

# Where Politics Are Complex, Simple Joys at the Beach



Rina Castelnuovo for The New York Times

Palestinian women and girls from the West Bank at the beach in Tel Aviv, after a group of Israeli women snuck them into the country for a daylong excursion. [More Photos >](#)

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TEL AVIV — Skittish at first, then wide-eyed with delight, the women and girls entered the sea, smiling, splashing and then joining hands, getting knocked over by the waves, throwing back their heads and ultimately laughing with joy.

Most had never seen the sea before.

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The women were Palestinians from the southern part of the West Bank, which is landlocked, and Israel does not allow them in. They risked criminal prosecution, along with the dozen Israeli women who took them to the beach. And that, in fact, was part of the point: to protest what they and their hosts consider unjust laws.

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In the grinding rut of Israeli-Palestinian relations — no negotiations, mutual recriminations, growing distance and dehumanization — the illicit trip was a rare event that joined the simplest of pleasures with the most complex of politics. It showed why coexistence here is hard, but also why there are, on both sides, people who refuse to give up on it.

“What we are doing here will not change the situation,” said Hanna Rubinstein, who traveled to Tel Aviv from Haifa to take part. “But it is one more activity to

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oppose the occupation. One day in the future, people will ask, like they did of the Germans: 'Did you know?' And I will be able to say, 'I knew. And I acted.' ”

Such visits began a year ago as the idea of one Israeli, and have blossomed into a small, determined movement of civil disobedience.

Ilana Hammerman, a writer, translator and editor, had been spending time in the West Bank learning Arabic when a girl there told her she was desperate to get out, even for a day. Ms. Hammerman, 66, a widow with a grown son, decided to smuggle her to the beach. The resulting trip, described in an article she wrote for the weekend magazine of the newspaper Haaretz, prompted other Israeli women to invite her to speak, and led to the creation of a group they call We Will Not Obey. It also led a right-wing organization to report her to the police, who summoned her for questioning.

In a newspaper advertisement, the group of women declared: “We cannot assent to the legality of the Law of Entry into Israel, which allows every Israeli and every Jew to move freely in all regions between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River while depriving Palestinians of this same right. They are not permitted free movement within the occupied territories nor are they allowed into the towns and cities across the green line, where their families, their nation, and their traditions are deeply rooted.

“They and we, all ordinary citizens, took this step with a clear and resolute mind. In this way we were privileged to experience one of the most beautiful and exciting days of our lives, to meet and befriend our brave Palestinian neighbors, and together with them, to be free women, if only for one day.”

The police have questioned 28 Israeli women; their cases are pending. So far, none of the Palestinian women and girls have been caught or questioned by the police.

The beach trip last week followed a pattern: the Palestinian women went in disguise, which meant removing clothes rather than covering up. They sat in the back seats of Israeli cars driven by middle-aged Jewish women and took off headscarves and long gowns. As the cars drove through an Israeli Army checkpoint, everyone just waved.

Earlier, the Israelis had dropped off toys and equipment at the home of one of the Palestinian women, who is setting up a kindergarten. The Israelis also help the Palestinian women with medical and legal troubles.

Israel's military, which began limiting Palestinian movement into Israel two decades ago to prevent terrorism at a time of violent uprisings, is in charge of issuing permits for Palestinian visits to Israel. About 60,000 will be issued this year, twice the number for 2010 but still a token amount for a population of 2.5 million. Ms. Hammerman views the permits as the paperwork of colonialist bureaucrats — to be resisted, not indulged. Others have attacked her for picking and choosing which laws she will and will not obey.

The Palestinian visitors came with complicated histories. In most of their families the men have been locked up at some point. For example, Manal, who had never been to the sea before, is 36, the mother of three and pregnant; five of her brothers are in Israeli prisons, and another was killed when he entered a settler religious academy armed with a knife.

She brought with her an unsurprising stridency. “This is all ours,” she said in Tel Aviv. She did not go home a Zionist, but in the course of the day her views seemed to grow more textured — or less certain — as she found comfort in the company of Israeli women who said that they, too, had a home on this land.

Another visitor lives in a refugee camp with her husband and children. Her husband’s family does not approve of her visits (“ ‘How can you be with the Jews?’ they ask me. ‘Are you a collaborator?’ ”) but she did not hide the relief she felt at leaving her overcrowded camp for a day of friends and fun.

The beach trips — seven so far — have produced some tense moments. An effort to generate interest in a university library fell flat. An invitation to spend the night met with rejection by Palestinian husbands and fathers. Home-cooked Israeli food did not make a big impression. And at a predominantly Jewish beach, a policeman made everyone nervous.

So, on this latest visit, the selected beach was one in Jaffa that is frequented by Israeli Arabs. Nobody noticed the visitors.

Dinner was a surprise. Hagit Aharoni, a psychotherapist and the wife of the celebrity chef Yisrael Aharoni, is a member of the organizing group, so the beachgoers dined on the roof of the Aharonis’ home, five floors above stylish Rothschild Boulevard, where hundreds of tents are currently pitched by Israelis angry with the high cost of housing. The guests loved Mr. Aharoni’s cooking. They lighted cigarettes — something they cannot do in public at home — and put on joyous Palestinian music. As the pink sun set over the Mediterranean, they danced with their Israeli friends.

Ms. Aharoni was asked her thoughts. She replied: “For 44 years, we have occupied another country. I am 53, which means most of my life I have been an occupier. I don’t want to be an occupier. I am engaged in an illegal act of disobedience. I am not Rosa Parks, but I admire her, because she had the courage to break a law that was not right.”

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