

## Hass in "Drinking the Sea at Gaza"

### A Bird of Different Feather . . . or just a lion's smile

In a country where the statement "go to Gaza means go to hell", where the majority view Gaza as the "hornet's web" and Gazans as the savage and the enemy, from such a country came Amira Hass(1) to write in love and admiration about these people and that land.

"Drinking the Sea at Gaza", is an exposition of Gaza society in its entirety: Doctors, farmers, taxi drivers, political parties, prisoners and released prisoners etc. Mainly written in Hebrew, translated into English in 1999, it consists of 370 pages, divided into four chapters, an introduction and an epilogue. (2)

In the introduction Hass writes sincerely about these people and their land. She recalls the history and concludes that what she has found in Gaza, is in a way or another, a part of her collective memory. The tragedy and suffering of these people is a part of her parents' and grand parents', back in Romania, since her father was thirteen years of age, in the barracks at Bergen-Belsen, and in the way Europe collaborated with Nazi Germany and accepted the gradual and final removal of the Jews with indifference.

The writer tells her experience in Gaza and reflects her contact with the Palestinians as human beings not wild beasts as the Israeli propaganda figures them. She tells that she had sensed Israeli life in Gaza in many aspects: In the sound of Hebrew spoken out in the refugee camps, in the stories told by the old refugees about their long-gone family homes in Palestine, speaking as if they had seen them the week before, or in the darkly funny stories had been told by her friends about their experience in the Israeli prisons . During her stay she had recognized Gaza and its people, experienced the bitter life under occupation and learned how *the wild armless smile of most Gazan hid bottomless depth of sadness*

In 1991 Hass had come to Gaza as a volunteer for the Workers' Hot Line, an Israeli organization that represented workers from the occupied territories in their grievances against Israeli employers. Being on the editorial staff of the daily newspaper "Ha'arts" she started writing about the Strip which was in many ways *terra incognita*. The writer praises in every occasion the welcoming attitude and the good treatment she found among the Gazans, contradicting the beliefs of her fellow Israelis who thought that she has put her life in danger: *"long before I actually moved to the Strip, I had discovered just how distorted the popular Israeli image of Gaza is - Savage, violent, and hostile to the Jews . . . My experience in Gaza, the ease with which the people accepted me, the natural way we talked about things and even argued, was my answer to all the Israelis who asked "How come you are not afraid? " . . . Thanks to them {gazans}, I learned to see Gaza through the eyes of its people, not through the windshield of an army jeep or the interrogation rooms of shabak, the Israeli security service."* (p.4)

About her parents, Hass tells how their memories affected her, how their way of thinking transmitted into her and because of them she became a struggler against the

persecution wherever it existed. Out of many stories she recalls one that is always in her mind, a story was told by her father about a pastry shop in the ghetto at Transnistria where few lucky ones would buy cakes while hungry children stood outside staring in hungry eyes. "Whenever I hear the pieties of "Jewish unity" *I remember that unity ended at the entrance to Transnistria*". About her motives towards coming and working in Gaza she says: they weren't due of adventurism or insanity, but from the dread of being classified as a bystander, from her need to understand a world profoundly "*created*" by the Israelis. She sees in Gaza the entire saga of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, it represents the central contradiction of the state of Israel: Democracy for some dispossession for others: "*It is our exposed nerve, I needed to now the people whose life had been for ever altered by my society and my history, whose parents and grandparents, refugees were forced from their villages in 1948.* (p. 8)

The 13<sup>th</sup> of July 1995 was an important day for the Palestinians, they were optimistic after the return of a Palestinian leader, from many years in exile. It meant to them the end of Israeli military rule and the beginning of the self-rule saga. There were official celebrations where journalists usually crowd, Hass, on her side had chosen to be with friends in an orange grove . . . they all enjoyed themselves for few hours. To the east, Hass tells, the light stroke the fields of Beit Hanun in Gaza and the Israeli kibbutzim of Kfar Aza and Erez (once the Palestinian village of Dimra). At that distance one could see no borders slashing the brown soul or dividing the cypress or eucalyptus trees: "*to me so Israeli, to my friends so Palestinian - restored the soul. From the top of the hill, spread before us, was one country*" (p. 9)

On the other side the view was different, it was the sea hugging the horizon. Just before signing Oslo accords<sup>3</sup>, the late Yitshak Rabin said of Gaza, "If only it would just sink into the sea". These words reflect the political Israeli attitude towards Gaza and its one million inhabitants. Many other demeaning expressions are used to describe Gaza such as, the "hornets' nest" and a "dunghill". The Israeli view of the city is best implied by the local variant "Go to hell" which is quite simply "go to Gaza"

The other four parts of the book expose Gaza's long suffering journey since Al'intifada (1989)<sup>4</sup> till the last reached agreements of Oslo Accord. Some times Hass goes back in time to reveal Palestinian history before and during their tragedy of 1948. Hass wasn't satisfied with depicting the political figure of the strip, but goes deep to the social, economic and psychological aspects of its people, drawing a complete image of this miserable city, which has lived for a quarter of a century under occupation. Hass roll in this story wasn't the roll of a journalist who simply stays aside, watching and reporting, but she was actively involved in all aspects of these people's lives. This enables her to conjure image that contradicts what is widely spread in mainstream Israeli society. Hass's most prominent point in this book is to reveal the humane Palestinian, the ordinary people who are living in chronic poverty and suffer all means of oppression though they didn't tend to crime:" We don't have much to do", a Palestinian police officer told . . . There are indeed drug use and traffic offenses, but the police record little theft, murder or rape. The writer explains the reason for this law crime rate, it is the strong family ties that allow needy persons to depend on their relatives in their livings <sup>5</sup>. A person in the Palestinian family is expected and ready to sacrifice his money, his freedom and even his life for the sake

of other members of the family. . Hass comments: *"A family structure like this which cushions life's jolts economically and emotionally is a blessing for any government"*(p.59). She finds out that the miserable life of these people didn't make them the savage, tough, unmerciful but the eloquent, flexible who react to critical hard situations with a bitter courageous joke.

The Palestinians as one of them declared, struggle for dignity, to be treated as humans, as any other human being under the sun. Why do you think we started the "Intifada" Ashkar asked one day " why do we want a state? It is not the land - no piece of land is worth the bloodshed. And in countless conversations through out the strip, Hass has discovered that the Palestinians wanted to expand the limits of their freedom of choice, personally and nationally. . In the long run they will judge the Oslo Accords accordingly, by measuring the breadth of their freedom as a people and as human beings.

In her proposition Hass didn't ignore the misgivings of the Palestinian society. She revealed many social irrational conventions that affect the life of the individual, she exposed the dramatical situation of women in society, the early arranged marriages, the polygamy, and the complete dominance of men over women. This leads Hass to talk about the influence of the new circumstances on this issue. She found out that the woman's role started to change due to the new circumstances. The frequent unexpected siege that caused high unemployment, the random imprisonment and detention that kept the man of the family "absented", gave a chance to the woman to play a greater role in her family life. Hass also appreciates the positive attitude practiced by the Palestinian authority towards feminine issues and the struggle of feminine organizations to liberate and protect woman's rights: *"In a way fighting the occupation led to feminism. It also taught me not to obey blindly . . . Things began to change with the Intifada. . . women were encouraged to go out and look for work"* (p. 188-9)

One of the issues that attracted Hass' attention was, the discrimination against the refugees by fellow Palestinians, (the original inhabitants of Gaza) who are considered as national, The refugees are those who were forced to leave their villages in Palestine in 1948, and came to live in the Gaza strip. They form the majority of strugglers against the Israeli occupation. The bitter feeling of persecution that they have suffered as a result of being uprooted from their villages, the poverty, the exploitation they were subjected to during the Israeli Occupation, and the discrimination practiced upon them from their fellow Palestinians, ignited within them both the positive and negative feelings of tribal spirit, the spirit that controlled many of the relations within the society. Hass named it in its Arabic term "hamula". She also explains that these emotions were developed to become political organizational, people of the same organization or party ( Fatah (6), Hamas (7), PFLP (8) ) for example, became the new belonging for the person that stand for him/ her, and feel related to.

A Chapter in the book is dedicated to the maltreatment of the Palestinians during the occupation, Hass stresses on the Israeli law tax that helps employers to exploit Palestinian workers who seek work in Israel. . Some of the examples mentioned is the comparison between the tax rate paid by the Israeli worker and that paid by the Palestinian: " A wage earner with a non working wife and three children, with annual income of NIS 12000(\$4800) pays no income tax, while in the Occupied Territories

he pays NIS 464 (\$185.60), or about four percent of salary " the writer adds: A civil administration officer defended the discrepancy thus: " *A whole crate of tomatoes in Gaza is cheaper a than a pound in Israel: The officer ignored all the essential goods that cost Gazans exactly the same as they did Israelis, sometimes even more in the absence of the government subsidies on water and electricity that Israelis receive, ( p 126)*. To know that Hass has called the relevant chapter " A Tax on Being Alive" is enough to give an indication of how injustice the situation is

On the other hand we read stories about violating human rights practiced, in particular on prisoners and detainees, stories that go so far as those practiced upon the Jews during the Nazi saga: The mental health center patient Abu Nada described the procedures: Four Shabak agents lay the prisoner on his back. One jump on his legs, the second on his chest, the third on his genitals, the fourth covers the prisoner's mouth and nose so he can't breathe. Someone keeps track of the time. A doctor may also be present, overseeing the session. Then they cover the prisoner's head with a stinking sack. He cannot see any thing, cannot tell day from night. He spends days without sleep and without enough food and without being allowed to go to the bathroom . In addition to the physical torture there is psychological humiliation: " you won't be a man by the time we pull you out of here, you won't be able to have children; we will bring your wife and mother and fuck them right in front of you." *Sometimes they make homosexual threats. Men who restrained themselves for days so as not to urinate or defecate in their pants develop physical ailments like kidney stones, those who couldn't hold back feel a sense of humiliation and a loss of self respect for a long time afterward. . . Some men became sterile because of injury of their sexual organs. One said about the efficiency of the Shabak methods: "choking, blows to the genitals, pressure on the chest - they have them down pat. They don't leave evidence"* (213)

In the last part of the book we find an explicit description of the Israeli maltreatment of civilian Palestinians: the arbitrary sanctions and curfew, the economical damage caused by the long unpredictable siege, the long periods of wasted time waiting for unasserted pass permissions on the check point Erez, etc. Hass's tone was strongly accusing; to the extent to call that chapter "Gaza Prison", though, Hass made it relevant the relation between the tough siege and the military action taken by the Palestinian Militants ( Hamas for example). Its true that the writer blames Israeli Authorities for these deeds but implies blaming, at the same time, the military acts and their destructive impact on the Palestinian society. Could this mean a hidden threat to Palestinians to behave themselves? ! ! . . .

Changing hands in governing Gaza didn't make life easier as it was expected. The National Palestinian Authority, when taken over, has to face many challenges. They have to prove themselves to the Israelis, that they are serious about the peace process, and good enough in controlling military acts against Israel. In order to do that, ordinary Palestinians have been subjected to different kinds of abuse, such as random arrests, unfair trails, home searches, imprisonment and exploitation. Some elite have took advantage and make unjustified profit at the expense of ordinary people, as it is the case with the two companies Al-Bahar, and Salaam. (302)

Hass, in her book, reveals deep understanding of the Palestinian cause, she accepts and understands the motives behind these suicidal activities that occur from time to

time, she realized that unless these oppressive economic and political circumstances change they will go further. She knew that frustration led Palestinian youth to join religious organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad<sup>7</sup>. She even knows better about their psychic construction, how they feel and react. She has known that the Palestinians in their hearts insist that the whole land is theirs and because of that will not renounce their longing for the fields that now carry Hebrew names; they will not forget the pain of loss and expulsion, but at the same time *"they have the ability and the honest desire to separate their heartfelt wishes from the need for a peaceful political solution. {We are after all the mother of the child}, they say, alluding to King Solomon's judgment to explain their readiness to share the country. On condition, of course, that any solution treat the Palestinians with dignity, as people with elemental rights and a claim equal to that of the others who live in this land and call it home".(352)*

No doubt that the book is led by a very brave vision, a vision still strongly denied in the Israeli literature. It's a cry to recognize Palestinian rights. A mutual recognition between the two people, Arabs and Israelis, is the only way to make peace in this hot restless part of the world. She implies in several situations that ignorance is the main reason of this animosity. Normal human communication between the two people will lead to better understanding and deep friendships. She quoted many examples where individual relationships developed to the extent where one of the sides is ready to sacrifice his / her personal safety for the sake of the other. As if implying that it's the Israeli political regime that abuses the Palestinians not the normal people?

One would wonder, is this to declare the death of the Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation because it is tailored from above ( the authorities), while the real reconciliation should come from the popular base of the masses! . . . Or aims to beautify this savage in the eyes of her people? . . .Does it hide under these noble feelings a threat and a message to those strugglers to stop their fight? ! ! . . .

#### Notes

- (1) - Amira Hass was born in Jerusalem in 1957, the daughter of European-Jewish refugees, she lives in Ramalla and reports the Gaza Strip and the West Bank for the Hebrew daily Ha'artz. Hass has been nominated for the Robert F. Kennedy Award, for her work in Gaza.
- (2) - *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*, Amira Hass, translated by, Elana Wesley and Maksine Kaufman - Lacusta, Metropolitan Books, New York, 1999
- (3) Oslo Accord: The umbrella term for a series of agreements signed by Israel and the PLO between September 1993 and September 1995, which includes the Declaration of Principles, the Cairo agreement, the Washington agreement, and the Paris Protocol. The accords are so called because early negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis were conducted in Oslo.
- (4) Al-Intifada: The Palestinian popular uprising that began on December 9 1987, in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza strip. The Intifada stopped officially in 1993 when the letters of recognition were exchanged between Israel and PLO. (PLO: Palestinian Liberation Organization founded in Jerusalem in 1964 as a coalition of various Palestinian political factions. The Arab League till 1969 tightly controlled the PLO when the Fatah movement took command of the organization.
- (5) In 1997, 1998, the criminal rates rose, especially serious crime. There have been several unsolved cases of murder and dispute with the Palestinian security forces

that resulted in injury or even death. These have created a sense that the traditional supports, which always provided a feeling of stability are beginning to crumble under the heavy toll of the closures, the political uncertainty, and the public's growing disaffection towards the Palestinian leadership. (The text footnote p: 61).

- (6) Fatah: The largest and most influential Palestinian organization, founded by Yassir Arafat in exile in 1959, Fatah took the position that the liberation of Palestine was primarily a Palestinian concern.
- (7) Hamas: (the Islamic resistance movement): Formed at the beginning of the intifada by Muslim brotherhood leaders. Hamas is the second largest organization in the occupied territories . . .
- (8) PFLP: Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine: A marxist-leninist organization founded in exile in 1967 by George Habash and historically most closely identified with the concept of armed struggle as the means to liberate Palestine.
- (9) Islamic Jihad: A Muslim brotherhood breakaway group formed in the mid-1980's by Fathi Shaqaqi and Abdel-Aziz Oudeh, two refugees from Gaza. The Islamic Jihad advocates an Islamic state in all Palestine.

N B: Most of the information given in these notes are taken from the Glossary of the book, pp: xi - xiii