

Dear family and friends,

I send two reports. The first reflects my introduction to the work of Machsom Watch; several hundred women who volunteer to take regular shifts at checkpoints where they monitor the activities and behavior of the Israeli soldiers as the Palestinian community moves through the checkpoints. The second is a description of a solidarity demonstration in Ar-Ram.

At two o'clock, my Machsom Watch guide picks me up and we set off for the first of three very different forms of checkpoints that she has covered on her assigned shift since 1998.

Driving south on Israeli roads for about twenty minutes we pull onto a narrow road that ends in a wide cement strip upon which is nothing but a building about the size of a doublewide aluminum trailer. Around it is barbed wire and carefully situated concrete blocks. Inside are narrow corrugated metal corridors lined with plastic chairs bolted to the floor, an accommodation to public criticism about too many Palestinians fainting in the heat. Two broken and now filthy bathrooms have been added as well.

To enter, each Palestinian is required to stand in front of a revolving eight-foot high metal turnstile that makes one quarter turn at a time, allowing only one person to go through for questioning. As he or she moves into the room where soldiers examine their documents and make their decisions, the person in the turnstile behind them remains trapped with bars both in front and behind him, like being stuck in an unmoving revolving door.

After the soldiers make their determinations-- allow them to pass, stamp their papers, turn them back for other documentation, the Palestinian exits through another turnstile, moving through it and held for just another moment, in order to "contain traffic flow."

As soon as we get out of the car, Palestinians descend upon us, holding out identification cards, instructions scribbled on pieces of paper, speaking quickly, urgently. The two Machsom Watch women go to work at once, pulling out their worn cellophane covered lists of numbers, calling, arguing, explaining to the Palestinians and again to the voice on the other end of the line. Most of the people lined up at the checkpoint and clustered before us were patient, just wanting to understand what they could do, if anything at all. Each had pressing need to continue the movements of their day. To go to work. To care for a sick family member. To take a child to school. To visit relatives. To live.

I watch a slow steady stream of families, young men and old people move slowly through the long narrow entranceway, down the narrow enclosed corridor to the revolving door through which their day would be decided.

An Israeli married to a Palestinian woman, both living in the West Bank, had been unable to get papers that would allow her to travel to necessary medical treatment. The soldier said he would have to bring a doctors note citing the exact date of the appointments, only then a pass would be issued for those times only. He was furious, and as he drove away, called to us out of the car window,

"They are making the terrorists. We are not terrorists. We just want to take care of our families. They are making us this," he cried as he drove away.

At 4:00 o'clock the checkpoint closed for the day. The metal doors slammed shut and the soldiers inside did not respond to the first tentative, then increasingly forceful knocks and cries by the Palestinians left outside.

"We told them to post the hours in Arabic. To tell people what papers they must bring," my guide mutters. "But they just close when they want."

This was neither a busy time of day, nor a busy checkpoint. During our brief stay, there were nearly one hundred Palestinians trying to travel through the area. Most, but not all of them got through. The soldiers consider this, successful. Making our way through the remaining huddle of people who will have to return again in the morning, we drive to the second checkpoint on the north-south road that intersects Jerusalem.

This ramshackle huddle of sheds, stalls, outdoor market, bazaar, and checkpoint is on the side of the main route that runs south from the Hebron area north to the Ramallah area, a road that would, in an ordinary world, pass through Jerusalem. But Palestinians are no longer allowed to travel through Jerusalem, so this roadblock and checkpoint have been set up.

People arrive by taxis with Palestinian license plates and are required to pass through what has become a long crowded souk on foot, go through the checkpoint if they get through at all, then get into other Palestinian taxis on the other side to continue east in a large circle around Jerusalem before continuing north.

This checkpoint, unlike the last, makes no pretense at modernity. Clustered at the entrance are dozens of Palestinian taxis with their special identifying license plates, all jammed together and honking their horns in order to find another millimeter of space in which to move. Just beyond them on the stony path is a long narrow souk

jerry-built out of old wood, sheets of rusty tin and covered with torn rugs and faded strips of cloth. Stalls are filled with produce, shoes, roasting nuts and drinks, handcrafts and clothing for sale. One of my guides said that there used to be beds for rent as well, because many people waited for days before being allowed through. This temporary village market is a squalid dust choked place, a resilient, life-affirming haphazard re-creation of life. A very old Palestinian woman walks past us carrying an enormous black plastic trash bag filled with belongings balanced perfectly upon her head, her short square body regal and dignified. An old couple dressed in traditional clothing moves along the path looking as though they had just stepped down out of a family photograph taken in the early 20th century. Stall owners, standing behind mounds of melons, oranges, fruits and roasting nuts call out their wares. Old men sit together at counters made of unused concrete blocks, sip Turkish coffee and bottled water, talk softly together. A young boy offers me hot roasted nuts for just ten shekels. It is the price for tourists I know, but buy them anyway and we smile at one another, for our very different reasons.

As the three of us, identified by our badges as Machsom Watch stand together, a Palestinian man approaches and begins to talk, wanting to tell us about his life. He speaks with great urgency, not because he imagines we can do anything to help him, but because we are two Israelis and an international, and he feels a need to educate us about what our governments are doing. To give the Occupation a human face.

The stall keeper offers us Turkish coffee which we accept, and as he serves us with graceful formality he says that he was once a chef in a high-end Jerusalem tourist hotel, but cannot enter the city now, so he serves coffee and drinks in this makeshift stall on the side of this road. After we begin to drink, he nods politely and moves off.

The man begins, "I am 34 and a half years old, married with five children."

His precise age is important because a new law has just been passed ruling that a Palestinian man cannot be issued a metallic ID to travel until he is 35. As a result, this man is unable to travel to work and is just barely making a living as a painter. His words spill out in a torrent, his need both to speak and to be heard. He tells us about his daughters and their schooling, his wife, their freshly painted home. He describes, in part, the artifacts of an ordinary life, except that his family is imprisoned by the Occupation. He didn't say that. He didn't need to.

As we stand together before the stall run by a once sought after Jerusalem chef, old men huddle together speaking in low tones, shopkeepers continue to call out their wares, families pass by on the

dusty road stepping around the concrete barriers everywhere, I am filled with respect for this re-creation of life and temporary community on such inhospitable soil. The Machsom Watch women offer the painter their telephone numbers, promising that they will do whatever they can to speed up the issuance of his identity card. For the first time, his face breaks open into a broad smile and he reaches for our hands shaking each one warmly, saying,

"Salaam, my sisters. Salaam."

"Quality control," my guide muttered as we climb back into the car. "That's all we can do anymore. Just quality control for the Occupation. Even the army wants to meet with us to get our advice about how to make things more humane. That's what it's come to."

We drive away on the Israeli road to the Bethlehem checkpoint where the monstrous wall now surrounds the city. We pull up in front of a small utilitarian building like those that fill industrial office parks at the outskirts of mid-sized American cities. We walk up a ramp and enter what looks like an immigration and customs concourse in an airport, except this is a self-contained building, except these are soldiers with weapons in closed booths, except once you enter you have to approach the booths into which Palestinians offer their metallic cards, scraps of plastic that legitimize their presence in their city. It is clean, quiet, orderly, a barren place where bureaucracy flourishes and people wait in line, eyes steadily forward.

Just above us are massive watchtowers surrounding the building. There is no conversation as Palestinians wait to be admitted in and out of their homes. The silence is so complete, I can hear the clacking echoes of women's shoes on the concrete, just ten minutes drive from the crowded marketplace of the previous checkpoint.

Across the street are open fields where my guide tells me people were detained for hours in the direct sun during the years before this building was constructed.

"They just kept them there penned up in the sun whenever there was a sweep, or after a terrorist action."

Now they are enclosed, out of sight, in rooms sealed away in this industrial box with doors that only open one way.

Preparing to return to Jerusalem, we turn down a short cul de sac towards a newly completed section of the wall that my guide wanted to show me. As we approach, we see a solitary car with a large Doberman pinscher chained to it. Two men, dressed entirely in black, with no identifying markings on their shirts, climb out of the car and approach us, eyes empty, guns slung over their shoulders.

They are members of a private force, they explain to what they

imagine are the three middle-aged Israeli ladies in the car, old women who had simply made a wrong turn. The checkpoint forces are being expanded to counter the army resisters both of the right and the left, one said. Privatizing the checkpoint soldiers allows the government to remain fully staffed as more soldiers refuse to serve. Finished with their brief explanation and impatient with us, they waved their hands indicating we should to turn around and leave at once. We did.

On the drive back to Jerusalem, my guide spoke about the changes in Machsom Watch since the start of the second Intifada, of her own Holocaust history and losses, and about the need for each of us to take responsibility for what Israelis were doing. She learned that primary lesson from the death of all her ancestors, she said. We are each responsible to and for one another. All the one anothers.

Saturday- Taay'ush, Bat Shalom and Gush Shalom joint vigil in A-Ram.

Ar-Ram is a small town just outside of Jerusalem on the way to Ramallah. Over the past two years, the Israeli government built the Wall down the center of the road divider, effectively cutting off one side of the town from the other, separating Palestinians from Palestinians. School from child. Land from farmer. Shop from owner. Families from one another.

Although Ar-Ram paid taxes to the Jerusalem municipality, the town's rate of growth meant that there was an expanding number of Palestinians just outside Jerusalem. The perceived demographic dangers meant that Israel would forfeit the tax revenues and build the Wall to divide the town, leaving the most populated half on the "other" side of the Wall, thus resulting in a town with no center.

During the construction of the Wall, groups of Israeli and Palestinian activists demonstrated to protest, with little success. Except, of course for the forging of coalitions, friendships and joint projects. This demo was called because the very last piece of Wall was going to be put into place, effectively sealing off a once vibrant community from itself and from Jerusalem.

At the Israeli meeting point, people talked animatedly about the pros and cons of cheap cologne and gauzy scarves versus raw onions if tear gas was fired. Men advised one another to remember not to shave on days of actions because tear gas stings the newly raw places on their face. These conversations were simply to educate newcomers to become more expert in their preparations for resistance activism. Boarding our bus, we set off for the junction where we would join up with the Tel Aviv contingent. There, we were given careful instructions, attendance was taken and lists of emergency phone

numbers were handed out.

The Ar-Ram community had organized a parade with drummers, little children with colorful uniforms leading the line, teenagers chanting, adults with banners and signs. We were told to wait until the demonstrators began their march down the street, then to mix our presence with theirs in order to display visible solidarity. By the time the Palestinians began to move and the Israelis and internationals joined them, there were nearly five hundred people moving towards the army checkpoint.

We were greeted warmly as we walked alongside the townspeople and I recognized two Palestinian women from the Jerusalem Centre for Women I had met at the Women in Black conference last August. We exchanged the requisite kisses with great warmth, and as we continued to walk together towards the checkpoint, I told them that I had taken wonderful pictures but had been unable to send them to the email address they had given me. They re-assured me that there was a new email address, and we made a date for me to come to Ramallah to meet with them the following week. We walked together smiling and chatting down the Ar-Ram street surrounded by hundreds of demonstrators.

"May I have a mobile number or email address in case we get separated during the demo?" I asked.

"Oh no," they smiled. "Don't worry. We won't get separated."

Just then, everyone in front of me turned and started running towards me. I turned and began to run as well, not yet knowing what had happened. Everyone was moving quickly and H. tore off a piece of onion and passed it to me as she ran, calling out,

"Breathe into this. It will help."

I ran; passing two Palestinian ambulances already on the scene, saw men and boys doubled over spitting phlegm onto the ground. I kept moving, covering my nose and doing my best to keep up with the crowd. After several panicked minutes, we all approached a large gas station, paused and re-gathered, a much smaller group now, people having scattered in many directions. Our monitors were busily talking on their cell phones trying to locate people and figure out what to do next. Army jeeps, lights flashing, drove past as we stood, many people still trying to catch their breath, red eyed, gagging.

"Let's walk to the Ar-Ram central council hall," Judy suggested, "it's the central political meeting place for activists." A few people joined us and we began to walk away from the checkpoint and towards town, while the remainder of the crowd waited at the gas station.

Within minutes, the army jeeps returned, this time accompanied by horses and tear-gassed the areas of the garage and everyone near it. Gasping for breath, we all ran again, scattering in all directions,

eventually re-gathering at the Ar-Ram council hall.

The exhausted group filled the government office to listen to the mayor thank us for our solidarity and promise to continue to make every effort at collaborative non-violent resistance against the Wall and the destruction of their community. We applauded him and one another, then made our way down to the street, wearily climbing into Palestinian taxis that were to take us back to our buses.

The mile and a half took more than twenty minutes around back roads, on the only route cars with Palestinians license plates are allowed to drive. Our driver left us off a substantial walk from our buses because he didn't want to drive anywhere near the checkpoint road. We disembarked, trudging along the side of the Israeli highway to our waiting buses.

Fifteen minutes and many lifetimes away, we returned to Jerusalem, still serenely in the midst of Shabbat. The air was cool, birds sang to one another, children played in the park, their tzitzit swinging as they ran through the grass chasing one another, under the loving gaze of their parents. The other Israel.

This morning, a picture illustrating the action appeared in Ha'Aretz. Three Palestinian children were shown throwing stones at approaching armored tanks. Members of Hamas participated, the article said. Soldiers had unsuccessfully tried to divert the demonstrators from the checkpoint before releasing percussion grenades. The story went on to briefly describe the numbers of Palestinians and Israelis hurt and arrested. There was no picture of the proud young Palestinian children in their band uniforms, colorful flags against the bleak grey wall along which we briefly walked together.

Here is alternative coverage from International Solidarity Movement sources

Date: Sun, 14 May 2006 14:15:27 +0000

From: media@palsolidarity.org

Subject: [ISM Media Group] Non-Violent Demonstration Against the Wall in Ar-Ram Attacked by Israeli Military

Saturday 13th May: Around 800 Palestinian and 200 Israeli and international demonstrators, representing a broad coalition of people, united in a march to call for an end to the Apartheid Wall in the Palestinian town of Ar-Ram, just north of Jerusalem. With the participation of schoolchildren, teachers, neighborhood residents and representatives of all the different Palestinian political parties, it was carefully prepared as a non-violent protest. It was well disciplined, with a line of organizers at the front of the march preventing any impatient youth from provoking a confrontation with the

soldiers.

The large, peaceful march was headed by a children's marching band. Despite this, it was violently attacked when Israeli Border Police shot round after round of tear gas at the demonstrators as it approached a checkpoint, forcing demonstrators to flee for cover in nearby homes. Chief Muslim Cleric, Sheikh Taiseer Tamimmi, Palestine Chief Justice, was among the injured, IMEMC reported. A few children in the crowd then responded with rocks to the tear gas attack. As is their standard practice, the Border Police afterwards lied to the press, saying that they were attacked by the demonstrators, and it seems that all the press (including al-Jazeera) took their lies at face value. We have photos and video footage proving that the demonstration was peaceful and was attacked by the Israeli soldiers.

The Border Police continued to shoot tear gas preventing protesters from regrouping. They also denied the entry to many Israeli activists through Ar-Ram checkpoint from Jerusalem, forcing some to crawl through the fence and others to hold a solidarity protest on the other side of the fence.

In conjunction with the regular Israeli police, the Border Police arrested 11 people - 7 Palestinians and 4 Israelis, including one man who it seemed was arrested for carrying the Palestinian flag. They also confiscated the protestor's signs saying they wanted them "for evidence". The three Israelis were all released that afternoon, but all the Palestinians were accused of stone throwing (supposedly "endangering people's lives") and participating in an "illegal protest". They were taken to the Russian Compound jail in West Jerusalem and held overnight. All seven were released today (the 14th) on condition that they will have to return to court if the state decides that they will be proceed with prosecution.

The Wall divides the main street of Ar-Ram in two. Contrary to the myth popular in the Israeli and international press, the main effect of the Wall is to divide Palestinians from each other, because it is built within Palestinian territory, and not on the internationally recognized 1949 armistice border, or "Green Line". It has critically damaged the life of the residents of Ar-Ram. It has divided families, stopped workers from reaching their workplace and cut off teachers and students from their schools; in fact, three schools have already been forced to close.

The mayor, Sirhan Al-Salaimeh, stated after the demonstration that Palestinians will continue their joint activities with Israelis and internationals against the occupation and the wall and for a peace that is just for both peoples.

This was a continuation of demonstrations organized by a broad coalition of forces in the Jerusalem area including: the Ar-Ram Counsel, the Public Committee to Resist the Wall in the Jerusalem district (which represents districts and villages surrounding Jerusalem on both sides of the wall), the Concord for Jerusalem, the Islamic and National Parties in

the Jerusalem area, the Palestinian National Initiative (former Presidential candidate and Palestinian MP Mustafa Bhargouti's party), The Stop the Wall campaign, the International Solidarity Movement, Anarchists Against the Wall, Gush Shalom, Ta'ayush, and other Israeli peace organizations.

For pictures see: ISM site: www.palsolidarity.org Gush Shalom site: www.gush-shalom.org