

A DOCS Rx FOR MIDEAST PEACE

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CAROL TOWARNICKY

A LOT OF people don't want to hear what Dr. Alice Rothchild has to say about what she's seen and heard as she crosses lines between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. So it wasn't unusual when, during a recent reading in the Boston area, an Israeli student walked out.

The young woman returned, still upset. "You know that story about that doctor being beaten, it's not true," she said.

Rothchild gently insisted that her friend, Allam Jarrar, a Palestinian doctor, had been beaten, cursed and humiliated by Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint when he was traveling with Palestinian presidential candidate Mustafa Barghouthi.

The student paused, then said, "It can't have happened. "

It can be hard for some Jews, Israeli and American, to take in the reality that Rothchild, an American Jewish ob-gyn who's worked in clinics in Gaza and the West Bank, is determined to describe: deplorable conditions in the clinics where she's worked with Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and the Palestinian Medical Authority, Jewish settlers throwing rocks and spewing racism, hundreds of checkpoints that constitute "a total disruption of daily life" for Palestinians.

Rothchild thinks she knows why: "If you start admitting that certain things are true, then you have to take responsibility for the fact that they happened," she said. "And then you have to make recompense. To do that requires a certain amount of pain, introspection, remorse that people don't necessarily want to go to. "

Rothchild was here recently to speak to medical students and read from her book, "Broken Promises, Broken Dreams. " I caught up with her at the Big Blue Marble bookstore in Mount Airy.

Much of what Rothchild has to say runs counter to U.S. Jews' love of Israel that rose from the Holocaust and the creation of a Jewish homeland 60 years ago. It also runs counter to the love and pride recorded in a diary Rothchild has of a visit to Israel with her family when she was 14. (She's now 59.) But "unraveling family secrets," as she calls her work, is perfectly in sync with the Jewish value of pursuing justice.

Using her training in listening to patients, Rothchild has seen and felt the fear that's part of everyday life in Israel, fear to do simple things like getting on a bus, fear that comes from not knowing how to recognize a mortal enemy. She watched as a 20-something female Israeli soldier at a checkpoint repeatedly yelled at the 5- and 6-year-old Palestinian children passing through.

The Boston-based doctor believes the brutality in the soldier's face came from the anxiety of wondering if one of the kids was carrying a bomb. But how will the kids remember it?

Rothchild also has seen life from the other side of the maze of checkpoints, bypass roads and the "security barrier. " There are 600 checkpoints in the West Bank, which is the size of Delaware. Each day, thousands face multiple stops where they must produce an ID, be searched and questioned and eventually let through or turned back without explanation.

Sometimes the delays prove fatal: Women at checkpoints have delivered babies who later died. In response, four maternity centers have been set up. They are so crowded that women are released hours after giving birth. With fresh sutures and a new baby, they often have to walk back hundreds of yards through the checkpoints.

In the press buildup to yesterday's "Mideast Peace Conference" in Annapolis, as the expectations were systematically downgraded so that just showing up could be declared a success, there were few hints of the passion and heartbreak, the trauma and resilience on all sides that Rothchild spoke of, and few indications that either side is up to difficult negotiations.

Yet cynicism is a luxury.

"Only privileged people get to say it's hopeless," said Rothchild. "When you're getting up every day, when you can't get to your fields, you can't feed your family or whatever, you have to be fighting this, or else you'll die. "

So Rothchild continues to write and speak and fend off hecklers and hate e-mails. As she wrote in my copy of her book, "Listening is the beginning of peace. "

Praying with the News: May the toys we buy for the holidays be safe for our children, and may the recent recalls impel us to pay more attention to the importance of government inspection and regulations. Amen. *

Carol Towarnicky is a freelance writer who was a long-time member of the Daily News editorial board. E-mail her at

carol.towarnicky@verizon.net