

## **Days of Ansar 3:**

### **A Pulsing Thorn in My Heart**

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**M**an is great because he can break the limits of time and place. Did anyone else say that before you? Before me? Man can break the limits of pain and make life out of pain. If he fails in doing that, the limits will become narrower every day. The walls of prisons and jails and detention camps are one. The most hostile limits to man since the time of them being invented. Invented? No, invention is a nice word. Since they were introduced, since they were put in the face of innocent man. These walls are sometimes seen as the most fragile to you, and the most strong and isolating at other times. When your homeland becomes a neighborhood of prisons, the walls may swallow your spirit like a tiny monster or they are demolished by your waves of smiles and thoughts as you sit on your bed in a certain cell in a certain jail. Man is great because he can break the limits of time and place.

Days in Ansar 3 were like being in front of a huge monster that opened its wide mouth to take us to the lands of death in life, to the lands of hatred, and to the lands of revenge. It can take you to the green grazing fields where the sheep triumph over the fear of the wolf. Those who broke the unseen walls of Ansar 3 were great, as they could keep the seed of life alive inside of them. On both sides of the walls there were fists that bang the wall. Palestinians from the inside, and from outside there were Israelis who realized that they can't be free while their government is occupying other people in their name. They kept the seed of life alive as they broke the walls towards the promising lands of peace. They are still struggling to break the walls that are used to try to block the road to peace. They are still hammering the walls when they meet in a dialogue that explores ways of transforming pain into a constructive energy to defend peace offended by the Israeli policies of building settlements on the Palestinian lands, and when they march together under the slogans of peace.

This job of using your inside energy to break a wall while you are behind walls and bars is not an easy one. It's painful and joyful when you look upon it through your eye as an experience that passed, and when you look at it through the eyes of your friends who are still behind bars. The days and nights of Ansar 3 can look as rosy as the baby rose bathing in the dew of an early summer dawn. Those very days and nights can become, in the

blink of an eye, as thorny as the prickly cactus you fell into when you were a six-year-old jumping kid.

Whether these days and nights are like a thorny rose or a rosy thorn, they are your days and nights. Write them! Write them for the sake of the pain and joy.

When I attempt to write about my days in Ansar 3, I find that I am unable to find a means of expression which does justice to the experience. Also, I am not a good documentary writer, and the literary style, which forces itself on me even when I want to document, is inappropriate. What can you do when many people tell you they want to read an account of those days at Ansar 3 in the Negev? The easiest way is to talk, and to leave it to someone else to write the things down, and phrase them in the style that he desires. But this is the way of evading responsibility. You yourself must write something about those days. Therefore, write the outline for your upcoming composition. Write it in terse prose, write about the peaks of your experience, and leave the dark details to the future. It may be that there is someone who does not agree with you regarding the designation of a specific peak or of several peaks. It doesn't matter, because differences of opinion are legitimate and they will enrich your future composition.

### **THE ROAD TO ANSAR 3**

The path I took the first time from Jeneid Prison near Nablus to the Negev, and which was, in a sense, the writing on the wall, cannot be erased from memory. In those same moments in the morning hours which I love, I reflected on the visit that was supposed to take place the following day. I thought about my son who had been born just a few days before, and whom I would see tomorrow for the first time. The officer entered with a few guards and they began calling off a list of names. We understood the matter: we were to be transferred to the Negev. The soldiers on guard wanted us to pay careful attention: before leaving the internal prison gate, they instructed us to cover our eyes with a strip of cloth from our clothing, and they checked that the cover was tight and that no light seeped through. The buses remained in the prison courtyard from 11:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., with us inside them, blindfolded and tied two-by-two. When we would ask them to decrease the pressure of the metal handcuffs, one of the soldiers would answer with a curse or a string of curses, strike the iron part of the

seats with his club in order to instill fear, or strike the nearest prisoner. Five hours in a tin box, in the August heat, when you are tied and blindfolded, is not something which can be forgotten. An additional picture is etched in my mind: shouts were heard from the second bus. I lifted my blindfold very slightly and looked out the window: a soldier bearing a club burst into the bus as if he were storming a military stronghold. Another soldier kicked Jamal, who was seated on the ground in the scorching sun, with his eyes tied. Things one sees in a stolen glance are etched in the mind, just as a photographed picture is etched in the camera's sensitive film.

The buses set out on their way and the heat became less unbearable. Many details on the way earned a place in my memory. The journey was torture. My neighbors and I spoke among ourselves as blind people. It was then I understood why blind people speak to one another without moving their heads. One of the soldiers caught us whispering and suddenly thrust his hand on my neighbor's neck. The worst, most painful blows are those which you receive when you are blind. Abu Hussein, who suffers from diabetes, began to plead that they allow him to urinate. He explained to the soldiers that he had diabetes and had to urinate immediately. His bladder might burst; he was likely to urinate in his pants. He spoke in Hebrew and the soldiers understood him well. One of the soldiers began mocking him, saying he was acting like a child. After over two hours, the bus stopped at a gas station, one of the soldiers brought him to the bathroom, and remained by his side to urge him to hurry. He was not able to urinate, apparently for psychological reasons. He returned to the bus, writhing in pain, and thus remained until the end of the journey.

When the buses stopped we waited for a long time until they removed our blindfolds. We felt that an eternity passed between the stopping of buses and the removal of our blindfolds. Suddenly we saw Ansar 3, Ketziot, the desert detention camp in the Negev... tents extending out into the distance, spot-lights, people moving behind the barbed wire fences, voices calling out, asking us who we were, from where did we come...the people finally descended from the buses, and at long last I was allowed to free my hand from the accursed chains. My hand had fallen asleep, the skin was a blue color, and handcuff marks looked like burns. The laceration and the handcuff marks on my hands remained for several days. They placed us in a large square where many armed soldiers equipped with gas masks were circulating. Every soldier was more than ready to give orders, yell, and

curse. They commenced the procedures for inducting us into the prison. All of the possessions we brought from Jeneid were taken from us, and we each received four blankets. We were not permitted to exchange anything. Half a blanket is a whole blanket if the officer says so, and you have to keep quiet. The clothes are large or small, they fit you or they don't, torn or whole, clean or covered with dust and the sweat of the person who wore them before you. These are the things about which it is forbidden to argue. Many preferred not to argue in order to speed up the moment of entrance to the tents and to see those who had arrived before us.

At 3:00 a.m. we entered our section of the camp. Most of the prisoners in the wing woke up, and we spoke with them a bit. We each received a sponge sheet, which with extreme exaggeration could be called a mattress. We laid the mattress on a *dargash*, curled up in the blankets, and sank into a deep sleep. The absence of a pillow delayed my falling asleep. The Israelis can be proud that the Hebrew word *dargash* (a low platform for sleeping) has become a daily word, just as the Palestinians can take pride that the word "Intifada" has entered many languages, and one English dictionary has included it among its entries. The voice of the *shawish* (*Shawish* is the detainees representative to contact the camp's administration) tore me from the depths of my sleep: "Count-off, men!" We went out to the square, and the "*shawish*" explained to us how the counting was to proceed: you sit in rows with your hands behind your back. He added that within a day or two the (court) battle against this policy of humiliation was to begin, but that Ansar 3, which had two weeks previously sacrificed two martyrs, would never accept this.

The stranger the clothes you wear, the less you realize your tragicomic appearance. The shirt's buttons are torn off, and the pants are a fist's-width wider than your waist, and therefore you connect two belt loops from the right side, and two from the left, by means of a wire or rope, because a belt is a dangerous item and it is forbidden to bring one into the detention camp. On this minor point, the mentality of the occupation and the prisons is revealed in all its stupidity. The instructions say that bringing belts into the camp is forbidden due to a fear that the prisoners may use them to commit suicide, and this in a place where there are many ropes and thousands of other ways to commit suicide, if someone only wanted to commit suicide. The point is that these clothes do not change you in your own eyes, but when you see them on someone whom you knew outside of the detention

camp, you grasp why they take a person's clean and neat clothes, which suit him, and give him these rags in their place, which are called, generously, clothes. They want everything around you to cause abasement and misery and will search for every way, large and small, to bring you to live in an emotionally difficult situation. But they do not know that a person who knows for what he is struggling is able to knock an opening in any steel wall so that the light will pass through.

### **OFFICERS**

Life in a detention camp, and transfer between two camps, enables you to see many types of soldiers and officers. At one extreme, there is the officer who always behaves, sometimes with reason and sometimes without, in a way that convinces you without doubt that there is no human dimension to his personality. You cannot imagine, not even in an instant of humane thinking, that he is son to a father and mother, or that he is the father of a boy or girl, or that he was once a child in grade school full of innocents, jumping and playing. You cannot imagine him as anything but a murderer who will take any opportunity to kill, and if he does not have an opportunity to kill in actuality, for reasons beyond his control, he releases his animosity and hatred in every possible manner. At the other extreme there is the officer who says to you: "I want to pass my period of military service with the absolute possible minimum of problems. It was not I who brought you here. I do not know why they brought you, and my job is to fulfill my duty according to the law." Then there is another type, of whom I met only one. In order not to do him injustice, my human responsibility obligates me to mention him, despite the fact that he is an exception. This is the type who is interested in hearing your story, and is very astonished when the details of "administrative detention" are made known to him, and he declares before you in all honesty, "I know that this is evil, but I don't have the courage to refuse to serve".

### **THE FAREWELL INSULT**

The day of release, the day of freedom, the day of joy, the day of meeting your loved ones after the separation. We thanked God that they moved us out of our section early. That meant that we'd get home early, and wouldn't have

to stop over and lose another night in Dhahriyya Village or in Hebron. That is what happens to those who get out later in the day: they find themselves in the evening hours at Arad junction without any way of getting home. Things went smoothly. They carefully checked our bags, confirmed the discharge date, returned our possessions which had been deposited since we came into the camp, and everything was ready. At 1:00 p.m. we got on the bus, and the officer responsible for our bags and deposits told the bus driver that everything was ready and that he could set out.

The period of waiting dragged on. At 2:00 we asked one of the soldiers when the bus was leaving. He was kindhearted, and went and asked the driver. The driver turned to a young officer and spoke with him, and then the officer came to the bus and began shouting, "Who asked when the bus was leaving? I am the one who decides when the bus leaves. Whoever opens his mouth will have his head opened. Is there anyone here who is asking about the bus?"

He ordered, with gestures and in easy Hebrew, to take the number of one of the prisoners, and to go check if his administrative detention had been renewed. We were worried, and our hearts were with our friend. We were almost positive that the matter was staged, and that the officer did not have the authority to carry it out, but we still felt for our friend, because there is nothing more difficult than the extension of your detention when you are just a step away from freedom. Extension of detention is difficult in general, but this is the most difficult type. Apparently the officer was aware of this, and therefore decided to part from us in this way. The officer exited with his sunglasses, hatred on his face, and the bus left at 4:30. Another day lost, far from our families.

## **THE BUSH**

When we entered Ansar 3 the water problem was the worst problem of daily life. A large water truck would fill up black plastic tanks, and every two of those would supply water to one of the spigots in the section. We spent most of the afternoon hours in thirst. Despite this, we longed for the color green, the color of life. Some people took initiative and cultivated small plots of land in the back entrances to the tents. The plots were sometimes as small as a chessboard, planted with lentil, hummous (chickpeas) or fowl (broad beans), which they got from the kitchen. I heard that in Section 7

they planted watermelon seeds, and they germinated and gave fruit which got bigger and bigger, but before the date of harvest, the residents of the section were transferred to a new section. When I saw the vegetable plots in the neighboring wing I became filled with the intoxication of victory. Ansar 3 did not succeed in the mission for which it was created. It did not kill the seed of life, and the love of life. I was reminded of the houses in the refugee camps. What tugged at my heart strings the most was that despite the narrow dimensions of the tiny front yards, their owners found enough room to plant a grape vine that would creep and fill the space with green.

Apparently, one of the officers discovered the secret. When he passed near the barbed wire fence which surrounded the section he noticed a small bush climbing along the tent rope. He approached the gate, called to the *shawish*, and demanded that he uproot the bush. The *shawish* argued and staunchly defended the bush. In the end, the officer stood his ground, but the *shawish* for our wing refused to do it. During the count, the officer entered with soldiers armed with gas, behind whom were soldiers with rifles, and behind them a tracked military vehicle mounted with an automatic rifle. But the officer and the soldiers did not leave after the count was completed. The officer turned to face the row of tents, and after some time returned, carrying the uprooted bush. The prisoners rose on their feet, but I remained sitting in the local courtyard, in my numbered spot. I thought of the Russian novel *Rainbow in a Cloud* which I had read during my previous prison term in Jeneid, and the description of an officer of the occupation, holding a newborn infant by his legs, shooting him in the head before the eyes of his imprisoned mother who had given birth to him the previous night.

### **THE TEACHER!**

I was transferred from Ansar 3 to Dhahriyya. I remained there for six days, without knowing the reason for my transfer, and then I understood that I had been transferred so that I could meet an American professor who had been sent by the American Physical Society (APS) to investigate the complaint I had submitted on being beaten relentlessly for an hour and a half in a barrage of immeasurably painful blows at the checkpoint between Tulkarm and Nablus. I thought to myself: Great, either they don't want my American colleague to see the Negev, or they don't want to trouble him with the journey to the Negev. Following the visit, I was not immediately

returned to the Negev. Instead, I was transferred to ‘Anatot, from ‘Anatot to al-Fara’h, from al-Far’ah to ‘Anatot, and from there to the Negev. When I arrived at al-Far’ah, I hoped that the chain of transfers would continue, and would include Meggido as well, so that I’d be able to see my brother who was imprisoned there.

On the way from ‘Anatot to al-Far’ah we were blindfolded. We were quiet until we had fully left the ‘Anatot camp, since the security procedures in each place required that the prisoners keep silent when entering and exiting the camp. We remained blindfolded a long time, and then we told the soldiers that we had come from the Negev to Dhahriyya, and from Dhahriyya to ‘Anatot, without blindfolds. Therefore, why should we be blindfolded now? An officer spoke with us. We didn’t manage to communicate with him in Hebrew or Arabic, although our Hebrew vocabulary was far more extensive than his Arabic vocabulary. I spoke with him in English and tried to appeal to reason, but he held his ground: “That’s how I want it, so shut up”. During the exchange, one of the prisoners told him that I was a university lecturer, so he turned to me and said, “Professor, if you explained something twice to one of your students, and he didn’t understand you, wouldn’t you call him an ass?” I really wanted to see the face of this man who thought himself a professor, and us his pupils who must understand the first time around — who thought that by virtue of the rank on his shoulder he could do whatever he wanted, and if we didn’t cooperate we were asses. Someone suggested that we all remove our blindfolds together, and that they could do to us as they pleased. We made our intentions known to one of the soldiers, from whose voice we discerned that he was more easygoing than the others, and he apparently transmitted our plan to the officer. Because of this he came and began to discuss the blindfolds with us. His condition was that we sit silently on the bus. They removed the blindfolds, and I recognized the one who had seen himself as my teacher and me as his prize student. He had a child’s face, and the beard growing on his face was nothing but yellow peach fuzz.

### **DOCTORS AND MEDICAL CARE: YOU WON’T DIE TONIGHT**

Since the time I met him in that tent I can still see the pain in his eyes. Perhaps his eyes had become smaller due to all the pain he had suffered. When his ulcer bothered him, he would sit on his mattress wrapped in



blankets and smoke, despite the fact that smoking exacerbated the problem. I asked him why he didn't go to the doctor. He said that it wouldn't help since at best, the doctor would give him a pill or two and advise him what to eat and what not to eat, as though he were residing in a hotel. The problem of eating proper food and avoiding harmful food is a painful problem when brought up by a doctor on reserve duty who comes to the prison for a month and then leaves. He wants to get that month's service over with in whatever way he can and get away from this desert. There is another reason which prevents Ali from going to the doctor and preferring to wait for medication sent by his family through a lawyer even though he may have to wait a long time (first, the Red Cross transmits a letter from Ali to his family). The family then gives the medicine to the lawyer, who waits his turn for a visit. When the visit takes place he gives the medicine to the administration of the camp, which passes it on to the clinic when someone remembers to do so. The clinic then passes the medicine on to the prisoner.) Ali told me this additional reason when his eyes were almost bursting from a combination of pain and controlled hatred. One night he had a terrible attack of pain. He tried to control himself but the pain was very strong and he felt as if knives were cutting his stomach. His friends in the tent went to the *shawish* and woke him up. The *shawish* went to the guard at the gate, the guard spoke with the officer, and the officer decided to send him to the clinic. Two of the prisoners laid him out on a platform and took him to the clinic. After they waited for a while the doctor came out rubbing his eyes. Apparently they had woken him up from a deep sleep. He approached the platform, and without even bending down to see the patient, asked him, "Does your stomach hurt very much?" Ali said yes and the doctor said, "You won't die tonight. Come back tomorrow morning". After that he told the guards to return Ali to his section.

### **SHUT UP!**

At the time of the routine examination (when I first came to the camp), I asked the doctor for a salve for hemorrhoids. He said that I had to request to see him after I was already in the camp. The Dhahriyya prison is Ansar 3's twin brother. Both were established at the same time and the same stories can be told about them. On the first day the nurse practitioner (medic) didn't arrive. The second day I signed up, but they didn't see me. On the third or

fourth day (I don't remember anymore), I went with other prisoners to the clinic. There were about ten of us. We stood in a line in front of the clinic. We were sick and supposed to receive treatment. A soldier came and told us to stand up and keep quite, not to sit down on the ground, and to face the wall. He cursed and hit the iron bars on one of the doors with his club. We waited for a long time and no one called us. After about an hour the door opened and the doctor came out. I stole a glance at him: he was a strange looking man, with his shirt hanging out of his pants, and his hair down to his shoulders, he reminded me of a hippie from the 1960's or the early 70's. He began to call us one by one. Each one went in and came out after a few minutes. I waited impatiently for my turn to go in and rid my body of the stiffness accumulated from standing up facing the wall. I went in and explained my ailment to him. He said that the medication I needed was not available then and that they would send it to me when it arrived. I went out hoping to return to my tent and was surprised to see that those who were ahead of me were standing facing another wall. The soldier placed me alongside of the others. When there were five of us I heard the doctor out in the yard joking with a woman soldier. We started to get annoyed and asked when we would be freed from standing in such a stiff position. This was punishment, not treatment. An officer came and threatened and warned us that he didn't want to hear us again. One of us asked when we would return and the officer screamed that he was the officer here and he would decide when we would return. The doctor, who was strolling through the yard approached us. It looked like he was resting and loosening his muscles after having worked very hard examining the five of us. I thought of raising the matter with him. I didn't think that a doctor would agree that his patients should receive this kind of treatment.

I called to him. "Doctor!" His answer was short and to the point, "Shut up!". I regretted that in my naivete I had deceived myself into thinking that I would get a kind response from a cruel person.

## **MOHAMMED**

Mohammed raised his medical problem with the Red Cross doctor who visits us in the prison camp and takes complaints, though she has no authority to do anything about the treatment of the patients. I acted as interpreter. I understood that sometimes air from his lungs escapes into his chest and

causes him pain. He had undergone surgery prior to his arrest and was supposed to be under medical supervision. Perhaps he would need another operation. He had explained his condition to the camp doctor some times ago and the doctor had promised to send him to the hospital to be examined by a specialist and to undergo the necessary examination. Mohammed was subsequently transferred to a different section of the prison camp. About a month later, I was transferred to the same section. I asked about him. His friends told me that he had been sent to the hospital. I was happy for him, but my happiness evaporated when he came back and told me what had happened to him.

He had been taken to a hospital in an army ambulance under the guard of two military policemen. All the way they cursed him. He understands Hebrew. I don't remember whether they told him in the hospital that he had come to the clinic by mistake and that he had to go to another ward, or whether they scheduled an operation. I sometimes confuse his story with that of Sami. In short, he returned without being treated. On the way back, the guard's cursing turned into slapping his face while his hands were tied. One of the guards said to him, "Why do they send you for treatment? Someone like you deserves only to die: I feel like killing you". When Mohammed returned to the camp he asked to submit a complaint. An officer came to him, heard his complaint, recorded it, and left.

We were released on the same day. We left the prison camp without his getting to the hospital and with out ever knowing the outcome of his complaint.

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