

**It's Easier to Reach Heaven than the End
of the Street: A Jerusalem Memoir**

Emma Williams

Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2010. 415 pages.

Emma Williams is a British doctor who studied history at Oxford and medicine at London. This book, which was first published in Britain in 2006, records her experiences and assessments of what she saw when she

accompanied her husband, a senior UN official, to Israel during 2000-03. The family lived in Jerusalem's "Forest of Peace," an area south of the old city, which remained undeveloped because it had been no man's land patrolled by the UN between 1948 and 1967. Emma and her husband went with three children and had a fourth, born out of choice in a Palestinian hospital in Bethlehem, while they were there. Her husband spent much of his time in Gaza; Emma worked in Jerusalem and, when possible, in the West Bank.

The outcome is a harrowing presentation of the actions and attitudes of "two extraordinary peoples." We are told of the fear generated by suicide bombers – the head of one landed in the playground of the school attended by Emma's children as the school day began; the regular deaths of Palestinian civilians at the hands of the Israel Defence Force, "the purest army in the world"; the "silent war," the relentless theft by one means or another of Palestinian land; the sickening problem, from Emma's point of view, of Israeli self-deception; the open talk of "transfer," a.k.a. ethnic cleansing as a solution to Israel's Palestinian problem; how western journalists find their reports censored by editors intimidated by Israel's attack machine; the oppression and misery heaped upon the Palestinians at the checkpoints throughout their territories, where teenaged Israeli soldiers wield absolute power; the wall, or "barrier" as it is supposed to be called, illegal under international law, which wends its ways through the West Bank, annexing further Palestinian territory to Israel and thereby dividing community from community and farmers from their fields; the settlements on the West Bank, also illegal under international law, which not only rob the Palestinians of further land but also often prevent them from working what remains; the breathtaking injustices piled upon the Palestinians; the Palestinian quality of *sumud*, of remaining steadfast in the face of all difficulty; and the double standards of the United States and, indeed, of most western countries in dealing with the two sides.

Emma Williams allows us to hear many voices: Palestinian doctors, Israeli politicians, mothers of all kinds who join the school run, children who are responding to "the situation" as they grow up, Israeli settlers who believe that God has given them all of the land, and Israeli activists who take their lives in their hands to protect Palestinian farmers from Israeli settlers. She quotes several powerful statements from leading Israelis concerned at how far Israel had gone down the wrong track. Take this from a member of the Knesset:

Israel – the government – is not yet willing to recognize that the Palestinians are here to stay... It's carrying out a policy of ethnic cleansing, and is unwilling to look within, to realize there is a problem inside Israeli society. As long as the US supports this, it is, ironically, giving support for the destruction of Israel – and the Israel Lobby is certainly not to the benefit of Israel. The Palestinians gave up so much already and even that is not good enough. They at least have learned, painfully, that Israel wants land not peace. (p. 367)

The epilogue of this first American edition covers the ground from 2006 through Israel's "Operation Cast Lead" in Gaza and the election of President Obama. Her message now is that Israel is still moving in a self-destructive direction and that it requires American political will and courage, such as has not been shown before, to achieve a two-state solution of a kind while it is still possible.

This is a first-class book, honest and fair-minded, although such are the passions and distortions in matters relating to Israel/Palestine that some will not see it so. It should be read by everyone concerned with the issue both as a powerful witness statement and as a warning of the complexities involved. Historical background is woven into the text. This book is ideal for confronting students with some of the realities of the modern Middle East.

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