already too far down to see the town or to be seen. How often I had come to these hills as a younger man running away from the eyes of my parents and the rest of society. Living as I did in a stifling community these hills were my only escape, as they had been to Abu Ameen. I could now slow down, rest on this rock and look at the wide valley of Wadi El 'qda (the knot) and the open hillside opposite. I squatted and felt the gentle cool breeze against my face. For the first time that day I breathed deeply and enjoyed the clean air filling my lungs.

In between the stones there was a shiny, almost wispy layer of grass embossed with droplets of water that glistened in the sun. The lichen-covered rocks made the trickling water look black. The afternoon sun cast long shadows from the olive trees. Amongst the green grass and winter flowers there was a predominance of dark green and charcoal black.

The thistles and shrubs burned from last summer's heat mixed with the soil and were wet. Amongst them were a few surviving twigs of sage from last year's bushes. I pinched one between my fingers and enjoyed its strong aroma. The earth was variegated with dark spots between the green and the grey stones. The green went up over the bulky roots of the trees around their thick trunks. There were blue hyacinth squills between the rocks. When I slid down and stood again on the path I noticed the crocuses that had sprung out after the rain, filling the little patch around the rock I was sitting on like a pink haze. I didn't want to crush their delicate petals so close to the ground but this was unavoidable for they were everywhere.

Because of my work and the heavy rain, which made the path too muddy, I hadn't been able to walk all last week. This was what accounted for my tense state. Walking

helped me put things in perspective. I now began to pick up pace and hurried down the sloping path towards the wadi. The further down I went the deeper the silence became. As always the distance and quiet made me attentive to those troublesome thoughts that had been buried deep in my mind. As I walked, many of them were surfacing. I sifted through them. The mind only admits what it can handle and here on these hills the threshold was higher.

The other day I had to plead with a soldier to be allowed to return home. I was getting back from our winter house in Jericho, where I had spent a relaxing day. I had to implore the Israeli soldier. I told him that I really did not know curfew had been imposed on Ramallah. I was away all day and hadn't listened to the news. 'I'm tired,' I said, 'please let me through.' Oh, the humiliation of pleading with a stranger for something so basic. Why should I endure all these hardships? Why should I spend so much of my time thinking about the dismal future? Living as a hunted, haunted human with a terrible sense of doom pervading my life? Why could I not live the moment, be at ease? But I knew why. If I and people like me were to leave rather than stay and resist the occupation, we would wake up in a few years to a new reality, with our land taken from under our feet. We had no alternative but to struggle against our predicament.

As long as there were no Israeli settlements nearby I could pretend that I had the whole of the hills to myself. A silent arena. The path I was on had once connected the villages north of Ramallah to those in the south. Many must have walked these same paths, not for pleasure but for work, transporting produce and commuting from village to village. This had been the sole way to

move around before the paved roads were opened. Only recently did I learn from a friend that even these very paths I've been using on my walks are marked on a British-made Ordnance map. I had wanted to believe this was my path, known only to me, my own discovery, that these hills were my private arena where I could be alone. I looked up the Mandate maps and found that my friend was right. The path was marked. It stretched from A'yn Arik, a village west of Ramallah, all the way down to the Mediterranean Sea.

Normally, when I only had time for a short walk, I would continue straight down and once in the valley I would turn around and walk back up. Today I had more time. Rather than continue down, I decided to head northwards, traversing the hill I was on and going down into the next gully. The further away from town I moved the less cultivated were the fields, until I got to a hill that was covered with weeds. Here and there, hanging down from the stone terraces, I could see dead charcoal-black branches, remnants of the once vibrant grapevines that had filled these hills, cascading down over the terrace walls. I stopped to examine them. I could smell their damp rot.

Most of the rocks here are limestone, sedimentary rock formed under the deep sea that once covered these hills. I often found fossils of different shellfish. On my desk at home I have several fossilized snails. Only on this side of the Great Fault can sea fossils be found. On the east side of the River Jordan, where the shallow edge of the ancient sea was, there is only terrestrial sandstone and grit.

Nearby I noticed a number of strange-looking rocks. I knelt down to examine them more closely. Protruding

out of them like a relief were tube-like fossilized roots. I picked up one of them, the size of my palm, which was embedded in the terrace wall. I noticed it because it was the colour of the brown soil, unlike the grey rocks used to build the wall. I held it in my hand and examined it closely. I was amazed. It looked as though hundreds of shells of sea snails, starfish and sea urchins had been pressed together to form this small grooved rock. Lithification is the general term for a group of processes that convert loose sediment into rock. Most sediments are lithified by a combination of compaction, which packs loose cement grains tightly together, and cementation, in which the precipitation of a cement around the grains binds them into a firm hard rock. This rock must have been millions of years old, from when this area was submerged under the sea.

I had ventured into a fascinating area. Not far from the terrace wall, tall as an altar, I saw a large rock that seemed out of place, as though it had fallen from on high. It was cracked in a number of places. I rested my elbows on it and examined it more closely. The sun was striking it at a thirty-degree angle. Engraved in the rock were two elongated lobes, one on each side, with a long mound like a giant toe between them. The whole thing was over a metre in length. At first I thought these shapes must have been made by water running down the rock over many years. But why would the water make circular grooves? I had once seen pictures of dinosaur footprints; the similarity here was striking. I lifted my eyes and tried to imagine an enormous animal standing with one foot over this rock, its head almost reaching the top of the hill overlooking Ramallah. How brief a moment is given to us to be here on earth. And how beautiful was that

moment then with the hills all spread out before me, not submerged under water, not dominated by enormous animals, but full of wonderful treasures.

Before moving away from this rock I made sure to remember its location: several terraces down from the pine trees, halfway between the top of the hill and the valley, in a field full of the common thistle called *natsh* (Poterium Thorn), which was likely used to make the crown of thorns worn by Christ. *Natsh* is as plentiful in these hills as heather in the Scottish Highlands. Both are tenacious plants with strong roots. In winter *natsh* acquires thick narrow leaves that conserve water. The fields are full of small green mounds not unlike porcupines. As the dry summer months advance the leaves eventually dry up and fall off, leaving humps of wiry mesh that farmers sometimes cut and use as a broom to clean coarse surfaces of pebbles and stone. It is also used to drain water and, because of its elasticity, as a substitute for a spring mattress by people who are sleeping out in the open. In Arabic the verb *natasha* means to pluck, hence the name of the weed extractor, *Minttash.*

In Israeli military courts this weed has gained great popularity. Never has a weed been more exploited and politicized, not least by Dani Kramer, the legal advisor to the Israeli military government responsible for expropriating Palestinian land for Jewish settlements. Dani knew few Arabic words. *Natsh* was one of them. How often I have heard him stand up before the judge in the military land court and declare: 'But, Your Honour, the land is full of *natsh.* I saw it with my own eyes.' Meaning: what more proof could anyone want that the land was uncultivated and therefore public land that the Israeli settlers could use as their own?

Alongside Dani, another hero of the settlement project, whom I had heard a lot about but never met, was Rabbi Kook. He once described to his disciples how his identification with the land was so total that he felt his own body torn. It was not clear whether or not the land in question was replete with *natsh.* Surely not! He was speaking metaphorically of much more profound things. It was the night of 14 May 1967, just before the war that resulted in the occupation of the Palestinian territories, the eve of Israel's Independence Day and the anniversary of the UN resolution that gave the state its legal standing. As he delivered his sermon he began to shout and his body was rocked by grief. He was recalling the announcement in 1947, twenty years earlier, when the UN decided to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. While the Jews in Palestine danced in the streets, the rabbi sat alone bewailing the division of the land. He asked his disciples: 'Where is Hebron? Have we forgotten it? And where is our Shkehm [Nablus]? And our Jericho – will we forget them? And the far side of Jordan – it is ours, every clod of soil ... every region and bit of earth belonging to the lord's land. Is it in our hands to give up even a millimetre? In that state,' he said, 'my entire body shaking, entirely wounded and cut to pieces, I could not celebrate.' When I read this I thought: God help us. But for now I was not going to think any more of Rabbi Kook and his body, or of Dani and his legal fetish for *natsh*. I was going to enjoy my walk.

The final section of the path that brought me down to the valley was narrow and overgrown with spiky shrubs. I forced my way through, scratching my skin until the path veered to the right. The walls diverged. I continued on the open path parallel to the valley. I was fanned by

the soft breeze that was blowing across this open green area. To my left stretched tall grass and olive trees luxuriating in the deep rich soil. I walked along, passing the gully between the next two hills. The valley here was at its widest. Winding their way between the terraces were flocks of sheep roaming on the sides of the hills like pale yellow ribbons. I looked for the shepherd and saw that he was about to play his reed pipe. I stopped and sat on a rock for a while to listen to his pastoral tunes. Then I began walking again, trying to move as quietly as possible.

I soon got to that part of the wadi which always inspired talk when I walked with Jonathan Kuttab, my colleague in human rights at Al Haq in 1981. Far away from town, next to the dry stream between the hills, we would sit on the rock, our feet dangling in the grass. Jonathan was thinking of getting married. We discussed his prospects. We talked of what lay ahead for us. We had both read the settlement master plan drawn up by the Jewish Regional Council in the West Bank in cooperation with the Settlement Department of the World Zionist Organization. According to this plan 80,000 Israeli Jews were to be settled in our hills by 1986 in twenty-five settlements and twenty outposts. To make this possible two billion US dollars were to be allocated. Tons of concrete were to be poured over these hills. The plan called for paving roads at a rate of 150 kilometres a year. Every year 500 dunums (a dunum is 1,000 sq metres) of industrial zones would be developed. All the available natural resources would be monopolized by these settlers. 'Settlement blocs' would spread over the entire area and our towns and villages would be isolated, their growth hindered by a massive road network.

The plan viewed our presence here as a constraint and

aimed at preventing our 'undesirable development'. By creating new human settlements where none existed, connecting them with roads, and isolating existing ones, it would not only strangle our communities but also destroy this beautiful land, and in a matter of a few years change what had been preserved for centuries. Ariel Sharon, the then Defense Minister, declared: 'We are going to leave an entirely different map of the country that it will be impossible to ignore.' Menachem Begin, the Prime Minister at the time, announced: 'Settlement [in the occupied areas] is the soul of Zionism.' The Israeli newspapers reported that the government in Israel had asserted that it would never accept dividing the Greater Land of Israel, never agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. We were certain that we could not remain idle in the face of this threat. We had to do everything we could to resist it. If the plan should be implemented generations of young Jewish kids would grow up in our hills considering them their home and we would have another hundred years of struggle over this part of Palestine. As we sat on the rock in the Wadi El 'qda, Jonathan and I proceeded to formulate our legal struggle against the Israeli plan.

The olive trees at the bottom of this wadi stood in flat, freshly tilled soil. We considered this the midway point of our walk, after which we would begin our ascent back to Ramallah. We ate apples as we discussed the future of the legal struggle. We plotted how through legal action we were going to frustrate the whole of the Israeli settlement project. We would raise money for legal aid to challenge every land expropriation order and put a stop to this charade, which claimed the settlers were only taking land that belonged to no one.