

According to Human Rights Watch, in Kenya women make up eighty percent of the agricultural labor force and provide sixty percent of farm income, yet they own only five percent of the land. For a Kenyan prisoner, a beauty school education may mean survival. Those who receive such opportunities may feel more confident in their abilities to achieve in other arenas, thus Miss Lang'ata's intention to "go to university"—not insignificant, since female enrollment in universities is only thirty percent, according to Akili Dada, a nonprofit organization that supports Kenyan girls and women. In addition, it is well known that the more education a prisoner has, the less likely she is to return to crime.

In Latin America, reporters have said that beauty is a "national obsession." According to *USA Today* writer Toby Muse, in Colombia, "[a]nnual telecasts of the Miss World and Miss Universe competitions draw ratings on par with World Cup soccer matches." Women prisoners in Brazil and Colombia, like those in Kenya, participate in pageants to get time off their sentences, cash awards, or in some cases the chance to go to modeling school.

Rebecca Roth is a US citizen who has been incarcerated since February 2006 in the Puente Grande women's penitentiary in Mexico, where those arrested but not convicted can be held for years. She lives in the same cell with sentenced women. Cockroaches are not uncommon. Almost fifty, Roth came of age when questions about women's roles were freely in the air. She confirms the observation of Susan Dworkin, the author of *Miss America, 1945: Bess Myerson and the Year That Changed Our Lives*, that any beauty pageant has a "dark underbelly." Roth writes in an e-mail, "Even in the slammer women flirt with the male judges in order to gain favor." Contestants, many of whom are over fifty, some of whom cannot read or write and can barely sign their names, "practiced and practiced," says Roth, going over "their promenades, dance routines, and beauty pageant smiles." The women rehearsed musical numbers to "New York, New York," complete with "styrofoam top hats that we painted black with white bands," and to "Brazil." "The 'Brazil' girls were given multicolor tulle carioca skirts that tied on with colored bias tape and felt eye masks that they were told to decorate with sequins," says Roth. (Note that the prisoners were "told" to decorate.) "My moment of truth came where I realized the people in front of me were going to decide if I was queen material based on a dance routine and a walk in my tight blue dress," she says.

Still, she feels it was "absolutely worth it" to take part in Queen of the Prison,

**“Although the clichéd titles and the concepts of women the pageants promote may seem bizarre to those of us on the outside, almost any activity, when you take it behind bars, acquires a new significance.”**

a contest held yearly for prisoners over age 36, because of "the additional liberty from the overcrowded cellblock after 6:00 PM curfew." For their efforts, participants were allowed to stay outside, sometimes until 8:00 or 9:00 pm. To gain any kind of liberty is precious when a life behind bars is defined, as Jean Harris says of her experience in New York's Bedford Hills, as having doors opened for you "ninety times a day." Roth's sister, who has moved to be near her in Mexico, writes that this year, Rebecca found some freedom in sewing and designing costumes for the pageant.

Certainly some pageants exploit far more than they support. Questionable ones include a "voluntary" singing competition in Maricopa County, Arizona. The prison-based *American Idol*-like contest is run by the controversial sheriff Joe Arpaio, also known for forcing male prisoners to wear pink underwear, housing prisoners in tents in the desert, and bringing back chain gangs. A sleazy website called "Iowahawk" posts mug shots of women behind bars and, in a nearly pornographic announcement, encourages readers to vote for their favorite "Hoosgow Honey 2007." These are the kinds of exploitative pageants that led Carol Hanisch and other women's liberationists of the sixties to picket Miss America.

Nevertheless, prison beauty pageants also demonstrate the immense resourcefulness of women who are locked-up, who live day-in and day-out in cramped spaces, far from their children and other loved ones, without much to cheer about in their lives. During the contests, prisoners grab a momentary respite from conditions that range from the austere to the intolerable; they use their creativity and even gain a leg-up upon release. The women, even if not the pageants, broadcast loudly, with style and pizzazz, that beauty does not have to die in prison. ♻

Jean Trounstein who recently co-edited *Why I'm Still Married: Women Write Their Hearts Out on Love, Loss, Sex and Who Does the Dishes* (2006), taught at Framingham Women's Prison in Massachusetts for ten years. She is the author of *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* (2001).

# The Search for Healing

*Broken Promises, Broken Dreams:*

*Stories of Jewish and Palestinian Trauma and Resistance*

By Alice Rothchild

London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007, 280 pp., \$24.95, paperback

*Reviewed by Sherry Gorelick*

**A**lice Rothchild, an assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School, and a contributor to the first, historic edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, has been engaged with women's and girls' health in the US for three decades. In 2004 and 2005, she traveled with medical delegations to Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, meeting with patients, medical staffs, taxi drivers and people "in the street."

*Broken Promises, Broken Dreams* is both the story of her moving personal journey and a shocking medical report. To each of the very diverse people she meets—from the Orthodox-Jewish pulmonologist in

an Israeli hospital who lost one of his four sons to a terrorist bombing, to the Palestinian psychiatrist in Gaza whose ten-year-old son was traumatized by seeing his seven year-old cousin killed by Israeli soldiers, Rothchild gives the depth of her critical empathy, which is informed by her medical and psychological knowledge. She honors the testimony of each human being, while framing it in her own political and historical understanding.

Rothchild begins with her own story. Born in Boston in 1948, and raised to identify strongly with Israel and with the heritage of "all the Jews who... defended the less powerful in the US," she began in the mid-1990s to meet with other Jews in a "Forum





on the Israeli/Palestinian Peace Process." For the first time, she and the other group members heard from Palestinian and Israeli peace activists in the Boston area. Rothchild found that she could relate to the Palestinian stories of displacement, wandering, and world indifference: "these stories sounded...so like the Jewish stories that grounded my identity."

In *Broken Promises*, Rothchild invites her audience to hear, as she did, first-hand accounts of Jews and Palestinians. The book is a welcome addition to writings by Jewish women dealing with

the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (For example, Sherna Berger Gluck's *An American Feminist in Palestine: The Intifada Years* [1994]; Simona Sharoni's, *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* [1995]; and essays in the anthologies, *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*, edited by Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin [2002], and *Wrestling with Zion*, edited by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon [2003]). Rothchild's book is unique because of her

perspective as a physician and her reflections on the latest controversies and developments.

Rothchild demonstrates the clear cost of the occupation to Israelis. The Israeli feminist peace movement has claimed for decades that Israeli women suffer increased domestic abuse, as male soldiers returning from the occupied territories bring the violence home. A neuropsychologist at Haddassah hospital notes that, on the one hand, Israelis develop a "bullet-has-my-name-on-it mentality," leading to reckless behavior and numerous accidents; while on the other, they become hypervigilant and restrict their movements in their efforts to avoid becoming victims. A psychiatrist at a major Orthodox hospital reports increased drug use, family violence, and incest among Israeli young people. Another psychiatrist says that between ages eighteen and 22, when teenagers in other countries are attending school, Israeli youth do their military service—confused adolescents facing moral dilemmas and given arbitrary power in situations without clear rules. Most telling for the Zionist view of Israel as a safe haven for the world's Jews is the fact that, according to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, more Israelis are leaving the country than are arriving.

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman tells Rothchild about

the moment at the beginning of the Second Intifada when ... [we] had to go pick somebody up downtown. We get in the car and [my wife] Paula said "Maybe we shouldn't both go. If something happens and we both get killed, then what will happen to the kids? Maybe just one of us should go..." What does it mean to have that kind of a conversation when you are just going to pick somebody up in an office downtown?

An Israeli medical student notes that,

while Israel is a major military power backed by the world's superpower, individual Israelis feel personally insecure, although they are mostly able to live their daily lives in a predictable fashion. In contrast, Palestinians living under occupation face a total disruption of daily life ... [finding] the checkpoints and the separation wall brutal and humiliating.... Ironically, mental health providers often [say]...that a predominantly young, poor, angry population is at great risk of turning to violent resistance when faced with daily humiliation and restrictions.

The second part of the book begins with a powerful chapter on checkpoints—often the only place where Jews and non-Israeli Palestinians encounter one another. Rothchild notes that restrictions on Palestinian civilian movement began in 1991—that is, nine years before the second Intifada, when they intensified. By 2004, the UN counted over 700 "physical barriers...ranging from highly militarized terminals and guard towers to ...trenches across roads [and]...41 roads where Palestinian travel is restricted or forbidden."

The system of obstacles and controls has profound effects both on the soldiers enforcing it and the Palestinians subjected to it. In the most compelling chapters in the book, Rothchild describes the effect of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian maternal, mental, and children's health. The occupation curtails the ability of doctors and other medical staff to get to hospitals, keeps patients waiting at checkpoints, disrupts a carefully created

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system of medical referral, and substantially impedes medical education.

For example, when ST, a young medical student at Al Quds university returns to East Jerusalem from a clinical rotation in New York City, she discovers that the Israeli separation wall has been built right in front of her house. She attempts to pursue clinical training with an esteemed physician in Nablus in the West Bank, but she is stopped at a checkpoint. So, she says, like the others who are turned away, she finds an alternative:

You would simply rent a donkey along with its owner, load it with your bags, and go up the mountains just in the middle of nowhere in order to make it to Nablus, a long and difficult route. Knowing that at any second soldiers might take notice...and start shooting haphazardly, I decided to take the risk.

Rothchild comments:

I look at ST with her fashionable blond streaked hair and trendy outfit, classy shoes.... I try to imagine her ... sneaking through the mountains with her bags of medical books and sophisticated clothes slung across a plodding grey donkey.

In the West Bank, Rothchild visits the Mythaloon Maternity Home, which reminds her of the free-standing birthing centers of the seventies in the US: "It is clean and cheerful, family-friendly, geared towards extensive patient education." But whereas the US birthing centers came out of the feminist and natural childbirth movements, she says, "[a] very different political reality propelled the need for this center in Palestine." According to the UN Population Fund and the Palestinian Ministry of Health, 68 pregnant women have given birth at Israeli checkpoints since 2000, leading to five maternal deaths. In addition, ten percent of pregnant women spend between two and four hours getting to a hospital; others spend even more time on trips that would normally take fifteen to thirty minutes. Rothchild notes:

The problem is common enough that PMRS [the Palestinian Medical Relief Society], a major NGO providing healthcare in the Occupied Territories, has produced a patient education pamphlet with advice for pregnant women trapped at checkpoints.

To solve the problems of the humiliation and danger of giving birth on the ground, in public, in front of male teenage soldiers, the Mythaloon clinic provides a safe, local, accessible place for low-risk births. In a little over a year, says Dr. Muntaha Hamarsheh, obstetrical gynecologist and director of the clinic, the midwives delivered about 400 babies. They refer high risk, difficult cases to the hospital, although this inevitably exposes the patients to new risks: excluded, as Palestinians from the well-paved roads, their ambulances must travel over bumpy roads gutted by Israeli tanks, and suffer delays at checkpoints.

In the chapter "Visiting Rafah," Rothchild presents the official Israeli Defense Force version of a military operation that included the bulldozing of 1,600 homes; then she presents the conflicting version of Human Rights Watch. She meets an elementary school teacher who lost her home in the demolitions, whose seven children are now exhibiting bedwetting and other post-traumatic stress symptoms. Visiting the demolished

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neighborhood, she weeps as she sees in the rubble

hundreds of lost shoes...a child's doll, bright yellow Lego pieces, ...fractured plates.... I can't imagine a better way to humiliate and enrage an entire generation of Palestinians. ... I cannot fathom how such a military operation makes life safer for Israelis.

Rothchild is a healer, and her last chapter examines possible solutions with a clear diagnostic eye. She is chagrined at the way right-wingers have framed the issues entirely as a public relations problem, as in Republican communications expert Frank Luntz's two reports on preventing world empathy for Palestinians via "Israel marketing." Instead, Rothchild argues, "Jews and their friends in the diaspora need to...honor everyone's humanity, to recognize the traumas that all of the players bring to the table, and to understand the imbalance of power." With an "Israel Lobby... far to the right of the majority of US Jews and Israelis," she asks, do mainstream US Jews really want to be allied with "neo-conservatives, Christian fundamentalists, and right-wing Jewish ideologues?" Rather, she says, US Jews must encourage, rather than suppress, debate about destructive Israeli government policies and the unwavering support they receive from the US government. They can learn from Israeli and Palestinian peace advocates who actively "refuse to be enemies."

Reflecting on the fact that majorities both of Israeli Jews and of Palestinians want a "two-state solution," with Israel and Palestine living peacefully side by side, Rothchild asks a series of questions: Now that the separation wall wraps around individual towns deep within the West Bank—cutting Palestinians off from each other, their land, their water, and Jerusalem, and creating what even Ariel Sharon called separate "cantons"—how is a viable Palestinian state possible? What would have to change? What of Palestinian refugees? What of Hamas? At the risk of reducing Rothchild's thoughtful discussion to a sound-bite, I provide one of her answers:

Because Israeli security is predicated on Palestinian hope and the possibility of justice, ... it is long overdue to ... work forcefully towards ending the occupation. This means truly dismantling Jewish settlements and ending economic restrictions on Palestinians. ...It is time to begin unconditional negotiations with Palestinians, starting by calling Hamas's bluff and offering something substantial in return for recognition of Israel and a cease-fire.

Ultimately, the specifics of her views on these daunting issues are less important than her discerning observations, and the open and intelligent sensibility with which she reports them.

A just and democratic Israel was the dream of Rothchild and the other Jews she interviews; an ordinary, uninterrupted life that of the Palestinians. Both sets of dreams have been almost entirely broken by the occupation and its brutalities.

Yet Rothchild records moments of resilience: some whimsical artwork on the Separation Wall; a wedding party's insistence on getting dressed up even though they know that the soldiers may prevent them from getting to the celebration. Perhaps the most hopeful element of this challenging tale is the deep humanity of the Palestinians and Israelis whom Rothchild meets and to whom she introduces us. 🌍

Sherry Gorelick has studied North American Jews for over three decades. She has published articles on feminist methodology, the history of US Jewish women's participation in peace movements, and the Israeli and Palestinian women's peace movement. Retired from Rutgers University where she taught sociology and women's studies, she is a member of the Women in Black vigil in Union Square, New York City.

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