that economically, Israel was booming. They all said, no. Money for education and social services were cut. Sounds like the US; wealth amidst lots of poverty and cost cutting. He brought one friend who was a biology major and said she had no interest in politics. But as the discussion continued, she talked about an aunt and uncle who the government moved out of their beautiful home and made them move to a settlement in the West Bank. People were afraid to visit them and visitors went in a convoy for safety. We had been riding around on “settler only” roads but Israelis were convinced they were in danger. When we were later talking about two-states at the 1967 line, she said that couldn’t happen. I t wouldn’t be fair for her relatives to be forced to move again. I asked her why they were forced to move in the first place (I thought, perhaps, they were immigrants being given the worst housing). It turns out they were among the settlers forced to move from Gaza. She said it so matter of factly; I wanted to push her face in (she’s not political, right?). OH, I felt so bad for them being forced to move like that. The third speaker, a female graduate student, said she was an ‘activist’ for the Israel-Palestine issue. One-State, “never”. Jews and Palestinians cannot live together. You can’t allow Palestinians to return; they’d outnumber Jews. Two-state borders should be the Green Line (at least she agreed with that) and Israel should pay reparations to the Palestinians in lieu of allowing them to move back. The last man had similar views: Two states, no right of return, no expectation of Jews and Palestinians living in proximity. I fully support one state, but one man in our group had previously told me that they should just move the Wall to the Green Line and if you’re West of it, you’re an Israeli citizen; if you’re East of it, you’re a Palestinian citizen, unless you move. Since this agrees with what my husband always says, I asked the first panelist what he thought of that idea. “I can’t let a Jew live in a Palestinian country. That’s just not possible.” So, not only do Israelis want to tell Palestinians what to do; this one thought he can even tell Israelis what to do. Seems like a great country to grow up in.

**Tuesday, May 31**

***Sderot:*** I was really glad we were going to Sderot. I’d heard so much about the Gaza rockets hitting Sderot but with virtually no fatalities. I knew that one of the major Israeli reporters (possibly Hass, but I’m not sure) lives there with her children to show that there was little danger. I also had heard Dorothy of New Profile speak about Sderot. “If it’s so dangerous to live there, why doesn’t the government move them, instead of moving more in?” She also says that new immigrants are put there “to pay their dues.” Basically, the Russian Jews and the Mizrachi are considered the dregs of society in Israel and the new immigrants are sent to Sderot to live; the rockets make great propaganda.

But the story I heard was way beyond anything I could have imagined. Sderot has a population of about 20,000 people and is about two miles from the Gaza border. Nomika Zion, the speaker, developed the kibbutz in Sderot about 25 years ago. For a number of years, there was constant rocket fire from Gaza; 20/day at any time of the day or night. There are reinforced concrete bomb shelters attached to each house and along streets and schoolyards and disguised as play equipment in the playgrounds. They are so close that no-one has to run more than 15 seconds from anywhere in the town to get to one. The Israeli army provides good warning signals when a rocket is launched, providing time for mothers to grab their children and scramble to their “safe room.” They needed to stay in a shelter only two minutes or so, but because of the shock and anxiety the rockets caused, she said many were victims of stress disorder. Her discussion of the mental state of the people in that town, just constant fear and horror, never knowing if your children were going to be killed made many people move out as soon as possible. Her explanation was very intense. The trauma from constant rocket fire was indescribable. It’s strange that while this was all going on, Israel was using the Wall between Israel and Gaza as the example of a Wall keeping Israel safe.

However, over the years, the people of Sderot and Gaza forged friendships, speaking by phone, although some residents of Gaza have stopped because they have been threatened by the Hamas authorities. When Obama was elected in the US, the Israeli army started a large offensive attack in Gaza, claiming they were killing militants. (She was the first person I ever heard who thought the Gaza massacre had something to do with the Israeli election. I never asked why.) Although her community wasn’t being bombed, it was traumatized by the sounds of Israeli bombing 24 hours a day. They also knew what kind of retaliation there would be against Sderot. Residents of Sderot tried to convince the Israeli army to negotiate, but they didn’t give a damn about the people of Sderot. She wanted to help the Gazans, but there was no way to do so. The worst of it was the celebrations in her community with fireworks for the success of the Israeli army.. She was crying so hard and she said she despised Netanyahu so much.

A man took us to a hill where saw Gaza and the 300-yard no-man’s land on either side of the fence. On a little hill between us and the fence we could see a strange little device. Our guide said it was an unmanned device that has already shot down a couple of rockets as they were launched and also includes guns that can be used in case of disturbances in no-man’s land. Unfortunately, our guide said, while the United States helped build the device, it is terribly expensive, and they could afford only one other such device to help guard the entire Gaza border.

In all, since the rocket fire started 25 years ago, 18 people in total have been killed by the rockets; nine of them were in Sderot. The last rocket to hit Sderot was in 2008, now they hit further North. When the settlers left Gaza, the olive groves were destroyed by Israel. All the settlements were bulldozed by Israel. The greenhouses were left but they were destroyed by the Gazans. Although food is getting in, they cannot legally export any of their products. There are 150 tunnels; an underground economy. Israel controls the electricity and it is turned off most of the day. They’re waiting to see what effect the opening of the Rafah Gate will have.

***Kibbutz:*** We also went to the nearby Kibbutz Zikim, developed in 1949 as a socialist community. It remains far left wing, but of its 280 members, perhaps only 60 are socialists. It started as an agricultural kibbutz, but today that’s not economical, so it manufactures plastic products, and it’s a struggle. Every member gets the same amount of money each month for food and spending money, and peer pressure is applied for each person to do his share. The kibbutz is renting to four Arab families, who conceivably could eventually become members. They make art from the Kassam Rockets from Gaza. No-one questioned him, but it sounded like, when he spoke of them, and the people who worked there, he was assuming that Palestinians, of course, had different status than Jews.

Someone asked about the fact that the kibbutz replaced some Palestinian families that had been living there, and there remains a large old Palestinian building on the property. Our guide, a San Francisco native who immigrated in 1967, said he never thought about it at that time, but now feels some shame. He agrees the Palestinians were forced out and they deserve the right of return, but they all now have to deal with what is, not what might have been.

***Settlers:*** We were supposed to meet with three ex-settlers from Gaza but they never came. Instead, a man who lives in the same town they do, spoke to us. He told of the trauma suffered by the 8000 settlers who were forcibly removed from Gaza in 2005. He showed a film about the settlements that were destroyed and how the people had been forced to move. One woman on the film said that she’d lived in her beautiful home for 3 ½ years and then was forced to leave it. Nowhere was there any sign of recognition that other people had been forced to move to make way for them. The speaker was living in the U.S. but he was so incensed when he heard of the Gaza evictions that he moved back to Israel. There is no way Israel should give back land as it did in Gaza. Genesis says that God gave them this land, and it not theirs to give back. Look what happened when Israel gave Gaza to the Palestinians. He wants a one-State solution so Jews can live anywhere in the area but Jews have to have sovereignty in the one Democratic State. It will be democratic because everyone can vote (presumably within the Jewish precepts). The Right of Return is an absolute no; every country has the right to keep foreigners out; look at what the US is doing to keep foreigners out..

**Wednesday, June 1**

***Hebron:*** We went to Hebron, the largest city in the West Bank. It has sites that are “holy” to both Jews and Muslims and had been divided in half for years between Palestinians and settlers. The settlement was the most extreme of them all. In 1994 an American Jew broke into the mosque during Ramadan and machine gunned the Muslims. He was prosecuted by Israel and is in jail, but to many Fundamentalist Jews, he’s considered a hero. Israel decided it had to “protect” Palestinians from such attacks, so they officially allocated half the Mosque as a synagogue, with a separate entrance, and closed the adjacent roads to Palestinians. The roads were the main ones connecting north Hebron and South Hebron, and they had been filled with shops and were always bustling with people. This destroyed all the economic activity in Palestinian Hebron; every store on the Palestinian Main Street have closed; there is nothing there. The shops in the Israeli sector are booming. A lot of homes were confiscated to add on to the settlement although many are not even occupied.

The road we arrived on was another that separated Palestinians from their fields. Although Mizrachi Jews are generally highly Zionist (probably to show their loyalty because they are treated so badly), the Mizrachi guides for the tour of Hebron were “Jews Against the Occupation.” We visited many sites that were mentioned in the Old Testament, although the sites went through several iterations with different cultures and invasions. We visited the mosque and the room where the massacre occurred, then went to see the synagogue. Apartments above the closed shops, where Palestinians live, had iron mesh on the windows because settlers had thrown so many stones through the windows. There were nets above the houses because settlers on the hills above these homes threw garbage down on the Palestinians. The stories we heard of settler behavior towards Palestinians in this town replicate anything you may have read in Makdisi’s book. There is swift Israeli action for any Palestinian demonstration or protest.

Since our guide was not allowed in the other half of Hebron, he took us up a rocky slope to see it from above. He told me there were only six steps; but I realized too late to turn around (I wasn’t going to climb down by myself) that it was six staircases and lots of rocks to climb over. Not knowing that it was coming, I wasn’t wearing my hiking boots or carrying my poles. The young people were great in giving me hands and getting me up there. Two of the older men helped me down the entire way (although I say, I helped them down, one in each hand) and I still owe them each a drink. We visited a textile factory and glass factory. I bought a couple of kafiyas and two sets of drinking glasses to match those I already have.

***Lucas’ Arrest:*** As we were driving back to Jerusalem, I started to notice lots of Israeli flags blowing in the wind. Each minute brought more people carrying large Israeli flags. It was to commemorate the end of the 1967 War and the “unification” of Jerusalem. The crowds got bigger and bigger and I started to understand the horror people feel when they see our demonstrations. They seemed to be everywhere because no matter where the bus went, there they were. They had come from all over. There were so many in East Jerusalem, near our hotel, that the streets were blocked and we were let out of the bus at least five blocks away (if you know bus tours, that’s not common).

There were few Palestinians on the streets. This demonstration in East Jerusalem would be the equivalent of Germans demonstrating for Hitler in the Warsaw Ghetto. The shopkeepers just watched and pedestrians walked with their heads down without looking at them. One person asked a shopkeeper why there was no Palestinian reaction and he said, “We’ve been domesticated.” Some of the young people walked back to our hotel carrying a gigantic kaffiya as the demonstrators hooted at them (and of course, they hooted back). The police started to chase Lucas, who I suppose was yelling the most, but they didn’t catch him—that time. After getting back to the hotel, though, the young people went out again, held their flag and chanted. They were soon joined by some young Palestinians. Lucas, a very knowledgeable sophomore from Tufts, was wearing a yarmulke with a Palestinian flag pin on it and a Palestinian flag wrapped around his neck. He was talking into a microphone, attached to a camera, about why he was demonstrating. He was attacked by three cops, thrown to the ground, handcuffed and dragged to a police car and then from the police car into the neighborhood police station. Our leaders contacted the U.S. consulate and a law firm, and a court-appointed lawyer went to the police station to be with him when he was interrogated. Late that evening Lucas phoned Adam, our co-leader, and asked him to bring him a sandwich. When Adam arrived at the police station, the first thing the police said to Adam was, “Are you Palestinian?” Adam said that Lucas was still being Lucas and protesting his treatment, but he didn’t look like he’d been hurt. He said he was being charged with biting a police officer, something that would have been impossible up, given his position as he was dragged into the police station.

**Thursday, June 2**

It was a free morning. I had planned to go back to the Crafts Center that it took me all morning to find the previous week, but this time to actually look in the shops. Adam asked for people to go to the court to support Lucas. As usual, I identified with his mother; I knew he could take care of himself and was making his own decisions. I also accurately assumed that not too much was going to happen to an American Jew. I thought his mother may want to hear from an older person and a mother that he was all right. In addition, I figured it couldn’t hurt to have an old Jewish woman sitting in the courtroom for him. I was certainly no-one anyone expected to go.

They wanted to get there by 8;30 because they didn’t know when Lucas’ hearing would be. We started walking and the others left me in the dust. I figured I would follow until I didn’t see them ahead of me anymore, but Amy got directions and came back to crawl with me. We found the administrative office complex but had no idea what to do next. She asked someone in Hebrew who pointed somewhere outside the complex. That seemed wrong. And just fortuitously, I guessed that someone sweeping might be Palestinian. When I asked, he pointed us to the middle of the complex. We needed a third opinion and Amy asked someone in Hebrew who pointed outside the complex. Fourth opinion, someone with a broom who pointed in the same direction as previously in the complex. So, Amy went into an administrative building to ask and I saw someone carrying a briefcase, who looked like an attorney. We both got the same response, and SURPRISE, it was the building in the spot in which the people with the brooms had pointed. Now, how LUCKY was that? I certainly couldn’t think of the reason, the people who speak Arabic know more than those who speak Hebrew. Anyway, the unintended consequences were that Palestinians who joined Lucas in the demonstration were also arrested later on (I guess, facial recognition software) and we know things didn’t go so great for them. The newspaper that morning said that Palestinians were arrested along with one “tourist.”

Amy and I were told before we went upstairs that Lucas had to many people and some would be asked to leave. We took our chances. Adam and others were in the hall waiting. We were told three people had to leave. I got up to go, but I’m a slowpoke and three of his friends left. I followed them down the hall but I didn’t want to yell, but gave up and came back. It looked like it would be hours, so another man and I left so Adam could call the friends to come back up. We walked to the hotel. And I got myself a fresh squeezed orange juice.

***LIFTA*** was a town of 2800 people vacated in 1948 and never demolished or repaired. It was left to deteriorate; the mosque and a number of buildings are still standing as is an old olive press. The only part that’s in good repair is the swimming pool which is used by Israelis for parties. A group of teen-agers went down while we were there. To get to it, you have to walk down a steep rocky hill; much worse than the day before when everyone but me wore sandals and did fine, and I was the only one with problems. Today, everyone had good sturdy walking or hiking shoes. I had my hiking boots and poles. But one of my poles broke. So, I waited on top with a few other people who didn’t want to brave it.

***Tent of Nations:***  To get there, the bus stopeed at a pile of rocks used as a road barrier about one-mile from the actual site. We had to climb over that. About a quarter mile down an unpaved path, was another rock roadblock that we had to climb over. There is no purpose to either of these roadblocks other than harassment. No-one can drive in or out and they can’t even drive one car the full mile, climb over the roadblock and get into another car. For anyone trying to get out in an emergency or to an ambulance, it would be sheer hell. All groceries, gasoline, and everything else being delivered has to be unloaded at the first roadblock, carried to the second roadblock and then driven to the house.

Nassar and his family own 1,000 acres here at the top of a hill from which they can see the Meditteranea Sea. Unlike most Palestinians who owned property by informal convention, Nasser’s family recognized that Western practices would eventually be coming and they got a deed to the land back during the Ottoman Empire. They have receipts for all their taxes, from every subsequent occupier (Jordanian, British, and now Israeli). Twenty years ago, the Israeli government surrounded his entire land with military installations and settlements and tried to get Nassar to move but he wouldn’t, even when given a blank check and asked to insert an amount. Israeli courts have upheld Nassar’s ownership, but they keep trying to get rid of him. Settlers cut down 250 olive trees, but Nassar planted 500 more. He has no water connection, but he has half a dozen cisterns that provide him running water. He had no electricity until a year ago, his son, an engineer in Germany, set up a solar system. They must have at least one family member on the land at any time, or the land will be taken from them.

The family created the Tent of Nations to protect his land by bringing people from various cultures together. Last year, 7000 people from around the world visited his Tent of Nations, including neighboring settlers. Nassar is not allowed to build anything new on his property. His house and two caves (one being a chapel) were there before 1948. He has erected four large tents, one a large meeting room, and the other three look a bit like barracks. They are illegal and subject to demolition, but he plans to rebuild them if they are demolished. His farm grows olives and grapes for wine, but it also has enclosures for chickens and goats. The fences for those enclosures are also illegal, and they’re also under order for demolition. Until last year Nassar and family squeezed the grapes the traditional way, with their feet. But now he has a press, donated by Americans. His son, Daoud, travels all over speaking about the Palestinian plight.

**Friday, June 3**

We had a wakeup call at 3:00 AM. British Airlines was great getting home as it was coming. Lucas was released from jail to a friend of his families on condition that he fly home the next day. A video taken of his arrest provided the evidence that he hadn’t bitten anyone. About a third of the group were going to be traveling around the Middle East after the trip was over. On Friday, several were going to join the demonstration in B’ilin. I saw a YouTube showing soldiers disrupting that demonstration and spewing tear gas; I didn’t recognize any of the faces on the video; it’s possible they didn’t go because they were working on Lucas’ release.

When I went through Customs, an African-American Customs Officer in his mid-20s, looked at my form and said “Kaffiyas and drinking glasses. Anything else?” I said, “no” and he said “You’re sure you’re not schlepping any other tchotchkes in your luggage?” I started to laugh and said that now I know I’m home. And he said, “No, you’re not. This isn’t Brooklyn.” Al said I was still smiling when I walked into the arrival area.

**I’M HOME** NOW, if you read this, I’ll take questions, comments, criticisms, corrections, etc. I think this trip is worthwhile for anyone interested in Israel-Palestine, the US military budget which pays for the Israeli abuses, human rights, equality, justice or any other good stuff. We were asked for a final quote before we left: What we learned about the situation or ourselves. I don’t remember mine, exactly, but it was something like:

**I learned I’m biased and I’m proud of it. I always take the side of human rights, equality, justice and truth!**