Umm al-Ara'is, Mufagara, Harruba

By David Shulman (May 9, 2015)

 There are some pleasant surprises in store for us today. We have already set off on foot by the main path to Umm al-Ara'is, a good half-hour's walk through the desert; shepherds wave hello from the slopes above us. It is 8:30 and still not too hot. I'm happy to be walking through this landscape once again—I was away for a month because of minor surgery—but within a few minutes Sa'id arrives in his clunky, white, infinitely expandable van: we count seventeen children and not a few adults. They tell us to get in, and somehow four seats, or quarter-seats, materialize. It feels like India. We bounce over the rocks for long minutes before we arrive at the Simri encampment overlooking the stolen fields.

 Much has happened since I was last here. The Civil Administration finally demolished the hothouses that the settlers of Mitzpeh Yair had built on what everyone knew was private Palestinian land. It took the CA well over a year to carry out the court's order. Two weeks ago there was another typical clash with the settlers, who tend to descend en masse when the soldiers are around. The 'Awad children, the same ones from the van, moved into the closed military zone, the settlers went after them, the soldiers and police did what they always do. Still, today Sa'id, a wise and prudent man, is buoyant and confident. Yesterday the Palestinians plowed in the once-forbidden wadi, without coordinating this work with the CA, as the soldiers always insist they must. Coordination means recognizing the authority of the Occupation. Over recent weeks and months, the 'Awad family's claim to this fertile ground has been recognized *de facto*, at least in part, by the army. Sa'id is sure these lands are now reverting to their rightful owners. There are still twenty dunams or so near the top of the hill, close to the settlement, that they need to get back; and the State is proposing some insulting "compromise," according to which the settlers would rebuild the hothouses on that chunk of Palestinian land. But the State is unlikely to get away with this. The courts, turtle-slow as always, have not yet pronounced definitively on the question of land rights here. There's still a danger they may rule against the 'Awads. For all that, it looks on the ground as if things are dramatically improved.

 For the last three years we've been coming here each weekend and joining the Palestinians—children, women, men-- as they march through the wadi and uphill through their lost fields; each time we are driven back with them, and sometimes there are arrests. I was arrested the last time I was here, while the settlers, as always, strode with impunity through the fields. There was, maybe there still is, a standing order by the major general that made the entire wadi off bounds to Palestinians. Now they've planted and harvested these fields. Persistence sometimes works. I've thought all along that with patience, and persistence, and whatever encouragement and help we could give them, they stood a good chance of getting back most of what the settlers had stolen. It seems to be happening, slowly, with no certainty about the end, but it's happening. I'm moved to be here to witness it.

No one should think that the 'Awads' problems are over. They live under Occupation. There is much work to do, and acts of protest, and faith, and hope, still to be carried out. The legal fees have skyrocketed, far beyond what these people can pay. But I hear the confidence in Sa'id's voice, and I am glad when he says to me as we walk back to Simri that wherever he goes, he hears Palestinians speaking with reverence about the work of the Israeli peace groups. For thirteen years the 'Awad family has been struggling to regain their lands, and for the last three we had the honor to be part of this struggle.

By midday we are in Mufagara on our way to Harruba and the outskirts of Chavat Maon. We pass the Mufagara mosque, now demolished a second time, a heap of slabs and blocks and twisted metal. We may be back before long to rebuild it. Along with the mosque, the CA destroyed the metal posts and towers that had been set up by the Palestinian Authority to bring electricity cables to Mufagara and electric power from Twaneh. The towers lie, twisted, decapitated, near the footpath where we're walking. So there's no electricity in Mufagara; no water either. They have to bring water in tankers at stupendous cost. Anyone can see the logic at work. If you let them have power and water, the whole project of expelling them from their lands might be endangered. For that matter, if the mosque remains intact, Allah himself might intervene on their side.

Sometimes, in the happiness of being here, in the white heat of the sun, amidst the sculpted symmetries of the thorns and the cries of the sheep and the donkeys, I almost forget, for a moment or two, the fierce reality of malice. Never mind the logic. I think the CA bureaucrats enjoy the cruelty. I've seen them in action with my own eyes many times. Sometimes a false bonhomie hides the meaning of what they are doing. Now they're gunning for Susya. As I've written to you before, the whole village has demolition orders hanging over it, and last week the Supreme Court threw out the last appeal , by the Rabbis for Human Rights, to stop the destruction. Now there are no legal impediments left to hold back the bulldozers. If they move against the village, it won't be the first time the Susya Palestinians have been evicted from their homes. So far, each time it's happened they've come back. Meanwhile, dear readers, *your* voices can make a difference.

Chavat Maon, probably the most violent of all the south Hebron settlements, just down the hill from Mufagara or uphill from Twaneh, is expanding, like many or most of the settlements and outposts. I won't bore you with the details. There are buildings going up on another stolen hill. Palestinian olive trees in the wadi have been savaged—time and again. A new trick is to fence off more land by wires that supposedly demarcate the *'eruv* for the settlement—that is, the area within which an observant Jew can carry something on Shabbat. The new '*eruv* line wanders over the hills far away from the nominal boundary of the settlement. And, as usual, while the wadi has been closed to Palestinians and to us, the settlers have free access to it. Adolescent boys in their Shabbat white wander there freely, cross our footpath to Twaneh, then head south up the slopes, and the soldiers, who have been following us all morning, make no effort to stop them.

There's other news, good news, that I can't write about today; and in a few days I may be able to write about a minor court case that is moving toward conclusion. Hopefully, more good news that can make a difference to dozens of people, even as the Occupation continuously deepens its grip. Such are our micro-victories over greed, hate, brutal piety and other travesties of faith, blind obedience to orders, genteel racism, mindless tribal solidarity, hypocrisy, hollow hearts, more greed. It's good to be back.