

Laylat al-Qadr

Tina Sherwell

Shu‘fat, 24 July 2014

Before I came to live in Palestine I wasn't very familiar with the traditions of Ramadan. Laylat al-Qadr in particular I knew nothing about. Occurring a few days before the end of Ramadan, it commemorates the first revelation of the Qur'an. This evening is normally a time for family gatherings, with children's excitement mounting as Eid al-Fitr draws closer and sweets such as *qamr al-din* and *al-halabi* served. We would gather around my father-in-law, listening to his stories about how heaven could open up to your prayers on this special night and wondrous things happen. Venturing into the city late in the evening, one would find crowds of people and many peddlers selling everything from sweets and nuts to socks and kitchen utensils, while boy scout bands played and marched in the main streets.

This Laylat al-Qadr I realize I haven't closed the kitchen window when the kitchen fills with tear gas. I've been listening to the firing for some time now – I live about a seven-minute walk from the new main checkpoint at Shu‘fat Refugee Camp. Our house is at the entrance to the main thoroughfare of the camp, so daily life is filled with the action taking place in the street and the neighborhood. I got used to not reacting: if you were to jump at every noise or firing you heard, you wouldn't get much done. Often it's a certain pitch or prolonged sound that makes me stick my head out of the window or take a peek from my mother-in-law's balcony. (We have all pleaded with my mother-in-law not to go to pray this evening, a tradition she has kept for years. We fear for her safety as she has numerous health problems typical of Palestinian women of her age who have

had many children: diabetes, high cholesterol, joint problems, and so forth.)

I have always been surprised by the number of occasions celebrated with fireworks here: birthdays, weddings, engagement parties, men coming out of prison, Ramadan evenings, the list is endless. I can't help comparing to England, where there is far less. But these days fireworks make me slightly anxious, as they accompany the stones young men use in their confrontations with the soldiers. As soon as I hear them, my mind takes off, wondering what is going on at the checkpoint at the end of the street. Probably the most extravagant evening of fireworks was that of 20 July, after the news of the first Shuja'iyya massacre came through. The day was quiet, very tense as people were overwhelmed, frustrated, outraged by the imagery of the massacre; then, in the evening, when word came through of the possible kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, people went hysterical. The fireworks continued for several hours while later in the night and further up the street, young men came into confrontation with the soldiers. People so desperately needed some sign of hope, of victory, of agency in the face of overwhelming brutality, that anything could have triggered it, but hundreds of men from the camp took to the streets to release masses of pent up frustration.

It is Laylat al-Qadr and I am watching live images of Qalandiya, where thousands of demonstrators marching from Ramallah toward Jerusalem were met by the Israeli military's tear gas, stun grenades, and gunfire. I had gone into Ramallah that same morning for a meeting that was cancelled at the last minute. Traffic was already horrific then, as Qalandiya checkpoint itself was closed and drivers sought alternate routes through Hizma and Jaba'. I watch the live footage for hours, flipping through the news channels to see who has the better vantage point. At times I find myself staring out of the window at the strange juice vendor's booth that I pass everyday – adorned with extra-large fiberglass fruits that could easily find their way into a contemporary art museum. I listen to the shots outside, I've become trained in knowing the difference between gas canisters, live bullets, and other projectiles. It is like living in a reality TV show. With this constant watching of live footage and newsreels, we suffer at times from a kind of voyeurism, living with a continual sense of trepidation, of adrenaline-pumping high anxiety not dissimilar to the effect of watching action movies. As you watch you also have a deep desire for the film to end, but it doesn't. It just keeps on going and as it does, one experiences a sense of absolute impotence. Perhaps the hardest thing about this particular conflict is the sense of hopelessness it has inflicted upon us, the feeling that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. People keep relaying news to each other, repeating, adding new bits of information from other news channels and social media. This incessant repeating of news and describing scenes of injury and devastation is, I think, a way of trying to make sense of it all.

12:15 am: One hundred and twenty casualties at Qalandiya and people are
in critical condition from live bullets, reports *Palestine Today*
one death, another unconfirmed
live bullets
live bullets

it's quiet outside ...

12:50 am: Two hundred injuries.

The shooting resumes outside and I try to recall the points I wanted to write about in this letter ...

I surf channels to get different views of Qalandiya ...

Everyone was predicting this would be a long night.

I flip to an international channel ... nothing. It's all about the Malaysian plane crash ... but I'm looking for a news ticker item. In frustration, I give up and decide to go to sleep. I can't keep watching hour after hour. I'll wake up the next morning and the first thing I'll do is turn on the news.

As a woman in the increasingly conservative society of the camp (although I've been living at the entrance of camp for over ten years, I am still considered a foreigner), I receive a lot of information second-hand. There is a whole series of networks from which to glean information: the teenagers who go in and out of houses when there is action on the street, summarizing news for mothers, sisters, female relatives; phone calls to male members for updates; older men's analysis of the situation on their return from their observation posts; social media; and balcony observation. From all these sources women paste together a complete picture of events without ever descending to street level.

Eid al-Fitr draws closer but no one is in the spirit of Eid celebrations. News of Gaza overshadows everything. I'm sitting at my computer trying to get some work done before *iftar* and there is machine-gun fire, continuous and alarming; the women rush out to the balconies and the men go out to the street to see what is going on. We hear the speedy shuttering of shop fronts, the shouts of men, and catch a glimpse of breezeblocks being hurled. We wait for news to come through, the men return disgusted: two young men have fought over a parking space.... After *iftar* the scene recurs again, this time some one hundred meters in the opposite direction at the main thoroughfare to the camp. Is it the same fight? Hundreds of men gather, machine-gun fire again, men in the street in their pajamas. I look on the surreal scene in bewilderment; my mother-in-law brings a cushion so we can rest our elbows on the windowsill while looking out onto the street below. No, it's different families but a similar dispute, while tear-gas drifts into the air as further up the street young men are in confrontation with soldiers. I ask my mother-in-law whether this level of violence was prevalent in the past, and she says that it became so only in recent years, with the increase in informers. My impression is that the street is full of them: they stabbed one young man with a knife the other day; informers, we heard, also filled Maqasid Hospital, dragging those injured in confrontations off for police interrogation. We go back inside, close the windows, and return to the news of Gaza.

Although these extreme acts of violence over parking spaces or hostile looks between young men seem unexplainable, I have pondered this phenomenon for some time. Most of us have a strong sense of the future and behave on that basis: we plan, schedule, envisage, dream. But what happens if you take that away from people, if they truly only live in the here and now, if there is despondence in the political system, humiliation at the work place in Israel or else unemployment in a refugee camp, if horizons are closed? Then, if

you live every moment with such a severely restricted sense of reality and possibility, everything is an extreme, everything is lived like it is lived for the last time, everything is exaggerated and all proportion is lost. The result is that you get terribly hyped-up over trivialities and minor events. I see this over and over again, disproportionate overreaction to an event, whether it is an engagement party or a tit-for-tat fight, everything is given the same measure, everything is taken to extremes, but also with a kind of emptiness. If the machine-guns were aimed, they would injure or kill twenty people at least; but shooting is always into the air to prove presence, exhibit bravado, create zones of trepidation. And the sellers of bullets raise their prices when family feuds erupt.

I'm always bewildered that there is no transport network between Shu'fat and Shu'fat Camp. In fact, there are not even road signs for Shu'fat Camp. It's probably about one and a half kilometers, an uphill walk, from the camp to where Mohammed Abu Khdeir was kidnapped. Everybody felt it could have been their son. Young men are regularly out in the streets late at night and early morning, especially during Ramadan. Hundreds of men from the camp attended the funeral and clashed with soldiers in Shu'fat. As details of his death and the vicious beating of his cousin came through, tensions rose further. Since then, there have been further attempts to kidnap youngsters, though this doesn't always make it into the news, instead filtering through social media. There is a high level of tension in Jerusalem and an increased level of fear; people are advising each other to carry spray cans in case of being attacked. Jerusalemites live in the belly of the beast, feeling the depredations of occupation on a daily basis. With the killing of Mohammed Abu Khdeir, the impression one receives from discussions and commentary is that Jerusalemites are left to fend for themselves, that there is no justice in Israel. This absence of justice is probably the most scary: where this feeling of abandonment will lead is a terrifying prospect.

I watch the former activists of the first intifada caught in the quandary, too old to participate, but unable to sit and watch and do nothing. They have gone daily into the streets all this month, since the killing of Mohammed Abu Khdeir, but confess that they are no longer fit to throw stones. They go the hospitals to speak to the wounded and spend time with those who have been transferred from Gaza; they donate money; they don't celebrate the Eid. But there is no clear role for them to play. Observing this generation who steadfastly clung to the dream of a nation, they seem devastated by their inability to do anything as they watch the continual live stream of images from Gaza.

Tina Sherwell is Director of Academic Programmes at The International Academy of Art, Palestine.