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Jessy Hampton

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ACCOMPANIMENT IN PALESTINE

JESSY HAMPTON

We were sitting in the back of a falafel shop off the Musrara in East Jerusalem, drinking fresh orange juice and talking about Israel's compulsory military service. My colleague and I were working on a series of blog posts focusing on women peacemakers in Palestine and Israel, and Ruth, an American Jewish immigrant to Israel, seemed a wonderful candidate. With the impromptu market of Damascus Gate just around the corner and fresh falafel frying behind us, my colleague and I furiously scribbled notes as Ruth described her decades of experience participating in anti-occupation and anti-militarism activism, most notably as a founder of an organization which supports Israeli conscientious objectors. As she tells it, Ruth's introduction to pacifism came when her son, fifteen years old at the time, declared himself a pacifist and stated that he would be refusing military service when conscripted at age eighteen. Though my conversation with Ruth occurred several years ago, I still remember her next comment: despite not knowing how to proceed within Israel's notoriously opaque military bureaucracy, she and her husband turned to their son and clearly stated, "We'll walk the path with you."

I can't help but think of Ruth's comment when I consider the history and importance of "accompaniment" in Palestine and Israel — the organizations and individuals, including many Quakers, who have committed to "walking the path" with Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers and others searching for justice. Accompaniment, like its cousin "solidarity," is multifaceted, complex, and involves difficult conversations about privilege and justice; it can be a literal, embodied "walking with," like escorting Palestinian kindergarteners to school past military checkpoints and Israeli settlements, or slightly more abstract (though no less meaningful), like commitments to partner with and support the work of justice-seekers. Like anything, there are better and worse ways of "accompanying;" the history and context of Western and Western-Christian engagement with Palestine make certain pitfalls and difficulties particularly prevalent. Drawing on the work of several post-colonial theorists and critical philosophers, I would like to complicate the question of "accompaniment" as it has traditionally been enacted, ultimately urging the discussion toward a

more holistic understanding of accompaniment as a form of “allyship.” Quaker involvement is a consistent thread through the various forms of accompaniment in Palestine and Israel.

Organizations engaging in accompaniment are many and varied, ranging from the activist-oriented International Solidarity Movement (ISM) to the highly diplomatic and bureaucratic Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH). Some, like Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR), are geared toward local participation, but a larger number involve international—often specifically Global North—participants who travel to the West Bank in order to physically be with Palestinians and Israelis in particular activities (i.e. the olive harvest).

With such a wide range of possible variants, it can be helpful to focus on a few organizations to examine important differences in operations and goals; in the West Bank city of Hebron, a site of immense tension and open violence due to the Israeli settlements and military presence within and (literally) on top of the Palestinian town, four international organizations operate along the spectrum of accompaniment and “protective presence.” In addition to the aforementioned ISM and TIPH, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) both maintain teams in Hebron. Each organization is quite distinct: ISM caters to a more secular, activist, anarchist demographic and is a less formal organizational structure; CPT embraces “peace church” theologies and both long-term and short-term volunteers and staff comprise the team; EAPPI, a program of the World Council of Churches, revolves around 3-month volunteer terms in which participants may or may not have previous experience in Palestine; TIPH, an Oslo Accords remnant, is composed of dozens of employees from six countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Switzerland, and Turkey) who produce reports for their capital offices. Additionally, CPT and EAPPI’s operating structures include requirements that participants engage in a specified number of advocacy events upon return to their home countries after the volunteer term. Despite the extreme differences in constituents and organizational structure, all four revolve around the “protective presence” mentality, a common form of accompaniment, in which the physical presence of internationals is supposed to lessen the possibility of Israeli violence against Palestinians.

At times, accompaniment programs like these encounter several pitfalls, one of which directly relates to the dynamic encapsulated

by the notion of “protective presence.” Working for social justice requires a critical examination of privileges and entitlements, and many activists, allies, and accompaniers engage in a great deal of introspection and reflection on how their interactions with conflict inform and are informed by their own identities. Despite good intentions, it is still possible for activists to recreate the negative power dynamics of the context. Mica Pollock, writing about ISM activists in Hebron, notes that even when activists are aware of their privilege and are actively struggling against it, they can end up “participat[ing] in its reproduction,” especially by accepting and functioning within the system of differential bodily valorization.¹ “Protective presence” activities can only be effective within a racially bifurcated system which values Western/white bodies over those of Palestinians. Likewise, solidarity with Palestinians has shifted since the 1990s, moving from an international movement to one composed of individual “internationals”; writing about this shift, Linda Tabar notes that solidarity has been “depoliticized ... [and] disconnected from the struggle to overturn a system of oppression.”²

The “protective presence” form of accompaniment is not the only activity which actively reproduces a problematic power dynamic. Several organizations which previously participated in embodied accompaniment have moved away from direct interventions towards an observation and data collection model. A great deal of EAPPI’s and CPT’s activities in Hebron, for example, revolves around monitoring military checkpoints in the city, noting the number of children’s backpacks searched or young men detained at certain hours of the day. Data is collated, cleaned, written up, and sent out in narrative report form to headquarters in the United States and Europe as part of an advocacy strategy (rightly) concerned with accuracy and evidence. Under the Foucauldian framework of “knowledge is power,” data collection and building an “evidence base” of Israeli human rights abuses makes sense, but simultaneously contributes to a situation in which not only is the West continuously producing and exporting knowledge about the “East” (see: Edward Said’s *Orientalism*), but statistics become the only way outsiders understand the situation.³ Separate is the question of efficacy: given that, since the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, UN agencies, international and local NGOs, and now “accompaniment” organizations have collected data and written reports on every imaginable aspect of life in the occupied territories with no correlating diplomatic breakthrough or drop in violence, should this be the primary strategy anymore? Is a decades-old

“evidence base” still not proof enough of injustices and international law violations?

Another related pitfall of accompaniment programs is a tendency toward non-mutuality — actions flow from North to South, West to East, White to Black/Brown, “accompanier” to “victim.” Knowledge, education, and anecdotes are extracted from the locals, to be reproduced in the West as part of an advocacy strategy. Again Edward Said’s *Orientalism* comes to mind; rare are the accompaniment programs which include elements of mutual exchange, whether Palestinians and Israelis traveling to be in solidarity with Americans, for example, or even an exchange of knowledge and anecdotes. This is not meant to discount the intangible and unintentional exchanges which inevitably occur with cross-cultural interactions, and I have both participated in and organized educational tours and accompaniment programs in Palestine; the point, however, is to interrogate the major flows of participants and knowledge and to question their relationship to power. With this in mind, what does it reveal about global power dynamics that international accompaniers flow in to Palestine and extract stories to retell?

For those reasons, I find it more helpful to reimagine “accompaniment” as a form of “allyship,” an intentional partnership characterized by mutual exchange and a commitment to dismantling oppressive structures. While living in Palestine, I experienced my privilege on my daily commute to the office; deciding which checkpoint to use was a heavier and heavier weight which settled in my shoulders as physical tension. These questions — how to take principled action in solidarity with others and subvert existing power structures — are difficult and uncomfortable and possibly unanswerable, but critical engagement is necessary to build mutually constructive movements. Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins’ comments are a helpful summary:

“The labor of traveling to Palestine and coming back with stories, new connections, and ways of addressing an American audience having ‘really seen’ what life is like in Palestine is, of course, extremely important to the movement. Without diminishing its significance, I want here to push a somewhat counterintuitive question into the discussion: What are the mechanisms through which we ‘in solidarity’ might extract ourselves from that cozy, comfortable feeling of solidarity with the ‘victims,’ a position so comfortable as to allow us to lose sight of the work that may be both more effective and more conceptually coherent—that is,

rearticulating our relationship to the ‘perpetrators’ while at the same time avoiding self-sainthood?”⁴

Ruth’s story remains a useful illustration. Choosing to accompany her son on his journey toward pacifism sparked her to examine her own place in Israeli society, to learn more about Israel’s military occupation of Palestine, and, importantly, to find an appropriate avenue through which to chip away at Israel’s oppressive structures. Rather than being the end goal, accompaniment was the beginning, a vantage point from which Ruth identified a way for her to dismantle a piece of the occupation system.

Quaker involvement in Palestine comprises a variety of these accompaniment and ally activities, including participating in EAPPI and CPT delegations, working for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), attending and supporting the Ramallah Friends Meeting, and partnering with the Ramallah Friends Schools as teachers or in student exchanges. More than one hundred years since the first Quakers ventured to Palestine to support girls’ education, Quakers’ reputation among Palestinians is as committed allies, people who take seriously the calls for justice and engage in principled action both inside Palestine and within their home countries.

Within the discussion of examples of allies, the maturing crossover between Palestinian and Black Lives Matter activists has been particularly inspiring. While American police quashed demonstrations and riots in Ferguson, Palestinian activists tweeted advice to protesters about how to deal with tear gas. BLM activists later took a trip to Palestine, and the groups produced a video of their exchange titled “When I see them I see us.” Activists in both camps have been intentional about translating the similarities of their struggles into concrete networks and actions, like calling on the United States to end its police training programs with the Israeli military or endorsing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement as a nonviolent anti-occupation tool.

As Americans continue to call for racial justice, Black activists are clear in calling for White Americans to back up their words with deeds, to not just make statements of solidarity but to work to dismantle systems of White privilege. Likewise, principled engagement with Palestine and Israel requires a “decolonized” accompaniment which prioritizes mutuality and assigns responsibility effectively. As an American working for justice in Palestine, for example, my work of

“accompaniment” doesn’t end when I leave the South Hebron Hills and fly out of Ben Gurion Airport, nor after a speaking event or an article written. Accompaniment doesn’t end, though the methods and location might change. Like Ruth, activists, allies, and companions should look for their niche from which to begin chipping away at their own privileges and the way their government or organization lends support to violence and occupation.⁵

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ENDNOTES

1. Pollock, M. (2008). p. 227
2. Tabar, L. (2015). p. 3
3. See: Li, D. (2006). The Gaza Strip as laboratory: Notes in the wake of disengagement. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35(2), 38-55.
4. Stamatopoulou-Robbins, S. (2008). p. 114
5. For example, the U.S. recently agreed to give Israel \$38 billion USD in military aid over the next ten years.