

From: David Shulman
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After our visit to Samu'a and Asa'el

It's cold in the South Hebron hills in late November; I'd forgotten. Gray day, dark cloud, a hint of rain; the rocks and thistles on the slopes are a somber brown. Beautiful beyond description—but there are dark memories too; on just such a winter day we were once fiercely attacked by settlers, a few miles to the east, near Twaneh. Some of our people were hurt; miraculously, no one was killed. That time, like today, we had come for the plowing, since the only hope that our Palestinian friends could plow their fields lay in our presence beside them, or between them and their settlers. I can't help wondering if something bad might happen today.

These ominous thoughts are mixed with a certain skepticism about arrangements. Usually Ta'ayush activities are well-planned, and much thought is given to various contingencies that might arise. But today's plowing is mostly a more or less private initiative of Ezra Nawi's; when the Samu'a people spoke to him of their troubles, he somehow cobbled together a disparate group of activists, arranged for two tractors, and headed south early this morning. There are four of us to start with: Ezra, me, Bernie, and Tzvi. On the way down we pick up a small Palestinian contingent from Beit 'Umar, and we rendezvous with four international volunteers from the ISM group in Hebron. They are still new to South Hebron: two from Sweden, one lanky Finn, and a spunky American girl called Hannah. We wind our way over the back roads, as far as possible from the army roadblocks—since we know we're officially *persona non grata* in these parts, classed by the army command as troublemakers and provocateurs. Mixed parties of Palestinian-Israeli peace activists unsettle the natural order of things.

I've seen more of Ezra this week than usual; on Tuesday I attended his trial in the Jerusalem District Court, in the Russian Compound. He's accused of having assaulted two Border Policemen during the demolition of Palestinian dwellings in Um al-Kheir, some three years ago. "Dwellings" is rather a grand word for the rickety tents and corrugated tin shacks that the Um al-Kheir Beduins live in; they are more impoverished than anyone else in the territories, worse off than anything I've ever seen in India. But it is their homes, such as they are, perched on top of a hill that is, as everyone acknowledges, their own hard-won land that the State decides to demolish—since these homes stand, or stood, just outside the perimeter of the Israeli settlement of Carmel, with its red-tiled roofs, and the settlers regarded them as an eye-sore. I wasn't there on the day the bulldozers arrived, but I am sure Ezra didn't attack the policemen; he's not capable of that. I've seen him in situations when he was faced with extreme violence and yet kept his cool, like that day of plowing in Twaneh. By his own admission, however, he did lie down in the path of the bulldozer in an attempt to delay the demolitions. Now here's a question for me. Sitting in the courtroom as the prosecutor reads out the sworn, but certainly false testimony of the policemen, I ask myself if I would have had the courage to do what Ezra did that day. Could I have thrown myself at the bulldozers, or dashed into the hut that was half-demolished, to stay the execution by another few minutes, as Ezra later did? I don't know the answer to the question. Maybe yes. Sometimes the decision happens of its own accord, if you're angry enough, if you don't think about it but simply act. Anyway, I sometimes

say to myself, when assailed by doubt and that gnawing sense of futility about life, that maybe someday someone will remember—not the books I have written or the languages I have learned or even the friendships I have nurtured, but the fact that I stood beside Ezra Nawi in Twaneh and Susya and a few other places when the settlers attacked.

Being in court on Tuesday was an education, and I clearly still need to be enlightened. The debate wavered back and forth between the prosecution and the defense; the middle-aged judge, Ms. Ziskind, seemingly rather humane, spent much of her energy slowing down the proceedings so that the typist could get it all into the computer. "Count to ten before speaking," she kept saying, at the conclusion of nearly every sentence, as if were sitting in a school for illocution. I wondered what she was thinking. She will have to decide whom to believe, the policemen or Ezra and his eloquent witnesses. We know what he's accused of. I kept wanting to scream out: what about the *real* act of violence at Um al-Kheir, the brutal destruction on government orders of those miserable tin shacks and the further impoverishment of innocent people? I wasn't there, but I've seen the pictures: the young wife, nursing her baby on the ruins of her home, alone in the vast space of the desert and the hills because her husband had, of course, been arrested by the soldiers for "obstructing justice." No one asked Justice Ziskind to pronounce on that; she is doing her job, as judges do, and soldiers do, and policemen do, and ordinary tax-payers do, and so the system keeps on its merry round.

There was still no verdict on Tuesday; and here we are today, Shabbat, back in South Hebron. I didn't realize that the fields in question were just outside the fence of Asa'el, which is what is called in Israeli parlance, with unintentional irony, an "illegal outpost." As if the rest of the settlers' enterprise were perfectly legal. Asa'el is not a nice place. It looks a bit ragged—a few dumpy caravans on the stony ridge, an ugly khaki-hued water-tower, a few bits of rusting military flotsam and jetsam. Worse than that, there's a recent story. Not long ago some of our volunteers were driving by when they caught side of a Palestinian shepherd tied to an electric pole just outside the settlement (note that the "illegal outpost" has been connected to the Israeli electric grid). He had been badly beaten, to within an inch of his life; you can guess who did it. The army eventually showed up and arrested, who else, two more Palestinian shepherds. This is where we are going to plow today.

The tractor has arrived, driven by 'Ali, gray-bearded, wizened, ancient, draped in the faded robes of the village. He starts at the bottom of the wadi and slowly works his way up the hill. Can anything grow in this petrified, thorny landscape? Yes. Barley sometimes grows. In the wake of the tractor, several young men from Samu'a scatter seed over the new furrows. As usual, the simple gestures of broadcasting seed, the immediacy of this touch, the nonchalant attunement of the farmer and his field—all this ravishes me as I watch. Ezra has brought a simple breakfast of bread, olives, avocado, za'atar, and tomatoes, and we eat it under the clouds and the occasional shot of sunlight; better to eat now, Ezra says, we don't know what will happen later. There is time to talk, even to laugh, and at times yet more incongruous absurdity filters into the limbo we inhabit amidst the thorns on the hill. Bernie tells me he saw *Turandot* last year, and how it moved him, and I tell him how much I love the opera, which Eileen and I also saw last year in Tel Aviv, and suddenly he says, Wait, we are living in the modern world, and he retrieves from his knapsack a sleek, silvery I-pod and

attaches the earphones and I hear "*Signore, ascolta!*" and "*Non piangere, Liu,*" and I can barely hold back the tears. "How many miles have I walked/ with your name in my heart, with your name on my lips....."

Opera Day in the South Hebron hills. Almost idyllic: the tractor scrapes away at the hard ground, the seeds scatter in its wake, an hour or more has passed, and these fields—utterly off limits except for today, since we are here—are suddenly reclaimed after all. There are still the prickly pockets of weed left over when the tractor has passed; we pick at them gingerly with our fingers, casting them away, cleaning the earth a little more. Have we, like Calaf, solved the riddle? Have we looked deeply enough into ourselves? Things have gone a little too well. The Finnish volunteer, scouting from higher up the hill, suddenly announces that soldiers and settlers are descending upon us. The settlers are dressed in Shabbat white; one is draped from head to toe in a vast black-and-white prayer shawl; there is a young woman, evidently a mother, and several children, holding their parents' hands. They are, one can assume, fresh from Shabbat prayers; maybe that is why they didn't notice our presence until now. Contact with the Almighty has, it seems, given them new vigor, and they open up with a stream of invective, most of which I have by now forgotten. Not that it was particularly new; quite the contrary. We've heard it all many times before. "You are Nazis. You are Hitler. Every one of you is a Hitler. God will kill you tomorrow, we are sure of it, we pray for it. Your bodies would be excellent fertilizer for the soil. That is where you belong. That is where you will be. We will kill you ourselves as soon as we can." By now the soldiers—four jeeploads—have also materialized, picking their way downhill among the rocks, and Prayershawl turns to their commander: "Why don't you shoot them? Shoot all of them. Kill them now. What are you waiting for? If you let them live, they will rape your daughters and kill you, too. They will turn Tel Aviv to rubble. This will surely happen, we know it. Why waste time? Go ahead and shoot them now." The children seem to be enjoying this game, and they, too, let loose a few primitive volleys: "You are whores, *sharmutot*, whores and sons of whores and grandsons of whores....." The parents egg them on, and now the mother decides it is her turn, so coming very close to us she shouts in a strangely accented English, working herself up into something akin to sexual ecstasy, something almost beyond the edge of speech, and often bizarre: "Our women are stronger than your men. You are weak, you are nothing, you deserve to die. You don't even wear underwear under your clothes. You are evil. We want you dead." And so on: I can't reconstruct it. Eventually the torrent of words takes its habitual track: "You are all homos and perverts, back-door fuckers, whore-sons, you fuck each other." The diatribe, coarse, surreal, and familiar, suddenly seems hilarious, and Bernie bursts out laughing; one or two of the soldiers join in.

And yet the hatred itself is no laughing matter. What about those children? Here is a world so neatly divided into two stark tones that murder seems, perhaps, the natural, the only possible conclusion. This was the week of the Mumbai massacre. Were the terrorists who opened fire in the Taj Mahal Hotel and the Oberoi any worse than these demented settlers? Worse, perhaps, in the final deed, but not in the feeling that compels it. And who is there to stop the white-clad settlers of Asa'el? A few unarmed lovers of opera? A few reservists who are following orders? They are not bad today, the soldiers, not at all, but one has to remember that their presence keeps these settlers safely in their caravans and that they, like Justice Ziskind, take their orders from within a system predicated on the deepest cruelty. What is at stake is not just another

one or two plowed fields. What is at stake is the riddle of being fully human. Maybe even half-human would do.

Soon the police are also in the game, and they immediately impound two identity-cards of the Palestinian villagers—as is usual—and they also want to see the license of the tractor, which of course does not exist. For a moment there is a real danger that the tractor will be impounded, too, and that the driver will be fined, or worse. The police also want to put an immediate end to today's plowing. As is their wont, they ask to see the deeds of ownership the villagers claim to have for these fields. The deeds, if there are any, are probably buried somewhere in the files of the Ottoman land registry; but that is hardly the point. Yet at just this moment another office appears, a tall, lean Druze, with an open face and honest eyes, from the Civil Administration. He takes charge. He shoos away the policemen. He returns the identity cards to their owners. He tells 'Ali he can finish plowing the field.

I go over to thank him, and for nearly half an hour we talk, quietly, of politics, of right and wrong. "You think that by coming here you are doing something good," he tells me, "but you are wrong." Why is that, I ask. "Because tonight these settlers will exact vengeance on the village for today's plowing." Maybe, I said, but it's not our decision. It's up to our Palestinian friends. If they insist on taking the risk and ask us to come, we come. Anyway, you know as well as I do that this is their land. Shouldn't they be able to plow it? Why do we have to stand here, and why do you have to guard them, if all they want to do is what any farmer would want? "No," he says, "who knows who owns the land? It's a matter of documents and evidence. From what I can see, they may be right about these fields, so I let them plow." Very nice, I say, I'm grateful, but you're not doing them a favor; you're occupying their territory, and they don't like it. "No occupation lasts forever," he says. "One day we will leave. It will be worse for these people when we are gone. The Hamas will rule them, or some other corrupt and violent gang. They will long for these days. And when we leave, there will be missiles on Jerusalem and Tel Aviv." He says it straight, undramatically, he has thought it through. He tells me how many roadblocks he has removed, how he has helped the people of the caves in this way and that, how things are better now, by far, than they were last year or the year before that. He's another cog in the wheel, but he's doing his best. And what about the violence of the settlers, I ask him; what are they doing here, they shouldn't be here in the first place. "I'm not worried about that," he says. "When the day comes, we will evacuate them, as we did in Gaza. It took a few days in Gaza, here it will take maybe another week. Meanwhile, don't go to Samu'a. The Hamas is working there already. There are warnings that they intend to kidnap Israelis. Last year we knew for a fact that the Hamas wanted to strike at the Israeli peace activists." He's no moralist, this young Druze man, and he seems to think that peace will ripen slowly, like the barley in the field, and that it is wrong, and dangerous, to rush it. He shakes my hand and drives off in his jeep.

Such were today's gains and sorrows. By South Hebron standards, a huge area was safely plowed. Will our friends actually harvest what they have sown? I doubt it. The settlers will see to it that the crops are burnt or buried. But plowing a ready field is one of those things in life, like listening to music, like loving, that have their own innate perfection, that are not judged by results. We follow in the wake of the tractor, the settlers above and below us, still cursing; in the end they throw a few stones. The stones miss. On the way back, Ezra turns on the radio: opera again. We speak to Anat

and the other volunteers who have gone to Hebron: she tells us that hundreds of settlers are marauding, throwing rocks at Palestinian houses and at the soldiers, and that Isa was hit by a rock in the head. I can see Ezra wants to rush in, but there's no doubt the city has been closed off, and there's not much time, I'm flying to Budapest tomorrow, to a conference about Gandhi in the modern world. I'll be speaking about Palestine: about Bil'in and Um Salamona and maybe about South Hebron. But did Gandhi know about irony? About feeling surreal? A propos of nothing, Ezra tells me that a new, effective leader has emerged in Beit Jalah, near Bethlehem, a Palestinian Lutheran activist named Jadallah who promises to galvanize tens of thousands in non-violent protest. He's already made a good start. So is there hope after all? I suddenly remember something Gandhi said: First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.