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Netanyahu's War on Transcendence

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has closed the only crossing point for commercial goods to enter and leave the Gaza Strip. He is unhappy that Palestinian protestors have deployed incendiary kites. Rather than address the illegal blockade which gave rise to the protests, Netanyahu has decreed that Gazan Palestinians will be permitted no trade, no shops and no goods to buy, as if he bestows those things as favours. Gazans will henceforth line up to receive only those humanitarian relief which Netanyahu approves on a case by case basis.

Two million Gazan Palestinians are living in his War of the Worlds fever dream.

I lived and worked in Gaza 2011 – 2015. I do not speak for anyone there, but I do speak with a wrenching fear for the community that Netanyahu is trying to break.

I have always refused to refer to Gaza as an open-air prison. Prisons are permanent institutions in our societies. Individuals are convicted and sentenced to prison for a time, and we debate the policies of their treatment. Gaza is a ghetto, an ethnic enclosure where babies are born into open-ended confinement. Whole communities are condemned to carve out their family and collective lives in a ghetto. In essence, a ghetto deems a people to be less than human, deserving of less than the rights of humans.

A ghetto is, by definition, a crime. When we call Gaza a ghetto, we begin by acknowledging that the occupation and blockade are massive crimes, inexcusable and escalating. To wonder at the life that Gaza built within its walls, is emphatically not a way of accepting the regime that they are trying to survive.

The West Bank's fragmentation made for constant friction with Israel's occupying forces. Gaza was the antithesis. The threat was pervasive. The horizon was a concrete wall, and the sea flowed as far as the gunboats. Drones hovered and buzzed overhead. The occupation was all around, but not between, Gazans. They were squeezed together in a miniature, complex world, one marathon in length. In response, they made exceptional choices about how they would share their space.

Several elements seemed constitutive of Gaza's collective life: their love of education, their families, their stubborn family-owned shops, their mutual assistance, and their resistance. None of those things could be taken for granted. Two million other people might have responded to their ghettoization differently, and Gaza might have felt like a jungle of all against all.

Instead, Gazans built universities, and observed special noise by-laws on exam days. Strollers along the beach met every electricity cut with a defiant cheer, night after night. Under attack in 2012 and 2014, my colleagues called and offered to drive through the bombardments, to bring me to their homes because bombs were less frightening in rooms full of family. After each military assault, parents struggled to live with their inability to protect their children – and then it normalized into their gnawing inability to provide their children with basic human entitlements like clean water, safety and the prospect of a peaceful life.

This year, these constitutive heartbeats of Gaza have come under fire from Netanyahu, Trump, and their enablers. Defunding UNRWA jeopardizes the education, public sector and emergency services available to the two-thirds of Gazans who are registered refugees. There is less electricity, less liquidity, less economic activity, less of everything for more people in the same space. Over 130 protestors have been killed, and more Gazans have been wounded than Gaza has hospital bed.

Now Netanyahu has ended trade. One man is emptying the shelves of two million human beings. The royal prerogative, the terror of it: he is dismantling a community before our eyes. In broad daylight, he is trying to bury it alive.

Whether or not he has gone clinically mad, Netanyahu must be calculating that he can get away with it in our disrupted moment. Gaza matters disproportionately to the present disruption. Two galloping processes meet on its field of protest. Illiberal power is dispensing with law and the rights of humans, dismantling protections and cultivating resentments. Grassroots resistance is weaving together the structure of oppression, and realizing new alliances.

Gaza is just one little vortex. Yet the blockade's gross power disparities and fierce resistance have also made it the proving ground for a malevolent biopolitical control.

Gaza matters for its own sake, and it matters again as a bellweather. That which is gotten away with in Gaza, will surface again where other walls are built, where surplus people are warehoused, and where other protestors dig their heels in. We have seen, over and over, that Gaza's densely populated neighbourhoods are the testing sites for strategies of asymmetrical urban assault.

My rage in Gazans' place would be boundless.

I also rage as a Jew. I am incredulous that mainstream Jewish institutions are willing to use this ugly global moment to get the dirty work of nationalism done. Too many of our temples give religious cover to racism and violence. Public discourse is learning to distinguish between Judaism and Zionism, and it's past time for Jews to do the same: the occupation is not a religious experience.

Netanyahu is slaving for the next pretext to throw his bombs at two million trapped people. I don't know if he can be stopped, and neither can I imagine how to live in the world he signals.