Israel *Horizons*
SPECIAL EDITION
Fall 2025

A MONTH OF "PROTECTIVE PRESENCE" IN THE WEST BANK: SNAPSHOTS AND REFLECTIONS

By Sam Fleischacker

My wife and I have donated to Rabbi Arik Ascherman's organization *Torat Tzedek* — which, among other things, tries nonviolently to help Palestinians in the West Bank threatened by settlers — for many years. When he came to raise money for it at our home last November, however, he ended his presentation with these words: "Although I've come to raise money, I want to say that we also need more Jewish bodies on the line." I was struck by this remark, and felt that going to Israel/Palestine to help Arik, and others, in their human rights work, would indeed be a more powerful way of expressing my opposition to the Occupation — something I regard as a human rights disaster, a dire threat to Israel's democracy, and an offense against the Jewish belief that all human beings are created in the image of God — than simply giving money or signing statements.

As I result, I spent June this year doing what's called "protective presence" with Palestinians in the West Bank. I took an Airbnb in Jerusalem, across from Mahane Yehuda, and went out from there to various Arab communities (some that identify as Palestinian, others as Beduin) that are under threat from settlers: mostly with *Torat Tzedek* but also, a bit, with *Rabbis for Human Rights*, and *Mistaclim l'Kibush b'Eynaim*. The threats are of various kinds, as you'll see shortly, but they are all intended to encourage these communities to disappear. Usually the threats come from small settlements, unauthorized by the Israeli government, filled with "Hilltop Youth." But clearing away as many Palestinian communities as possible from the West Bank is widely supported in the settlement movement, and has been endorsed explicitly by the Israeli Cabinet ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir.

A friend suggested that I send back notes on my experiences to a small WhatsApp group; what follows is drawn from those notes. To those who have done protective presence themselves, my experiences will not be new — David Shulman's 2007 book *Dark Hope*, for instance, records very similar experiences. But others may find it useful to get an overview of what is going on in the West Bank today, and to hear how that looks even to someone, like me, who still identifies as a liberal Zionist of sorts.

June 9. A typical day of protective presence consists of 1) an hour in the early morning dealing with an emotionally unbalanced teenaged settler who has come into a Palestinian village to harass or steal fodder from the villagers, 2) eight or nine hours of sitting around on a porch or in a community center doing very little, followed by 3) another hour in the early evening tangling with an unbalanced teenaged settler. I did this mostly in Mukhmas Beduin, a Beduin compound outside the Palestinian village of Mukhmas, with other volunteers for *Torat Tzedek* and Arik. The settlers generally bring a flock of sheep or goats to graze on privately owned Palestinian lands, or perhaps to enter a shed and eat the fodder that Beduin have stored there. We film them, with cellphones or a video camera, call the army and police — the army rarely comes; the police almost never come — and sometimes shoo the animals away. The idea of the filming is two-fold: to limit the harm that the settlers do (they don't want openly violent acts caught on camera) and to provide evidence of it, to be used in a courtroom or publicity about the settlers'

activities. They generally film us too — for what purpose is unclear, except that they like to keep tabs on who comes out to oppose their activities. On my first day in Mukhmas, Arik and I were accompanied by a photographer for Italian newspapers; I have some bizarre shots of the settler and the photographer taking pictures of each other. You can also see here some footage of the settler trying to do something to Arik's car. We were unclear exactly what he was up to; he may just have been trying to get a rise out of us. But we had to take seriously the possibility that he meant to damage the car in some way.

The Italian photographer and a local settler youth filming one another. Photo courtesy of the author

We never so much as attempted to use force on settlers — *Torat Tzedek* and *Rabbis for Human Rights*, like most protective presence organizations, have a deep commitment to nonviolence — but we did sometimes try to engage in religious discourse with them. Without success. I pointed out to the first settler I encountered (the one above, photographing his photographer and messing with Arik's car) that he was committing theft by grazing his flocks on someone else's land, and that to do that to a non-Jew was a desecration of God's Name; he just smiled at me. Arik gave him a longer lecture on how he was committing idolatry and endangering his soul. He betrayed no reaction at all to that.

Yoav, who drove me to Mukhmas — a bubbly man with white hair and beard who loves Jerusalem — gave me an overview of what the settlers do aside from grazing their flocks on Palestinian land: 1) They send dogs roaming through Palestinian villages at night. 2) They burn trees or cut them down. 3) They enter homes without permission and take things, or plop themselves down on a chair in the home as if they own the place. And 4) they threaten to kill the inhabitants if they don't leave.

The settlers appeared to me, at this point, to be hoping that harassment alone will be enough to get the Beduin and Palestinians to leave. That their strategy was both more insidious, and more violent, than this became clear to me only by the end of my stay.

June 11. I took today off in order to give a workshop to the Political Science Department at Hebrew University. (Nothing to do with Israel-Palestine.) As a result, I missed the most violent attack on activists that took place during my time here: Arik and two other activists were beaten up by settlers, after trying to protect Palestinians in Mukhmas from an assault involving gunfire. As best I could make out from Arik, and from a Palestinian contact we had in Mukhmas, a settler shot in the air next to two women with their children in a playground. They then fled to a mosque right behind the playground but when they emerged, the settler shot at their feet. At that point, Palestinians in the village threw some rocks at the settlers – to distract them so that the women and children could be brought to safety, our contact said – after which a melee broke out and the settlers charged the Palestinians and the Torat Tzedek activists. The Palestinians got away, but Arik dropped his car keys, which rendered him a sitting duck when the settlers descended upon him with clubs and rifle butts. Arik was taken to Shaarei Tzedek in Jerusalem, where his head was stitched up and he was given a brace for two neck fractures. The two other activists sustained broken elbows.

Arik was back in Mukhmas the next day.

I don't have anything like Arik's stamina.

Rabbi Arik Ascherman in the hospital after his attack. Photo courtesy of the author.

June 12-13. As we returned to Jerusalem from Mukhmas on Thursday evening, the activist I was with said, "I hope we don't go to war tonight." I was dismissive, thinking that war with Iran was very unlikely. I was wrong, of course. Now I've had to start figuring out what to do during missile attacks. There is no bomb shelter in my Airbnb, but I spent shabbat with friends in Katamon, who had a shelter in their basement.

Over the next 12 days, attending to the missile-alert app on my phone, and finding shelters, was to be a constant pre-occupation. I eventually found two bomb shelters in the haredi neighborhood behind my Airbnb, and a non-haredi one in an apartment building across from me. There were no shelters in the West Bank, however. (The advice I got, in case of a missile attack, was to go out to a field and lie down.) Nor did Israel's missile-alert apps so much as list the Palestinian communities we were in as places where one might want an alert. Mukhmas (pop 1363) was not on the app's list; Ramot Hashavim (pop 1709), where my cousins in Israel live, is.

June 14. A different kind of settler provocation today. I went out with activists with Rabbis for Human Rights in the Masafer Yatta area. Mid-morning we were called out to a place where a middle-aged settler, sporting a cowboy hat, had parked his jeep in the middle of a Palestinian village, gotten out, and was standing in front of it with his gun slung prominently down the front of his body. A quiet but effectively menacing threat, especially since there were about a dozen small children in the square in front of him. (At about this point I told friends that settler threats were mostly more Sam Shepard than Brian de Palma: not a lot of open bloodshed, but a constant threat, which could be turned into violence if anyone forgot that they mean business.) Someone called the army, and eventually they showed up. But after talking to the settler a bit, they said laughingly to us, "You can watch him," and took off. He stayed there for another hour or so, then left. The Palestinians in the village were delighted, and sat with us on a porch to celebrate, offering us tea.

Tea on the porch. Photo courtesy of the author

Later in the day, he came back again, with various young helpers: teenagers again, of the troubled sort that I had seen in Mukhmas and that are often brought in to man the outposts. Each time, he and his helpers made quietly clear that they were there as a threat; each time, also, they did this in front of young children. At one point, we had a conversation with the cowboy-hatted guy. He told us that the problem we have with him is all in our heads. *He* sees good in all people, including us ("you're wonderful people! A little mixed up … but good people"), while we saw people as evil: "You'll live a lot better if you start seeing the good in people." I asked him, gesturing at the Palestinians in the square, "What about these people? Is there good in them?" He affirmed that they had good in them too. But there's a war on, he said, between Jewish and Palestinian nationalism, and only one side can win. (I was a bit surprised at this line of argument, since it affirms the humanity, and even the nationalist commitment, of Palestinians. That's something I heard Meir Kahane say back in the 1980s, but today it's more common to hear from settlers that Palestinians are either not really human or not really a nation. Stunning that Kahane is now *less* horrifying than some of the other settler ideologues!)

We called the army and the police on these guys again and again. Finally, at the end of the day, a police vehicle did show up — and harassed … us. One quick, casual word to the settler, then a suspicious grilling of both me and the other non-Israeli activist. "Where's your ID? What are you doing here? Were you invited here by some group?" I played the clueless American — quite convincingly: my limited Hebrew completely fled from my mind — until the policeman questioning me, who spoke no English, gave up.

This was the first time I had personally seen that the army and police either don't care about settler threats to Palestinians or are actively in league with them. I had been naïve enough to suppose that that couldn't possibly be true.

June 16. I'm taking today off from activism, since it's my father's yahrzeit and I want to say kaddish. I also came back from Masafer Yatta yesterday morning, so in effect I'm getting a two-day break. I'm enjoying it! Nice to have a chance to run, take showers, eat food I like, buy things (books! I need more reading while waiting around for settler visitations) and see people. I'm also trying to process my trip to Masafar Yatta, which was disturbing in new ways. The activists I was with referred to Israel as "48" and the West Bank as "67." As in: "I like driving jeeps in 67; in 48, it feels too macho." Or: "I love meeting people!" (said after we visited with some friendly Palestinians), corrected immediately to: "I love meeting people *here*! I hate meeting people in 48." When I asked (although I had already guessed) what the "48/67" nomenclature meant, I was told: "All of this is Palestine. It's just that some of it was taken in 48 and some of it has been taken since 67. I use the nomenclature to emphasize the right of return."

Sometimes these activists stated their views more straightforwardly. The one who said that she "hates meeting people in 48" also burst out with, "I hate Israel!"

Meanwhile, at the activist base camp, there was a mural of Israel/Palestine with barbed wire wound around the whole of it and Palestinian flags (only) next to it. On the opposite wall was a mural of smiling Palestinians, some wearing a hijab and some not. The message seemed to be: one day this land will be all Palestinian, open to both religious and non-religious Muslims. No pictures or symbolism of Jews or even Christians, nothing suggesting hopes for a pluralistic future in which two peoples might share a homeland to which they are both attached.

The mural. Photo courtesy of the author

The activists I was with were also working together with activists from the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), which includes among its principles a statement against criticizing any form of Palestinian resistance, including terrorism, and an expectation that all their volunteers will "take a stance against Zionism … and all other forms of bigotry."

All this saddened and worried me. In order to stand for the rights of Palestinians, do we need to believe that Zionism, in all its forms, reduces to "bigotry"? Do we need to reject the possibility that this land might properly serve as a homeland for Jews as well as Palestinians? On a pragmatic level, if Jewish Israelis knew that the activists standing with Palestinians believed in the complete eradication of Zionism — in the replacement of Israel with a state that has no room for the collective aspirations of Jews — wouldn't they all rush back to their nationalist corner, and reject everything that we are working for here? On a moral level, I don't see why an Arab, Muslim ethno-religious state has any advantages over a Jewish ethno-religious state. Surely there is space for a more nuanced middle road, that shows respect and empathy for everyone who lives here.

I have seen that sort of mutual respect and empathy in the relationship between the leaders of Roots/Shorashim/Judur — Khalid Abu Awwad and Hanan Schlesinger — and among the activists in Standing Together. I wish I had seen it in the activist community at Masafer Yatta.

That said: The politics of the activists don't matter much for what we do on a daily basis here. Settlers toting guns for hours in front of Palestinian children is wrong whatever happens in the long run. Settlers sending their flocks to eat the fodder of Palestinian shepherds is wrong whatever happens in the long run. And indeed, to the extent that these ugly behaviors are characteristic markers of "Zionism" in the West Bank today, no wonder it comes off as, just, bigotry.

June 18-19. Back to Mukhmas again. A quiet day — no settler interventions. No settlers, either, coming to daven at 5:30 a.m. in the middle of the Beduin compound we are staying in, as they did the previous morning. (And once when they had done this, when there were no protective presence activists around, they had followed their davening by walking into people's homes and breaking and taking things).

So I'm going to take this lull to reflect on two broader questions: 1) what is witnessing? and 2) what is Zionism?

The very first day I did this sort of thing led me to wonder about what "witnessing" means, exactly. Yes, I realize this is very much a philosopher's question, but it gets at something directly relevant to how my experience can be useful to others. What can I really tell people that I "saw with my own eyes" when the settlers came to graze on the lands of the village I was staying in? I feel pretty confident about saying that I "saw with my own eyes" a settler sending his sheep into a Beduin shed to steal fodder: the shed looked obviously constructed by one of the Beduins in the compound around it. But I wrote above that one of the settlers I encountered was grazing his sheep on privately owned Palestinian land. How do I know *that*? Nothing about what I could see of the land *looked* "privately owned": it was fenceless and it looked pretty barren. I learned that it was privately owned only because Arik told me.

Now I trust Arik. He knows a lot about ownership rights here and he seems, from the many conversations I've had with him, both very honest and very careful about the legal claims he makes. But taking his word for the status of the land here is not quite the same thing as using "my own eyes and ears." Instead I was relying on testimony. And Arik himself, even if he saw the Palestinians planting feed, can't possibly determine ownership rights just by looking. That's a legal matter, something abstract, which can't be directly seen.

There's a rich philosophical literature on testimony these days, stressing how much of our knowledge — even what seems to be direct sensory knowledge — depends on testimony. Reflecting on what it means to "see" an invasion of someone else's land confirmed the basic claims of this literature nicely for me. It was a good reminder of how much even of our "direct experience" depends on the word of others — we can't know what exactly we are seeing and hearing without facts that we learn from other people. What I report back, about what I have witnessed doing protective presence, will have to be a mixture of pictures and tales, of what I saw and what I heard *about* what I saw.

As for the second question: several of the Israelis I've met have told me that they are anti-Zionist. And when I told B., the young Russian postdoc who was with Arik and me yesterday in Mukhmas, that I thought Israel could be a homeland for both Jews and Palestinians, with a law of return for members of both communities, a public calendar that marked Jewish, Muslim and Christian holidays, perhaps differently in different cities, and school systems that teach both Jewish and Palestinian history and culture (perhaps, again, stressing one or the other more in different cities), she said to me that that sounded anti-Zionist to her. I was surprised, saying that I think it's pretty much what Ahad ha'Am, and Buber and Magnes, envisioned as Zionism. B. is new to such discussions — she has just one Jewish grandparent and has not grown up with much of a Jewish identity — but she said that many of the Israelis she meets say they are anti-Zionist but don't mean that Jews should have to leave this land. And indeed R., the elderly Israeli who was also with us yesterday and told us he has been an anti-Zionist for the past 20 years, said he's still inclined to think that there should be a Jewish homeland here.

Yehudah Mirsky told me on Tuesday that he thinks we need a definition of "Zionism" that can encompass everyone who has described themselves that way, from Martin Buber to Meir Kahane (he says much the same thing in a wonderful interview with him, published recently, about Zionism). His preferred definition was "a belief that Jews need and should have a collective presence in their ancestral homeland." Arik told me today that he believes that Jews need a collective home here that will enable them "to survive and thrive physically, culturally and spiritually"; he added that some people will consider that Zionism and others wouldn't. I think it is Zionism, if again more of the Ahad ha'Am than the Ben Gurion variety.

These are not purely abstract questions. The idea that Israel needs to be a state controlled exclusively by Jews and for Jews — the idea that a "Jewish state" means a state in which Jews must hold a decisive power advantage over non-Jews, and the rights and well-being of Jews must take precedence over the rights and well-being of non-Jews — has been turning increasingly into a antiliberal nightmare: an idea that is incompatible in both theory and practice with liberal democracy, and with anything remotely resembling equal rights for non-Jewish minorities (contrary, in both respects, to the hopes embodied in Israel's Declaration of Independence). So if Zionism retains, as I still think it does, a morally legitimate core, if there is something still to be said for Jewish nationalism, then we need an understanding of it that doesn't license the oppression of Palestinians. And we are sorely lacking that right now.

June 22. Yesterday looked to be a quiet day until around 4 p.m. I was out for a second time in Masafer Yatta with G, the coordinator for Rabbis for Human Rights I had been out with before. We spent a long morning talking to Hamdan Ballal, a co-director of the Oscar-winning film "No Other Land," in his family's home. One thing that Hamdan mentioned, and that fits with what I've heard from other people, is that the settler youths who go out to harass Palestinians are largely drawn from broken homes, in terrible socio-economic circumstances, and are often also mentally or emotionally challenged. Behind them, occasionally with them or coming to fuss over them, are older settlers, more clearly Orthodox — one of the youths I saw was told to daven mincha but seemed not to know his way around a siddur; another wore *payos* [sidelocks] but no kippah — who will bring them an ice cream or sandwich and pat them encouragingly on the head (I witnessed this a couple of times). Hamdan was outraged, as much as anything, by this exploitation of what are essentially children. Others have told me that the settlers should be charged, among other things, with child abuse.

After talking with Hamdan, we accompanied a shepherd named Ali as he went out with his sheep, in case settlers came to graze on his land, or threaten his isolated house while he was far from it. That was uneventful for an hour or so. Then a settler did come, walk around the house with Ali's frightened wife alone inside it, and bring his flock to graze on Ali's land. We rushed up to the house, filmed the settler's activities, and called the police. They came twice. The first time the policeman in charge seemed genuinely concerned about what we said and went off to talk to the settler; he didn't remove him, however. The second time we got a policeman wearing a kippah (the first one was secular) who treated G's account

of what happened with contempt, questioned us suspiciously, asking for our ID's, and then said "Bye. We're going," and left without so much as looking at the settler. He remained in the area, grazing his flock on Ali's land, for several hours. We stayed until seven, when other activists came to relieve us.

June 24. Back to Mukhmas. Our activist group has been moved out of the Beduin compound. Arik says that a new reserve officer in the IDF has come in who seems honestly to want to quell the settler depredations (he's given the Beduins his private phone number) but whose solution to the problem is to declare a closed military zone over the Beduin compound, and ban both settlers and activists from it. That's what the settlers requested — "we'll leave if they leave" — and the officer thinks that acceding to their request is the simplest way to lower tensions. (Needless to say, perhaps, the settlers never kept their part of the bargain: they were back in the compound within 24 hours.) Arik notes that there is something absurd about this arrangement — the military could have more sensibly written an order banning everyone except the Beduin *and their guests* from the area — but he wants to co-operate with the new officer. So we're staying in a community center in Mukhmas proper (a funeral home, actually …), across from a little grocery store. This is in some ways nicer than our shelter in the Beduin compound but also hotter and stuffier.

Mukhmas proper is a fairly well-off little town, where many Palestinian-Americans built homes after the Oslo process got started in 1993; they or their children come here during the summers, especially, to maintain their Arabic and their ties to Palestine. Sometimes these young people come to visit us in the community center, or even out in the field, to chat, inquire about our mission here, and thank us for it. They ask us if everything is OK and bring us tea or soft drinks or ice cream. Part of the point of doing this work is building these sorts of bonds with Palestinians. On his fund-raising trips, Arik often says that he is for many Palestinians the first kippah-wearing Jew they have ever met who was not also carrying a gun with which to threaten them. I make sure to wear my kippah at all times.

The town of Mukhmas. Photo courtesy of the author

June 26. I was out in the Ras Ein area this evening with activists from an organization I haven't worked with before: *Mistaclim l'Kibush b'Eynaim* ["Looking the Occupation in the Eye."] Not that that made too much difference. I've heard that some people associated with Mistaclim are not committed to non-violence and will pick fights with settlers. That wasn't true however of the two I went out with; both were non-violent to their core. One, a lovely, soft-spoken Israeli named Alon, was about my own age. The other, older, was David Shulman, whom I had heard about for years from our mutual friend Jim Ponet, my Hillel rabbi when I was a graduate student (and the rabbi who did our wedding).

David is remarkable. A poet as well as a scholar, he has won the Israel Prize and a Macarthur Fellowship. He also co-founded *Taayush*, a Jewish-Arab grass-roots peace and justice organization, to which he gave the money from his Israel Prize, and has written several highly regarded books about his experiences on the West Bank. Originally from Iowa, he moved to Israel in the 1970s because he fell in love with the Hebrew language; he also speaks or reads Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic, Greek, Farsi, and several other languages (retired, he now teaches just advanced Sanskrit at Hebrew U). With all these accomplishments, one might expect him to be self-important or condescending. But in fact he is extremely gentle and modest; his kindness is the first thing you notice about him. And he is no ideologue, showing deep empathy for both Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

Three stories from David:

1) The Beduin in Ras Ein and Mu'arajat (the village we stayed in) now bring water from outside and keep it in large tanks, like one across from where we slept. I was impressed – that seemed a better arrangement than piping the water in, since settlers often cut the pipelines. But David said he had seen a settler, early one morning, drive up to one of the tanks and open the tap so that all the water ran out. In these extremely dry parts – we were right near the Dead Sea, and the temperature was still 100 degrees at 7 p.m. – not having water can be a death sentence.

2) One of the buildings in Mu'arajat is a school. About a year ago, settlers broke into the school while it was in session, tied up the principal, and beat him within an inch of his life. The army came, did nothing to the settlers, but left the principal in their car, bleeding, for several hours, before bringing him to a hospital.

3) The head of security at Mevo'ot Yericho, the local settlement, is a guy named Gabriel Kalish, who actively supports settler depredations: there are videos of him on Youtube, up on the Temple Mount, praising God for helping settlers in their holy work of "purifying the land" of people who don't belong in it. Recently a Haredi young man named Yonatan, in full black and white dress and currently at yeshiva, has been working with groups like Mistaclim. He is firm in his religiously anti-Zionist views but so gentle that everyone likes him, apparently, even at his yeshiva. One day David was with Yonatan when Kalish came along. Spotting Yonatan, and assuming that he was one of "his people," Kalish called out to him joyously, saying "Isn't this a wonderful world that Hashem has created?" Yonatan responded, "Yes. But there are a few flaws." Kalish was puzzled: "What flaws?" "Well," said Yonatan, "people are suffering here because of what people like you are doing." And then – gently but firmly – he let Kalish have it.

My two most recent visits to Mukhmas had been quiet, as I've indicated, and I had begun to say to Arik that I seem to have become a "mascot" of sorts, warding off settler attacks. ("If that's true, I'm not letting you leave!" he responded). I said the same thing to David and Alon after we spent a surprisingly quiet night in Mu'arajat. But just moments after I'd said that, we saw two haredi boys at a home just below us. There was no good reason they should be there, so we rushed down to see what was up. We were too late: they had taken off — with two sheep they had stolen. We felt ashamed that we had not gotten there sooner.

A friend in London said to me, before I came out here, that I should be prepared to accept how little I would actually be able to accomplish. I've been keeping that in mind, and it resonated especially strongly with me when we failed to stop the theft of those sheep. Even that – it seemed such a small thing! – we couldn't manage. I guess I would have liked to do something at least mildly heroic on this trip. But David remarked wisely, as we drove back from Mu'arajat, that he distrusted heroes: "In the army, they get you killed." Citing Camus' doctor in *The Plague*, he suggested that we should aim to carry out the duties before us in decency, not to be a hero. That too has been worth keeping in mind.

June 28. Beautiful shabbat yesterday, which reminded me of what I love about Jerusalem, and why I continue to think it's important for there to be a Jewish communal presence – even if not a Jewish *state*, precisely – in this land. I davened in Nachla'ot, and the variety of lovely, quirky old shuls alone — people flooding out of the doors of one of them, on Friday night, such that there were really additional kabbalat shabbat davening groups, male and female, on the streets — was alone wonderfully moving. In the morning, I went to Ohel Moshe, a small, bright Sephardi shul, up some steps, that was built in 1883, for a shacharit that started at 7:30. Then back through the shuk, now completely silent and peaceful, to an equally quiet Jaffa Road. One feels here as if shabbat is radiated back to you, proclaimed by the very walls of the buildings. Nowhere else have I felt so able to be *publicly* Jewish: have I felt that I don't need to excuse or awkwardly explain my religious practices to others, that the public square itself endorses and celebrates them.

Why shouldn't we Jews have spaces like this? I have been in richly Christian and Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist villages, all over the world, and admired and envied them for their communal texture. Once there were Jewish communities like this all over Europe and Asia and North Africa. Now they exist (with the limited, too narrowly haredi, exceptions of

places like Boro Park or Stamford Hill) only in Israel. It would be a tragedy if that changed, if they were made to disappear.

But surely all this is compatible with there *also* being Muslim and Christian (and Bahai and Druze and other) communal spaces in Israel, with their not being harassed or encroached upon by Jews, and with the people in all these places having equal political and civil and economic rights and opportunities. Why should there not be one state here that protects everyone's individual rights while also protecting and nurturing a variety of communal spaces — yes, Jewish spaces especially, perhaps, given the paucity of such spaces in the world, but also especially Palestinian spaces, given their long history here and the unjust and brutal ways we have treated Palestinians?

Is this Zionism? I don't know. It's a kind of Zionism, I think. It also seems to me an obvious way to secure rights for all the people, and peoples, who live here.

July 1-2. Yesterday morning in Mukhmas, we got a call around 7 because settlers had brought their sheep and goats into the Beduin compound and were grazing them on their land. Same deal as so often before (this is basically a daily occurrence). The one difference this time is that the army, when called, actually came – 4 or 5 soldiers in a jeep – and while they told us to leave (fairly politely, for once) they also told the settlers to leave. They then took off before the settlers had fully cleared the area, but this was a better response than the usual one. Then last night around 11 the three of us were called out because settlers had come to the Beduin compound with the apparent object of either blocking the road to the compound or damaging its water main. When we got there, however, our contact Yusef told us that they had left after he shined his flashlight at them. We hung around for a little, in case they came back - and were treated with rich cream cakes by a Palestinian who lived near where we were standing - then went back to sleep.

So a fairly quiet second-to-last time "in the field" for me. In between those two events, moreover, 15-20 representatives of the EU, including the Danish Ambassador, and the Spanish and Rumanian Consuls General, came to meet with Yusef at Mukhmas, and took testimony also from representatives of Action Against Hunger, B'tselem, the West Bank Protection Consortium, and Torat Tzedek (which meant me and two other activists I was with). They listened thoughtfully and empathetically, and came up to the three of us with warm expressions of appreciation. That was of course gratifying; how much good it will accomplish, in the end, is unclear.

One thing I wanted to say to the EU folks was that having activists like us try to protect Palestinians on the West Bank against settler attacks – in the name, explicitly, of ethnic cleansing, and with the explicit backing of leading figures in the Israeli government, and of much of the police and army - is like the boy who tried to stop a flood by sticking his finger in a dike. The same metaphor sprang independently to the mind of Arik and one of the other activists. This is no way to solve even the immediate problem of the harm that the settlers are causing, let alone its deep systemic roots.

July 4. Here are a few final notes.

1) Mu'arajat is now being evacuated by its Beduins. David Shulman passed on the news this morning. The settlers have won there, he said. Now the land can be declared "empty" or "abandoned" by the government, and used – officially – for new settlements. One of the Beduins who is leaving sent along the following WhatsApp message to everyone who had tried to help them stay: "All activists, heartfelt greetings from someone whose heart is broken on their own land. You are heroes – thank you for standing with us throughout our time living in al-Muarajat. I will miss talking to you and telling you about the settlers."

2) A bit more about the activists I've met. Several people have told me that the best part of this work is meeting the other people who do it, and they are certainly an interesting bunch. They are also a very diverse bunch. The settlers call all of us "anarchists." That's a completely bizarre appellation for people like Arik or Anton Goodman or other liberal human rights advocates (including me) – strong believers in the rule of law, all, who are looking precisely for legal order, protecting everyone subject to it, to replace the injustice and arbitrariness that currently reigns here. But some of the activists are indeed anarchists: three of the people I was out with this past week openly identified themselves that way to me. Similarly, and perhaps relatedly, some of the activists are Zionists, while others are strongly anti-Zionist.

What's crucial is that these people generally get along quite well as partners in the defense of Palestinian rights. *Generally*: I've met a few who get very irritated if one dissents from their favored politics, seeing a commitment to anti-Zionism as essential to this work, and at least one who, whatever her politics (I'm not sure what they are), is known for her crankiness and says openly, "I'm old; I don't need community." Yuli, a young open anarchist who was with me in Mukhmas one day, is not like this at all – he's very friendly and strongly committed to community (the cranky one's remark was a response to his defense of community). He says that one always needs to be wary of an activist with a car. If you don't have a car, you need to be friendly with others in order to get a ride home. If you have a car, you can be a cranky loner. (Our crank came in her own car.) Yuli and I also agreed that activists self-select for feisty, highly opinionated personalities. That's how one gets into this sort of thing. And that can be a problem. But at least the ones without a car seem to know how to work together.

3) It took a while before I began to see clearly what, overall, the settlers are up to. Coming into a village to daven at 5 a.m. seems obnoxious, but is it really worse than a prank? What about driving one's car back and forth through a village? Grazing one's flock on Beduin lands is of course theft, but given how little there is to eat there, it too seems a minor offense. Even standing around in the middle of a village with a gun slung down one's body could be seen this way, given how many people hang around with guns in Israel. But the *point* of all these things is to answer the question around which Itamar Ben Gvir ran his last campaign: "Who is the *baal ha'bayit* [home-owner] here?" Who *owns* this land, who is the homeowner, the one with an absolute right to decide who stays and who goes? (You can find a fawning, disingenuous defense of this slogan here). And the answer we are supposed to give to that question is, of course: Jews. No-one else. No Palestinians, no Beduins, no non-Jews of any kind, not even if they have full property rights – under every system of law, including Israeli law and halakha — in the homes they've built. Jews get to come into those homes whenever they feel like it. That's what is shown by davening at 5 a.m. in the middle of a Beduin village. That's what is shown by lying down in the middle of that village, playing one's favorite Israeli tunes. That's why the settlers sometimes literally come into a home and sit in the chairs, or take things. These are the actions of a *baal ha-bayit*, establishing his ownership rights.

Moreover, even these seemingly minor actions are backed up by violence. Sometimes the settlers burn cars, shoot at the feet of women and children, or beat people up. Over the past weeks, they have also killed several Palestinians.

All this makes clear that even the settlers' "pranks" are not really pranks — they are threats. But the relatively low level of harm they inflict makes it hard to get the press, or the law, to attend to them. This, however, makes them all the more excellent a tool — *better* than open violence — for ethnic cleansing. The horrors of Gaza have rightly aroused international outrage. But the more subtle settler campaign to drive Palestinians out of the West Bank flies mostly under the radar of world opinion. It too deserves outrage.

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Israel *Horizons*

Published by Partners for Progressive Israel

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