



Checkpoint Jerusalem

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My last trip to Jerusalem was in March 1995. I remember the day quite well. It was unseasonably warm, and I was scheduled to meet a British film producer at her rented flat near the Old City. Annie and I were finishing up work on the subtitles for a television documentary film about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for Channel Four TV in London. After spending several hours putting the final touches on our work, we went up on the roof of the two-story house to eat a late, cold lunch. Annie was flying back to London the next day, and after relaxing in the late afternoon sun, I kissed her goodbye and walked down to

the main street to catch the bus that would drop me off near my house in Dheisheh Refugee Camp just outside Bethlehem. Little did I know on that glorious March afternoon that I was riding out of Jerusalem for the last time!

Don't get me wrong. It isn't that I've moved away to another country. On the contrary, I still live in Dheisheh, and Jerusalem, the city where I was born, is still an insanely close fifteen-minute drive to the north. So what has prevented me from going back to the city where I was born? The reason is rather simple really. Like countless other Palestinians, I lack the proper documents, entry permit, call it whatever you like, to present to the Israeli soldiers stationed around the clock at the military checkpoint that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem. Now a permanent fixture, the checkpoint was erected back in 1991 to tighten Israel's control over Jerusalem and to control the flow of Palestinians into the Holy City. No Palestinians residing outside the municipal border imposed by Israel in 1967 are allowed entry without a special permit issued by the Israeli military authorities for periods extending from several hours to three months.

Now anyone who lives on the West Bank or has visited the place knows that Israeli military checkpoints certainly do not stop Palestinians from getting to Jerusalem if they are keen on getting there. Sneaking past checkpoints is commonplace, and I, for one, have always envied my friends who deliberately disregard the soldiers and their ready-to-fire guns and walk on often long and windy dirt paths just to get to their destination. It seems to be a Palestinian

trait, one that I have come to greatly admire, to break Israeli occupation laws. If an ordinary Palestinian wants to go to Jerusalem to shop, pray, visit a doctor, or work, no lack of permit or presence of a checkpoint will stand in his or her way. Such are the subtle ways of resisting a mean-spirited occupation.

But this method of entry does remain "illegal" and, at best, could mean being forced to turn back to the West Bank if caught and, at worst, could lead to the arrest and detention of the person who attempts it. More importantly, why should the Palestinians have to "sneak" into the Holy City? Shouldn't peace with Israel mean that they can enter the Holy City as freely as Israelis enter the Palestinian Territories? So much for "peace" changing our lives!

A well-known Israeli peace activist came to visit me in Dheisheh last year at a time when the Palestinian Territories were completely sealed off following a suicide bombing in Jerusalem.

"Didn't the soldiers at the checkpoint warn you against entering our territory considering the tension in the air?" I asked.

"They tried, but I coaxed them into letting me in," he smiled triumphantly.

"Too bad we don't have a Palestinian checkpoint to turn you back," I remarked.

"What do you mean?" he asked surprised.

"Well, how in the hell are you going to really feel what we have to go through if you don't go through it yourselves," I lashed out. "If I were in a position of authority, I would require all Israelis to obtain a special permit from the Palestinians before entering our areas."

My Israeli friend wasn't amused. "You must be joking?"

"No, I'm dead serious. Just as we need your permits, if we can get them, in order to come visit you in Tel Aviv, you should get our permits to come visit us. But Oslo doesn't even give the Palestinians the right to arrest you for a traffic violation when you are in the West Bank. All we are authorized to do is to turn you over to the Israeli police."

"Well, if you'd like to go to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, I'll take you. The soldiers won't speak to you if you are with me," he offered.

"So you'll sneak me in like I'm some kind of a criminal. No thanks. I'll only go to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv when I can get in my car and drive there as a free woman, and not because an Israeli, any Israeli, will allow it to happen."

My Israeli friend of nearly 14 years has not been back to Dheisheh since.

Frankly, I don't care. Often I feel as if even the best-intentioned Israelis are happy to have us stay in our small Bantustan prison cells, and then to come show solidarity with us and issue press statements to the world demanding that we get our rights. For isn't it curious that there hasn't been a single mass Israeli demonstration at one of the numerous Israeli checkpoints leading from the West Bank to Jerusalem to demand freedom of travel for the Palestinians? If five thousand Israelis were to occasionally show up at a given checkpoint, instead of the handful who normally do, wouldn't they force the Israeli government to pay attention?

Instead, the Palestinians are the ones who are miraculously expected to forgo their

sense of belonging to Jerusalem. "Out of sight, out of mind" is supposed to make us forget the cobblestoned roads of the Old City. Somehow, the distance is intended to obliterate from our nostrils the aromatic smell of spices in the ancient market. Absence is meant to fade the image of Jerusalem's old homes with their tilted redbrick roofs from our minds. Somehow, we are to forget the landmark newspaper stand on the sidewalk across from Damascus Gate and the peddlers selling oven-broiled eggs and sesame bread. And quite magically, we are to lose the sense of awe that touches even the non-believers among us whenever the shimmering golden Dome of the Rock blinds our vision and fools us into thinking that it has taken the place of the sun.

Increasingly, as we head toward a final settlement deal that is unlikely to offer us a more dignified "peaceful" solution than what previous peace deals have offered us so far, we find ourselves forced to face a very hard fact. Israel is moving along with its "Greater Jerusalem" scheme, with the full blessing of the United States, in order to squeeze the city inside the ironclad fist of mushrooming settlements and make it physically impossible to negotiate in any final status deal.

And while we wait for the future to reveal to us the fate of our Holy City, we remain locked inside our Bantustan prison cells, fooling ourselves into believing that we no longer belong to Jerusalem.

But we do belong, damn it!

We belong just as our parents and grandparents belonged before us. Grandpa Attallah lived in Jerusalem all his life. My best childhood memories are those of the

times spent with him. Our walks on Salah id-Din Street and stopover at Nasser id-Din Supermarket for chocolates and candy must have really left an impression since, quite unconsciously, I would stop to buy Cadbury and Mars bars there whenever I went to Jerusalem in the past. Also memorable were our visits to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to light candles on lazy Sunday afternoons. How many times did I go back to light a candle for grandpa? I haven't counted. Nor have I tried to count the endless times when I found myself walking up Nablus Road and stopping next to the American Consulate. There, across the street, stands the house where my mother lived as a child—now, of course, occupied by an Israeli family.

Without planning to, I look at the upstairs windows and try to guess which room was mother's. And then I can almost see her, a charming girl with a pretty dress swaying slowly on the swing. Or is she reading in the garden? As I try to make up my mind, two young children come darting out of the house. Their small talk in Hebrew confuses me. Where did Mom go?

I swallow hard and feel a twinge of pain from the knot in my throat. As I walk away, I glance back at the house, longing to be inside. "This is our Jerusalem," I whisper to myself, feeling intoxicated by my inability to really make it mine.

Oh dear God! When will sobriety come?

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