

Freedom Through Awareness

by Leen Radi Aburayyan

I grew up believing checkpoints were ordinary. They existed quietly in conversations, something my parents spoke about with practised patience. I heard about delays, long waits, and unpredictable crossings, but I never tried to fully imagine them. To me, they were distant inconveniences, part of a place I belonged to but did not yet understand. I accepted them without questioning their logic, the way children accept most things.

In June 2022, that acceptance began to unravel. The heat was the first thing I noticed as we stood in line at the border, unmoving for hours. There was no clear beginning or end to the line, only a slow shuffle forward. Suitcases scraped against the ground. Children cried until they fell silent against their parents. Elderly men leaned on canes, swaying slightly as they waited. Time stretched in a way that felt unfamiliar. No one complained. The silence was not acceptance, but rather resignation.

People adjusted themselves, conserving energy and emotion. Every few minutes, a voice called someone forward. When my name was called, my body reacted before my mind. My heartbeat quickened. I became aware of everything: how I stood, how I spoke, how I might be perceived. The questions were simple: Why are you here? Who are you visiting? How long will you stay? But they carried an unspoken demand – justify yourself!

I answered carefully. It was not enough to respond; I had to convince. I had to present myself in a way that would be accepted, understood, allowed. In that moment, belonging felt conditional. I had worn my hijab that day without hesitation, the way I always did. But standing there, it felt different, no longer just a part of me, but something that could be interpreted before I even spoke. By the time we crossed, exhaustion had settled in. But what stayed with me was the quietness of everyone around me. That silence unsettled me more than anything else.

It was then that I began to understand that this was not an interruption of life; it was woven into it. Inside cities, life seemed to resist that reality. Streets were filled with movement. Shops spilled light and conversation onto the sidewalks. Children ran through narrow roads, their laughter rising above the noise of passing cars. For a moment, everything felt normal. But that normalcy was fragile.

The moment we travelled between cities, it fractured again. Another checkpoint. Another line of cars stretching farther than I could see. Engines idling under the sun, drivers waiting without knowing how long the delay would last. Movement was no longer assumed. It was granted.

“What happens if the checkpoint closes?” I asked.

“You stay,” my uncle replied. “Until morning.”

The simplicity of his answer revealed something deeper; staying was not a choice.

In Canada, movement had always been effortless. I measured distance in time, not permission. The idea of being unable to reach home had never crossed my mind. There, it was an ordinary possibility. However, a memory from my childhood returned with new clarity. When I was twelve, my uncle took my sister and me to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. He showed permits and even claimed to be our father so we could pass. At the time, none of it felt unusual. What I remember is the brightness of the courtyard, the movement of people entering and leaving prayer, the smell of freshly baked ka’ak, and the colourful sweets sold by vendors. I remember the ease of that day.

Years later, the memory felt different – not diminished, but deepened. I began to understand that even this moment had been shaped by restriction. Access to a place so central to identity and faith had required permission and negotiation. What I had experienced as freedom had, in reality, been conditional. There were also places that were inaccessible for other reasons.

Gaza had always felt distant to me, defined more by headlines than lived experience. That changed when I spoke with my cousin's wife, who had lived there. She described her home being destroyed, her belongings buried beneath rubble, the fragments of a life that could not be recovered. She spoke calmly, but the weight of her words was undeniable. I realized then the limits of my own understanding. I could listen, but I could not fully grasp what she had experienced. The distance between us was shaped not by geography, but by what I had never had to endure. That realization stayed with me.

In Canada, my concerns had always existed within stability: school deadlines, plans, routines that never threatened my sense of security. I woke up each day expecting consistency. Safety was not something I thought about. It was something I assumed.

In Palestine, that assumption did not exist in the same way. Movement was uncertain. Access was controlled. Even routine actions carried unpredictability. And yet, life was not defined solely by restriction. I saw hospitality that was immediate and genuine. Families shared meals, neighbours exchanged stories, and communities held onto connection in ways that felt intentional and deeply rooted. I saw pride in language, culture, and faith that remained steady despite everything around it. There was strength in that balance, the ability to carry both hardship and hope at once. It challenged the simplicity of how I once understood the world.

I used to think that innocence meant not knowing. Now I understand it can also mean accepting what is familiar without questioning whether it is fair. This shift did not happen all at once. It emerged gradually, shaped by small observations.

In the waiting.

In the questions.

In the answers that required no explanation.

I did not return with a completely new perspective, but with a clearer awareness of the one I had always lived within. And once that awareness took hold, it changed how I move through the world – not all at once, but in the questions I began to ask, and in what I now no longer accept as simply normal.

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