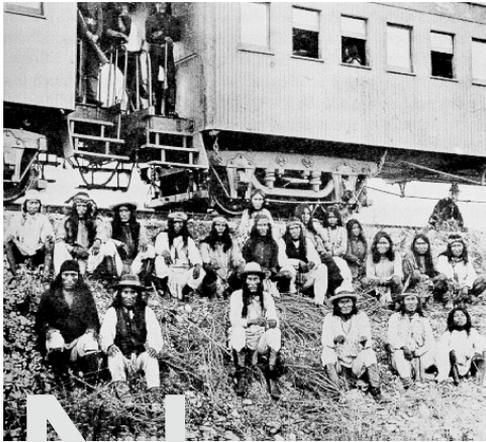




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# OTES ON BORDER WALLS AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

From conversations with Wendy Kenin

Clare Kinberg

On May 16, 2008 the Texas Border Coalition filed a class action lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—and its Secretary Michael Chertoff—over the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Estimates of the cost of the wall range from hundreds of millions to fifty billion dollars. The Secure Fence Act, enacted October 26,

2006, allows for over 700 miles of double-reinforced fence to be built across cities and deserts alike between California and Texas. It authorizes the installation of lighting, vehicle barriers, and border checkpoints, while putting in place equipment like sensors, cameras, satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles. Although there has been widespread opposition

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this essay, the author reports on opposition by Wendy Kenin, an Orthodox Jewish woman, to the U.S.-Mexico border wall being built by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Her opposition is based on her support for indigenous people who live along the International Boundary Zone. Kenin makes connections between Jewish and Native American legacies of spiritual connection to the land and oppressive relocations and genocide.*

to the construction of the wall, it has remained a minor news item outside of the immediately affected communities.

Wendy Kenin, an Orthodox Jewish woman, a doula and mother of four, and Executive Director of the San Francisco chapter of the American Israel Friendship League wrote to the *Bridges* office of her passionate support for the indigenous people opposing the building of the border wall. Wendy had co-authored a Berkeley City Council resolution condemning the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall and had done other press work to build support for the opposition. The connections she makes between Jewish heritage and the U.S.-Mexico border wall struggle are complex, from the similarities between Jewish and Native American oppressions to looking at the many Jews who are involved on all sides of the issue. Over several months in 2008, Wendy and I corresponded and talked about the border wall and her views on cultural exchange.

Wendy's involvement in the U.S. Mexico border wall issue is political, spiritual, and personal. One aspect of her connection to the issue has been her long time friendship with Margo Tamez, an award-winning poet, scholar and mother of five who is of Lipan Apache, Jumano Apache, and Basque descent and whose family land lays on the Texas Mexico border. [See review of Tamez' poetry collection *Raven Eye*. p. 141]

Early in 2008, human rights lawyer and South African-born Jew, Peter Schey had sued Secretary Chertoff on behalf of Margo and her mother Dr. Eloisa Tamez (a professor of nursing at the University of Texas-Brownsville/Texas Southmost College) and hundreds of other families who live along the border. The U.S.-Mexico border wall is slated to pass through Dr. Tamez' three-acre inherited property, land the Tamez family



Margo Tamez

has resided on along the Rio Grande levy since 1784, awarded to them by the San Pedro de Carricitos Land Grant signed by the King of Spain. To this day according to Wendy, neither the U.S. government nor the State of Texas recognizes the existence of the Jumano nor Lipan Apache, nor any other Native American tribe in Texas. Native American communities and others live all along the International Boundary Zone, north and south of the border, from California, Arizona, Mexico and through Texas.

The border wall is opposed for many reasons. According to groups concerned with the environment, about 60 to 75 percent of the Rio Grande Valley's protected lands and refuges could see direct or indirect impacts. Animals will lose access to fresh water from the Rio Grande and the ability to migrate to other habitat. Birds and butterflies also could suffer from habitat loss. Yet, in April 2008 the De-

partment of Homeland Security announced plans to waive more than 30 environmental and cultural laws to speed construction of the barrier. The wall is also opposed as an infringement of property rights in both the U.S. and Mexico, and because it brutally enforces a desperately failed U.S. immigration policy. Many U.S. border towns oppose the wall because it will have a devastating impact on their economy. But it is the wall's damage to indigenous people and culture that most drives Wendy Kenin's opposition to it. "As a Jewish woman, my world opens up when I come in contact with Native American stories about history, culture, spirituality. From gaining understanding, I become an ally, a friend. When I hear the stories, I cannot help but compare and contrast the experiences to those of my own ancestry. The lesson comes home through new language on self-determination and spirituality, and I become more equipped to make sense of my Jewish heritage with an expanded framework. Along this path I discover more Jewish people engaging in important encounters with Native Americans, also fulfilling their own personal and vital legacies."

Wendy, who is a former correspondent for *The Navajo Times* and the *Navajo-Hopi Observer* writes, "The days I spent in the late '90s on the Navajo Reservation herding sheep make up some of my best memories. In addition to offering physical and political support to elderly people living under duress, I personally gained from being exposed to traditional peoples, their ceremony, lifestyle, and land." And as she learned about Native American history, she began to see parallels between her own Jewish family's history and the relocation, confinement and genocide of Native Americans, what she calls, "the American Holocaust."

"As youths, my own grandparents were all children of immigrants to the United States,

who had fled the countries of longstanding Yiddish settlements in hopes of finding a place to live that would be safe for Jews. As Ashkenazi Jewish American youngsters in the early 1900's, they could never have imagined that methods used in the American Holocaust would be replicated in Europe against Jews: Indians were deported from their lands on long walks or via trains—a method that Hitler emulated 50 years later.

"Scenes from walking the Dineh rolling hills with the herds reminded me of the colors and sensations I had when I had visited Israel with my extended family at the age of 12 in 1983. All four of my grandparents kissed the ground when they exited the plane.

"Dineh (Navajo) elder Pauline Whitesinger is known for saying, 'Relocation is Genocide.' Anthropologists hold that when a language dies, a culture dies with it. In northern Arizona regarding the case of Big Mountain and its surrounding communities affected by the Relocation Act of 1974, the federal government provided homes for thousands of Dineh people in New Lands and other places away from their traditional ancestral homes. The people who moved were plagued by many problems, one of which was language loss. In an instant, grandchildren in relocation homes were learning English only and could not even understand their grandparents' Dineh language, and hence could no longer receive the original stories of their ancestors by way of their oral tradition." Wendy explains how the use of eminent domain to take land to build the border wall is a continuation of the policy of forced relocation of indigenous people, adding to legacies of trauma. For both Jews and Native Americans, Wendy makes some of her most complex observations in regard to our legacies of trauma.

"The Tamez and Texas Border Coalition's

attorney Peter Schey and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff both embody Jewish legacy with apparently contradictory messages. Born and raised in South Africa, Schey's father was a French Jew who was turned away from the U.S. during the Holocaust. Since 1980 Peter Schey has been the President and Executive Director of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law in Los Angeles where he focuses on the rights of immigrants, refugees and children. He has successfully represented numerous clients against violations by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Especially notable of Schey's achievements, in the 1990's he defeated California's proposition 187 on constitutional grounds, regaining access to health care, social services and education for millions of California immigrant residents.

Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff's mother was born in Poland in 1925 and lived for many years in Palestine before immigrating to the United States; his father was an Orthodox rabbi from New Jersey. Wendy points out how a Jewish focus on clear definition of boundaries and on physical security are possibly playing out in Chertoff's investment in building the U.S.-Mexico border wall: "In religious Judaism," Wendy says, "we do not carry anything out-of-doors on the Sabbath unless there is an unbroken wall, or *eruv*, surrounding the vicinity." While it is not possible to know if or how Chertoff's Jewish heritage is influencing the policies he advocates as Secretary of Homeland Security, his Jewishness is a major focus of hard core anti-Semites. A simple internet search on his name will inform you about his relationship with the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion and his fraternity with Marx, Lenin, Stalin and the Devil.

To help understand the irony of these two

embattled—and battling—Jewish icons responding so differently to the Jewish legacy of trauma and displacement, Wendy looks to the methodology of inter-cultural therapist and trauma counselor/trainer/author Gina Ross, founder of the International Trauma-Healing Institute. Ross describes, "Unresolved trauma becomes immobilized energy in the body. This phenomenon compounds when events occur that rekindle any past unresolved trauma and reopens deep wounds causing a flood of memories of every past injury, insult, humiliation, loss, fear and hatred. There is a hyper-vigilant search for threat and a sense of on-going danger that sets the stage for violent reenactments, with the psychological hope to finally master the deeply wounded and traumatized feelings. The trauma cycle has a life of its own; it is difficult to stop and extremely contagious."

Ross explains the trauma phenomenon as being passed on over generations, and as a cycle that becomes a vortex that drives individuals, groups, and nations to act irrationally. "When traumatic events happen, they challenge our sense of safety and predictability and this may trigger strong physical and emotional reactions. These reactions are normal," she says.

People come to Ross' trainings from various professional and cultural backgrounds to learn how to help people and societies heal from trauma. Wendy views Gina Ross' inclusive approach to trauma as the next wave in social justice activism. "No real peace will take place unless the recurring traumas are recognized, validated and stopped from being perpetrated," says Ross. "Without understanding the role of trauma, there might not be a prospect for a successful peace."

To Wendy passing on of trauma from generation to generation in Native American com-

munities is both specific and familiar. She reports on an urgent call for help made by Margo Tamez to the International Indian Treaty Council on January 7, 2008. “Margo echoed the inter-generational trauma experienced as she relayed new information conveyed to her by her mother. Margo wrote, ‘In the mid 1930’s the army came to build the so-called “secure levee”—which was forced upon the community. At that time the army constructed a dangerous levee system, against the wishes of the traditional indigenous farmers—my great grand parents and grand parents, grand uncles and grand aunts included. At that time, they forced a massive destruction of the traditional fields, and flooded out all of our families to the south of us. Women, children and elders vanished horrifically—a dramatic display of hyper-militarized power to dominate through terror, and bring my ancestors under the authority of the U.S. Army.’

“Margo continued, ‘My mother retold me, tonight, that she remembers how during this time period the U.S. Army and Border Patrol ran their vehicles into the front doors of the small jacals (traditional shelters, or gowas’—wickiups) and how she ran and ran...in fear of being run over and killed and seeing her family destroyed. She recounted how they burst open doors and forced their way in the homes and how she hid under the bed as the soldiers destroyed everything in their maniacal rampages against the indigenous. Thus tonight, the elders who were also vulnerable teens and young children at that time specifically associated the trauma with the U.S. Army Engineers’ “levee,” are all too cognizant of the subversive ways of the U.S. government, forced occupation and militarized terror tactics.’”

As she hears about the indigenous peoples fleeing the violence, Wendy says, “I think about pogroms in Russia, about the Egyptians and the Red Sea.”

Wendy and other peace and justice activists also think about connections to the Israeli border wall, and its path through land long owned and used by Palestinians. Wendy points out that Americans who are against the U.S.-Mexico wall hold various opinions with regard to Israel’s wall. Her hope is that those opposed to the U.S.-Mexico border wall discuss and debate Israel’s wall, as long as those discussions do not become divisive. In fact, she sees the U.S.-Mexico wall opponents’ contradicting views around the Israel wall as a challenge suitable for useful cultural exchange. As an example she cites an emotional conflict between organizations in the Bay Area.

In the summer of 2007, two hundred residents of San Francisco’s Mission District painted a mural designed under the auspices of the grassroots organization HOMEY—Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth. HOMEY serves low-income disenfranchised and at risk youth ages 13 to 24 in the San Francisco Mission District.

The mural, “Solidarity: Breaking Down Barriers” focused on the theme of breaking down physical and social walls. The 117-foot wide and 10-foot tall mural on the corner of 24<sup>th</sup> and Capp Sts. has several panels depicting themes such as “Youth learning from their ancestors’ struggles,” “Liberation Struggles and Memorial to youth who have passed due to violence,” “Old Skool meets New Skool,” and “Black Brown Unity.” One panel depicts Palestinians breaking through an Israel-shaped crack in Israel’s border wall.

The San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) and the SF office of the Anti-Defamation League objected to the scene of the “Israeli security barrier, depicted as a long solid wall, with a group of Palestinians crashing through it.” They argued that the mural only depicted “one side of the centuries-

old conflict.” Abby Michelson Porth, the associate director of the JCRC stated, “The imagery took a radical position on a complex geopolitical issue that was out of touch with the international community, San Francisco and the overwhelming majority of Jews.” In a letter to the SF Arts Commission, which had given HOMEY a \$34,400 neighborhood-beautification grant for the mural project, the JCRC and the ADL asked that the mural project be altered or halted, and in fact, payment was withheld until the controversy was resolved.

However, the San Francisco Jewish community was not unanimous in their criticism of the mural. Jewish support for the mural materialized as the Jewish Support for HOMEY Mural petition addressed to the SF Arts Commission. In this petition letter, the coalition asserted:

“We want to affirm our support for the H.O.M.E.Y. artists in their expression of the global connections between current and historical experiences of oppression, displacement, and resistance. It has come to our attention that the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) has complained about the HOMEY mural in the name of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish community and we therefore feel it is imperative that you hear from a broader spectrum of organized Jews not represented by JCRC. Our support for this mural stems from our historical Jewish experience that includes oppression and resistance. We therefore stand in solidarity, as Jews, with local communities in their struggle for self-determination and their self-expression.”

HOMEY, the designing artist Eric Norberg, and the JCRC reached a compromise and the mural was altered. The artists agreed to change the shape of the crack so it does not resemble a silhouette of Israel, add blue sky where the wall towered to reflect a

brighter future, add an olive tree to symbolize peace, and remove the headscarf from a Palestinian woman’s face.

“Our intention was to draw parallels between the issues at the U.S.-Mexico border and the Israeli-Palestinian security barrier,” said Nancy Hernandez, youth program coordinator at HOMEY. “We consider this section . . . to be a statement of solidarity between the residents of the San Francisco Mission district and global movements for oppressed peoples to gain self-determination.”

Some on both sides of the conflict however, remained enraged.

“This does not show why the barrier was brought on—to stop the suicide bombings,” said Gina Bublil Waldman, co-founder of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, a San Francisco-based educational and advocacy organization. “To show only one side is biased, unfair and unjust.”

The Bay Area Arab Resource and Organizing Center issued a statement after the compromise that said in part: “Many of us feel saddened and outraged that HOMEY, a group of youth working towards their own empowerment as young Latins, was pressured to change a mural they, and we, believed stood for true ‘Solidarity—Breaking Down Barriers.’ Not only is this unjust towards Palestinians and other Arabs, but an unfair act of censorship for the youth and the community.”

Wendy saw this controversy as an opportunity. “The Mission Mural brought to light a pre-existing polarization in the Bay Area around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” she says. “Though the mural may have resulted in a greater wall between local communities, the solution to this community discord would be inter-group dialogues and community-led coexistence programs with cooperative leadership from all parties.

“As a young environmental activist in the early ’90s, I sat in on meetings of Native American, Latino, and Chicano youth. Raised in a Reform Jewish family in the New York area, I finally developed the language to identify myself as a result of hearing these indigenous youth reclaiming their own stories and identities. I expressed my gratitude for being permitted to hear their indigenous experiences, as well as my appreciation for my newfound awareness that I too come from an ancestry whose tradition and spirituality is struggling but is still intact.

“A key thread of the message I heard was that indigenous youth can stay away from drugs and violence that plague their communities by connecting with their elders, reclaiming tradition, and finding positive outlets for expression such as music, art, or sports. Might there also be a parallel consequence of internalized violence in the Jewish community due to our history of oppression, assimilation, and culture loss, I wondered?

“While some Palestinian supporters in the U.S. draw a parallel between these two walls as tools of oppressive governments against indigenous peoples, ironically Israel’s democratic precedent in examining the integrity of their wall may well serve as leverage against DHS’ dismissal of U.S. constitutional law. In September 2007, litigation against the Israel wall by a Palestinian community in Bil’in resulted in Israel’s High Court of Justice mandating that the Israeli government deconstruct and reroute a particular section. The wall had jutted into Bil’in land, and obstructed residents from accessing their fields and orchards.

“Might the U.S. government learn from their Israel counterparts the difference between violence and immigration, and the need for litigation before implementation?”

Still, as of June 2008, almost a year after

the Israeli High Court ruling, the path of the security barrier through Bil’in land had not been changed. According to an Inter Press Service news report of May 7, 2008, “the Israeli Defense Force has not yet acted on these orders.”

Activists in the U.S. are largely unaware that even Israeli security experts are against the U.S.-Mexico border wall. “Out of all the countries whose opposition to the wall is not being reported on by the U.S. press,” Wendy says, “Israel is the country with current-day wall experience which could be helpful.”

Wendy quotes a *Newsday* article of August 14, 2006, that reported on Israel/Palestine Wall builder Uzi Dayan differentiating between the two situations, “The United States is trying to solve the problem of illegal workers. We are trying to avoid bloodshed. There is a big difference. There have been some serious inquiries from Washington about how to build a fence along Israeli lines. They want to emulate us,” Dayan said. “But I’ve always said that it’s not in America’s best interest. It won’t solve their problem. It’s not cost-effective and it won’t work.”

In fact Secretary Chertoff is quoted as saying as recently as May 2008 that the U.S. could not adopt border security methods used in Israel to prevent Palestinian militants from entering its territory, for U.S. efforts to stop illegal immigrants from crossing its frontier with Mexico. “(Ours is) a vastly longer border. It’s not an area where there is much useful experience,” he said.

Despite this, Chertoff has by-passed property law, environmental regulations, community protest—and apparently his own better judgment—to push forward with building the U.S.-Mexico border wall.

Wendy concludes, “Youth leadership and empowerment groups that support youth of

inter-ethnic or inter-cultural background to feel proud of their own diverse heritage and find the language to identify themselves are so needed by the youth in our communities. I have found that the younger generations of Native Americans as well as Chicano people who were not alive during the time of the Holocaust tend to relate more with the Palestinian peoples' experience, as victims of institutionalized colonialism. Yet, an elder Apache woman I met at a ceremony told me she could relate to the Jews' connection to their ancestral land. Despite thousands of years of exile, Jews have maintained and

even adapted their culture. Apache elders would talk about how their morning prayers include Mount Graham. This reminded me of how the land of Israel is in the daily prayers of the Jews as practiced for thousands of years.

"I firmly believe that cultural exchange via sharing of stories is a critical element that must take place in order for humanity to attain peace. It is my hope that by sharing some of what I have witnessed of the Native American experience, that Jewish readers here will gain perspective that will support the universal quest for peace."