

Dust on My Shoes

By Wendy Hartley

Today we visited al-Birwa, a destroyed Palestinian village inside Israel. We were met by two men in their late 60s, Abu Asad and Akim, survivors of the Nakba, and Cyrine, the beautiful 15 year-old granddaughter of Abu Asad. The men were dressed in spotless short sleeve buttoned shirts, tucked into belted trousers. They could have been at a business meeting, and perhaps they were, standing on the dry, dusty earth littered with stones, desiccated thistles, and patches of cowpats. Cyrine is small, slender in her black South Park tee shirt, her wavy black shoulder length hair crowned by a perky black and white checked baseball cap.

As Abu Asad told us the story of his village's destruction, my mind began to run on two tracks. Abu Assad was born in 1939 (he is 3 years older than I), and was 9 years old at the time of the 1948 assault on his village. The Israeli military surrounded the village on the North, West and South, leaving only the East open as an escape route. There were 1600 residents in the village, Muslims and Christians, sharing one life. There were no problems between the two faiths. Even though the town priest was the village leader, the Muslims participated in his selection because he represented the village.

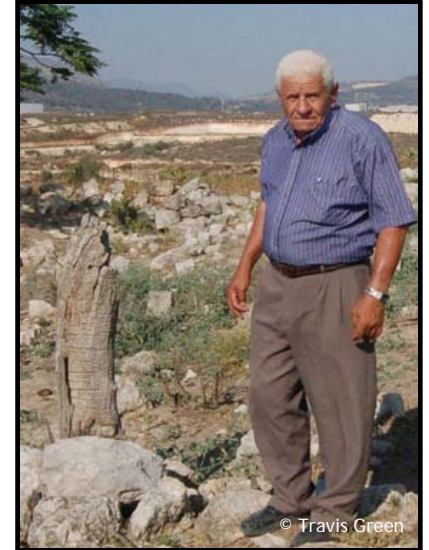
The Israelis forced everyone to flee; this was equal opportunity oppression. Although some have remained living in nearby villages, others have scattered to cities in Israel and the occupied territories, to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the United States – a full diaspora. No one is allowed to return. Israeli Jews have built houses on the village's land. A barn stands where the church used to be.

Abu Asad is a short man with sun weathered complexion and grey-white hair. He has deep creases on his face, and speaks with clarity and emphasis. He is a good storyteller. Hearing him put me in mind of my Grandma Bertha who was born in a Jewish village in Russia near the end of the 19th Century. In the year 1900, after suffering pogroms and attacks by the Cossacks, Bertha's mother decided to send her two daughters to what she prayed would be a better life in America. Bertha, then 13, took her 8 year-old sister, Jeannette, by the hand and joined a group of refugees to walk across Europe to an Atlantic port. They hid in barns during the day, progressing under cover of nighttime darkness. Sometimes they had to stay in hiding before crossing a border, waiting for the right (bribed) guard to be on duty. My grandmother made it to America, but she never saw her mother or her village again. Bertha was a good storyteller, like Abu Asad. As I saw and heard him telling his story to us, and to his granddaughter, I had a sensation of merging circles, of my family history merging with theirs.

People want to live their lives in harmony with their families, neighbors, and land. When a mighty oppressor overpowers and displaces the people and demolishes the villages, it crushes more than houses and lives, it breaks the harmony composed by people and land that has been created and sustained for countless generations. The Israeli military has demolished Abu Asad's village, trying to change the landscape by knocking down all the homes and the mosque and church. They have taken stones from the church to use in road construction. They destroyed 3,000 – 4,000 olive trees. They desecrated the cemetery. Yet every refugee believes he will return. They come each year to plant new trees, and each time the Israeli bulldozers uproot the plantings.

Abu Asad's granddaughter, Cyrine, says, **"We can't give up. It is important not to forget.... Tell (young) people in the US not to give up if they are oppressed. Keep hope."** A delegate asked what she would say to George Bush. A brief pause, and then, "I'd ask him what he would do if what happens to us happened to his kids."

When I removed my shoes this evening, I noticed the crevices on the soles had retained the dust gathered by walking through the destroyed village. I shall not wash off this dust.



*Abu Asad walks among the
remains of his village, al-Birwa.*

Time is neutral: Actions are not

By Michael Brown

I spent considerable time living and working in the Gaza Strip between 1993 and 2000. Yet I did not realize just how different this trip would be until after a young man in Bethlehem told me about his three-year-old son, who is roughly the age of my oldest son. His son, he said, recently confided to him that “he didn’t want to die like the children in Gaza die.”

I had not previously understood just how much emotional power one young father can convey to another. Time and again the Interfaith Peace-Builders’ itinerary brought me face to face with charged emotional or political issues at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I had seen and considered many of these issues previously, but I am much changed since my last visit and the situation has deteriorated considerably.

The most revealing political comment came from Muhammad Jaradat, director of Badil, an organization working for the right of return for Palestinian refugees to homes and lands from which they were forced out 60 years ago. He said to our delegation, “What Israeli leader will have the charisma to pull 500,000 settlers out of the West Bank?” The question goes straight to the heart of the conflict and whether 10 years from now we will have a two-state solution, a one-state solution, or an apartheid arrangement comprised of disconnected Palestinian Bantustans and a dual system of law.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert intellectually seems to recognize the urgency of establishing two states, yet appears constrained by his right flank. So entangled are Palestinian and Israeli lives in the West Bank that it seems increasingly unlikely that the mix of people can be undone.



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Three generations of Palestinian refugees meet with the delegation in Deheishah Refugee Camp: Murad (right), his father Naji (left), and Naji's mother Fatma (center).

The choice before Israel is clear: Withdraw quickly from the West Bank and East Jerusalem or face the prospect that some day soon Palestinians will give up on their own independent state while insisting on a South Africa-like outcome that provides them with full equality – and an emerging majority – in the Holy Land.

Our delegation encountered the notion of one state with greater frequency than I recall it ever having been raised. Popular understanding of the conflict is changing. The central question of the next five years is likely to be: two states, one state, or apartheid?

The IFPB delegation gave me much to consider. Israelis and Palestinians, of course, have the same question before them, but do not have the luxury of time. For Israelis to continue settlement activity as usual is to choose.



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