

**WORKING WITH JAHALIN BEDOUINS**  
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*"The phenomenon of the Bedouin will disappear. He will not live in his land with his herds, but will become an urban person who comes home at night and puts his slippers on. His children will become accustomed to a father who wears trousers and does not search for vermin in public."*

-Moshe Dyan, 1963

In 2014, when I was invited to give a paper in Jerusalem, I made the decision to go to Palestine first. The so-called Operation Edge had just ended. I had long ago lost any trust in mainstream media and had seen alternative media reports on the unspeakable, genocidal devastation perpetrated in Gaza by the Israeli government over the previous few months. I wanted to get to know the truth through what I could personally see and hear, so I stayed with a Palestinian family for three weeks and planned to tour as much of Palestine as possible.

My introduction is an ominous grey wall topped with barbed wire that stretched as far as the eye could see. It takes over three hours to pass through two Israeli military checkpoints. Many cars are searched; many men are pushed up against the wall legs spread, shirts off, belts unbuckled to be searched or led off for interrogation. Old women are yanked out of cars.

I sweat shame for the first of many, many times. However, throughout the subsequent four years that have now been going to Palestine, I continue to be grateful for Lynne Jacobs' paper, *Learning to Love White Shame and Guilt*. This has helped me to face my complicity, my ignorance and then to act.

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Today is Eid al Firt. Ramadan has ended, the fast is over and now there are two days of festivity.

However, for the Jahalin Bedouins with whom I have spent so much time over the past four years, it is a day which makes clear that each and every day since 1948 is Nakba.

Having been forcibly removed from the Negev Desert in 1950, where they and 400 other tribes had lived for 4,000 years, the Jahalin have subsisted on a scruffy piece of land granted to them by the United Nations. For the past 70 years, they have in spite of Israel's violation of freedom of movement tried to carry on their Bedouin culture—shepherding their flocks, their tribe a tightly knit unit which proudly survives nature's elements. When they sleep, their bodies must have contact with the earth symbolizing their oneness with the land.

For the past 10 years, they have fought demolition—but a few weeks ago, determined by a court of illegal ultraorthodox settlers, the final decision has been made to remove the Jahalin and forcibly transfer them to Abu Dis where they would live in cement blocks next to a toxic waste dump. Most remaining Bedouin tribes have moved there, where they are not permitted to live in tents or have their animals. The Bedouin culture has all but become extinct. At Abu Dis, toxic sewage, which has contaminated their water supply, runs down from the hilltop where the Israeli settlers live with swimming pools and palm trees. There is next to no employment and no medical care; disease has spread and death is more predictable than life. It is an open-air prison—a death camp, a graveyard as Jamal Jahalin has described.

When the bulldozers do show up to raze the Jahalin land, which includes the only school for the 120 children from the surrounding area, the Jahalin must do the demolition themselves or face a \$60,000 fine.

The Jahalin have lasted as long as they have because of Eid, their tribal leader, who has made trips to the United Nations, invited international delegations as witnesses, and come to know all the reporters from the Palestinian press. These are the reasons he has been able to fend off demolition.

I first met Eid towards the end of my first visit to Palestine, when I stayed with a Palestinian family for three weeks in the West Bank. The Dad of the family, which has now become my family, is a historian and partner with the Green Olive alternative tour. Wherever I travelled it was either with him or with Yamen, another guide with whose family would become very close to me.

It was with Yamen that I first watched Eid's meeting with a French United Nation representative who was making excuses—yet again—to justify why there were no funds to purchase winter clothes for 120 children. I was mesmerized by Eid, who seemed to embody the Palestinian quality of *sumud* (steadfastness), strength, and patience. He had clearly held this conversation with the UN representative before. Eid sat quietly and contemplatively, regarding the man until he was finished. Then he rose with dignity, shook his hand, and walked away. I told Yamen that I would buy the clothes. Yamen informed Eid of this, and then Yamen and I left for Hebron where Yamen knew lots of wholesalers. In a few hours we were done with our purchases—but had to wait until well after midnight to drive through the desert to maximize our chances of being unrecognized by the IDF, the violent settlers, or the drones. When we distributed the clothes the next day, the children looked at me with a grave suspicion which I could well understand. Their only experience has been that white people are dangerous and not to be trusted.

When I left, I asked Eid if there was any other way I could be useful. His immediate response was the young men wanted a football (i.e. soccer) team. And after a pause, he warned me, “Just don't make promises that you can't keep.” I answered that I understood that it would be up to me to earn their trust. Football is everything to Palestinians—resistance, pride, a sense of belonging, a human language, and a common language. Almost every family watches football after dinner while drinking sage tea. The Bedouins have played football too over the years, but with bare feet and rocks.

Yamen met with the young men. There was little enthusiasm until football cleats and balls were distributed. Yamen knew of a coach and a field was rented. I knew what I was capable of sponsoring and no more. They named themselves the Desert Hawks and when Yamen had uniforms

made, their insignia was already visible. Yaman had also placed my name on the uniform as the sponsor—a detail which made me cringe. I knew it was completely strange if not humiliating to have a Jewish American woman in a position of power sponsoring their team. I hung back as much as possible, cheering them on from a distance when I watched them play and making myself scarce when they took team photos.

The team improved rapidly and after a while began to play other local team as the first Bedouin football team. Bedouins are often looked down upon by the Palestinians, but when they began to win, respect for them grew. I saw from a distance their pride and kept my tears of joy to myself. The Desert Hawks played in Ramadan Leagues and were written up in news stories the *Middle East Eye* and ultimately in news items carried by *ESPN*. Yamen, the guys on the team, and I were interviewed several times. One day, well over two years into the team's activity, the Desert Hawks wanted a group photo and asked me to be in it. I was moved beyond words. Now I am called either "Jane" or "Mom". This is privately funny, since neither of my own boys played soccer and now I have become a soccer Mom for twenty Bedouin guys.

Not everything was simple. At one point, activity at checkpoints became increasingly restrictive. Palestinian teenagers were being imprisoned in larger and larger numbers and the Desert Hawk parents were frightened that the bus transporting the team would be stopped and their sons kidnapped. We had to find another field which was much further away but avoided all the checkpoints.

The Jahalin were now enduring almost nightly attacks by rabid Israeli settlers whose illegal settlements were built on the top of hills across the highway from the Jahalin. Attacking settlers poured down the hill like lava. Families were beaten and their animals murdered. There were also frequent incursions by the IDF whose helicopters shone spotlights for hours and terrified the families.

The Jahalin land lies in the E1 corridor. The plan is that once the Jahalin are removed, two illegal settlements could then join—a project which would cut the West Bank in two and prevent any contiguous access

for Palestinians to enter Jerusalem. **It is important to articulate very clearly that this plan would violate the prohibition on forcible transfer which is established by international humanitarian law. Such a violation constitutes a war crime and all persons involved in its implementation would bear personal liability—including the prime minister, senior cabinet members, the chief of staff, and the head of the civil administration.**

At this date [June 2018], the football team has been placed on hold until the future of the Jahalin become clearer. Eid has told his community that they will not go to Abu Dis. They will not go there to die. To survive however, it must be every family for itself. The families must split up. The demolition could be any day now.

To conclude, there is more to say about football. This is not only a sport but evidence of Palestinian strength, resistance, and survival. The Israelis have arrested and tortured and shot as many promising Palestinian football players as possible. As the March of Return continues in Gaza, seven footballers have been shot to death. Palestinian football legend Ahid Zakut was killed by his home by an IDF jet fire missile during Israel's "Operation Protective Edge" in 2014.

However, children's films in Palestine continue to show football as the path to freedom—in reality or in the imagination. My personal favorite is the four-minute animated film *Child Fiction* by the Ramallah animators Amer Shomali and Basel Nasr. The film demonstrates that the wall's harmful effects don't always "separate a child from a dream." The film shows a boy bouncing a ball that is the image of the world. The boy approaches the barrier, and the wall topples as he continues to play—suggesting that the joy of the game is a powerful weapon against oppression.

I have told the Desert Hawks that even if they live separately, I will do everything humanly possible to keep the team together. Inshallah.