

## BRIDGE OVER THE WADI

By Sue Jackson

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This isn't going to be an easy piece to write. But I still want to give it a try.

At a workshop a short time ago I ran into a woman whom I've known for many years. Our lives have followed similar courses. We studied together, each of us has three children, now young adults, and both of us are therapists. But there is a difference - Judith\* is Jewish and I am not. (\*Not her real name)

Although Judith's parents managed to escape to Australia, most of their extended family perished in the Holocaust, and the few survivors subsequently made their home in Israel. As a young woman, Judith had taken a year off from her studies to visit these relatives and to work in Israel. And each of her children in succession has followed in her footsteps.

These days Judith and I only cross paths occasionally, so there is always plenty to catch up on. At a break in the workshop, we were discussing where our kids were up to, when Judith told me that her youngest son had just returned from his gap year in Israel. When I replied, 'Mmm... Israel...' Judith said, 'It's been great catching up,' and moved on. And I realised I was relieved, because I sensed that any further conversation might be uncomfortable.

I'm sharing this experience with you because I suspect my unease in discussing the subject of Israel with a Jewish colleague might not be unique to me. If this is true, given that, since Freud's days, therapy has been the career choice of many Jewish professionals, it seems important to address the topic. As we therapists know only too well, when things are difficult to broach it's often exactly the moment to take the risk.

And risky it can be. Or so says American journalist Ethan Bronner in a recent article in the *New York Times*. Bronner, who has covered the Arab-Israeli conflict for over a quarter-

century, including the recent war in Gaza, outlined how difficult it is for journalists to get it 'right'.

He argues that it is virtually impossible for a reporter in the Middle East to be seen as anything other than partisan, since both sides constantly interpret unfolding events via irreconcilable 'larger narratives'. These narratives, which make inevitable a stance of 'if you're not with us, you're against us,' Bronner defines as follows:

'After thousands of years of oppression, the Jewish nation has returned to its rightful home. It came in peace and offered its hand to its neighbours numerous times, only to be met with a sword. Opposition to Israel...stems from Muslim intolerance, nationalistic fervour and rank anti-Semitism, all fed by envy at the young state's success...'

The opposing narrative goes like this: 'There is no Jewish nation, only followers of a religion. A group of European colonialists came here, stole and pillaged, throwing hundreds of thousands off their land and destroying their villages and homes. A country born in sin, Israel has built up an aggressive military with help from Washington in the grips of a powerful Jewish lobby.'

It's easy to see why, despite his best efforts, Bronner despairs at ever being acknowledged by both sides simultaneously as a 'fair' reporter. But he is determined to keep trying and concludes that 'you should not be a reporter if you are not telling the whole story, not just the parts that sell'.

And it's exactly this 'whole story' that Avaaz, the online watchdog organisation, suggests is being overlooked by the majority of the American press. Avaaz concludes that the press is strongly biased in its coverage of the Middle East. A mere four per cent of stories filed describe the situation in Palestine as a 'military occupation', and not surprisingly, less than twenty-five per cent of Americans surveyed felt sympathy for both sides in the conflict.

As Avaaz puts it:

‘Palestinian kids throwing rocks were seen as dangerous rioters, rather than token resistance to an illegal military occupation. The crushing nature of that occupation, in which the smallest details of life are tightly controlled, is rarely covered by the US media.’

Avaaz hopes that the new-broom American President will be able to broker a fair peace, but, echoing Bronner, argues that Obama’s hands will be tied until the media ‘tells both heart-rending sides of the story’, thus effecting a change in public opinion.

One spokesperson for the Palestinian side of the story is Suad Amiry, who visited Melbourne a few years ago.

Interestingly, in view of Avaaz’s assertion of bias, I never did see advance notice of this eminent speaker’s lecture in the press, nor any report on it subsequently. I learned of Suad’s visit via word-of-mouth when an overseas friend called and warned me not to miss her.

I found Suad, an architect by profession and an accidental activist, most inspiring. Suad has lived in Ramallah, on the West Bank in the heart of the Occupied Territories, for over twenty years. While by no means ignoring the large injustices suffered by her fellow country men and women, she spoke mainly about the myriad minor restrictions that make daily life so difficult:

Curfews, imposed unpredictably and of uncertain duration, mean that Palestine is frequently a nation of citizens under house arrest. When the curfews are lifted, often for as little as three hours, people are confronted with impossible choices.

Do they make a dash for the shops, which are packed with their neighbours, to pick up much needed supplies? This can feel like the priority when they have no idea when the curfew will next be lifted.

Or do they use this precious time to check on ill or aged relatives? Suad’s 92-year-old mother-in-law lives across town. She described how she had spent many intervals between curfews desperately, and often fruitlessly, negotiating the ruined roads and dodging Israeli soldiers in an attempt to reach her.

The intricate web of Israeli permits and passes means that many families are separated for years on end, which was the case for Suad herself and her husband. Ironically, as a result of a bureaucratic bungle, her dog Nura was awarded a Jerusalem passport, something that has eluded thousands of Palestinians. Her readiness to laugh at absurdities like this is no doubt a crucial survival strategy.

Check points, manned by armed soldiers, overshadow every aspect of daily life. Children have to queue twice daily merely to attend school. Mothers with babies or toddlers in tow have to stand in crowds in the hot sun, often for prolonged periods, to do their shopping or visit the doctor. And males, who attract extra scrutiny from the soldiers, have checkpoints to endure at the beginning and end of every single working day.

The impact of the concrete ‘separation wall’, now snaking through Palestine and dividing communities, separating farmers from their fields, and people from their loved ones, she described in all its horror.

Listening to Suad, it was impossible not to be moved by the Palestinians’ plight. Suad has written a best-selling book about these experiences, called *Sharon and my Mother-in-Law* (Granta Books, London, 2005). I recommend it to you.

Moving from fact to fiction, recently I was lucky enough to see a film called *The Lemon Tree* by the Israeli director, Eran Riklis.

Salma Zidane, a Palestinian widow who lives alone on the West Bank border, has spent her life tending the lemon orchard bequeathed to her by her father. The orchard provides her livelihood. As she puts it, ‘This grove is my whole life’. Then the Israeli Defence Minister moves next door and everything changes.

Immediately, a watchtower is erected on the boundary of their properties. It is manned by a young Israeli soldier called Itamar, who spends his time preparing for aptitude tests by listening to weird verbal puzzles that boom throughout the orchard.

Because the close proximity of the orchard is seen as a threat to the Minister's safety, Salma is prohibited from entering it and has to watch her trees dying from lack of water and attention. When she receives an official directive to cut down the trees, Salma determines to challenge the ruling in the Israeli courts.

For me, the impact of this film was less verbal than visual. The Minister has a beautiful and neglected wife, Mira. And although Salma and Mira never actually speak, Mira tracks her neighbour's deteriorating situation and tries unsuccessfully to influence her husband to moderate his stance. As Mira watches Salma fighting for her home, the women lock eyes through the metal fence that divides them, and Mira comes to court to support Salma by her presence, it is clear she is suffering alongside her neighbour.

*The Lemon Tree* is not a polemical film, nor does it stereotype people. Everyone is flawed and idiosyncratic and very real. It is masterful in the way it conveys the complexity of the situation, the myriad injustices and their corrosive impact on ordinary people, and the pervasive impotence experienced by all of the main characters, even the blusterers. I won't give away the ending, because I hope you'll see it, but suffice to say, it's not a Hollywood one.

The Mira character brought to mind a group of Israeli women, also motivated by compassion for their Palestinian neighbours, who have formed themselves into an influential advocacy group.

Machsom Watch are checkpoint observers. Members stand in small groups at checkpoints to monitor soldiers' behaviour, in the hope that their presence will deter abuses. The group's first outing in 2001 was at the checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where five sleepy and nervous women 'stood at the edge of the wadi wondering what to do next'.

Although there was initial uncertainty about the most effective strategies, Machsom Watch has always been absolutely clear about its aims. Watchers 'call for Palestinian freedom of movement within their own territory and for an end to the occupation that destroys Palestinian society and inflicts grievous harm on Israeli society.'

If you see only one thing on YouTube this month, make it the open letter to President Obama posted on 3/1/'09 during the war on Gaza. It was written by a Watcher and is entitled 'Obama, take away the pain in my stomach'.

When Machsom Watch started out, it was seen as an isolated leftist group. But things are changing within Israel. In January this year, thousands of Israelis took to the streets to protest against the war on Gaza, and the protests were well covered on Israel Social TV. While opponents of the war are still in the minority and are frequently seen as 'traitors' by their fellow citizens, their numbers are growing.

There are other citizens, who may not choose to march, but are nevertheless demonstrating to their leaders that there is another way forward. Several years ago, a group of Palestinian and Israeli parents and teachers established a bilingual Arab/Jewish primary school. It is located in Wadi Ara, a Palestinian village in the heart of Israel.

The school was the subject of a documentary called 'Bridge Over the Wadi', recently screened on ABC 1's *Compass*. The film shows students, taught by both Arab and Israeli teachers, playing together, enjoying sleepovers and learning from books written in Hebrew and Arabic. The struggle of the teachers and parents to understand each other's perspectives and for the young classmates to make sense of their future as potential enemies is heart-breaking.

As well as opposition within Israel to the Israeli government's stance, there is growing international pressure. This year there have been anti-war marches in London, New Orleans and Chicago. And back in February 2007 a particularly important opposition group was launched in the UK.

Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) comprises eminent British Jews, many of whom come from the arts. Playwright Harold Pinter, film director Mike Leigh and the wonderful actor/writer Stephen Fry are just some of the members of an organization 'born out of a frustration with the widespread misconception that the Jews of this country speak with one voice – and that voice

supports the Israeli government's policies.' Following this British lead, similar organisations have been established elsewhere in Europe and in Australia.

As therapists, we are acutely aware of the power of Ethan Bronner's 'larger (in our terms 'dominant') narratives'. But we also have a great deal of exposure to the power of alternate narratives as catalysts for change. Neither Jews nor Arabs speak with a single voice, and hopefully it's out of this diversity that solutions to the supremely complex problem of the Middle East will eventually emerge.

Personally, I just wish I could rewind that conversation with Judith. I don't know for sure, but I imagine she finds the current situation in her beloved Israel both distressing and bewildering. I'd like to say to her that I appreciate there are no easy answers, and that I feel for her.