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The Punishment of Gaza

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AN IMPASSIONED ACCOUNT

The Punishment of Gaza, by Gideon Levy. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2010. xii +145 pages. \$15.95 paper.

Reviewed by Edward Sayre

When I last had the chance to visit Gaza, I was foolishly caught in one of the periodic waves of optimism that inflict some students of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It was early in 2006 and I made plans to visit the West Bank and Gaza later that summer. As it turned out, my timing was as bad as my hopes had been foolish. I arrived just days after the siege of Gaza began, cutting off Gaza from the world—the beginning of what Gideon Levy aptly calls “the punishment of Gaza.” In Levy’s account, the beginning of the siege started with the mythical de-occupation of Gaza in 2005. Instead of being the end of the occupation, the removal of settlers from Gaza led to a different phase of the occupation. Instead of being an occupation from within, it became an occupation from without. Levy never believed that the occupation ended, since he, as a clear-eyed correspondent for *Ha’Aretz*, had seen too many false promises.

Levy takes the reader to the period from 2006 to 2009 to reflect on the events that culminated in Operation Cast Lead, during which over 1,300 Palestinians in Gaza were killed by Israeli forces during the winter of 2008/09. While it is impossible to say exactly what the motivation for this war on Gaza was (Bring an end to Qassam attacks? Weaken support for Hamas?), the reason for Israel’s timing is all too clear. Israel had just lost its “best friend,” U.S. president George W. Bush and the man replacing him in the White House, President Barack Obama, was not likely to accommodate Israel’s every demand. In the chapter entitled “Obama Should Not Be Israel’s Friend,” Levy defines what “friendship” means in this context: “When we say that someone is a ‘friend of Israel,’ we mean a friend of the occupation” (p. 72). So while the world’s attention was turned toward the inauguration of the first black U.S. president, Israel took its opportunity to punish Gaza.

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Levy describes in painful detail what this punishment entailed, providing a day-by-day account of the horrors of Operation Cast Lead. Levy’s voice is that of the passionate critic horrified by the atrocities being committed by his own country. Through articulate accounts of the raw data that depict the sheer volume of the carnage, Levy leaves the reader gasping. But because numbers never tell the full story, Levy’s most powerful chapters are those that give accounts of individual loss and suffering: the stories of children left without fathers, of the husband who lost his newly wedded wife, of the family that saw siblings killed in separate attacks. Through first-hand interviews and the incisive pen of the author, the reader is left nearly as grief-ridden as the author is by the horrors of war.

Levy’s tone throughout is powerful, thoughtful, and confidential. It reads much like a diary, with each entry dated and the chapters arranged chronologically. Since the chapters are taken from his *Ha’Aretz* column “The Twilight Zone,” this is the logical arrangement. However, this style also helps tell the story of the pain that was suffered by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank as it unfolded in front of Levy’s eyes.

The most passionate chapters are those targeting Israeli public figures. Politicians (all the major parties were complicit in the war), jurists who did not condemn the actions, and artists who promoted Israeli war propaganda all receive equal condemnation. While the empathy that Levy feels for those in Gaza is real, he also expresses frustration and sadness for what the war has done to Israel and Israelis. In his concluding chapter, “Another Wonderful Summer,” Levy details how the separation wall and the disproportionate loss experienced by Palestinians have affected the Israeli people. Essentially, the occupation has become a non-issue for most Israelis. He concludes, “The Israelis don’t pay any price for the injustice of the occupation, so the occupation will never end” (p. 145).

This last message may be the most important. As long as the world continues to let Israel commit atrocities without any political or economic repercussions, we are all complicit. The Palestinians have been silenced through the siege and the wall, but what is keeping everyone else quiet?