Attending to Pain

an interview with Susan Heckler

Q: Why did you want to do this?

A: I'd never been to Israel before, and I felt that was because I was very discouraged and unhappy about the situation. I didn't want to go as a tourist, and ignore this gaping wound in the psyche of the world and in the Jewish psyche. To me this trip presented a responsible way to go and thoughtfully and consciously look at the issue [of Jewish-Palestinian relations]. It was a fascinating and intense experience for me as a Jew to be in Israel. Israel is the most morally complex place I've ever been to.

Q: What was the itinerary?

A: We were based in Jerusalem, at a convent called Ecce Homo in the Arab quarter of the old city. Ecce Homo is on the Via Dolorosa and is one of the Stations of the Cross. I became friendly with the Christians who ran the convent, and who were curious about us. When I related some of the experiences we'd had with Palestinians, the sister in charge said to me, "It means a great deal to us that you're staying here. We have a lot of Arab staff and we have developed a somewhat biased view. It's very meaningful to us that you're here, and to hear about the work you're doing."

On the last day, I went with a volunteer to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, because my neighbors in Queens, who are devout Catholics and who are elderly and ill, asked me to go to the Church and pray for them. I went in their place, so I did what they would do. It was interesting because later I thought that people I know would have found it difficult to accept that I prayed at this church of Jesus. I gave my own prayer and I gave the prayer I thought they would give. It was again an experience of trying to be large enough to be beyond yourself, to take another perspective, to speak to God from beyond the identity you were born into.

Q: You went to some of the most difficult places in the area: Hebron and Gaza. What was Hebron like?

A: In Hebron I stayed in the home of an upper middle class Palestinian lawyer, his sons, and his wife. While you see things being built in Hebron, you also see the infrastructure crumbling. The streets, sidewalks, lampposts, sewers and things we take for granted were decayed. The decline of services is a point of anger. The Palestinian Authority in Gaza was given $14 million by the Swedish government to create a sewage system that had been neglected by the Israelis, and the people are enraged that money has been squandered. They say it's gone into the pockets of the people from Tunisia [where the Palestine Liberation Organization operated in exile]. It's gone to pay for an insanely large police force. Meanwhile, there are open sewers in

the refugee camps throughout the Palestinian territories, with all the attendant illnesses. One of the people I spoke to said to me, “Before we had shit from the Israelis; now we have shit from the Palestinian Authority and shit from the Israelis.” Among Palestinian territories, Hebron is uniquely troubled. Because of the way it has been split down the middle, this has enforced a perpetual state of warfare in the town.

Hebron felt terrible to me: bad, tense and unhappy. I should say that other people had very different kinds of stays with people, where everybody was very calm and nothing happened. With my homestay partner and me, it was quite different. There was a barrage of anger. It began with, “Why do you do this; why do you do that?” We were synonymous with Israelis. When we went to Gaza there was a newspaper article about us that described us as American Israelis. We just listened and tried to be sympathetic.

Q: How were you taught to listen compassionately?

A: The training was just to listen. If you had a reaction, you were to keep it to yourself and deal with it later. You could reflect back to the person and show that you were really listening, that you heard what they were saying. The key was that it was about them, not you. Compassionate listening is not a back and forth. Compassionate listening is where you attempt to enable the person to come to a deeper resolution of this feeling; to feel safe enough with you to get to another level of speaking so they no longer need to keep up the same quality of defense. We really found that to be true: there was a shift that could occur, even in a single conversation with someone, if you really showed that you heard who they were. For example, in the conversation that first evening, it slowly shifted from “Why do you do this?” to “Why do they do this?”–which is a little easier to take.

Q: What else did they say?

A: They said to me, “I don’t know what you’ve heard about us in Hebron.” I asked them if they would like to know, and they said they would. I said, “I’ve heard that terrible things have happened here and that there’s a great deal of pain and that people hate each other.” I put this in a mutual way, and they said, “That’s right.” I would try to say things so that inherently there was not a conflict. During this conversation the father in this family asked his grandchild, who was about eight, what she knew about the Jews. He would ask her in Arabic and prompt her and she would say something and he would translate it.

Q: What did she say?

A: She said things that one would expect. They lock up men, they put men in jail, or they shoot at people. But then she said something that was really more than I could bear, “They don’t believe in God, they take the name of God in vain.” This was so painful for me. I started to cry and said, “I have to say something.” I said, “I need to bless this child, as a Jew. I bless this child as a Jew that she should grow up and live in peace in the home that she wants to live in; that she has happiness, that she has the family she wants; and that she lives with peace, fullness and grace.” And we all said, “Inshallah” [God willing]. It was a slight shift.

Q: What did the father say when he saw you crying?

A: When I first started to cry, he said, “We have been weeping for years,” as if to say, ‘You’re tears were nothing.’ When someone is so full and so charged with something there’s no room for anyone else’s feelings. The next day, our group was supposed to rendezvous at the mosque/synagogue known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs which is the tomb of Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Leah. This is, of course, the place where in 1994 Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Muslims at prayer. It just felt terrible. Now this place is not only the grave of the ancestors, the patriarchs, it’s also supposed to be the grave of Adam and Eve–the ancestors of all people, the symbol of the unified source of all human beings. And nothing could feel more separate than the experience of going there. The feeling of the separation was like something tangible that you walk through. With both the Jews and the Arabs of Hebron, there is no middle ground. There’s really deep hatred. I cried in front of the tomb and asked, “What have we done, what have we done with the legacy?”

That night, when we were with the family sharing the Ramadan breaking of the fast, I told them about my visit. I think because of what had gone before, there wasn’t a venting, but a real conversation. We were able to actually exchange. There was room for me to say something and I was even asked things. I told them that I went to the cave and that I cried. I said, “It hurts to be here. This place feels so terrible. How do people stand it?” And they nodded. I said, “Now I understand. After seeing your incredibly close family I see a way what makes life bearable.”

As I said, other people had much gentler visits. There was genuine interest in us, and a respectful attitude. But there were times when I had to have a certain sort of detachment so that I didn’t show that I was taking it personally. Once at the end of a discussion which had seemed hopeless, my host said, “Thank you very much for listening.” I said something like, “It’s important for people to be honest.” And he said, “My sister Susan is always welcome in my home. Feel free to bring your group tomorrow for Ramadan breakfast.” For me, that really felt like a vindication. People need to know that you can really hear the most difficult things; that unless you’re able to sit and listen to what was between you they can’t talk to you at all. When I left that family, one of them took a ring that said “Peace” off his hand as a gift. I said, “If someone asks me if the Palestinians want peace, I’ll show them this ring and I’ll say that this was given to me by a Palestinian.” I had an occasion to say that when I left the project and stayed in the Jewish quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.

Q: What was Gaza like?

A: The Israelis have built a long narrow cement tunnel to control the flow of people at the border so you can’t get a riot and rush of people. It’s a security measure, which I can understand. However, there’s a very frightening, dark quality seeing people walk two at a time through a long cement tunnel. It’s depressing. When we were in Gaza there were reporters who wanted to interview us because of who we were. This was quite dangerous and the Palestinian Authority gave us an armed escort the entire time we were in Gaza. Before I went to Israel I don’t believe I’d seen an automatic weapon in my life. You walk around in Israel and there are soldiers everywhere wearing rifles and automatic weapons. You go into a pizza place and brush against

someone's weapon. At first this was horrifying to me. I thought, "What does this do to people? How does this affect you?" If nothing else it says "Occupation,"–an occupation under which one lives oneself, and not only other people.

In Gaza, we met with Sheikh Yassin, the spiritual head of Hamas, who is dying of an irreversible degenerative disease. That was another very interesting trip. There was a line of men at the side of the room. There was a very intense quality–a quality of resolve. It was neither hopelessness nor anger alone. There was a quality of self-mastery and power that for each man was shaped by his sense of injustice and rage. Sheikh Yassin talked about his experiences in prison, about being tortured in prison. I think some people felt they were being manipulated.

I felt badly for him. I know there are people who say that he has blood on his hands, and that he's responsible for the death of many people. And he is. Someone asked me whether I would meet with Meir Kahane [founder of Israel's extreme-right Kach party, who was murdered in New York City in 1990]. But there has to be some level in which no matter what has happened, you have to talk to people, that's my experience. So I would have met with Meir Kahane–even if he was alive–though his views fill me with horror in a way that is almost more disturbing than Sheikh Yassin, because I have some identity with him.

Q: What other groups did you meet with?

A: We met with Israeli peace activists, people who had spent time in prison for refusing to serve in the army, and people from Peace Now. We met with Yossi Klein, a writer for The Jerusalem Post, who is a crossover–he voted for Rabin then crossed over to Netanyahu. The group did a homestay with Jewish settlers as well. We met with a group called Besod Siach (which means "Across the Divide") who are primarily right wing settlers. They're working to have dialogue with left wing Israelis. They expressed willingness to speak with left wing Israelis– which I think is an enormous stretch for them– because they had been horrified by what had happened to Yitzak Rabin. After the project, I stayed on for a month with Israelis, primarily religious Jews. We did visit an elderly Jewish couple and that was one of the most difficult meetings for our group because they were unapologetically angry, bitter and racist.

Q: What did they say?

A: All those myths got trotted out. The land really didn't belong to anyone. There wasn't anyone here. They talked about how they bought the land, and maybe there was an exchange. I don't think they were lying. They said they bought it from the person who actually owned it and those other people [who claimed it] didn't really own it. They said, they work their land; that not much was being done on the land. They also said, "I'm not sorry for this," and "We've been through five wars, we won the wars. Other people win wars, they take territory, no one asks them to give it back. If England or France or America took territory and they won it in a war, would someone make them give it back? I don't think so. Because we won it fair and square."

When we were listening, I thought, "I don't know what to do with this. How do I relate to this experience? How do I make a connection with these people?" It was very alienating. The

woman told a story about how her mother had been pregnant during the British mandate and had gone to a hospital which was attacked by Arabs. Everyone in the hospital–all the nurses, doctors and patients were massacred. They talked about the Jews who died in the Holocaust. I said, “I hear you saying, ‘People don’t care about Jews. The British said they would watch out for the Jews, and they didn’t.’ Your mother was murdered, all her doctors and nurses were murdered, people said they would watch out for Jews during the War and they didn’t, there was a terrible massacre and holocaust. ‘Non-Jews don’t care about Jews, only Jews do.’ ” And they said, “Yes, that’s right.” I said, “It must be very difficult to carry that feeling.” They nodded. And as I said all these words to them I found a place in myself where I understood those feelings. I found those feelings in myself and I found that wound. As I talked, they jumped up and started talking excitedly and anxiously about other things: it was too much for them.

I don’t know if they were changed by my saying that. I don’t know if it made a difference in their experience or if it clarified anything for them or felt like any kind of comfort. I don’t think so: it was so painful and we didn’t have enough time together. But I changed. I learned something about compassionate listening. I felt that the very thing that had separated us felt like the point of connection. I continued to experience that with other people. If I could listen and drop down inside to a quiet level of experience, I could find their wound inside me. I felt like we were part of something larger. Their lives were shaped by that experience, mine was not. While I don’t take on their beliefs, I understand what they are.

Q: What larger lessons have you drawn from this experience?

A: In everyday life, when people are clearly polarized, active listening is therapeutic. We live in a time of so much noise and information. There are so many things we’re supposed to know, so many things going on. There’s also a lot of pain in our own culture about not being heard. The experience really brings up for me the notion of listening better. What does it mean to listen: to listen to your friends and lovers, to the earth, to God in this other way? What does it mean to listen and know that a lot of things are not listened to. I’ve noticed the differences between an argument or an unsatisfying exchange and a very profoundly different exchange. For me, it goes hand in hand with my meditation practice; to develop the quality of inner stillness that allows you to listen from another part of your being. That’s what I’m trying to look for now and I find that it requires work on my part, rather than having the stimulus of this obviously dramatic situation and the project. I find myself moving to develop that quality of listening on a regular basis.

Susan Heckler is interested in continuing the dialogue between Arabs and Jews in New York City. If you are interested in thoughtful and respectful exchange, write to her c/o Satya. For more information on the Compassionate Listening Project, contact Leah Green at P.O. Box 17, Indianola, WA 98342; email director, Leah Green

First published in Satya Magazine, July 1998