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Living with Integrity: Ethical Engagements in Israel/Palestine 2016 MES Student Paper Award Winner

Valerie Giesen

"As you know, the army and all the system are for the settlers and the soldiers and all this. So, trying to be violent in our situation as we are now is helpless, is senseless. We cannot do anything. We can just *watch* and tell them: 'We are against you. What you are doing, you are not doing in my name. And if you think you defend me, it's not *true!* Because of your activity you risk *me*—and my future.' But we cannot do much and, in fact, we do not make any, any change."

(Hagar, interviewed by author, 20.8.2013, West Jerusalem)

I meet Hagar, an energetic woman in her 60s, over coffee in a Jerusalemite suburb. Throughout our conversation about Machsom Watch, a group of Israeli women who protest Israel's 1967 Occupation at the military checkpoints (*machsomim*) of the West Bank, Hagar dismisses my questions about the group's positive impact. In some ways, she says, the group is even contributing to the smooth administration of the checkpoints. When I ask why, she volunteers with the group every week, she is adamant that she must continue: "No, no. I want to spread out the word! I want to tell the whole world: 'Look! It's a crime! And it's happening every day, every day, every day.' Unfortunately, nobody wants to hear it. But we still go." Like Hagar, none of my interviewees hoped that their protest could destabilize the Occupation. Nonetheless, since 2001, [Machsom Watchers can be found at most permanent checkpoints](#) in the West Bank on a daily basis.

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So why do people continue to protest, even when their actions fail to weaken the sources of injustice and may even implicate them in the status quo? How is avowedly *political* practice sustained when activists are aware of their own inefficacy?

I came to Machsom Watch with questions about political tactics, state power, and resistance. However, each of my fifteen interviews with long-time members was derailed right at the beginning, as Machsom Watchers spelled out to me that they were not politically effective. Many pointed out that the group's presence as critical observers at Israeli Defence Force (IDF) checkpoints might be mistaken for the army's willingness to allow human rights observation of their work. Moreover, the IDF seizes opportunities to demonstrate its minimal (or proportionate) the use of force ([Kotef, 2011, 553](#)). It has even come to treat Machsom Watchers as "enabling critics" ([Weizman, 2011, 117](#)) and individual members lobby high-ranking military officials for changes in the administration of the checkpoints, such as lowering the age limit for Palestinians allowed to travel to Jerusalem to pray during Ramadan.

So why do people continue to protest, even when their actions fail to weaken the sources of injustice and may even implicate them in the status quo? How is avowedly *political* practice sustained when activists are aware of their own inefficacy? In the paper, I argue that members' political activity is integral to how they evaluate their lives as ethical subjects. With reference to my interviewees' high moral standards and determination to live with integrity, I argue that political protest is conceived as an opportunity to bring one's conduct in line with an abstract conception of virtue. However, Machsom Watchers' activity at the Israeli military checkpoints is always potentially contradictory, both morally and politically. It is near impossible for Machsom Watchers to *be good* at the checkpoints, according to their own sense of moral virtue.

Machsom Watchers experience tensions that resemble those experienced by professional humanitarian and human rights workers. Ethnographic studies of professional humanitarianism have traced the tensions inherent to the humanitarian claim that "to do something (however limited that

something might be) is better than doing nothing in the face of war, suffering, and human misery” (Feldman 2007, 694). Humanitarian workers have long recognized that this may implicate them in the forces that cause human suffering, as their assistance is often dependent on cooperation with the powers that be (Givoni 2011; Redfield 2005; Terry 2002). Machsom Watch shares this uneasy relationship to the political force field and members are aware that their ad hoc support of individual Palestinians in overcoming the Occupation bureaucracy implicates them in its smooth functioning. Just as humanitarian professionals worry that their work may prolong political crises (Redfield 2005), proponents of doing what is possible within the group remain uncomfortable about the political consequences of their choices.

Nevertheless, I suggest treating Machsom Watchers’ checkpoint shifts as an ethical technique. Its precariousness—Machsom Watchers’ actions may end up contradicting the virtues they aspire to—distinguishes it from prior analyses of ethical self-fashioning as bodily learning which enables virtuous conduct (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006). Machsom Watchers’ ethical work on themselves puts their pursuit of virtue at peril, as there is no form of conduct that can be learned to solve the tensions inherent in their presence at the checkpoints. In contrast to prior work on ethical practice in impossible situations, I place the precarity of Machsom Watchers’ practice at the heart of their formation as ethical subjects. I suggest that their longstanding experience sediments a visceral knowledge of the checkpoints’ daily reality in a way that unsettles their moral sense of self. Members return to the checkpoints over years and their efforts to *see* the Occupation are constitutive of the urge to return and ultimately renew their struggle for virtuous action. In a sense, it is members’ visceral awareness of the gap between their moral standards and the reality of the Occupation that renews the desire to do something.

Thus, the impossibility of ethical life in the context of the Occupation sustains members’ commitment to doing all they can, namely returning to the checkpoints to witness and report. It is in fact the very precarity of Machsom Watchers’ ethical practice that has contributed to sustaining my interviewees’ activism for over ten years.

Valerie Giesen recently completed her MA in Sociocultural Anthropology from Columbia University on humanitarian technology in the context of refugee aid in Jordan. She has done research in

Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan, and has worked on migrant/refugees’ rights in the UK and Germany. She currently works for the ICRC.