

Blog post 3/31/15

Traveling while Muslim?

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I am sitting in the Jerusalem Hotel sipping coffee and taking a deep breath for the first time in a while, having had more than the usual interplanetary landings in one long, tiring day. And it is only 3:30 in the afternoon. I started on planet Gaza, the caravan of vans, roofs piled with luggage emptied of medical equipment, children's books, and magic markers and reloaded with embroidery and certificates, and brochures and of course my gigantic paper pineapple. I make the drive to Erez checkpoint with that deep seated nausea and anxiety that proceeds any experience with Israeli security. I can find an infinite number of things to worry about.

We did the Hamas checkpoint, the PA checkpoint, the long walk in the metal fenced corridor across the no-man's land, passing one of those go-carts mounted with a stretcher, (can you imagine doing this with cancer or some terrible fracture on a *stretcher?*), a hapless donkey wandering amongst the flowers, most likely beyond the reach of its Palestinian owner. It took an hour to get the suit cases, computers, and various baggage x-rayed, inspected, disappearing into the chaotic machines and ramps, the bodies screened, the sign says it is not dangerous to your health...I wonder about mental health as I watch male security touch women's hijabs, make them rotate their bodies...that combo of intimidation and helplessness cannot be good for anyone's health. We do a lot of waiting. I cannot figure out the rules, men separate from women? White people separate from Arabs? It keeps changing and no one is friendly. I try singing *We Shall Overcome* very quietly. Only the pigeons fly freely back and forth.

And then we finally get to the dreaded security box. Yes they did go through our luggage and actually put one of the delegate's purse and passport in a strange woman's bag, luckily noted before it was too late, but soon enough to make me worry if I really had all my stuff and yes

one belt is missing, hopefully that guy's pants won't fall down.) Back to the lady behind the glass peering at my passport and her computer screen: Name? Father's name? Purpose of visit? Where are you going? Where are you staying? I make it clear I am traveling with the woman next in line and that she is my friend. A quick moment, a few stamps and I am on the other side, deep breath.

And then the anxiety really begins: I am learning the real meaning of Islamophobia. What must it be like to travel while Muslim? To have a Pakistani last name? A father and grandfather named Mohammed? To go to a mosque back home that was recently vandalized and burned? ("Fucking ragheads! You want a hate crime?") To spend the night before Erez, heart pounding, dreaming of being locked up in an Israeli prison? As I watch my colleague in the booth, I am feeling very white and very Jewish. After multiple questions and phone calls she is sent back to wait for extra screening and my heart sinks, even though this could be called "normal" for her in the post 9/11 world we live. Our delegation leader talks with security, trying to intervene on her behalf; she is one of "us" even though she has the wrong name, the wrong religion, the wrong face for this intersection with the people who are supposedly keeping us "safe from terror." I notice one of the glass panels in a nearby booth is completely shattered, did someone explode with anxiety or was it rage. There is a *mezuzah* on the door to the exit. God on our side?

So here is the security saga at Erez: (FYI she has a "clean" passport and most of this information has already been submitted on the entry form and I suspect is all in the computer): Some of this took place in a big open area with a soldier carrying an M16 walking back and forth in front of her, (she quietly said Islamic prayers to stay calm), some took place in a small room, (it always gets more creepy when they put you in a small room, trust me). They took her scarf and jacket. (She has been strip searched in Ben Gurion Airport but that's another story.) Name? Father's name? Grandfather's name? Where were they born? Where were you born? (try Louisiana) Where do you live? Home address? Emails, personal and work? All phone numbers (US, Israeli, Jawal)? What

groups are you traveling with? Mother's name? Grandfather's name? Where were they born? Are you sure you are American (asked twice)? Who did you meet in Gaza? Show me your camera. (Battery is out, they make her dig through her backpack, find the battery and insert). He reviews her photos, lots of photos. Give me your cell phone. He reviews her contacts. Who are you staying with in Jerusalem? How do you know him? What is his address? Who did you meet in Gaza? Hamas? Jabal al-Nusra? Did you see tunnels? Where did you go in Gaza?

So, dear white person, are you feeling safer now?

After an hour, they finally release her with some nod to the "intervention" by the white person earlier. Forgive me for my cynicism. For reasons I cannot fully explain, we are taking a detour before heading to Jerusalem to visit a kibbutz just north of Gaza, Yad Mordechai. Planet number two. I was last here at the age of 14, BC (before consciousness). This is a famous kibbutz founded originally in 1936 near Netanya by *Hashomer Hatzair*, basically Polish commies who arrived in Palestine to make a new life connected to the land away from European anti-Semitism. In 1943, on land courtesy of our friends the Jewish National Fund, they moved for more space to this area and were asked to name the kibbutz in honor of Mordechai Anielewicz, a famous leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. We pass many bomb shelters, new schools, a honey factory, an armored vehicle used to rescue the children in 1948, a bakery; the smell of manure is ever present. I can easily see Gaza in the near distance and I am feeling a bit bipolar. I think of the tens of thousands of Gazans who will wait a lifetime to get that precious permit to drag their tired bodies through Erez to a university or hospital or to travel abroad or visit their grandmother or pray at Al Aqsa Mosque and I have just crossed over without even thinking about that privilege. I feel like a traitor.

The kibbutz features an extraordinary museum, From Holocaust to Revival, and we are soon on a tour with a cheerful, lively woman who arrived from Baltimore in the 1970s, married a "Persian Jew" and

considers herself a lefty and a true believer. The museum is exquisitely crafted, using a combo of dioramas, technical wizardry, powerful historical photos and footage, and artifacts from Eastern Europe, the Warsaw Ghetto, Mandate Palestine, and early Israel. It is different from other Holocaust museums in that it focuses on the living and the resistance and is designed to educate young Israelis. “Making the dream true.” I am having a hard time listening intently to someone who is such an unambivalently happy Zionist.

She really loses me when she starts discussing the Partition Plan and “all that wonderful real estate that would have stayed with them...but they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity [for peace].” When challenged on some of her history, she responds, “All history is an interpretation.” (Really?) There is an exhibit on bringing water to the Negev that has the subtly racist explanation: “They were not a nomadic people wandering from one body of water to another. [Like you know who.] They laid pipes bringing water from the North to the South, The outpost erected one night soon became an oasis of green. Water flowed in pipes like blood in arteries. And blood spattered and stained the pipes, blood of those who were there at night guarding the life-giving water.” What the museum does brilliantly is to recreate a sense of the past, (perhaps a bit too Fiddler on the Roof-y for me), celebrate the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and Jewish fighters (as opposed to the usual sheep to the slaughter), and provide a lucid and emotionally powerful argument for the need for a State of the Jews that must fight for its existence always. I would also argue that the framing particularly after ’48 is not only uncritically Zionist, but a manipulation of Holocaust history and its consequences. (see Israeli historian Tom Segev’s, *The Seventh Million*). My bigger problem is that the ghetto in Warsaw reminds me too much of the ghettos that have been created in the West Bank, and Gaza, that thin starving Jewish children today have their parallels south of the Israeli border, and that the photo of the Warsaw Ghetto fully demolished after three weeks of Nazi attack, looks just like Shejaria or Khan Yunis. And I can’t stand it. So I walk out.

Finally after dragging two ridiculous suitcases across the cobblestone, high curbs, and dirt of East Jerusalem I am on the bus to Kalandia. A slightly blond woman sits next to me. She has just arrived from Warsaw, Poland (Warsaw???) and we get to chatting and she is going to teach fencing at Birzeit University for a month. (Fencing???) Planet number three.