



By Tommy Mulvoy

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Am I talking to a wall?

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In 1992, during my first year of high school in a small New York City suburb, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin first proposed building a physical barrier to separate Palestinians and Israelis in the occupied Palestinian territory. While I ran uninhibitedly around perfectly manicured playing fields and wood-paneled hallways, a Palestinian boy halfway across the world fought for his life, and land. A decade later, when I first stepped foot into the classroom as a teacher, still oblivious to not only the barrier, but to how much I would imaginatively, professionally, and personally engage with it, some 100 miles stood. Today, more than 400 miles of concrete wall, fencing, barbed wire, patrol roads, sand, and anti-vehicle ditches wind through the verdant lands of the Levant. The construction of each section has solidified my interest and brought me figuratively and literally closer to the barrier and the myriad difficulties it presents to the world, and more so, to the inhabitants in its immediate vicinity.

For some within Israel, the wall presumably protects Israeli citizens from Palestinian attacks. For others, though, the wall is a living monster that creates “facts on the ground” for a future Israeli state stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River and usurps Palestine’s lush farmland and natural resources while simultaneously imprisoning its people. Israel’s right to protect its citizens from attack is an immutable point. Though, as Noam Chomsky wrote in 2004, “It is also clear where such a wall would be built if security were the guiding concern: inside Israel, within the internationally recognized border, the Green Line established after the 1948–49 war.”

For 25 years, I suffered from debilitating and irrational obsessions and compulsions associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). In a manner somewhat comparable to the normalcy characterized by chaos and confusion in the Middle East, my own inner torment raged and threatened to explode. In this time of turmoil, the thought of trying to make sense of my OCD and how to rein it in for my emotional

wellbeing, which would inevitably include my parents, doctors, and school officials, not to mention friends, was too difficult to wrap my head around. The easiest answer was to put up an emotional wall and not deal with it. My mantra was “what is behind the wall does not exist.” However, as I matured, I looked more closely at myself and the world, which OCD prevented me from fully participating in, and knew that I needed to engage. The wall had to come down.

When I first started teaching Middle Eastern history, in 2008, my lessons only scratched the surface of the wall’s construction, but on my own time, I studied the barrier from its cruel proposal to its grotesque reality. At the end of the school year, I quit my job and traveled around the world, with the motivation to spend as much time as possible smelling, tasting, and touching the history that I taught. My focus, though, was to get physically closer to the wall and to engage with it. To grapple with it.

While I often question my sanity when it comes to my obsession with this notion of the wall, it was clear from the beginning that the urgency to educate myself and make it visible to others, was transforming my life. Though, when I think back to the lessons I learned from families in the literature I read as a kid, the wisdom of my fictional teachers, including the Berenstains, of bear fame, and the Finches, is clear. Atticus taught me that “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” As an American living near New York City, Israeli skin was somewhat easy to get into—Palestinian skin, however, remained hazy, underreported, marginal. In a strange way, the wall makes it easier for us to climb inside Palestinian skin. One needs to simply head to a checkpoint, wait in an absurdly long line, and take a deep breath. In just a few steps, you are transported into a world where checkpoints, trash, and organized chaos reside with generosity, courage, and an unrelenting hospitality.

Halfway through my trip, I had the first of many subsequent opportunities to “climb inside Palestinian skin.” During my first twenty-four hours in Jerusalem’s Old City, I saw the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Tower of David, the Dome of the Rock, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque; I felt like I was starring in a never-ending documentary on the most famous religious sites in the world. After quick trips to Masada, Haifa, Acre, Tel Aviv, and Nazareth, I returned to the Old City with my sights set on visiting Bethlehem, the proposed site of Jesus’s birth, and Ramallah, the de facto capital of occupied Palestine.

While planning these two trips from the ornately ornamented lounge of my hotel in the Arab section of the Old City, I read the following travel warning from the U.S. State Department that included phrases like “Violent demonstrations, kidnappings and shootings are unpredictable and can occur without warning. “Israeli security operations can occur at any time, including frequent raids to arrest terrorist suspects that result in shootings, demonstrations and often violent conflict.”

Throughout the entire evening, and a sleepless night, I wavered over whether I should visit Ramallah. The words “shootings,” “kidnappings,” and “gun battles” fought their own silent fight in my head. They were there, too, when I awoke. After my second cup of sweet Arabic coffee, I realized that if I did not cross the infamous Qalandia checkpoint, a sense of failure and deep regret would settle into the deepest recesses of my soul.

Although it is only 15 kilometers or so from Al Quds, the Arabic name for Jerusalem, the trip to Qalandia took almost forty-five minutes. While the delay gave time for the State Department warning to play havoc with my thoughts, it also allowed me more time to chat with my seat mate, with whom I had immediately engaged in a conversation about the wall, the process by which he has to go through to enter Israel, and various other topics concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict. As we approached the checkpoint, he nonchalantly offered to drive me the rest of the way to Ramallah. As a Palestinian, he is forbidden to drive his car across the border to his job in Al Quds, so he leaves his car at the checkpoint. Foreigners, on the other hand, are allowed to stay on the bus. But, crossing the wall with a local was an experience I was not going to pass up.

After shuffling through numerous steel gates and absurdly narrow pathways that resembled a prison, I looked to my right and saw a huge steel pen. The gentleman told me that this is where the Palestinians wait for hours every morning to cross into Israel. In his case, he lines up at 4 a.m. if he wants to be at work by 7 a.m.

As we drove to Ramallah’s city center, I listened intently as he spoke about the hardships of life in Palestine including the division of families, the scarcity of water, and the difficulty in finding employment. I learned as much from the expressions on his face and the grip of his hands on the steering wheel as I did from the words that flowed from his mouth. The way that body language expressed indescribable feelings was a constant theme throughout my time in Palestine.

In Ramallah, I planned nothing more than walking around the streets, visiting a community center, and getting something to eat. After lunch I strolled around the downtown area and settled into the Stars and Bucks coffee shop where the poetic sounds of Arabic and the sweet smell of apple argileh smoke filled the air. Next, I tried to make my way to a cultural center but within minutes was completely lost. I asked a man sitting outside a local store for directions and before I knew it, I not only had directions, but the man's friend, who had pulled up to the curb to chat, offered me a ride. After only three hours in Ramallah, I was sitting in a stranger's car for the second time, and not once did I think of the State Department's warnings of "kidnappings" or "shootings." The immediacy of the strangers' generosity and spirit of engagement decisively won the battle that I struggled with the previous evening.

On my way back to Jerusalem from the Ramallah bus depot later that evening, I sat next to a Palestinian man heading to work. During our conversation, I learned that he earned a degree in architecture from a university in Egypt, but because of the Egyptian connection, he can't practice architecture in Israel. When I asked why he didn't practice in Palestine, he mentioned that there was no work; according to him around 40-50% of the population is unemployed. So, in order to support his family, he works the night shift in a Jerusalem bakery. Although the night shift is difficult on his family, he doesn't have to deal with the long lines at the checkpoints. Our bus stopped at Qalandia and all the men and young women promptly got out and marched to the security area. A guard then boarded the bus, started to check IDs and bags, and forced a couple of elderly women into the security line. From the comfort of my seat, and with the safety of my US Passport, I watched the women wrestle their overflowing bags across the darkened street and enter the long, slow-moving line.

As I walked back through the dimly lit Damascus Gate and into the cobweb of alleys and small streets that is the Old City, I had much to ponder. However, I did not pressure myself to immediately figure it all out. I knew it would take time, and certainly more engagement, before I could start to put some of the pieces together into a narrative that made sense. I went to sleep that night knowing I would be back.

A little more than two years after I first crossed through the wall into Palestine, I signed a contract to teach at King's Academy, a boarding school outside of Amman, Jordan. The school's proximity to Palestine, and the fact that more than 50% of Jordan's population is of Palestinian descent, ensured many more opportunities to engage with the wall. It took only a few hours after my arrival before the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict entered a conversation and just a few weeks before I once again physically crossed the wall. Over Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday that honors

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to God, I jumped at the opportunity to chaperone a weeklong community service trip to a small Palestinian village.

Mas Ha is a small, religiously conservative village that abuts both the concrete and electrified fence topped with razor wire version of the wall. Since its construction, life in this quintessential Palestinian village has come to a standstill. Prior to the second Intifada, Israelis and Palestinians lived next to, traded, and provided services to each other. Ruth Dayan, the former wife of Israeli war hero Moshe Dayan, emphasized the social aspect of the relations between Israelis and Palestinians in an interview with Robert Fisk in December 2012. Dayan remarked, "I didn't know I was Jewish—I didn't know what Palestine was. My mother taught [sic] an Arabic kindergarten, just inside the old city of Jerusalem. We went to a playground on Mount Zion, provided by a Jew on condition it was for Arabs as well as Jews." Her comments in Rula Jebreal's October 2011 Newsweek article also touched on the economic ramifications of the wall. In this case, Dayan discussed her hiring of Arabs to make rugs and other merchandise when she was the head of Maskit, an arts and crafts store. She commented that, "It was about living together, working together, creating a bridge." While this type of intermingling no doubt slowed in the years after each successive war, the wall's construction severed relations between the two peoples and ravaged Mas Ha's economy. Israeli law forbids its citizens from crossing the wall to purchase goods or services from the Palestinians, and Palestinians, in many cases, are not allowed to work in Israel. Left in the midst exists crumbling storefronts, a disenfranchised youth, and a service sector lacking in ways in which to provide the most basic necessities for its citizenry. While most Palestinians moved or had their homes demolished during the construction of the wall, one Palestinian stayed.

I met Hani Amer on a cool fall evening on our second day in Mas Ha. One of my students from the village set up the meeting, and after Hani's wife offered us tea and cookies, our group settled in for a discussion of the events that led Hani to his current situation—a Palestinian living on the Israeli side of the wall but not residing in Israel. Simply put, the man doesn't live in either place but resides in a void created by the Israeli government and an infuriatingly obliging US government where human rights abuses cast a long shadow every time Hani leaves his house. The Israelis who live next to Hani continually harass him, but he told us that no amount of intimidation is going to make him give up his land. He and his family have lived there for decades, and he will stay until he dies.

We talked for what seemed an eternity about Hani's day-to-day life and his family's rich history in the area. I tried to scribble everything he said into my weathered Moleskin notebook but abandoned this endeavor in short order. This was not the first

time I had given up trying to copy down a sage's prescient words during my travels. Over many years, I have come to realize that at special moments like this, it is more fruitful to allow all of the senses to concentrate—in this case it was seeing Hani's weathered face juxtaposed with the concrete version of the wall looming just 20 yards away, the smell of mint rising from a tea pot on the rusted table, listening to my students pose astute questions to a respected elder, and every 45 minutes or so, listening to the groan of a Humvee driving along the immaculate patrol road that sits between Hani's house and the wall. The sun leisurely made its way to the horizon, but instead of casting its last rays on our group, it suddenly hit the wall and, much too similar to Palestine's future, disappeared.

The intricacies of the wall's effects on Mas Ha's people are truly appreciated after walking along its dusty roads, watching Hani amble down from his porch with a special key in hand so that he can pass through a small gate that gives him access to his people and his land, and listening to the youth agonize over their few opportunities. All the while the wall looms large and casts a shadow longer than what is allowed by nature; as you get closer to it, the shadow is replaced by the reality of the wall's immense size and control over this land and its people.

In the summer of 1990, I traveled to Germany on a summer camp exchange program. After spending a few weeks at the camp on the northern coast, our group toured several German cities, one of which was Berlin, where a mere eight months earlier, the wall dividing the city fell. Our camp leader provided some background on the wall, but as a naïve 14-year-old, I struggled to comprehend much of what he said. I could only ask why? As I surveyed the wall up close, one of the first things that stood out to me was that one side was covered with graffiti while the other was spotless. I was utterly confused how half the people in the city were allowed to paint on the wall while the other half was not allowed within 20 meters. My brain could not comprehend the fact that a city had literally been cut in half with different rules for each side. My brother and I did this religiously in the room we shared as kids, usually with hockey tape, but when I tried to imagine a wall being built in the middle of my hometown, I couldn't. After a few hours at the wall, I bought three pieces of spray-painted concrete and upon returning home a week later, displayed them on a shelf in my bedroom.

In high school and college, I learned more about the sad history behind the Berlin Wall and was certain that walls, including the ones that surrounded Jewish ghettos in various Eastern European cities before and during World War II, would not exist again in my lifetime. But, during my first visit to Palestine in 2008, I saw the words

“Been There Done That. Ich Bin Ein Berliner” spray painted in massive letters on a section of the wall outside Bethlehem.

On the last day of our service trip to Palestine, we had the opportunity to spray paint a section of the wall. While I was excited to leave my mark, I also wondered if what we were doing had any significance. We could have spent the time writing letters to members of Congress back home who support subsidies for the wall’s construction, or we could have taken the money for the spray paint and bought books for kids in one of the refugee camps we visited earlier that day. But, there was something about having seen the graffiti on the Berlin Wall some 23 years earlier that pushed me forward. I imagined a moment in the future where a young student, much like me in Berlin, would come to this exact spot, see my graffiti, and ask his teacher and himself the same question I asked back in 1990—why? In a way, I was engaging with the thousands of people who would hopefully see my graffiti. So, I grabbed a few cans of paint and walked along the wall to a blank spot.

I knew exactly what I would write: STG—See the Good. I began using this phrase in my early 20s when OCD started to severely impact my social and professional life. When I was at my lowest points, walled in from both helping myself and engaging with the outside world, I would repeat the phrase in my head as a means of not getting too frustrated at my situation. As I stepped back to admire my careful work, I wondered if Palestinians would find my message offensive. Would they ask how they could possibly “See the Good” while living under such appalling conditions? After a few moments thinking about my time in the country, I was positive that they would not find fault with my words as good exists everywhere in Palestine and each Palestinian I have ever met makes a point of showing me this.

In the same way that I slowly matured and let my OCD out from behind the wall and gave it a voice, I hold out hope for a constructive end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One starting point is liberating the voices from behind the wall and shifting our attention to ways in which we can recognize, engage, and question the divisiveness. As a teacher, I am granted an impressionable audience every day and take advantage of this by contesting the all too often one-sided narrative by bringing to the fore some of Palestine’s unheard voices. In the last few years, I have encouraged my students to read Susan Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin*, and Ghassan Kannafani’s *Men in the Sun*. Reading two books might seem superficial, but if the voices in these texts rouse my students’ voices, and hopefully, a desire to further engage with the world around them, then I consider it a significant breach of the wall.