



Book Review

Wanderer with a Cause: Review of Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks*

Stephen Bennett

New York: Scribner, 2007, 200 pages

It is clear that the documentation of the disappearing terrain of Palestine has taken on increased importance of late. The steady intrusions of Israeli settlers into Palestine, the Israeli governments' intransigent defiance of international calls to halt settlement construction in the West Bank, and the desecration of Palestinian land as a result of the Separation Wall all have rendered 'Palestinian land' an increasingly endangered concept. Fortunately, Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks* aptly recounts the tragically altered and changing lands of Palestine in the form of an affectively written memoir that recounts his experiences on six *sarhas*. In Shehadeh's own words, "A man going on a *sarha* wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul

and rejuvenate himself.” (p. 2) One can appreciate the cathartic effects these *sarhas* have on the author throughout the book as he escapes the realities of the occupation and ventures into the hills of Palestine. Recounting intermittent walks spanning almost four decades, each chapter encapsulates pivotal and formative periods of change in Palestine as a result of Israeli incursions and the stealing of territory in the “vanishing landscape” surrounding Ramallah where the author has spent the majority of his life.

Palestinian Walks renders meaningless the embedded discourse and phraseology often used when discussing the settlements, as well as the larger conflict itself, by plainly revealing the human consequences of the occupation of the West Bank. For example, Shehadeh brings to light the very real “terrifying consequences” and “legal and political implications” of the legal utilization of “abandonment”, the ambiguous catch-all term used by Israel to justify the stealing of Arab homes and land left ‘vacant’ after the wars of 1948 and 1967. (p. 13) This is often accomplished anecdotally, by documenting the heartbreaking stories of local Palestinians who have lost their lands and livelihoods due to Israeli settlement construction. Of course these anecdotes comprise but a sliver of the total number of lives directly affected by such land-grabs, and the modern historiography of the Israel-Palestine conflict has proven that the ‘vacancies’ were only intended to be temporary on the part of the Arab inhabitants. The author also laments the deplorable checkpoints manned by Israeli soldiers and the “humiliation of having to plead with a stranger for something so basic” as freedom of movement to travel from work to his home within his own country. (p. 50) Shehadeh’s affective telling of encounters with armed settlers exude a particular tension, especially tangible for those familiar with the atmosphere created by automatic weapons in the hands of Israeli settlers who are essentially afforded legal impunity from their violent actions against Palestinians.

Shehadeh also vividly and effectively details landscapes and geographic features of Palestine. Many of these, the author notes, are gone forever, including the view of the Old City of Jerusalem, now obscured by modern Israeli structures. He laments his and his descendants’ inability to retrace the paths of their ancestors due to the destruction of Palestine as it once was, a result of Jewish settlement construction, done with the aims of establishing a permanent presence and claim to the land. His appreciation for the land of Palestine and its every detail is apparent throughout his narrative, and Shehadeh’s knowledge concerning the history of the landscape is equally as rich as his writing style. In his provided details of the formative geological periods to its social history, and in transcending the biblical and Roman periods, the reader comes to understand one of the true lessons gleaned from the history of Palestine - that “Empires and conquerors come and go but the land remains.” (p. 167)

And while Shehadeh’s narrative is rich in description, his writing is not weighed down with flighty or excessive stylistics, nor does he obsess with the politics of the issues of the “vanishing landscape” to the point of becoming overly polemical. His account is a straightforward and matter-of-fact one, and thus relates what is obvious and readily observable in the West Bank today. His book is a realistic and pragmatic take on the true cost of the settlements; after a lifetime of witnessing settlement rooted

in Jewish religious fanaticism he notes, “There is no place like the Holy Land to make one cynical about religion.” (p. 170)

Beyond his descriptions of the altered lands of Palestine, the personal details of Shehadeh’s life provide useful insight into the life of the active human rights lawyer and founder al-Haq human rights organization. *Palestinian Walks* reflects the changes in Shehadeh’s frame of mind over the course of the occupation and increasing Israeli incursions onto the Palestinians’ land. For some readers, especially those unfamiliar with the history of conflict in modern Palestine, his tone may become quite disenchanting. We first sense his disbelief at the audaciousness of the settlement projects: “. . . would it really be possible to implement these plans? Could our hills, unchanged for centuries, become home. . . for around one hundred thousand Jewish settlers who claim divine to them, who ultimately want to drive us away?” (p. 32). Soon after he embraces the legal fight in Israeli land courts that would ensue with the settlers- “We had no alternative but to struggle against our predicament.”- (p. 50), and soon adopts an overly idealistic naiveté: “I had no doubt that if we tried hard we would win and justice would prevail. For that glorious day of liberation there was no limit to what I was willing to sacrifice.” (p. 114) But upon witnessing the unjust and fixed nature of the Israeli court procedures regarding the land disputes and accepting his inability to stop the settlement projects, Shehadeh’s tone shifts to a morose, grudging acceptance: “The truth was that we had been defeated. . . For now the Israeli policies had succeeded. And I had wasted many years working on an area of law and human rights that came to nothing.” (p. 118). But in the end, like many Palestinians facing down the injustice of the Israeli occupation, all is not lost, particularly hope, as Shehadeh sees “a higher purpose to the suffering” and faith that “it wasn’t in vain; it wasn’t without purpose”, that “all this misery” and his “efforts had a point.” (p. 123) For the sake of the peoples and the “vanishing landscape” of Palestine, let us hope Raja Shehadeh is proven correct.

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