Checking Your Waistline at Qalandiya Checkpoint:

Dieting as a Peace Initiative

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In 2006, Yael Luttwak, an American Jewish woman and Israeli citizen, organized a multi-faith dieting group for women, both Palestinian and Israeli, in Jerusalem. The premise was that concern with one's body fat was shared by all women and therefore could provide a common ground for peaceful discussion in what has been known for centuries as the "Holy Land," now the highly contested place of Israel-Palestine. Luttwack's film about the encounter, *A Slim Peace*, described as "a hybrid film which has its roots in observational documentary,"[1] premiered in 2007 at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York and received positive attention in the American and British presses. It continues to be shown at interfaith events, and at special women's nights at British and American synagogues; the primary audience for the film seems to be those outside the Holy Land as it is in English with no Arabic or Hebrew translations or subtitles.[2]

Eating and peace have often been associated: commensality may be seen as a prelude to peace, an act that is a celebration of peace, or an acknowledgment of the need to eat that unites us all in a common, if base, humanity. In this documentary, in contrast, it is the not-eating together, the collective *withdrawing* from food through dieting, which is imagined as the way to peace – a counterintuitive move piquing interest and some curious amusement. One might wonder why this hour-long film of a short-lived dieting group in 2006, a year that saw the election of Hamas and the institutionalization of the Qalandiya checkpoint separating Ramallah from Jerusalem, deserves anthropological attention. One answer is that this quirky, seemingly benign initiative joining Israelis

and Palestinians in peaceful activity is an example of larger practices of "normalization," which treat the contemporary unequal distribution of resources and power between the Israelis and the Palestinians as if these problems can be overcome by personal, polite, and positive interactions between the populations. This particular incarnation of normalizing practices puts women and their bodies on center stage in Jerusalem, a city valued by all but accessible only to some. Luttwack asserts that women's talk about losing weight, assumed to produce an unadulterated increase in their attractiveness to men and positive feelings of self-worth, is "deeply human," a universal that can overcome the divisiveness and violence in the Middle East. In Luttwack's own words: "I believe in peace. I care a lot about the Middle East. I care about the fact that Israelis and Palestinians are continuously killing each other, and I'd like that to stop. I wanted to see what would happen if we brought them together over something as universal as weight loss – because who doesn't care about their weight? Could they come together on something as neutral as that?"[3] The documentary provides one of the many examples of how international discourses – here discourses of dieting, which feminist scholars would hardly find neutral – take on a particular inflection when transplanted to the "Holy Land."

This article seeks to address the question: can diverse women getting together to talk about the fat on their bodies solve the greater problems of the political unrest and violence in the Holy Land, which are experienced by Palestinians as a result of other kinds of losses? A central concern of this article is the checkpoint, particularly the oppressive checkpoint at Qalandiya, which cuts the city of Ramallah off from Jerusalem, curtailing the mobility of Palestinians.[4] Palestinian bodies are already among the most checked and regulated in the world and in this film they have to cross the Israeli checkpoints to get to Jerusalem (their erstwhile capital) in order to have their bodies checked again – this time for fat – at a group moderated by an Israeli nutritionist. The sad irony is that while all the women are encouraged to surveil their own bodies, checking them obsessively to prevent weight gain or encourage weight loss, Palestinian women's bodies are subject to other forms of external surveillance as well. I also examine the wider talk in the documentary about *loss*. Here the talk of *loss* of the despised fat on women's bodies is presumed to produce a unifying political subjectivity. Loss was a constant topic of conversation during my work with Palestinians in olive oil production – loss of life, of land, of olive trees, of movement, of hope – but none of it was positive. Yet in this context, that of the bizarre dieting group, in contrast to practically every other situation Palestinians face, loss is touted as an achievement.

The other assumption in the documentary is the notion that talking, "peaceful dialog," is better than war. This is part of post–World War II global politics, an idea with attendant moral values that persists despite the fact that the valorization of talking has done little to erode fighting worldwide. In Palestine, "talk" as a means of addressing conflict over land and right to self-determination has a particular long and painful history, always subservient to wider structures of power. The peaceful mass Palestinian protests of the first intifada (1987–1993) resulted in the Oslo accords in 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). From the Palestinian perspective, at least from the perspective of those not associated with the PA, the space of talking about peace has already been colored

with a dubious hue by the enormous and stunning failure of these accords. Prominent Palestinian scholars, including Edward Said and Raja Shehadeh, among others, critiqued their inability to produce anything positive for the average Palestinian. Indeed, the "peace" talks, including the "roadmap to peace" proposed by Tony Blair and the Quartet, were widely held to have ensured nothing but the further co-optation of Palestinian land and further restrictions of their everyday movements.

By the time the film was shot in January 2006, what Neve Gordon calls the "politics of separation" between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians were in full force, embodied in the enormous separation wall (362 kilometers of which were constructed by the end of April 2006);[5] in the massive checkpoint at Qalandiya, constructed, along with the wall, well beyond the 1949 armistice line known as the Green Line; and in the separate highways for the exclusive use of illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank. The press release for the film asks: "Can two groups of women who live so close to each other, Palestinian and Israeli, who would ordinarily never speak, lower their barriers?"[6] This question is posed as if the *central problem* to be overcome was *personal*, women's personal barriers against *speaking* to each other.

Luttwack, the filmmaker, proposes that her "dieting talk" between "ordinary" women can fill a void left in the crumbling of the peace talks between leaders. But the kind of talk that appears in the film is what feminist scholars like Susan Bordo – drawing on Foucault – call a form of disciplining of the self, in terms of producing an acceptable gendered, self-regulating subjects.[7] This talk about weight and the fat on women's bodies and how it shapes their attractiveness to men is drearily familiar to anyone in a North American context. But transferred to Jerusalem, the premise goes, Israeli and Palestinian women can find common ground in their willingness to enter into dieting-as-self-discipline.

The Semiotics of Fat Control on Female Bodies

Fat on women's bodies is often perceived as a means of "othering" in general publics; here, and in other contemporary weight-loss regimes, it is posited as a means of "togethering." Talk is essential to the kind of nutritional pedagogy embodied in the most influential of the twentieth century's weight loss programs, Weight Watchers. "Positive" self-talk is central to the Weight Watchers movement; for Weight Watchers founder Joan Nidetch, not only diet, but talking to others afflicted with fat on their bodies is key to "success."[8] Weight Watchers' "success" in weight loss is achieved not only by talk – doing things with words, in Austin's sense[9] – but also by producing certain emotional states, pride in one's own weight loss, and verbally attested *empathy* for others facing the same cruel challenge of obesity. Weight Watchers was influential in the conception of the Slim Peace group launched by Luttwack, although it is not an official part of it. Shortly after the film's release, interviewer Amy Reiter of *Salon* posed the following question to Luttwack: "Where did you get the idea to marry weight loss and the peace process, two things that one doesn't normally think of as fitting together?"

Luttwack responded:

> It came from my own personal life. I have always struggled with my weight. And I've seen a lot of women around me struggle with it. It's not that I'm obese – though I've never been stick thin – but I've always had my own body issues. I think it's hard to find someone who doesn't.
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> So when I lived in Israel, and I was working with Israelis and Palestinians, I lost 10 kilos, or 20 pounds. I went to Weight Watchers, and I sat in these meetings and I saw these Middle Eastern women – and they're so full of life and spice. And it's all so intimate, because weight has so many emotions attached to it. It's so loaded. There's success and there's failure and there's pain. Then at the same time, in 2000, the peace process broke down – and it's never been repaired since. So something in my head just connected the two.[10]

The film conveys Luttwack's conviction that the desire for weight loss resulting in a sexually attractive thin body is as universal as eating itself and that Middle Eastern women who share nothing else will share this desire.[11] Weight work and body work are now seen as a site of positive personal transformation, but the moral discourse in the history of Weight Watchers in America does not stop there: as "excessive" body weight began to be perceived as a social problem, weight loss groups themselves began to be seen as a social good. Further, the various incarnations of the Weight Watchers program, with the addition of nutrition and exercise advice, began to be perceived as "a model of socially responsible business."[12] As Cressida Heyes notes, the "watching" in Weight Watchers implies surveillance: "The disciplinary practices of weight-loss groups are concealed in part by one of the most insidious dynamics in normalization: the reification and subsequent internalization of subject-positions initially defined by mechanisms for the measurement of populations."[13] Reforming the self by losing weight in the North American context is held to be a positive strategy for producing healthy, happy, and *responsible* citizens. Transposed to Israel-Palestine, the model of healthy, slim, responsible citizens faces another cruel challenge: the fact that not all participants in this group are citizens of Israel. Rather, the Palestinian participants in this group implicitly become "accepting" occupied persons to the Israeli/settler "reasonable" occupiers.

The Holy Land Dieters

The film is described as "sensitive, unusual, and entertaining"; "quirky and humorous"; even, by some, as a "comedy." Yet when I screened it in a course on food politics, my students and I found it difficult to watch. More cringe-worthy than entertaining, it certainly raises questions about both food and talk, about the politics of land and the politics of the body. But it does cast an eye on the "intimate and vulnerable arena of a weight-loss group" to evaluate the extent to which it can be a space to develop empathy, which Luttwack claims is the subject of the film.[14] As the promotional material for the film describes it:

> When Israelis, Palestinians, Bedouin Arabs, and American settlers in the West Bank are brought together with the shared goal of losing weight, they find out they have far more in common than they ever would have imagined. A Slim Peace takes a revealing look at the universal struggle for acceptance, understanding and personal transformation in a land of intractable conflict.[15]

The group is deliberately multi-faith: "when seven Jews and seven Arabs get together," the film's trailer declares; the "Arabs," it becomes clear in interviews with the film's producer, are assumed to be Muslims. Yet no effort is made to look within the religious traditions themselves to draw out shared commonalities in eating practices and the central role of food in the religious rituals of both. For instance, the similarities in practices of slaughter (kosher and halal) in Judaism and Islam, and their shared avoidance of pork are not mentioned. There is no reference to the powerful bonding effect of other practices of withdrawing from food together –fasting – in the monotheistic religions. The main differences this co-dieting are assumed to overcome are religious. This film is therefore part of a wider set of discourses that present the conflict in the "Holy Land" as primarily religious in origin.[16] These conflicts are not presented as a result of, for instance, the particular ways in which religion is connected to rights to citizenship and landownership in Israel and the occupied West Bank.[17] The group interactions are conducted in English, with asides in Arabic and Hebrew that are not subtitled. The participants have very different English capacities: from the strong American accents of the recent Israeli settlers, to the Hebrew accents of the Israeli women, to the uncertain English of the Palestinian Bedu woman. The English of Ichsan, a Palestinian comedian and widow, though accented, is fluent enough to convey her often biting wit. The occasional interventions of the producer, Yael Luttwack, are in American English.

The filmmaker clearly tried to select diverse members of both communities, although the audience is given minimal information about how the participants were recruited. The Jewish participants include some secular Israelis, including Dasi (who is married to the son of Avraham Stern, leader of the Stern Gang, a Zionist militia considered "terrorists" by the British in the 1940s, but as "freedom fighters" by many Israelis). The film introduces new settlers in illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including two recent converts to Judaism, who differ sharply in disposition from the Israeli-born women. Despite the settlements' role as civilian outposts of surveillance in the West Bank and extensions of the military occupation,[18] in this documentary (aimed at English speaking audiences abroad), the settlers are presented as a legitimate and inevitable presence in the West Bank. The filmmaker (wittingly or unwittingly) participates in the goal of settlements to create "facts on the ground" by giving these settlers ample airtime to present their presence in the West Bank as ordained by God, without pointing out that the settlements are illegal according to international law.

I’m So Fat!

As might be expected from a dieting group inspired by Weight Watchers, this dieting group has as its cornerstone weekly meetings, dutifully recorded in the film. The “techniques of the body” on display are practices like weighing, measuring, and counting calories and calculating the nutritional components of food.[19] The Israeli nutritionist Dorit Adler from Jerusalem’s Hadassah Hospital, described in the film as a Jewish hospital which accepts Palestinian patients despite political conflict, is the group leader who coaches the women of the virtues of a diet featuring vegetables, whole grain bread, and fruits.[20] The non-English speaking Palestinian nutritionist, Suha, is present, but gets little airtime.

Like other Weight Watchers groups, this Slim Peace group features the performative public act of stepping on a scale. In the first session depicted in the film, each woman is weighed and her weight is recorded publicly. Criticism is supposed to be withheld in favor of encouragement; participants are reminded that even small improvements “count” as long as they are recorded and shared. In an early group interaction, each Slim Peace participant fills out a slip of paper recording their goals for participating in this weight loss group and each person selects one note to read aloud to the rest of the group. This is part of the disciplining practice whereby the self (represented by a personal goal) is presented (in a semi-anonymous state) to the circle of participants. Someone reads out “Lose 10 kilos,” which receives enthusiastic applause, as does another goal about developing “tools” for a better lifestyle. One note’s goal is “Meeting Arabs,” and Ichsan, the Palestinian comedian, jumps up and takes a bow to titters of uncertain laughter. Thus the strangely united dual purposes of the dieting group – to lose weight and to provoke positive boundary crossings for political ends – are acknowledged.

As is common in such self-transformative groups, confessional speaking is encouraged: the women engage in auto-disciplining fat talk as they explain their reasons for joining this dieting group. A secular Israeli woman of ample girth, Aviva, says that she has tried the “vegetables diet, the soup diet, the bread diet, the steak diet, all of them, and none of them worked.” Later, she says she has overcome many difficult things, but that she cannot overcome her “craving” for food, which upsets her. Another secular Israeli, Dasi, a lithe and svelte yoga instructor, embodies Fanny Ambjörnsson’s observation that it is those who aren’t fat who are comfortable about talking about how fat they are, saying: “People say I don’t need to lose weight, I’m so skinny, but I don’t think so.”[21]

A goal of the group is to dispense with what are described as “non-functional” thoughts and practices (desires for food that is banned by the dieting regime) which have to be articulated (confessed) to be dispensed: “I am trying to lose weight and yesterday I ate chocolate. I don’t have a will [self-control] for chocolate,” Amal says. While supportive words are the norm in the group, a form of teasing and gentle shaming, known by critics as “fat shaming,” also occurs, as is evident in a scene filmed in Ichsan’s house. As she extracts a beautiful cheesecake topped with glistening fruit from Ichsan’s fridge, Luttwack, the filmmaker, exclaims as if talking to a naughty child: “What is this doing here? This has to go!” In this first introduction to Ichsan, we see her with a tape measure around her stomach, which looks more ample than it might because of her skin tight jeans. A

few scenes later, we see Ichsan pulling at the waist of her jeans, to show us how loose it is after a few weeks of dieting. At another point, Amal, her hair modestly covered, lifts up her shirt to show the now-excess fabric of her pants.

The filmmaker's hopeful claim that the shared goal of weight loss can overcome political differences is quickly questioned when the group is confronted with a political loss, one which immediately made world headlines: the loss in the 2006 parliamentary elections of Fatah to Hamas, the Islamist party defined by the U.S. and Israeli governments as a terrorist organization. After Ichsan and Dasi exchange air kisses at the meeting following the election, the talk of weight loss is sidelined as participants fall into a heated discussion about Fatah's loss. It is mildly amusing to see the American settlers hold the Fatah-supporting Palestinian participants responsible for Hamas's election, although they are just as horrified by the results as the Israelis, if not more so. One Palestinian jokes, "We have become like Israel, changing the government every two years!" Aviva argues that Hamas won because the PA is corrupt, while Amal chimes in that every member of the Knesset is corrupt. One Israeli suggests that people chose Hamas because they are desperate. Dasi claims that she is optimistic: Hamas will have to change its extreme behavior, because "you have to be different when you are in power." Ichsan, clearly annoyed, announces that she wants to go for a cigarette.

The Stepometer and the Checkpoint

Throughout the film, we are shown clips of women commenting on and applauding each other's weight loss; however, while the women are brought together to, as the Israeli nutritionist exhorts, "get tools and strategies from people facing the same challenges as you," it soon becomes obvious that these women, despite the shared presence of fat on their womanly bodies, do not face the same challenges at all. A review of the film notes: "The women met regularly in Jerusalem, some of them traveling past checkpoints, an hour and a half each way, to bond over their body issues, and maybe – just maybe – find common ground."[22] What cannot be avoided are the differences faced in how participants can physically *get* to the meetings, which take place in the Jerusalem Cinematheque on the border between East and West Jerusalem. Israeli checkpoints restrict Palestinian access to Jerusalem, as do Israeli-issued permits without which Palestinians cannot enter Jerusalem. A simple headline in the film announces: "Special passes were organized to enter Jerusalem." The passive voice is used; it does not note who organized the passes for whom or why. Were the passes for the Palestinian women arranged by the Peres Center for Peace with which Luttwack is associated?[23] No passes are needed for the American settlers who reside in the illegal settlements in West Bank, who are considered Israeli citizens by virtue of their religion and travel on restricted access highways. The restrictions on access to Jerusalem do not apply to all those residing in the West Bank, only the Palestinians.

As in contemporary Weight Watchers programs, duly recorded exercise is an essential part of the Slim Peace weight loss regime. Participants are taught that ten thousand

steps a day is the "gold number," part of the environment/lifestyle change necessary for successful weight loss. To this end, every participant is given a "stepometer" – a small device to attach to one's clothing which records each step they take. Rebecca Solnit in her lovely *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* notes the shift in Western society from viewing one's body as a means for doing work and of walking as a functional means of getting places to viewing one's body as a project of self-realization.[24] Technologies of walking like treadmills and step counters are part of these shifts in techniques of the body and transformations of subjectivities. Solnit goes further to suggest that for those who are no longer using the body for labor, the body becomes a kind of pet that needs to be attended to, groomed, and exercised as a form of leisure activity and consumption.[25]

Yet these technologies and understandings of self-as-project or self-as-pet take on particular valences when transported from North America to the Israeli-occupied West Bank. This telling section of the film sheds light on two constant themes in Palestinian life: mobility and restriction. The issue of mobility – and different potentials for mobility – quickly appear in the film as we see the nine-meter-high concrete wall accompanied by the Muslim call to prayer; this choice of aural accompaniment to the spatial and visual blight of the wall is not explained. Another factor shaping Palestinian movement (for work, religious observance, medicine, or exercise) is the bureaucratic Israel control through IDs and special permits.[26] Historian Rashid Khalidi argues:

> The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any one of those many modern barriers where identities are checked and verified. . . . for Palestinians, arrival at such barriers generates shared sources of profound anxiety.[27]

This issue is addressed in Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish's famous poem "Identity Card," which beautifully articulates the Israeli imposition of documents granting mobility – but also the right to remain in one's homeland – on Palestinians post-Nakba. The checkpoint itself becomes a character in movies such as Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention*; in the memorable scene of confrontation between a middle-aged woman and a teenage soldier in Suad Amiry's hysterically funny account of the Israeli occupation of Ramallah during the second intifada, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*; or visual artist Sharif Waked's video *Chic Point*, which satirizes Israeli soldiers' treatment of young Palestinian men at checkpoints.[28] Rema Hammami, an anthropologist living in Palestinian East Jerusalem and teaching at Birzeit University outside Ramallah, gives a memorable ethnographic account of how her commute to and from work, which should take fifteen minutes, becomes extended, unpredictable, and painful as she, like other Palestinians, is delayed at checkpoints, humiliated or forced to witness the humiliation of others.[29] As Hammami points out elsewhere, the Israeli intention is punitive: "As a macro-structure, the more than 400 checkpoints and roadblocks constitute a spatial regime of incarceration that has delivered more than 50% of the population into poverty and rendered a quarter of them workless. While on the micro level of everyday interaction, they constitute the most

visceral experience of Palestinians relationship of inequality with Israel, and a profound reminder of their status as stateless people."[30] Dorit, the Israeli nutritionist, asserts that both Jews and Arabs are gaining weight and they need to "change their environment." Yet this advice begs the question: how can individual women change their environment when it is policed by armed and often young, tense, or bored Israelis at checkpoints on Palestinian land?

In *A Slim Peace*, we see an uncanny and unsettling account of the uneasy encounter between a technology of self-control, a stepometer, and a technology of other-control, the checkpoint. One can safely assume that providing an opportunity to maintain the physical fitness of the Palestinians was not a goal in establishing the checkpoints![31] The camera follows the Palestinian dieters, including Ichsan and her daughter, as they make their way from a Ramallah taxicab to the checkpoint on foot. The approach to the checkpoint is muddy and strewn with rubble. Traffic jams, horns tooting, people with frayed nerves and painfully exasperated and stressed expressions face the chaotic informal economy of the checkpoint.[32] The delays that sustain this informal economy are pointless, grinding, soul-destroying, and a phenomenal waste of time and energy.[33] In the film, the women are shown lining up at the turnstiles, pushing on them to try to make them move in a pointless manner familiar to those who have gone through this experience, and waiting for the green light to tell them they can proceed. The film does not record the faces of the Israelis behind the bulletproof glass checking the Palestinian permits, only those of the Palestinians trying to get through.

The camera then records the women, now at the meeting in Jerusalem, comparing the number of steps recorded by their stepometers. Ichsan complains to Luttwack that she discovered after the long walk through the checkpoint that her stepometer had reset without recording her steps, therefore losing the only benefit that could be possibly be gained from such a traverse. She complains that it stopped, saying: "It doesn't work because I'm a Palestinian woman, it would work for an Israeli women." When the settler Rivka said that her stepometer didn't work either, Ichsan jokes: "Even in the settlements it doesn't work!" Rivka reluctantly agrees that they agree on something: the non-functioning of the stepometer in the West Bank, regardless of religion or nationality. Luttwack purrs teasingly: "Who would have thought you, a Palestinian woman, would be upset about the stepometer resetting rather than having to go through the checkpoint?" While Ichsan seems to be trying to keep the politics of inequality of movement in the frame, Luttwack's response seems to be trying to minimize the checkpoint's devastating effects by attempting to situate it in what Gregory Bateson would call a "play frame."[34] It is not a play frame that seems particularly persuasive, however, to the viewers who can't help but notice the glaring inequalities of Palestinian mobility.

The Limits of Fat Sisterhood

Ichsan is filmed paying a visit to Dasi in her West Jerusalem home. After complimenting Dasi's home, she issues a polite invitation for Dasi to visit her home in Ramallah, a highly

unlikely possibility. As they continue their greetings, they cast eyes on each other's waistlines in admiration. Ichsan announces she has lost 9 kilos, and Dasi urges her to eat her specially prepared low calorie treats. Dasi raises the issue of *who* Ichsan could be dieting *for* if her husband is dead and asks why she would be "allowed" to be single in her society. Here Dasi seems to be espousing prejudices about male control of female sexuality in the Arab world of the ilk that would make Raphael Patai proud.[35] Ichsan responds hotly, noting that not all Arabs are conservative, that very liberated Arabs exist like the ones she grew up with in Lebanon.

In an earlier encounter, on hearing that Dasi was married to the son of Avraham Stern, Ichsan exclaims, "Ah, we have that in common! You are terrorists, too!" When Luttwack asks Dasi about that comment outside of the group environment, Dasi says that she wasn't sure what Ichsan meant, perhaps that her father-in-law had been designated by the British as a terrorist. What Ichsan seems to be getting at is that the term "terrorist" depends on where one is situated in relation to power: one person's terrorist is another's proud revolutionary. The conversation begins to get heated when Ichsan notes that Palestinian women pay the price for war, often with the lives of their husbands. Her own husband had been killed by the Israelis. Though Israel designated him a terrorist, to Ichsan he was a revolutionary hero, martyred for the Palestinian cause. Ichsan says heatedly: "What we did was right, Arafat was right." Luttwack was then asked to stop recording the conversation. The camera focused only on Ichsan, while Dasi and her husband can be heard conversing loudly in Hebrew in the background. Ichsan says, looking exhausted, frustrated, and defeated: "You can sit with people and not agree with them. You can sit and talk even if you don't agree. If you talk, you don't shoot, so use your tongue," as she sticks her finger in her mouth as if she wants to blow her own head off. Luttwack cannot control the moments where the shared "fat talk," instead of leading to the solidarity supposedly engendered by the shared goal of losing weight, leads in other directions, exposing the prejudices, injustices, and debates about who should be defined as a "terrorist" that divide women in the Holy Land.

Conclusion: A Weight Loss Regime for a People without a Regime

Despite the celebration of the collective loss of 98 kilograms among the 14 women dieters – punctuated by the fervent snapping at loose waistbands, self-shaming about chocolate consumption, compliments issued and accepted, assertions that a loss of 2 centimeters from your waist can bring about a change in your political subjectivity – what the film records is a failure. In a conversation between settlers filmed in a kosher restaurant in West Jerusalem where Palestinians are not welcome, Rivka says: "It makes me sad that Israel is the way it is. It is sad that I can't be friends with who I want to be, it is sad. Ichsan is great. Our peoples are not friends. Living in Israel, I am here to be a Jew in a Jewish state." In this film, as in wider discourses, the problems in the Holy Land are seen to arise exclusively from religious differences. Rivka points to the fact that the state of Israel is based on separation of religions – though without acknowledging that

this separation has been made possible through "ethnic cleansing."[36] The problems of a political economy of discrimination along religious lines cannot be hidden, nor is the politics of dispossessing non-Jews, or the raging disparity in the question of how land ownership in the West Bank is asserted or dismissed.

The film does not camouflage the blistering condescension of the Israeli settler women toward Palestinians and they hardly come off as particularly endearing. Luttwack also includes a clip from an individual interview with Aviva, an Israeli woman who notes that she found the Palestinians more understandable, likeable, and even more "fun" than the settlers. Yet while one could imagine that these settler voices could have been used to mobilize an effective critique of the settler movement itself, Luttwack presents them as an equal voice among many. The end result is that the Palestinians are presented not as having a powerful and just claim to their own land, but as merely one of the voices contesting the ownership of the Holy Land. In this sense, the film implicitly endorses the settler project project, which aims to undermine the legitimacy of any Palestinian claim to their land. Similarly, Luttwack gives careful attention to what Israeli women have to say about the suicide bombings of the second intifada. One of the American settlers says, after the first meeting: "I said to myself, 'I cannot believe I am sitting next to a Palestinian from Ramallah!' I just wanted to say to them [the Palestinians], 'Where were you when our brothers were being torn apart?'" But there is no recording of a Palestinian woman asking where the Israeli dieters were when the Israeli army was invading their houses, destroying their streets with tanks, or breaking the legs and arms of Palestinian children throwing rocks.

This documentary about a diet-and-dialogue group in a land of conflict is both shocking and (very occasionally) amusing in its assertion that the women of Palestine and Israel engaging in the self-surveillance of their own fatness can provide a ground for the development of a shared political subjectivity. In this sense, the film records a bizarre and questionable (in terms of gender politics) example of a "normalization discourse" that assumes that nongovernmental practices and interactions can somehow lead to an end of violence or acceptance of the very unequal state of affairs in the Holy Land. The positive reception of the film among certain North American audiences suggests that this is the preferred understanding: "Why not? Who does it hurt? Isn't peace better than violence?"

A minor film about a six-week Jerusalem-based diet group might not seem worthy of much attention, even in the bizarre field of Israel-Palestine news coverage where local events that would not be considered particularly newsworthy anywhere else receive international press attention. But the latest incarnations of the Slim Peace Groups, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, see these groups extended to North America.[37] In his searing criticism of the film, Tareq Radi singles out Ichsan as a Fatah "normalizer" and "apologist," but his primary concern is that the Slim Peace expansion is a part of the "normalization" discourses on American university campuses, with them actively recruiting from Muslim students' associations.[38] The group's attempt to establish influence on college and university campuses is reflected on its Facebook page, which includes announcements of various events. For example, from 21 April 2015:

> Today, our founder [Luttwack] is speaking at at AU [American University]'s School of International Service conference on conflict cuisine and gastrodiplomacy, called "The Kitchen as the New Venue of Foreign Policy: Can Food Build Peace or Drive Conflict?" – it is a sold out event! We are grateful to share the Slim Peace story there![39]

Luttwack is right smack in the middle of neoliberal normalization discourses that put an awful lot of weight on individual efforts. As in many neoliberal policies, much agency is given to individuals to be the site of positive change for themselves, with solutions to larger political barriers located in individual actions. If you can control your weight (and diet), you can control anxiety, and control uncertainty in an uncertain world. In this scenario, it is the loss of weight, the shrinking of women's bodies, which is displayed as a triumphal accomplishment of self and group surveillance, whereas in the everyday world of the Palestinians, surveillance and loss and shrinking are associated with Israel's denial of land, mobility, and rights to Palestinians. Despite the difficulty of losing weight and keeping it off, there is no obvious reason to assume one's political consciousness or knowledge will be enhanced through weight-loss and there is no indication that even if shared weight loss did provide some shared political consciousness, that it would make any difference to the establishment of peace in Israel-Palestine. No amount of affection grudgingly expressed, of awkward dancing and drumming (which closes the diet group's last meeting and meal together) appears to be able to change the "environment" or lead to a new "way of life."

One year later, Luttwack goes back to check in with members of the group and to see if they had kept their promise to stay in touch. Dasi looks tired, and admits that they didn't meet anywhere, and that she does not go to Ramallah or the settlements. The settler women, saddled with more children, say that they don't go to Jerusalem. Aviva says: "we need someone to bring us together." Ichsan says that some things are more important than losing weight, such as losing your mind or your life. She lights up and declares in a tired voice: "Cigarette, she is my partner." "Well," bleats Luttwack, "I have to say, you do look great."

Ultimately, the film does not acknowledge the self-work that Palestinians do to manage the surveillance regime imposed on them by the 500-plus checkpoints of the Israeli occupation. Hammami describes how Palestinians themselves must do daily self-work to refuse to be made abject during the checkpoint crossings which waste their time and fray Palestinian social and economic ties. Hammami argues that Palestinians deny the poisonous status of abjection imposed on them collectively through the structures of the occupation, but that "working through" the regime of checkpoints depletes Palestinians' "psychic and physical resources" due to the enormous energy required to just survive the checkpoints.[40] It is hard to see how adding another self-surveillance regime for women would provide any kind of possibility for political amelioration. The film cannot evade the physical and legal barriers that need to be lowered before the personal and emotional barriers of the women can be. The larger question is why anyone would think that it could.

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Endnotes

1 Discodog Productions, "A Slim Peace: Press Pack," n.d., online at www.discodog.net/slimpeace/html/press.html (accessed 6 June 2016).
2 I first encountered this film through online clips of the *al-Jazeera* talk show "The Fabulous Picture Show," which was originally aired on 14 July 2007. I realized that the time covered in the film (6 weeks in early 2006) had just preceded my first trip to Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank in April 2006 on a preliminary trip to begin my research on Palestinian fair trade olive oil. In 2012, I contacted director Yael Luttwack by email and was able to purchase a copy to use in my Food Politics class. The film invoked unease in my students and I found it difficult to watch; this paper is part of my attempt to explain this unease to my students.
3 Quoted in Amy Reiter, "Taking It Off for Peace," *Salon.com*, 3 May 2007, online at www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2007/05/03/slim_peace/print.html (accessed 05 May 2007).
4 On Qalandiya and its impact, the work of Rema Hammami is particularly instructive. See, for example: Rema Hammami, "On (Not) Suffering at the Checkpoint: Palestinian Narrative Strategies of Surviving Israel's Carceral Geography," *borderlands e-journal* 14, no. 1 (2015): 1–17, online at www.borderlands.net.au/vol14no1_2015/hammami_checkpoint.pdf (accessed 6 June 2016); Rema Hammami, "Home and Exile in East Jerusalem," in *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Home and Exile*, ed. Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh (Northampton, MA: Olive Tree Press, 2013), 111–133; Rema Hammami, "Qalandiya: Jerusalem's Tora Bora and the Frontiers of Global Inequality," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 41 (Spring 2010): 29–51; and Rema Hammami, "On the Importance of Thugs: The Moral Economy of a Checkpoint," *Middle East Report* 231 (Summer 2004): 26–34.
5 Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). On the separation wall, see: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA), *Preliminary Analysis of the Humanitarian Implications of the April 2006 Barrier Projections, Update 5* (Jerusalem: OCHA, July 2006), online at www.ochaopt.org/documents/OCHABarrierProj_6jul06_web.pdf (accessed 6 June 2016).
6 Discodog Productions, "A Slim Peace."
7 See: Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
8 Joyce Hendley, "Weight Watchers at Forty: A Celebration," *Gastronomica* 3 (2003): 16.
9 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1962]).
10 Reiter, "Taking It Off."
11 The filmmaker does not note that the desire for thinness and the connection between thinness and sexual desirability is historically and culturally specific. See: Don Kulick and Anne Meneley, eds., *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession* (New York: Penguin, 2005); and David Haslam and Fiona Haslam, *Fat, Gluttony, and Sloth: Obesity in Literature, Art, and Medicine* (Glasgow: Liverpool University Press, 2009).
12 Hendley, "Weight Watchers," 18.
13 Cressida Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74.
14 Discodog Productions, "A Slim Peace."
15 Discodog Productions, "A Slim Peace."
16 In tandem with larger Israeli policies of deliberately fragmenting the Palestinian population (seen also in the distinction drawn between "Palestinians" and "Bedouin Arabs"), the presence of Arab Christians in the Holy Land is elided. On the historical dimension of this elision, see Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
17 Perhaps inadvertently, the film cannot help but depict how religious identities are used to circumscribe movement or facilitate movement, a point I elaborate on below.
18 See, for example: Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London:

Verso, 2007); Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman, eds., *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture* (London: Babel and Verso, 2003).

19 These are familiar to anyone who has taken part in a similar diet program in North America or seen its myriad representations in media advertisements.

20 All of these recommendations were standard nutrition recommendations in 2006. In a Recipes blog posted on the Discodog website (online at www.discodog.net/slimpeace/html/recipes.html), participants post recipes, each followed by a section entitled "Dorit & Suha's Comments" with a per-serving calorie count and breakdown of the dish into protein, fat, and carbohydrates. While women contribute recipes, there is no discussion of food as having any attributes beyond nutrition (including whether the recipes posted are considered tasty by the women posting them or their families). I thank A. Paz for noting this odd fact.

21 See Fanny Ambjörnsson, "Talk," in *Fat*, ed. Kulick and Meneley, 109–120.

22 Reiter, "Taking It Off."

23 The center is named for Shimon Peres, the current president of Israel who, along with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 after the Oslo accords were signed. The center's self-presentation conforms with the film's assertion that the capacity to change the present situation lies in the hands of individuals rather than structural changes that would address the continuing Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. See, for example, the Shimon Peres quote featured on the "Our Mission" page of the center's website: "In spite of our differences, we can build peace, not just negotiate peace. We can create the proper environment, and not just become victims of the existing environment." Peres Center for Peace, "Our Mission," online at www.peres-center.org/our_mission (accessed 6 June 2016).

24 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

25 Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 264.

26 Helga Tawil-Souri has a powerful analysis of the enormous consequences of the Israeli-issued identity documents and permits. See: Helga Tawil-Souri, "Colored Identity: The Politics and Materiality of ID Cards in Palestine/Israel," *Social Text* 107, no. 29 (2011): 67–97.

27 Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 1.

28 Elia Suleiman, dir., *Divine Intervention*, 2002; Suad Amiry, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries* (New York: Anchor, 2006 [2003]); Sharif Waked, dir., *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints*, 2003.

29 Hammami, "Home and Exile."

30 Hammami, "Qalandiya," 32.

31 In the documentary *The People and the Olive*, a group of Palestinian fair trade farmers and foreign marathon runners record their difficulties pursuing healthy exercise in finding a stretch of contiguous territory long enough to hold a marathon, because of the Israeli checkpoints and security. Aaron Dennis, dir., *The People and the Olive: A Run Across Palestine*, 2012.

32 On this informal economy, see: Hammami, "On the Importance of Thugs"; Hammami, "Qalandiya"; and Helga Tawil-Souri, "Qalandia Checkpoint: The Historical Geography of a Non-Place," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 42 (Summer 2010): 26–41.

33 See Julie Peteet, "Stealing Time," *Middle East Report* 248 (Fall 2008): 14–15.

34 See Gregory Bateson, *Step to an Ecology of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

35 Raphael Patai, an Israeli anthropologist, published *The Arab Mind* in 1973; it was reissued in 1983 and 2007. The book received criticisms for embodying essentialist stereotypes rather than scholarship; it was reported to be widely used by the American military and was implicated by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq. See Seymour Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," *New Yorker*, 10 May 2004, online at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib (accessed 6 June 2016).

36 See Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: New World, 2006).

37 On the group's expansion in the United States, see: Dina Kraft, "Jewish and Muslim, Bonding Over Dieting," *New York Times*, 16 March 2013, online at www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/us/slim-peace-unites-jews-and-muslims-to-talk-diets.html (accessed 21 April 2015).

38 Tareq Radi, "Slim Peace's Slim Chances for Justice," *Mondoweiss*, 21 March 2014, online at mondoweiss.net/2014/03/peaces-chances-justice (accessed 21 April 2015).

39 Slim Peace's Facebook page, post from 21 April 2015, online at www.facebook.com/SlimPeaceGroups/posts/809519012476698 (accessed 6 June 2016). Other similar posts can be found on the group's Facebook page, online at www.facebook.com/SlimPeaceGroups/.

40 Hammami, "On (Not) Suffering."