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by Moisés Kaufman

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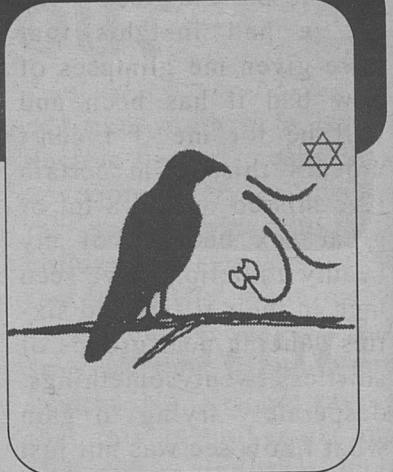
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Crow's Caw

by Crow Cohen



Women In Black

I wrote this article before the September 11th attack on the U.S. I still stand behind it. May we all find peace in our hearts somehow after that national disaster.

I am emotionally attached to Israel. From 1981-1985 I had lived there as a lesbian-feminist activist and became part of the Jerusalem Women's Community. It has been awhile since I have participated in Middle-East peace activism, but I heard that there was going to be a "Women In Black" vigil in Burlington on a Friday afternoon in June. Women in Black was started by Israeli women during the first Palestinian "intifada" after I had left the country. Since 1987, women have been standing at major intersections every Friday afternoon from noon to one dressed in black carrying "Stop the occupation" signs. This vigil has been adopted by women worldwide in other warring countries to protest their governments' injustices.

I decided to participate in the vigil even though I felt ambivalent. I was furious with the Israelis for this latest round of violence, but I was apprehensive that I was more attached to Israel than many of the protesters. I knew that most of the demonstrators in Burlington would be non-Jewish and that they would be protesting the suffering of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation with no acknowledgement of Israeli civilian losses as a result of this conflict. Back in the 80's, I actually took out Israeli citizenship.

When I moved back to the States, I left behind many dear friends - brave Israeli peace activists.

Standing in line as the lone Israeli/American Jewish lesbian felt emotionally scary. I was sure that I would feel isolated and open to criticism by many from my Jewish community who are Zionists as well as my lesbian community who I feared are anti-Zionist. I managed to convince another buddy to join me who had spent seventeen years in Israel and was married to an Israeli. She was even more of an insider than I and felt very ambivalent as well. But an out-of-the-blue phone message left on my answering machine on a Thursday afternoon convinced me I had to do this despite the discomfort. The message was from Chaya Shalom, a fifth generation Israeli lesbian-feminist and long-time peacenik. She was calling

from Israel. She said she had seen Burlington listed as one of the American cities standing in support of this international demonstration, and she hoped I would be in that line. I thought about how the Women In Black have stood on street corners for years under the hot sun vulnerable to intense harassment - garbage thrown at them, obscene epithets hurled from passing cars, threats of violence. Standing on harmless little Church Street during the jazz festival across from a youth band was the least I could do. I made up my little homemade signs from cardboard and tree branches and in Hebrew script wrote "Di l'kibush" - stop the occupation.

I was right. My friend and I were the only Israeli Jews in that line. Sure enough people were holding enlarged photos of distraught Palestinians whose homes were just destroyed or whose children were just killed by Israeli soldiers. But even though some of the signs said, "Stop the Violence," there were no photos of the seventeen Israeli teenagers that had just been blown up in a Palestinian suicide bombing the previous week. I do believe that Israel needs to take the lead in declaring a cease-fire and halting the continued building of settlements on the West Bank since we (notice I said "we") have more power, but dead children are dead children. There is suffering on both sides.

I noticed that one of the organizers of the vigil was being interviewed by the media. I told her that they ought to interview one of us Israeli/Americans, but although she was supportive of that idea, I could see it wasn't going to happen. I stepped forward to a guy with a video camera. I told him he needed to interview an Israeli. He got snippy with me and said he already taped the Israeli consulate who had been in Burlington a few weeks ago. I said, "Not someone like him. He's bound to be conservative. I mean an Israeli who is standing in this line." He grudgingly told me to step in front of the camera and state my name. I decided to talk a little about the origins of the Women in Black movement. His ears perked up when he heard this vigil was started by Israelis. This was news to him.

I really had hoped my friend would have been interviewed because spending a few years over in Israel with no intention of making it my home again hardly

makes me an Israeli, but she was busy. She was passionately engaged in dialogue in Hebrew with another Israeli woman from the Lubavitch (Jewish ultra-orthodox) sect in Burlington who came by to counter-demonstrate. The white woman standing next to us told them to keep quiet, that this was a silent vigil - not that she understood a word they were saying. Besides, when's the last time she heard a lively discussion of the Middle-East conflict in Hebrew on the streets of Burlington? I think it was a bit too much reality for her pure soul. It was also a typical reaction of white do-gooders who come across as experts protesting the injustices of ethnic groups they are not a part of. Hence, we who have had first-hand experience with the conflict are made invisible. I'd be damned if I was going to let her shut my friend up since that dialogue was one of the most authentic actions on the block outside of those in the demonstration who were of Arab descent.


I eventually joined the discussion so the two Israelis switched to English since my pidgin-Hebrew is less than adequate. That debate turned out to give me hope in what has felt like a hopeless conflict. The Lubavitch woman said if she were convinced that the Palestinians would really trade land for peace, she'd be all for it. After close to a half-hour of nose-to-nose arguing in true Israeli style, all three of us admitted sheepishly that we are afraid to go back to Israel at a time like this and submit our families to such out-of-control violence even though I know the region needs peaceniks from outside the country more than ever. All three of us laughed in recognition of our vulnerability. I was reminded of those hours of hearings at the Vermont State Legislature when we were trying to pass the Civil Union Law. All those individual gays and lesbians provided a human face to the conflict. It's not so easy to hide behind homophobia when you're face-to-face with "the enemy." It's even easier to demonize your opponent when they live on the other side of the planet. The three of us standing off to one side of the line of protesters working out our anguish humanized the conflict - and that's the stuff of true peace.

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