

THE WOMEN'S PEACE MOVEMENT IN ISRAEL:

♀ Forty Years ♀ on the Move

By Hannah Safran

Women have been active in the peace/resistance movement within the Palestinian community in Israel since 1948, especially as part of the Democratic Women's Movement "Tandi," in which Jewish women were also active. Years later, Palestinian and Jewish women joined together in activities and demonstrations when the Second Intifada started at the end of 1987.

Peace organizing began in 1977 with the establishment of Peace Now (*Shalom Achshav*), but women in this movement were "second-class" activists, never invited to speak from the podium at demonstrations nor in positions of leadership. In 1982, the beginning of the war in Lebanon brought the outrage of women as mothers, having to send their sons to the war, into the public arena. They started opposing the war, as did left-wing women, who demonstrated daily against the invasion of Lebanon, marking the emergence of the separate women's peace movement. Soon after the beginning of the first Intifada in 1987, the women's peace movement gained momentum, and the number of groups and activities has fluctuated since then.

Mothers and/or feminists?

Two major trends characterized the movement: one is peace activism as a maternal drive and the other is peace activism as a feminist act of resistance. In Israeli public memory the "Four Mothers" movement of 1997, demanding an end to the war in Lebanon (begun in 1982), remains to this day the most impressive phase of women's peace organizing. However, for those of us whose conviction and passion for resistance to Israeli militarism comes from a radical feminist analysis, the usage of motherhood as a political argument is controversial.

Our analysis combines violence against women with violence against the "other," i.e., the Pales-



Protesting the investigation planned by the police into the activities of New Profile, a feminist organization whose aim is to help de-militarize Israeli society.

tinians and other oppressed groups too. We would rather use our voices as women demanding peace, justice, and an end to violence whether we are mothers or not. In 2000, the pressure the Four Mothers movement exerted on Israeli politicians to pull out of Lebanon succeeded, but this great success was not an occasion to celebrate; the Second Intifada with its deadly impact was about to commence. Had the power and wisdom of the Four Mothers movement been directed to ending the Occupation as well as ending the war in Lebanon, perhaps we would have a better political situation today. But this has never happened.

Recent developments

The last decade has been very difficult for us in the peace movement. The Second Intifada, with its horrific results for people in both Palestine and Israel; the siege of Gaza; the second war on Lebanon; the attack on Gaza; the ongoing attack on Bedouins' rights in the Negev; and the current attack on human rights organizations have all contributed to a feeling of despair. It has become more difficult to communicate with our fellow Palestinians in the OPT (occupied Palestinian territories), and within Israel the erosion of human rights continues. Racist attacks occur almost daily, and we hear horrific reports from former servicemen and women about harassment of Palestinian civilians in the OPT.

But the struggle continues, and there are always enough people with courage and hope to keep on. In the wake of an anti-human rights campaign by the right-wing racist government of Israel, we can point with pride to demonstrations staged in support of New Profile, when their activists were summoned to police investigations¹. Women and men joined together to protest the investigations against New Profile, a feminist orga-

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXT08ciSAMl&NR=1

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nization whose aim is to de-militarize Israeli society and give support and guidance to resisters.

The slogans in this demo reveal the anger of feminist and peace activists against Israeli oppression both inside and outside its occupied lands. They shouted, “We will not die and we will not kill in the service of Zionism”; “Call the police, I am committing treason”; “Frightening feminist, call the police”; “I don’t shoot, I don’t give birth: call the police”; these slogans—publicly stated in front of a police station—show the defiance of these mostly young women (and men), at the connection they see between national politics and the abuse of women and women’s bodies in the service of the state.

Women in Black, who started weekly vigils on downtown street corners in spring 1988, are still holding some vigils around the country demanding an end to the Occupation. It has become an international movement with women around the world using the same slogans to work against militarism and for peace. Another group that started when the checkpoints were established during the second Intifada is MachsomWatch (CheckpointWatch). They stand at military checkpoints to make sure Palestinians are not harassed and maltreated. They brought awareness to the Israeli public about the atrocities committed against Palestinians at the checkpoints. Two women known publicly as Aya and Tamar are documenting on video the endless evils of the occupation². Many peace activists joined other people who are not necessarily peace activists, in helping Palestinians in big and small ways: bringing sick Palestinian children, and some adults too, to get treatment in hospitals inside Israel is now a widespread activity.

A disobedience movement by women started recently with the action of a well-known author and translator, Ilana Hamerman, who began taking Palestinian women in her car to visit the seashore. Such seemingly innocent action might sound totally remote from women’s activism for peace, but there is an Israeli law that forbids Israelis from taking Palestinians to visit inside Israel without permission (which must be applied for, and is seldom granted). Hamerman published articles about her activities, and other women joined her in publicly breaking this apartheid law and taking more Palestinian women to visit the seashore, for the first time in their lives. Hamerman was investigated by the police, and many of us have signed a petition saying that we too are ready to go to prison for taking Palestinian women to the seashore. This is one small story from the ocean of anti-democrat-



Documenting on video the endless evils of the occupation [www.mahsanmilim.com/testimonies.htm].

ic laws that Israel has produced over the years against Palestinians. Now it is starting to be aimed against Israeli Jews, too

The movement comes of age

During this long struggle our activism has shifted. We are more involved in joint demonstrations and campaigns together with other groups, on issues not necessarily focused on women’s lives. For example, on the last day of January 2011, the Women’s Peace Coalition called its members to join in demonstrating against the demolition of the Bedouin village El-Arakib in the Negev. This village has been repeatedly destroyed by the security forces so that the Jewish National Fund can plant trees on its land. The matter has gone to court in Be’er Sheva, but there is no verdict yet. All the people of this village, including children, women, and the elderly, have suffered harassment and destruction for the last six months. Is joining their struggle for home and place a feminist issue? African-American feminist bell hooks teaches us that yes, feminism is for everyone; thus, the struggle for social justice is for all of us, too.

The women’s movement has come of age. Many people joining the peace movement today do not remember, or never knew, the discrimination against women we experienced in the early days of the movement. Young men today believe that feminism is something they can embrace too. Stepping outside the oppressive Israeli stereotype of masculinity is welcomed by progressive people in certain circles, not only in the left. For myself, I believe my best weapon today is the written word, circulated near and far by the Internet (and in this magazine). I am too old to run away when the army is throwing tear gas on a demonstration. I sit and write and pray for better days. Yes, peace is possible. We are all obliged to struggle for a better world. This is the mitzvah of *Tikun Olam*, repairing the world, that someone secular and atheist as me feels proud to espouse. ♦

¹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXT08cISAMI&NR=1>

² <http://www.mahsanmilim.com/testimonies.htm>