

American psychologist Sallie M. Motch, Ph.D. traveled to Hebron, Palestine, to work with individuals and families suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Through letters home and personal commentary she offers readers a loving, bipartisan view of the Middle East.

Palestine: A Look Inside

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PALESTINE: A Look Inside

Sallie M. Motch, Ph.D.

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The names of many of the people mentioned in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION: Writing the Forbidden	1
PART I: The Letter-Writing Project.....	7
ONE: The Compassionate Witnessing of Pain and Identity	9
PART II: Encountering the Facts on the Ground/Letters Home.....	33
TWO: January—Beginnings	35
THREE: February.....	59
FOUR: March—The Grappling Begins in Earnest.....	105
FIVE: April, May and June	125
EPILOGUE.....	145
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	147

INTRODUCTION

Writing the Forbidden

Defining Myself in This Enterprise

I am a psychologist who has spent varying amounts of time since 2002 working and living in Palestine: I have visited families, witnessed violence, and absorbed the weight of oppression which resides in people's stories and experiences and in the air itself. As such, I do not write from an ivory tower. I write as an ordinary person from my position on the ground. It is my hope that my situation will bring greater accessibility to the issues for the reader.

Patterns of violence, assassination, glimmers of hope, loss of hope, bitter disappointment, political and social tumult, loss of land, loss of livelihood, loss of honor, encounters with daily humiliation are some of the externally imposed foundations for Palestinian life.

Everything mentioned above is reflected in my six years of writing. This book is an attempt at documentation and at critique. It is an effort to bring forth some of the lived experience of the Palestinians I know and it is a plea to those who do not know or do not want to know of this suffering to try to open your minds and hearts to what is contained in these pages.

By attempting to document and respond to the events contained herein, I join the others who have tried and continue to try to put these observations into written words. Our actions and all other forms of resistance to the occupation and its consequences, whether they are peaceful or violent, have thus far made no difference to the state of affairs for Palestinians in Palestine. The Palestinians have a long history of nonviolent protest that continues today. Every day, for example, there is a protest in the village of Bi'lin against the building

Sallie M. Motch, Ph.D.

of the Separation Wall. However, such efforts are rarely reported to the outside world.

Journalists such as Amira Hass and Gideon Levy, writing for *Ha'aretz*, are chronicling events daily in the territories. The women of Machsom Watch: Women against the Occupation and for Human Rights; the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem; Rabbis for Human Rights; Physicians for Human Rights; Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International, and countless other international, Palestinian, and Israeli human-rights groups large and small, known and unknown, in addition to individual activists, are posting stories daily on the Web. There is also the coverage, however meager or biased, in our hometown newspapers. And yet many people still say that they have little knowledge of what is happening there.

Given so much effort by so many we have to ask ourselves, why? What sustains our ignorance? What supports our acceptance of the perpetuation of suffering and deterioration?

It is my hope that what is contained in these pages will contribute to the demise of the de-humanization that is the result of hatred and racism, our hatred and racism, that I believe holds so many in its sway. I believe that these factors consciously or unconsciously determine the actions taken against the Palestinians and in the Middle East in general. It is a tall order, I know, perhaps even grandiose, yet it feels immeasurably necessary to try.

It is my feeling that any reading about Palestine or on behalf of Palestinians requires of the Jewish or otherwise non-Arab/Muslim Western reader, particularly those who would identify as white or as having race and class privilege, a great amount of open-minded, open-heartedness that is lacking for many of us. Perhaps this is the Herculean effort that is required before engaging. And so, before moving forward I have come to the place where I feel that I must declare outright that while I feel I have the responsibility to state my position clearly, I must also require from you the reader your ability to hear it.

This ability to hear, I think, is where we are most likely to close down. I have often noticed that people reading my words about conditions in Palestine cannot retain statements regarding my support

of Jews and Israel (though not necessarily the objectives of Zionism). While I do understand the yearnings for a Jewish state, I feel that inevitably, if a two-state solution cannot be achieved, as I am sure is the case, then a one-state solution that is bi-national in nature, with equal rights for all, such as Ali Abunimah advocates in his book, *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse*, may be the only alternative. I say this, however, knowing that there is almost no support in Israel for such a solution. While it is also difficult for many Palestinians to accept as well, for some, it is the only way forward.

The Reactions of My Friends

In the book I offer some of my letters home that I wrote during my first few months in the West Bank. I lost some friends in this endeavor and I think it is important to address this here as I talk about the issues with which I am presently dealing.

My impression was that for some of my friends even the descriptions of the effects surrounding the occupation precluded any further belief in my love for them or my compassion for or understanding of Jewish vulnerability as a driving force for Israel's actions. I believe that they felt that if I could care for Palestinians or criticize Israeli soldiers or the actions of its army, then I had forgotten why these things were deemed necessary. And, in a relational context that highlighted ethnic identities and differences, the fact that I was not Jewish but they were, I think my actions implied to some of my friends that I no longer appreciated or sympathized with their identities as Jews.

In short, I think they saw my new connections as a change in my allegiance and by taking the steps I took, I was experienced as betraying my love for and understanding of their ethnic legacy by standing against actions that they believed were meant to keep them safe from danger. That, I believe, was in the minds of some of my friends as they relayed their disappointment to me. Through this engagement, our ethnic differences suddenly began to matter in ways that had not previously been the case. I became someone who could

Sallie M. Motch, Ph.D.

be dangerous to them, who could cause them harm. That is simply not my intention.

Entering Forbidden Territory

Let us begin this exploration with an acknowledgment of the fact that if you, a prospective reader, have opened these pages, you have already embarked on a somewhat illicit endeavor. If you are standing in a bookstore anyplace in America, you may not want others around you to see what you are reading. Or perhaps you are proud. I think it is unlikely that you are not somewhat self-aware or self-conscious of your choice. Regardless of your mindset in handling the material, you will no doubt be aware that to do so is implicitly a provocation of some sort to someone.

It is tempting to become overly preoccupied with trying to convince the reader of my stance. I have taken pains to avoid having my words be taken in a manner that I do not intend.

I cannot say too often that even though I am weighing in on my political beliefs with regard to a resolution in the Middle East, I do not do so from a position that assumes that my opinion has any relevance or is in any way appropriate. Really, it is none of my business. When Palestinians ask me if I think they should have a state my answer is that they should have justice and it should take whatever form they think it should take.

My reason for weighing in as I do in this book is related solely to laying out the complexities on the ground and in the political sphere that affect resolution. In so doing, I am also attempting to tread a difficult path that advocates safety for all, Jews and Arab, in which the process of stripping away the rights of Arabs is completely halted and reversed.

Denial and Erasure—The Issue of Contested Memory and Loss

Post-1948, after Palestinian Arabs had fled or been driven from their homes, Israeli settlers began the project of resettling Arab villages in an effort to erase the history of their Arab occupants. In her book, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*, Susan Slyomovics writes, “The story of Arab Ein

PALESTINE: A Look Inside

Houd and Jewish Ein Hod, one village with two identities in the Carmel Mountains south of the city of Haifa, recounts Palestinian Arab memory covered over by Jewish memory, just as Halbwachs observes that medieval Christian memory superimposed itself on Jewish memory. A Jewish Israeli artists' colony founded in 1953 has come to replace an agriculturally based Palestinian village of traditional stone houses that traces its establishment to the twelfth century.”

This is an extraordinary book that discusses the complex relationship between narrative and action with regard to the Israeli project of erasing Palestinian Arab claims to a history on the land. For Palestinians, any project involving narration allows them to story and re-story their history and losses in an effort to make “real” their lives and their humanity in the face of efforts to render them physically and geographically invisible. Narration would also allow the Palestinians to concretize and transport their story. Such retelling should allow them to get a hearing in the outside world.

As I consider the issue from the perspective of the successful erasure of the concrete in the form of a building or village, I can better apprehend why the Palestinian story is so easily dismissed. A building is a structure that can be seen, touched, dated. While aspects of its history can certainly be argued, its very existence is irrefutable, while a story is only words. It can be transcribed but its veracity can be challenged to the point of rendering it extinct: The words can disappear into the wind if there is no one on the receiving end who cares enough to hear, remember or heed it. And then there is the matter of whose stories we choose to attend to and why.

In the story of Israel/Palestine for most of “us” (those who identify as white, privileged, members of the dominant culture in the U.S., in addition to fundamentalist Christians who may or may not identify as the above, who have their own agenda), the Jews are deserving of their heritage, while the Palestinians, the Arabs, are relegated and reduced to a parody: The Palestinians are known to us, post-9/11, only as one-dimensional creatures called “terrorists.” They do not exist in the minds of many Americans as human beings. As such, they

Sallie M. Motch, Ph.D.

have no claims to the land, no right to justice and their story doesn't count.

Throughout Part I of this book, as I lay the foundation for discussing my life, work and responsibilities in Palestine and now, here in this country, I make the case that this is the heart of the matter. If we cannot see the Palestinians as human beings, how will we ever bring ourselves to recognize their stories, *their* history, their pain, their suffering, their rights, their need for justice? There will be more, much more about this as we proceed. For now, I simply ask the reader to hold these thoughts for consideration as we begin this exploration.

—*Sallie M. Motch, August 2009*

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