

FREEDOM AND DESPAIR

Notes from the South Hebron Hills

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Published 2018

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-56651-1 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-56665-8 (paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-56679-5 (e-book)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226566795.001.0001>

Earlier versions of some portions of this book appeared in *Manoa* 20, no. 2 (2008) and in the *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 6, no. 3 (November 2014).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shulman, David Dean, 1949– author.

Title: Freedom and despair : notes from the South Hebron hills / David Shulman.

Description: Chicago ; London : The University of Chicago Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017055604 | ISBN 9780226566511 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780226566658 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780226566795 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Arab-Israeli conflict—1993—Peace. | Peace movements—Israel. | Pacifists—Israel. | Palestinian Arabs—Government policy—Israel. | Palestinian Arabs—Government policy—Moral and ethical aspects. | Ta'ayush (Organization)—Political activity. | West Bank—Social conditions—21st century. | Palestinian Arabs—West Bank—Hebron—Social conditions.

Classification: LCC DS119.76 .S7833 2018 | DDC 956.94/2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017055604>

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ON THE USEFULNESS OF DESPAIR

Only a soul full of despair can ever attain serenity and, to be in despair, you must have loved a good deal and still love the world.

—BLAISE CENDRARS

There is action, and there is thinking about action. The two are sometimes at odds. Acting, doing what one can, the best one can, is (for me) the easy part. It feels good. You are with real people. Often it all takes place outdoors in some ravishing setting rendered less ravishing by human ugliness and cruelty; there is an adversary to be confronted or even, sometimes, with luck, overcome. The simple physical business of moving, walking, climbing a hill, racing to help, your blood flowing faster, your breathing fuller—all this is its own reward. We were not created to be sitting inside in front of a screen. I like the feel of the wind on my skin in the South Hebron hills, the dusty taste of the air, the active business of doing, the intense moral satisfaction of taking a stand, especially when risk is involved.

That's the easy part. The hard part is the nagging sense of futility and despair. I want to explore the meaning of those feelings and of the dilemmas they present to us. I know I'm not the only one to feel, all too often, like I'm battering at windmills.

I've been active in Ta'ayush—Arab-Jewish Partnership—for the last fifteen years. I've been in South Hebron and elsewhere in Palestine probably hundreds of times. From the start, we established a special connection with the shepherds and subsistence farmers of South Hebron. They're a small population, a few thousand, clinging fiercely to the land in the face of immense pressure by a state that seeks to drive them away and by the often violent, and insatiably greedy, Israeli settlers who have been planted in their midst, *on* their lands. We've stood by the South Hebron Palestinians and even helped a little, but it's their astonishing, everyday courage and tenacity that explain why they're still there, against all odds. If you want to read more about the situation in this area and how it evolved, you can find more information in my book *Dark Hope*. There is perhaps something to be said for the fact that we've concentrated our efforts, over years, largely in this one area, although all of us have experience, often extensive, in other parts of the occupied territories. I think the Palestinians' situation in South Hebron, while objectively terrible, is still somewhat better than that of Palestinians in the central and northern West Bank, where there is less of a steady, ongoing presence of Israeli peace activists.

At the beginning, the futility quotient was very low. In fact, we were usually euphoric. Everything was new. It may sound strange, but it's true, nevertheless, that like most Israelis—including those firmly in the peace camp, on the left—I had only the most rudimentary experience of Palestinian life and Palestinian people until 1988–89, when the early dialogue groups sprung up. The first strong tastes came at that time: spending a day in Beit Sahour, south of Jerusalem; eating with our hosts in the village; sometimes sleeping overnight in their homes; seeing the world as they saw it, confronting the sol-

diers and the police together with them. A world opened up for us. All this deepened immeasurably in the early years of the second Intifada, under the emergency conditions that were in force everywhere in the territories. Now there was action of a far more radical kind—pushing our way past the army blockades, facing the violence of the soldiers and the settlers, finding circuitous and ingenious routes to our friends in the villages, marching together, bringing food and medical supplies, breaking down the roadblocks with our bare hands. It was sometimes dangerous, but the rewards were immediate. And there were many of us: the first time I was in South Hebron, in early 2002, I was one of some 250 activists, and large-scale actions like that were more or less the norm. We thought (I'm a little embarrassed to admit this) that we were the catalysts for what would, perhaps, someday become a mass movement for peace.

We were wrong.

We know the reality all too well. We know what we're up against. The vast machinery of the Occupation has proved remarkably resilient so far, certainly capable of containing our acts of solidarity and struggle, both on the ground and in the courts. We haven't given up, we'll never give up, but I, for one, am haunted by those feelings I mentioned.

Let me give you an example. Take, first, the trivial business of getting out of bed before dawn on a winter morning in order to leave for South Hebron. It's very tempting to stay in bed beside my wife, Eileen. And it's not just a matter of what's comfortable; going to South Hebron means I won't see my grandchildren that day, I won't have time to be with Eileen, of course I won't get to everything I need to do for work, and I won't rest, an art I have so far fruitlessly tried to cultivate. I'm not complaining: it's a choice I happily make, in fact I should be in the territories much more often, what am I doing living my life

as if it were really mine when my country and my people are inflicting grievous pain on another people? I know I can never be free in any meaningful way if they are not free. This is the task that has been given me and that I have chosen. If you hear an undertone of guilt, I won't deny it—it's a kind of default, not just for me—but nonetheless I think I can say with confidence that it is not from guilt that I go to South Hebron.

But the real problem with getting out of bed before dawn is the insistent, unnerving inner voice that says: *It's all for nothing. It's anyway a lost cause. We can't make much of a difference. A handful of well-intentioned activists are no match for the malevolent system firmly in place in the territories. A monumental crime is going on, literally hour by hour, and we are not able to stop it. We are banging our heads against a wall. No one even notices what we do. The Israeli public couldn't care less. The international press is generally unaware of or indifferent to our existence. Our victories, such as they are, are minute, our ultimate defeat certain.* And so on. This voice is astonishingly versatile in its range and cleverness. It's much smarter than I am. So why not stay in bed?

But I always go anyway, and I'll tell you why.

First, let me make the context in the field more explicit, because it is there—usually after the “action” is over—that despair sometimes seeps through my defenses. So let us take a real, quite common situation that I have experienced many times. At Umm al-Ara'is, just under the “illegal outpost” of Chavat Yair, there is a fertile wadi—a narrow valley at the base of the hills—whose fields belong (some individually, some collectively) to the extended al-'Awad family. The settlers have stolen them. But since the al-'Awad family has by no means given up on these lands, the Civil Administration has declared the wadi to be “in dispute.” This means, translated into practical terms,

that settlers continue to have open access to the fields, while their true owners are forbidden to come near them. For over five years now, each week the Palestinian owners march down the hill into the fields, together with Ta'ayush and international activists, to publicly demonstrate their claim. Invariably, soldiers are waiting with an order turning the wadi into a Closed Military Zone; they then proceed to chase the Palestinians—men, women, and children—and the other activists out of it, back up the hill. Sometimes they arrest one or two activists (not so long ago they arrested ten, including a child nursing at its mother's breast). The whole process has acquired a ritualistic aspect. We march into the fields, there is the moment of confrontation—sometimes compounded by the infuriating presence of the settlers—we argue, and in the end we follow the Palestinians in retreat. It feels terrible. We have seen, on occasion, even more savage acts by the soldiers. In November 2013 they joined the settlers and policemen in attacking the activists; many children were beaten. Verbal violence—often incredible in its sheer, obstinate inhumanity—is routine.

Let me say it again: I have been driven off many fields in South Hebron by soldiers who are following their orders, and each time this expulsion is like an open wound in the heart. Incidentally, such acts by the soldiers are expressly illegal according to the ruling of the Israel Supreme Court, but in South Hebron the court is a very distant, nebulous entity. There is only one law there: the law of the gun.

For a while, in the spring–summer of 2015, it looked as if the al-'Awad family might win their struggle and recover some large chunk of land. They were allowed to cultivate and harvest one section of the wadi. The Civil Administration even sent the army, after innumerable delays and excuses, to demolish the fifteen or so greenhouses that the settlers had put up

on the stolen land. We thought that we might well be able to halt, at this one tiny point, the remorseless process of expulsion and dispossession that is the norm throughout the territories. We've had many small successes of this sort. So to speak of "futility" is rather out of place. Nonetheless, it *feels* futile. My heart sinks: *Not again*. . . . Despair rises in my stomach, a sick feeling compounded of various elements like rage, disgust, insult, helplessness, and the memories of earlier, familiar traumas. It is not for myself that I feel this despair but for the Palestinians whose pain I have made my own. Sometimes I remind myself at such moments that there is a rational, practical logic that makes it possible, and necessary, for us to undergo this humiliation. It's good to bear it in mind.

In the spring of 2016 the Israeli Supreme Court ruled on this case—or rather, it decided not to rule but to rely on what it called, with touching optimism, the professional judgment of the Civil Administration. This decision not to decide is the equivalent of giving a burglar jurisdiction over a house he has just invaded.

The story of Umm al-Ara'is is not yet over. Sa'id al-'Awad, who has led the campaign there, still hopes that justice will triumph and the land will be restored. It is not impossible that he is right. Still, it is not for pragmatic reasons that I have marched, and will march again, into the wadi at Umm al-Ara'is.

I do it without thinking very much about the results. I do it because—this is what I say to myself in those moments, if I say anything to myself at all—it is the right thing to do, and also the only thing I can do. I do it because it makes me a little freer, makes me feel like a human being. I do it for its own sake. And I want to say something more about the choice to act on moral grounds, as best one can, without romanticizing the choice in any way or turning it into something heroic, which it most

definitely is not. In fact, romanticizing it is the one sure way to undermine it and siphon away its value.

Even to think of this work in terms of measurable results (as I did just a few paragraphs ago) is somehow to distort the impulse. Of course, we're human: how can we *not* occasionally calculate the successes we've had, some of them rather salient, like the return home of the exiled villagers of Bi'r al-'Id on the eastern ridge overlooking the desert and their survival there, with our help, in the face of the usual brutal harassment by soldiers and settlers. There are some things we can be proud of. But the functional side of it all is, in a certain sense, secondary to a deeper motivation, which does not depend on tangible results, certainly not in a short-term perspective.

Wittgenstein famously said something along these lines in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.422: "The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form 'thou shalt . . .' is: And what if I do not do it. But it is clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the ordinary sense. This question as to the consequences of an action must therefore be irrelevant. . . . There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but this must lie in the action itself."

I think when I first read this passage, many years ago, I didn't understand it even on the simplest possible level. There was no way I could have understood it. If I understand it now, it is only because of my own experiences in the South Hebron hills. "The consequences of an action must therefore be irrelevant." The word "therefore" has a little sting, or spin, to it; I like it, not because it suggests a logical deduction (though it does) but because it derives from indubitable experience under conditions of rooted moral ambiguity. When the soldiers threaten me, and I stand up to them, not giving way easily, and even more when they arrest me, I sometimes feel an unexpected

happiness, though that may not be the only thing I'm feeling. Like anyone else, I react badly when my physical freedom is revoked. That was one reason I hated the army. But I, like so many others, have discovered empirically the immense difference between external and internal freedom.

At such moments, one's sense of freedom is so overpowering that it is literally impossible to think about the actual results of the action, and the notion of futility is as remote as the moon. I will have more to say about this later on in this book.

But speaking of the ground for action and the ethics of action, I think it's time to reclaim despair, which is as good a ground as any and better than most. Since the results are not the point, despair has a role to play. One despairs: the wickedness is all too present and effective, we cannot stem the tide with our bodies or our words, we confront a faceless system embodied in the faces of the soldiers and bureaucrats and settlers that we meet on the hills. I recommend despair as a place to start. It is in the nature of acting, of doing the right thing, that despair recedes at least for a moment, and its place is taken by something else: hopeless hope, for example. Those who work these furrows know that hope is not contingent. Sometimes the worse things get, the more hope there is, for hope is an act of the deeper self, or the freer part of the person, what some would call a spiritual act, though "spiritual" is not a word I use. In this sense, hope bears no relation to the superficial, mentalistic mode called optimism.

What about the everyday, all-too-familiar kind of despair that saps our strength and may render us unable to act? There is always good reason to feel despair about oneself. Our self-indulgence, our rationalizations, our compromises, our laziness are usually transparent to the inner eye. How could we not despair? And, at such moments, do we have a choice?

Yes. Good despair starts at this point. Good despair drives me from bed on a Saturday morning. There is a movement in the self that goes beyond reflection. The same place in me that knows that I am free and can taste this freedom at rare moments—and this is our most fundamental knowledge of ourselves—is the place that sees where I could go, if only I stopped hesitating and thinking about futility. One very gently and compassionately puts aside the hesitation, even as the futility chorus begins its crescendo. One may need despair, the good despair, to put hesitation aside. Then, for a few moments, one can act, doubt and all.

As the pre-Islamic poet al-Harith ibn Hilliza said, "Nothing consoles you like despair."¹ Not everything that comes into the mind or heart can be used, but I can use my despair; it is, in fact, more to the point, more to the purpose, than many other inner states. It is a friend if I use it wisely. If I use it at a moment when I feel it most keenly—say, for example, when I have just been driven off a certain Palestinian field for the twentieth time, or when I see the soldiers humiliating the owner of the field and I know I can't stop them, or when the soldiers join in with the settlers in beating us and our friends—if I use my despair well in those moments, not expecting immediate, tangible success in the task at hand, indeed not expecting anything, I am likely to feel a little different: not so alone in the world anymore. The despair itself binds me to the victim, my friend; I take him or her into myself; that may be enough. Their suffering is mine, and neither mine nor theirs is in vain. Despair may also paradoxically bind me at such moments to what remains of the potential decency of the perpetrator, who is betraying his own deeper nature.

Sometimes on those Saturday mornings I say such things to myself as I walk to Gan Hapaamon, where the transit leaves for

South Hebron. It's hopeless, I say, but not in vain. It's not about the result. It's not even about that intoxicating sense of freedom. It's not "about" anything except the intrinsic goodness that sometimes infuses good despair, which transmutes itself into something that cannot be denied. A certain directness and lack of drama are needed for it to work. Despair and delight may thus oddly go hand in hand if the delight does away with our residual self-indulgence, though not, perhaps, with that evergreen voice of doubt.

Perhaps if I didn't despair, I wouldn't keep going down to South Hebron. I'd let others do it for me. The whole point is that the despair is mine, a personal business; thus the act, too, must be mine.