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Crow's Caws: Impressions of the "Peace Process"



**crow
cohen**

For the OITM travel issue, I decided to once again tackle the complexity of Israel from my American Jewish feminist perspective. I haven't had the guts or money to return for nine years, but I'm due for a trip any minute now. Meanwhile, I'd like to share some excerpts from my 1994 journal when I traveled to the region for the "Women, War and Peace Conference" in Jerusalem and took a camping trip to a wildlife preserve in a desert oasis across from the Dead Sea. My freedom of movement back then was enviable. My only hope is that soon, the rich diversity of tourists and residents will be able to roam the region and intermingle like I did back in "the good ol' days."

"As part of the peace conference we are offered a 'tour' of parts of Israel which are not your typical sightseeing attractions. We go to an 'unrecognized village' called Arab Naim arranged by our kibbutznik [resident of a communal farm in Israel] tour guide - a radical feminist diplomat who lives in the area and does outreach work. This small settlement of Bedouin [once desert nomads] touches me deeply. They have enough money because they work as laborers in Israel and pay full taxes but receive no services and are not allowed to build stone houses - only corrugated tin shacks - because they are not 'legal.' (The Bedouin had lived there for 300 hundred years.)

"They put generators on when the sun goes down, but turn them off at midnight because they make too much noise. They draw water from central wells. They serve us bitter coffee and a piece of candy as we look into their houses with their permission. They want us to publicize their plight. No furniture - just a rug on the floor, a few pillows, a mattress and a wood stove in the corner. The children seem so open. One of the feminists I'm traveling with from Zambia in Africa deliberately walks over to a huddle of giggling, mildly frightened children and says, 'Now I'll give them something to be really scared about' with a big smile on her face. Sure enough they run away with excited screams.

"There is something of the spartan hippie in me that appreciates the simplicity of that simple room without furniture. Are they constantly frustrated and miserable or do they find some joy in their hillside existence in the open air without a lot of distractions? Am I being over-romantic? Perhaps. When I go back to the bus, I start to cry quietly, my heart full of shame. I say to the French Jewish lesbian in my group, 'I'm so ashamed of what my government is doing.' She tries to comfort me by touching my arm saying, 'But it is not your government.' Well, I sup-

pose not, but I certainly feel connected. I can't just disassociate myself like some anti-Zionist American Jewish dykes I know. Then I remembered Harlem and Appalachia. When's the last time I made a tour of those blights on our national character? At any rate I feel compelled to take some small action for these 200 unrecognized villages whose lands will be confiscated sooner or later if nothing is done.

"After the conference I take a bus to the desert in the south to go camping. Nothing restores hope in me more than immersing myself in the natural world. I get a little way-laid in the wadi [desert wash] as I wander off the road due to a magnificent twilight, so I have to whip out my flashlight which I stuck in my backpack just for emergencies such as the one I created by becoming a little too mystical at sunset.

"I return to the overly well-lit campgrounds and muster up the energy to heat up my less-than-deli-

The Bedouin in this settlement work as laborers in Israel and pay full taxes but are not allowed to build houses -- only shacks -- because they are "not legal"

icious soup powder and water with typical unmeltable Israeli cheese in it to add substance. I fish through the flavored water around the bottom of the cup for a rubbery blob of equally undelicious gunk. But at least the powder came from the shuk's [open-air middle-eastern market] version of a health food store. I should have listened to the warnings of the storekeeper who said, 'Here's something with no sugar, no monosodium glutamate, no preservatives, no soup' I noticed in the ingredients it said 'antioxidant.' 'What does that mean?' I asked the ever-helpful storekeeper wondering if it meant that it was impossible to add oxygen. He merely shrugged and said, 'Who knows. If it's 'anti' it must be OK, no?' I could have used a little 'pro' in this soup. I ask at the information booth when the spotlights [would] go off in the campground and am told 'in the morning. Security.' Great. So much for desert moon and stars.

"In the campground I notice a beautiful black woman who is with a white man. I long to interact with her but don't have the nerve to just approach her. As she walks near my campsite where I'm preparing breakfast, I drop something loud in the trash. When she turns to look, I say hi. She smiles and asks if I'm

camping so I eagerly engage her in conversation while boiling my eggs.

"She's Honduran, married to a white German man - an artist, who came over to Israel a few years ago to build a fountain commemorating the Holocaust in a small politically conservative town over the Green Line [in the Arab territories]. She herself says she's conservative. She says the Arabs want it all. They refuse to budge. There are plenty of hills, but they want the exact hill the Jews are building on. She says they have plenty of money from the oil-rich Arab nations.

"She also says her German husband got in trouble with the German authorities for coming over here to build the fountain. She says the Germans don't mention the past. 'It's taboo to talk about the Jews in Germany.' She says they skip over the Holocaust when they teach history in the public schools. She says she never went to Yad Vashem [Jerusalem's Holocaust museum.] 'No way. It's enough I live in Germany.' She said her husband is anti-establishment, and that's why he built the fountain despite the flak he got from the German government.

"On the way back to Jerusalem I have to stand in the crowded bus. I engage in conversation with a lovely Ecuadorian woman travelling with her two young sons. She starts the conversation by asking me where Masada is. I figure out the

bus had already passed it a long time ago. She shrugs her shoulders (notice how much shoulder shrugging goes on in Israel) and says, 'OK. So we go someplace different.' I say she'll probably go to Jerusalem because there's nothing between here and Jerusalem. 'Well, we've already been there, but OK, we'll go again.' I compliment her on her hang-loose attitude.

"She's married to a half-Dutch, half-Ecuadorian man who also has some Jewish thrown in. They are living in Holland so he came to Israel to get in touch with his Jewish roots. She says he was very emotional when he got here. She was so touched by his reaction that she 'fell in love with him all over again.' She is traveling without him this week because he was only here for a few days. She has a hard time visiting her family back in Ecuador because it's so heartbreaking when she has to leave again. She said the people in Ecuador are much more outgoing and open than in Holland. 'They are like the people here in this country.'

"She asks me if I am travelling alone. I decide not to come out to her. I say I like being alone. I have

continued on following page