Crossing the Green Line

BETWEEN THE WEST BANK AND ISRAEL

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The Ethnography of Political Violence

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Preface

> That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study it.
>
> —Rabbi Hillel (c. first century B.C.)
> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

The recognition of mutual personhood is a profoundly widespread (although not exclusive) principle of human morality. It is often called the Golden Rule, and Rabbi Hillel's quote above is not unusual. Similar statements are attributed to Jesus and Confucius and can be found in the ancient Hindu epic poem the *Mahabharata*. Most humans have significant abilities to empathize and act morally when face to face with other humans, despite the opportunity to neglect or harm. Carolyn Nordstrom, who has been at the forefront of anthropological studies of violence, while amid devastating bloodshed in Sri Lanka and Mozambique said that even in warzones most people work to create a healthy society (1997: 212).

Despite the popularity of this moral wisdom, great violence has been committed in the name of righteous traditions by individuals and by organized groups. Severe violence and oppression come not necessarily from those *without* an understanding of morality, but from the systematic exclusion of particular people from empathy. We detach ourselves from the pain of others by placing them outside "our" community, which is often understood and identified by reference to overlapping distinctions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, or ideology. "We do not acknowledge the destruction of beings outside our moral community as suffering" (Morris 1997: 40).

Stopping suffering often requires broadening a moral appeal and disrupting power holders enough to scare them into concessions or collapse (Heyman 1998a: 11). Although it has not posed a threat to power as of yet, ethnography has made effective humanist appeals because it "is well equipped for moral witness of the documentary style" (Heyman 1998a: 12). At its best, "I-Thou relationships, impossibly intimate, are at the heart of the anthropological enterprise" (Mahmood 1996: 25). Cynthia Mahmood argues that the work of recognition is what "humanistically inclined ethnographers do in the research setting, in the writing of monographs, and in the courtroom. Not to praise or condemn our interlocutors, but to discover with them the challenges they face" (Mahmood 1996: 267). Such ethnography can help expand the boundaries of

a moral community and widen the circle of those called neighbors. Lila Abu Lughod (1993) advocates using a technique called tactical humanism. Humanism as a style of representation should be deployed tactically within particular struggles to broaden political support for a particular group, but it should not be a general strategy for every group an anthropologist might study. Josiah Heyman urges that anthropologists "diagnose contexts and ideologies that weaken, restrict, or distort mutual personhood" (Heyman 1998a: 7; see also Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1995). By learning about human interchange, anthropologists can better advocate ways to increase moral recognition of mutual personhood (see Heyman 1998a: 3).

An anthropology based on the human-to-human, ethnographer-to-host relations formed in fieldwork is naturally open to healthy skepticism from those familiar with the presumption of objective scientific inquiry. Some readers will be more comfortable and convinced by writing (representational) techniques, like statistical norms, ideal types, chains of linguistic analogies, or symbolic grammars, that produce an aura of objectivity and factuality achieved partly by extracting the researcher from the view of the reader. However, it is naive to think that disinterested styles of anthropology do "not reflect the predominant worldviews and preoccupation of an era" (Heyman 1998a: 10). Ethnographers cannot extricate themselves from unequal relationships and should be careful about writing texts that attempt to stand outside the world of struggle, contest, and competition. In fact, the obfuscation of the researcher's position is itself a technique of authority, a political technique. The objective language of the scientific report, dislocated from any social position, has become an important tool for the production of the modern state as a rational bureaucracy. While fascism requires objectivity, the strength of the scientific tradition is the transparency of method and epistemology which require political and personal reflexivity, not the obfuscation and denial of subjectivity. "Partisanship does not change the answers social science finds-though most people who have not tried it assert that it does. It changes the questions one asks" (Sider 1993: xxii).

This ethnography is about the conflict in Israel-Palestine. I argue that the conflict is hardly about an ancient Jewish-Muslim religious dispute, but is mainly a consequence of a drastic political and economic inequality. This national apartheid in the Middle East developed mainly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the era of high colonialism, and was shaped by the converging struggles of the British, Zionists, and Palestinians. It has been sustained and reinvigorated with the rise and collapse of the Oslo process. In Palestine, the border, as opposed to parliamentary quotas as in Lebanon, was always the officially preferred mechanism for governing separation. State

The focus of this study is not the essence of Palestinian culture, but the geopolitical border that enforces difference and shapes cultural affiliations. This ethnography of the Green Line uses very particular Palestinian experiences as the framework for an analytical and moral critique of how borders work in the modern world. When the role of the border in creating inequality is made evident, the practical and moral legitimacy of its maintenance becomes open to question. From the borderland, the debates of politicians and nationalists about where and how to redraw the border seem inadequate as a solution. The agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), although politically expedient, were beneficial to a limited few, reorganized an apartheid for most, and have proven to be temporary. The militarization of borders for workers and their selective opening for trade, appearing unique in Israel-Palestine, are also persistent features organizing inequality in the old/new world order.

powers have drawn and redrawn the shape and practice of borders in Palestine, carving it into increasingly smaller pieces, but this form of administrative violence has remained a central factor in the conflict.

In order to learn about the importance of the border in the daily life and struggle of Palestinians, I visited Palestine-Israel eight times between 1988 and 2000 for a total of about three years (September 1988 to June 1989, the summers of 1992 and 1993, June 1994 to September 1995, the summer of 1996, the winter of 1998–99, and the summers of 1999 and 2000). Between 1988 and 1993, I spent a significant amount of time at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Birzeit University in the Ramallah District of the West Bank, traveled widely, and defined a research focus on state violence in general and borders in particular. Since 1994, I have spent most of my visits living with a Palestinian family in a village in the Tulkarm District in the northern West Bank. In addition to complete immersion in social life during these visits, I worked alongside Palestinians in construction, agriculture, and other jobs in the West Bank in 1994 and 1995.

For those in the West Bank, the Green Line (the former Jordanian-Israeli armistice line that separates the West Bank from Israel proper) shaped everyday life, more than ever, in the opportunities to make a living. Border policies restricted Palestinian agriculture and industry, pushing many to serve Israeli producers and consumers. Tens of thousands of West Bank workers crossed the border to work in Israel almost every day. Tens of thousands of others, like car mechanics and textile workers, worked for Israelis in the West Bank. The border limited the claims most of these workers could make on those who made the profits. Subcontracting agents, who made business across the border possible, also suffered from restrictions at the border, but the border brought them new sources of wealth, creating new internal tensions. Labor and production processes in the borderland were an important part of the national conflict often missed in descriptions of the Israel-Palestinian struggle.

Palestinians often spoke to me about these problems in relation to the border, but they also reflected on the border in more indirect ways. The border became a location separating cultural worlds. The customs of gender, age, and marriage of most West Bankers were demonstrably different from those of their relatives only a few kilometers away across the border. Palestinians were marking inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic cultural borders. Customs indicated inequalities and solidarities, and reinscribed relations made by the border as well as the personal identities they imply. The making of borders established a distinction and connection between West Bank and Israeli Palestinians and also distinguished those who remained inside historic Palestine and those in diaspora communities in Jordan, the Gulf, and beyond.

Contents

1. Locations

The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at the border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any one of those many modern barriers where identities are checked and verified. What happens to Palestinians at these crossing points brings home to them how much they share in common as a people. (Khalidi 1997: 1)

Near the Palestinian town of Tulkarm, in the northwestern West Bank, in the middle of a two-lane road that ran past olive groves, small wheat fields, and plastic hothouses that grew vegetables and flowers, sat an Israeli military checkpoint marking the Green Line, the border between the occupied West Bank and Israel. At the checkpoint a half a dozen concrete blocks, each about a cubic meter in size, fortified the Israeli soldiers manning the crossing. On each side of the formidable obstruction ran parallel lines of red plastic barricades that guided drivers and pedestrians around the blocks, past the soldiers and across the border. An Israeli sniper with a machine gun stood watch in a three-meter tower protected by concrete slabs and sandbags. On one side of the checkpoint, smooth, soft, black asphalt paved the way to the coastal plains of Israel along the Mediterranean. On the other side, the surface of the same route was old, hard, and broken from years of neglect. This ragged road twisted into the hilly lands of the West Bank that border the Jordan River. Permanent army checkpoints like this were created on the Green Line between Israel and the West Bank in March 1993.

The Green Line was the armistice line between Israel and Jordan established in 1949 that ended Israel's war of independence. From 1949 to 1967, the border was closed and the West Bank was occupied and annexed by Jordan. In the June 1967 War, the West Bank was taken from Jordan and became an occupied territory under the Israeli military. The border was opened soon thereafter. Palestinians began crossing for work and Israelis began to confiscate land to build settlements. There

were no permanent checkpoints from the 1970s until 1993, when they were established to enforce work permits. This occurred as Israel and the PLO were secretly negotiating in Oslo. (More descriptions of these changes are provided in Chapter 2.)

Crossing a checkpoint from the West Bank into Israel, after 1993, required all men between adolescence and old age to show their identity card, known to Palestinians as a *huwiya*, and, if they were West Bank or Gazan Palestinians, to have a *tasrih*, a permit to be in Israel between 5:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. The identity card, issued by the Israeli army's Civil Administration, had a sword and branch inside a six-pointed star (a Jewish star) printed on its face. It showed the name, place of residence, and file number of its carrier. Israeli ID cards had blue plastic holders. Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians who became citizens of Israel around the time of independence in 1948 (henceforth called Arab-Israelis) had the same blue ID and could pass Israeli checkpoints with relative ease. But after the Israeli army took the West Bank in 1967, West Bank Palestinians did not become citizens of Israel. They became "residents" of Judea and Samaria, which is what Zionists call the West Bank. Identity cards for Palestinians who were just "residents" came in orange plastic holders (red for Gazans) that stood out like neon signs when they came out from the pockets of their owners. Israeli soldiers and policemen asked Palestinian men for their *huwiya* any time or any place. Taking a person's ID was the first act of taking the person into custody.

While everyone was required to have an ID at all times, most West Bank Palestinians could not get a permit to enter Israel. Tens of thousands of workers who built, picked, cleaned, and manufactured every day in Israel had to sneak across the Green Line without military permission in order to get to work. From 1993 to 1997 this was a formidable task. Plenty got caught and could be seen sitting in groups on the ground next to the checkpoint with their IDs in an Israeli soldier's pocket. When the morning traffic subsided, the police would write them a ticket, sometimes for 450 New Israeli shekels (NIS) (about $150 in 1994), about a week's wage for most people, and send them home. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of men crossed clandestinely in the hours around dawn. Few women crossed among the men. If they did, neighbors might gossip about how they were vulnerable to an immoral world. Those women who did cross, mostly to work in cleaning and agriculture, were usually in the most difficult financial circumstances. They were often allowed to pass through the checkpoint without showing any identification or permission. This was also the case for small boys or very old men. When workers got across the border, there were usually many vans and trucks waiting to transport them to locations all around Israel.

1. A clandestine path in a valley, cutting through the Green Line, 1995.

During the midmorning hours, after the workers' traffic ended, Israeli vans and trucks came across into the West Bank. Just over the border they waited for transport vehicles to deliver or pick up their goods. Largely, Israelis sent cut fabric and labels into the territories where Palestinian women assembled and packaged the clothes. Some Israeli merchants delivered supplies to the checkpoint, business to business, especially for light industry, automobile garages, and construction. Most heavy construction deliveries were made all the way to the site in an Israeli truck. Some deliveries, like petroleum or tanked gases, usually had Israeli army escorts. On Thursdays, there was an animal market on the West Bank side of the checkpoint where Israelis sold horses, cows, sheep, and chickens to Palestinian farmers and butchers. Most imports came from Israel, and the West Bank was open to the dumping of Israeli goods, but Israel's market was protected from goods coming in.

About a hundred meters from the checkpoint inside the West Bank there was an unplanned industrial zone where Palestinians fixed Israeli cars. There were some semi-permanent fruit and vegetable stands, but the main industry in these zones was auto service. There were paint and body shops, engine mechanics, electricians, carburetor, air-conditioning and muffler specialists, oil and tire changers, and even simple car washes. There were Mercedes specialists and American car specialists, and everyone could fix a Subaru. These industrial zones grew on the outskirts of all major towns to service the villages, but they were especially numerous near the border where they could service Israeli customers. Most of the customers were from nearby Arab-Israeli towns, but a number of Jewish-Israelis were also regulars, even wearing sidearms and military fatigues or carrying an M-16 rifle.

2. Men going around the checkpoint in view of the soldiers' tower, 2000.

Like the merchants who stopped at the checkpoints, many Israeli labor contractors, Jews more than Arab-Israelis, were often scared to enter the Occupied Territories because Israeli cars were regularly stoned by children during the uprising (1987–93), and a handful of attacks occurred against Israeli drivers and passengers in the middle and late 1990s, although most were in Hebron and Ramallah. Around 4:00 P.M., most Israeli contractors would simply drop off their workers at the checkpoint, and the workers would pile into shared taxis that carried them from the crossing to the garage in town where other taxis traveled to more distant towns and villages.

In the evening there was little movement across the checkpoint. West Bank Palestinians, even with permissions to cross, were not allowed in Israel between 7:00 P.M. and 5:00 A.M. Some Arab-Israelis came into the Occupied Territories to visit friends and family or to contract workers. The infrequency of movement during these hours made soldiers suspicious enough to closely scrutinize any car coming into the crossing, even from Israel. The only visible activity at the checkpoint was one Arab-Israeli, parked on the side of the road

3. Men going around the checkpoint, passing vending carts, 2000.

inside the territories, who sold ice-cold beer from his van from sundown until about 9:00 P.M. This was the only place to buy beer in the entire Tulkarm District.

Saturday was the one day of the week when the flow at the border was reversed. The Jewish Sabbath was everyone's day off, and many Arab-Israeli families from areas of Israel like the Triangle and the Galilee crossed the border to shop in the West Bank for clothes and food. The largest segment of Palestinian business, retail sales (Palestinian Bureau of Statistics 1995), was visibly dependent on Arab-Israeli money. Before the uprising, many Jewish-Israelis went to the crowded vegetable markets on Saturday for the great bargains; after the uprising, only Jewish soldiers on patrol could be found in the market. Even Jewish-Israeli drivers who employed Palestinian mechanics were scarce in town. The Oslo negotiations and the arrival of the Palestinian Authority led to the gradual return of Arab-Israelis to the Tulkarm market, though Jews were still rare. This normalization collapsed with a renewed uprising and intensified closure in Fall 2000.

4. Netanya checkpoint with crowd of workers being stopped by a soldier, 2000.

Violence and the Border

Acute forms of violence that inflict or threaten to inflict physical pain in a punctuated way to the body (by abrasion, rupture, temperature, pressure, electric shock, etc.), are often woven closely together with economic and "structural" violence in which pain is inflicted slowly and in a chronic fashion, by keeping people in poverty, depriving them of the ability to reproduce themselves, forcing them into hunger, or systematically preventing them from pursuing their chosen life on an equal playing field. Structural violence is built into everyday life, into the economy, a political system, and into the landscape. In the Palestinian refugee camps, for example, poor living conditions, overpopulation, and poverty were ongoing forms of structural violence caused partly by the war more than half a century ago.

Obviously, both acute and structural violence can destroy natural resources, community infrastructures, and the ability to make a living, and they can kill and maim people. But the power of violence goes beyond the act of destruction or deprivation. Long after physical suffering, violence can work

5. Israeli junk collected by Palestinian workers for sale on the West Bank side of the checkpoint, 2000.

through the fear or trauma it produces (see Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000). The fear of violence is largely produced by experiences of violence and stories of violence or "talking terror" (Taussig 1992). Understanding the role of the border as a particular form of violence in daily life requires situating it within the larger repertoires and discussions of violence "on the ground" in the West Bank.

At about 11:00 P.M. one spring night in 1995, after a leisurely evening of socializing in the village of al-Qarya, I drove a few friends back to their homes in the town of Tulkarm, about a ten-minute journey by car. It was a common and routine event for me. Listening to music and enjoying the weather's pleasant change, I turned a corner on a small street in a relatively new residential area, and we found ourselves squinting into the spotlights and headlights of two Israeli army jeeps. I turned off the music, and our conversation stopped. My companion in the front seat said "slowly, slowly." We came closer into the bright lights and I began to see in silhouette a group of about ten or fifteen soldiers, spread out, moving down the street, some with their M-16 rifles

raised to their eyes, aimed at us, with clips in their guns and fingers on their triggers. In a loud, screaming voice, one soldier ordered us in Hebrew to stop and get out of the car. We got out slowly with our hands up and stood looking down the barrels of several rifles held by nervous and aggressive young men. They ordered us to put our hands against the wall on the side of the street. They frisked everyone and collected our identification cards. Because it was my car, they ordered me to open the trunk. Two soldiers searched the vehicle, while my friends were ordered to remain against the wall. We had no weapons and the soldiers moved on down the street. My four friends remained standing there, with their hands against the wall, not turning around. I realized I did not have my ID, my American passport, even though my friends' ID cards had been returned to them. I ran after the soldiers to get it back and caught up with them about two blocks away. I called out from about thirty meters distance. They turned, raised their rifles, and ordered me to stop. I told them that they had my passport. One of them had put it in his pocket, and he gave it back. I walked back to my friends, who were still standing facing the wall as they had been ordered to do, although they had put their arms down. I assured them the soldiers were not coming back, and we left. One companion remarked, "You ran after the soldiers," sounding somewhat surprised. Running toward or away from soldiers, another said, was stupid, but, he said I did not know any better.

Violence in the occupied territories was imminent, possibly around the next corner, and it shaped lives in obvious and subtle ways. I could not drive around at night without some cautious hesitation. When I was walking through the village at night, the sight of oncoming headlights or the sound of a car motor from just over the hill inspired a physical desire for flight that I had to resist. When people approached a checkpoint on the road, experiences of violence, either from personal memory or from the stories of friends and family, could flood forward, and these thoughts could compel potential victims to be compliant, at least for the moment. The lingering effects of violence continued to work even when it was not actually happening because it created permanent scars, both physical and psychological. It weighed in the air with imminence.

In the West Bank and Gaza, the effects of violence were intense because the use of violence by the state was continuous under the Israeli occupation, especially to crush the uprising called the Intifada, which began in December 1987. During the Intifada, villages, town councils, labor unions, student groups, women's organizations, and Islamic centers all became politicized to the point of confrontation (Nasser and Heacock 1990; Hiltermann 1990, 1991, 1992). Harassment by the Israeli military government in the name of tax collection pushed shopkeepers and small businessmen to become willing activists in the uprising (Tamari 1990b: 163). Palestinians shut their stores every day