

Leaving Jerusalem

Palestinian-American finds bitter ironies in visit to homeland

Opinion by Rula Khalidi

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Jerusalem

When I walk down the stone steps into the dimly lit alley at 2:30 a.m., I'm comforted by the presence of three young Palestinian men sitting and talking in the edgy darkness of the Old City of Jerusalem. I'd heard the muted echo of their voices throughout the long evening and silently prayed they would still be out there when I left my cousin Haifa Khalidi's house before daybreak. Sitting on low wooden stools, they speak in hushed tones, voices sharpening only to interrupt each other.

I squeeze myself and my suitcase through the narrow green metal door, holding it open as I mentally check and recheck the location of my passport, ticket, and letter of safe passage from the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem—more prayer than promise.

Haifa is hard-of-hearing. There's little chance she would hear the doorbell if I needed to get back in. Anxiety already hovering near panic levels, I make one last check, close the door and turn away from Bab Al-Silsileh Street.

The young men scarcely pay attention to me as I say good morning. They probably haven't slept, either, and don't really consider it morning yet. I briefly try to eavesdrop, curious about what has kept them up this late. Then I remember my son, Jamil, who at 18 doesn't need a reason to stay up late, but rather several compelling ones to turn in early.

I make my way up the deserted alley, normally bustling and picturesque during the day. Short and long shadows dance along the ancient stone walls; footsteps echo close by. An ugly, surreal cast of orange light illuminates the alley for the security cameras that dot the walls of the Old City.

I pass the drug den that Haifa's adopted daughter has warned me about, imagining that I hear faint laughter and music behind the metal door set slightly off the street and decorated with graffiti. I've been told that Israelis use these drug addicts as informants. I've seen plenty of drug addicts in the emergency room in Tucson, but the thought of a Palestinian collaborator on crystal meth sends chills up my spine and adds purpose to my stride.

Just past the drug den, a man leaps out of the shadows and into my path, causing my bags to tumble into a heap between us. He is unshaven, middle-aged, unsteady on his feet—still, I ready my purse for optimum striking power.

He has an eerie Cheshire cat smile on his face and speaks to me in slurred speech in a language I can't make out. I decide to play mute and proceed to make swatting gestures at him, as if he were nothing more than a large fly trying to land on my lunch. Glancing down the alley behind me, I can't see or hear the three young men anymore.

At no time do I pray for the heavily armed pairs of Israeli soldiers, ubiquitous in daylight. I think I'd rather be mugged than become a ticker-tape headline on CNN: "Palestinian-American woman saved from militant Palestinian terrorist mastermind leader by pro-American, pro-democracy, anti-terrorist Israeli security patrol."

There'd be no mention of the fact that they rescued me because for a second (too late!), they didn't realize I was Palestinian. I've been told I don't look very Palestinian, sometimes by people who don't realize we come in a full color palette. Today in particular I've dressed the part of the American tourist, readying myself for the Arab-sniffing Israeli airport security police.

My heart continues to pound loud and hard in my ears even after the strange man stumbles back into shadow and I continue my trek up the hill towards Bab Al-Khalil (Jaffa Gate). I pass the closed metal doors of shops that reveal nothing of the colorful wares and characters that spill onto the narrow streets during the day. The uneven cobblestone streets of the Old City aren't easy on the wheels of my suitcase, and there is a step up every six feet. After several fumbling starts, I fall into a Quasimodolike rhythm, finally granting my thoughts permission to travel.

Inescapable bitterness

It's hard for me to accept my own anger and cynicism regarding all that I've seen and heard during the past two weeks traveling through the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Nothing can prepare you for the cruelty of an occupation that hangs in the air so thickly and pervasively that you're forced to breathe it in every second of the day. There isn't an inch of the West Bank or East Jerusalem where one can escape its suffocating heaviness.

My journey has been filled with bitter ironies. I've waited my whole life to visit Palestine, something that was practically impossible for me (and other Palestinians in exile) to do before I became an American citizen about 10 years ago. My father was born and raised here, walked and played through these very streets of Jerusalem as did countless generations of our family before him. After the Israelis occupied Jerusalem in 1967, he was not allowed to return until he became a Swedish citizen almost 25 years later.

At the airport in Tel Aviv, I watched as the mostly Jewish members of our group passed through Israeli customs and immigration in a matter of minutes, while I was interrogated repeatedly for almost six hours when I arrived.

From the moment I landed and throughout my visit, my American citizenship was negated by my name and place of birth. I simply became a Palestinian woman born in Lebanon—a combination apparently too dangerous to overlook.

Overnight, I came to share the loathing and dread of the checkpoints and Israeli soldiers who were responsible for curtailing my movement through the West Bank. My birthplace and my lineage prevented full participation in the activities planned by the Palestinian Medical Relief Society for the medical members of our delegation. My U.S. passport was not given a port-of-entry stamp needed to travel between the West Bank and Israel. For a Palestinian, even with a U.S. passport, lack of the stamp could result in being detained or possibly arrested and deported at checkpoints.

Thus, I couldn't justify the possibility of holding up the entire group and preventing them for accomplishing our joint goals.

Leaving weighs heavily on me. I wonder if other Palestinians feel this sadness, helplessness, and yes, even relief, when they leave—awed and confused by the feeling that they've received far more than they've given, longing for a breath of the mundane.

I recall a message painted on the Wall now surrounding (and isolating) the town of Qalqilya: "To Exist is To Resist." I think of the obstacles and frustrations we encounter in the United States trying to engage in honest and meaningful dialogue. I doubt we've accomplished anything as tangible, powerful and inspiring as these people's daily survival.

The one-dimensional media images one sees of the occupation are fundamentally different from the ones that float in and out of my mind's eye. The missing quality is spite. Malice for the sake of it. Cruelty for the fun of it.

Imagine a group of heavily armed racist teenagers drunk not on alcohol but on power. Imagine that their official orders are to enjoy making your life so wretched, so miserable, so bleak and so hopeless, that you will leave. The fact that you have nowhere to go is irrelevant, "not their problem." The fact that you are on your own land, in your own home (and the home of generations of your family) doesn't compute for them. They didn't teach that history at school. And so, simply because they can, they: bring bulldozers to tear up a road you take to work every day; deny you entry into your groves to harvest your olives; arrest your 16-year-old as he hangs out with his friends in front of a cafe in downtown Ramallah, his only crime acting too "cool" and maybe a little nervous because he was trying to impress a girl; create a checkpoint anytime, anywhere, wait for a long traffic jam, and then say, "The road is closed."

The crossroads

So as I trudge up through the alleys of the Old City, my heart is flooded with uncharacteristic bitterness. The few days I spent with Haifa in Jerusalem have also highlighted my own extended family's losses since 1967. The beautiful Khalidi library, home to rare Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Latin manuscripts, is single-handedly run by Haifa, one of the few family members left with the coveted Jerusalem ID card.

The Khalidi waqf, or endowment, has lost more than 40 properties—lands, homes and shops. Some have been taken over, literally, by Jewish settlers. Others have been expropriated by the Israelis for "security" or "public use" and then transferred, auctioned or sold for profit, like the land on which Brigham Young University stands today.

I finally arrive at the "crossroads" leading to Bab Al-Khalil. I stand there frozen, afraid of getting lost for the first time in a long, long time. There are shooting pains in my right hand from holding my suitcase so tight, and I've broken into a sweat. As I stand there flushed and panting, almost comical in my misery, I feel the hint of a breeze on my face. I turn and walk toward it without hesitation, as much for the relief of its gentle coolness as from knowing it is the way out.

The power of action

It would be a dismal failure of anyone's imagination to say that things could not get worse in this part of the world. One needs only to look at the devastation in Gaza, and the world's utter indifference to what is happening there to understand that. Look at Iraq, at Lebanon. I realize it's hard not to feel immobilized by the monumental task of trying to relieve human suffering, wherever it may be. The alternative, however, is inaction; wallowing in our luxury and safety and blessings, complicit in the crimes taking place before our very eyes.

On the other hand, it is impossible to deny what history has taught us time and again: that we should never underestimate the tenacity, strength and courage of a people demanding freedom and justice. My heart fills with memories of such people, and by the people I've met and traveled with on this journey, people I won't label, because the most remarkable thing about them is what they have in common: a deep sense of humanity and a belief in the power of action.

I finally arrive at the Citadel at Bab Al-Khalil and sit close to a group of eight Russian Orthodox nuns, admiring their soft, lilting speech and pointed black wimples. It's peaceful and quiet here in the square. I begin to relax, knowing that I have 15 more minutes to enjoy this feeling before the Armenian taxi driver will arrive to take me to the airport with its arrogant security police and degrading procedures.

I watch as four Israeli teenage boys in a white car (they're young enough that only their yarmulkes are visible over the seats) drive around the square, hip-hop blaring through their car's open windows. A solitary older Palestinian Bedouin man walks across the street. The boys see him, drive around the square again, slow down until they're right behind him, and then honk their horn at him. The man jumps as the boys drive off laughing. The sound of the horn reverberates through the square, breaking the moment of peace.

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