

Working with Michigan Peace Team in Palestine

By Martha Larsen, RSM

Face to face with a well-armed Israeli soldier in a nonviolent demonstration in the town of Beit Jala, which borders Bethlehem, I had an unusual opportunity to speak with a young soldier. The Israeli army prevented protestors from blocking the bulldozers destroying an olive grove near an Israeli settler-only highway. This highway connects the large illegal Israeli settlements encircling Bethlehem to Jerusalem and to Hebron. The Israelis stole land from Beit Jala for highway construction and now more land is being stolen to build a high cement wall along the highway.

Nonviolent peace activists seldom have the opportunity to be face to face with Israeli soldiers who usually are at a distance shooting tear gas and rubber coated steel bullets at activists. One must think carefully about what to say to reach the hearts and minds of the young soldiers. Sometimes one appeals to international law and sometimes to the concern and love he has for his family would can be extended to other families. This day, I appealed to international law which he was violating. He responded that he would not speak to me here but over coffee somewhere. I felt I had touched him and challenged his actions. During this demonstration Palestinians also communicated with the soldiers, but 3 Israeli peace activists, in particular, appealed to the soldiers. The soldiers backed the protestors out of the area and arrested one Israeli peace activist. There was less physical violence from soldiers this day, but soldiers' actions are always unpredictable. Perhaps by the nonviolent communication and action of the protestors these soldiers' actions at times will be less violent and after their military service they may reconsider their actions.

I, Martha Larsen, work with Michigan Peace Team [MPT]. I have been on peace teams with MPT to Palestine/Israel for about six months a year for about four years, mainly as the anchor. The anchor is the experienced person who orients new teamers, but the team works by consensus.

MPT has trained hundreds of people in nonviolent action, based on the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Teams have worked in Palestine/ Israel, Bosnia, Haiti, Mexico, with First Nation/Native Canadian groups, on the U.S./Mexico border, and locally here in Michigan and the Midwest. MPT is not a mediation or peace-brokering organization; instead, the teams have modest but achievable goals to interrupt/reduce cycles of violence and touch lives on a personal level. MPT works with nonviolent peace activists of Palestine, Israel, other countries and the USA helping to create moments of nonviolence where the seeds of mutual respect and non-violent interaction can grow—a small step toward a climate where nonviolent transformation is possible. You can read about MPT at www.michiganpeaceteam.org .

I will be part of a fall team in Palestine/Israel for 3 months. MPT's main work will be to accompany farmers during what is hopefully an abundant olive harvest. MPT goes to areas where Zionist Israeli settlers use intimidation to disrupt the harvest. Our presence may allow a peasant farmer to harvest the crop and minimize the potential for violence.

We may monitor checkpoints and document violations of human rights especially in cases of young teen-agers being seized at night from their homes by Israeli soldiers. We may be asked to be present in these homes during the incursion. Our presence may be supportive of the family and help prevent further violent actions by soldiers. We will be present at non-violent direction actions/demonstrations resisting the apartheid wall. As team members we strive to be kind, respectful and compassionate to all people, including one another.

I ask for your support and suggest the following options:

1. Continue to learn about the situation. We all know that accurate information can only come from multiple sources representing multiple vantage points. You might try www.ifamericansknew.org, www.justforeignpolicy.org, and www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org for some data and ideas to consider.
2. Work for peace and a reduction of violence in the Middle East. Write to Congress, the President and the State Department. Share your concerns with others.
3. We go as a team, work as a team, live as a team, and share expenses as a team. Some of my teammates are in greater financial need than I. I pay somewhat less for my time in Palestine because I am an anchor, but I need to raise about \$4000. I could use help with this.
4. Contributions are tax-deductible (MPT is a registered 501-C3 organization). Donate quickly and easily at www.networkforgood.org—just enter “Michigan Peace Team” in the Charity Name search on the left side of the page—then click Donate Now.

Checks made out to Michigan Peace Team and sent to:

Michigan Peace Team

808 W. Barnes Ave.

Lansing, MI 48910

IMPORTANT: please note “Martha PT” on the designation line of your online donation or the memo of your check.

A part of my commitment is to share about the experience after my return. Perhaps I could present a program or join a discussion in your area.