

Courage, Hope and Love Amid the Pain

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Mission of the Atonement
Beaverton, OR
December 6, 2015

My hopes for this my first trip to Palestine in early November were to walk on the land where Jesus, the disciples, the early Christians walked. I wanted a sense of the land, to see where those early miracles and lessons happened, where the early Christians were constantly embattled by the local Jewish leadership as well as by the occupying power, Rome. And I wanted to connect with the Palestinian people who again are under the heel of a brutal occupying power. It has occurred to me – and certainly this was borne out in my conversations with my guides and people I met – that the Christians who remain in Palestine are probably descended from those first Christians, who still considered themselves Jewish. I visited numerous churches and ruins of villages and palaces and other antiquities, but what really drew me was the land and the people.

Usama Nicola is a Palestinian Christian/Catholic was my tour planner and my guide for part of my visit. Usama grew up in Bethlehem with three brothers and his parents, Nicola and Lorette Zoughbi. Usama works at Wi'am, the Palestinian Conflict Resolution/Transformation Center, a non-profit that promotes conflict transformation, restorative justice and mediation among the Palestinians and works to build peace, sustainable development, empowerment and hope. One of their projects is to provide tours for people like me and try to really show us what life is like under the Israeli Occupation.

I stayed with Nicola and Lorette in the guest house they have and ate most of my meals with them. Often Usama would join us, and sometimes his wife and three children would also eat with us. They were welcoming, kind, generous and I felt completely at home with them. Lorette told me that Palestinians are required to retire at the age of 60 to open up jobs for younger people; this last quarter Palestine had a 27.5% unemployment rate. But there are no pensions, no retirement plans, no insurance for the Palestinians who retire so some, like Lorette and Nicola, depend on tourism and rent out rooms to keep food on their table.

Wi'am is located on the Jerusalem Hebron Road very close to Aida Refugee Camp, Rachel's Tomb and a military complex with several watchtowers. The street in front of Wi'am had been the site of daily protests and conflicts between Palestinian youth and IDF soldiers. The streets are littered with marbles – which the youth shoot from their slingshots – and with a variety of different tear gas canisters, rubber-coated bullets and spent cartridges from live ammunition from the Israeli soldiers, the IDF. The smell of skunk-water, sprayed on the protestors, hangs in the air, something like Skunk meets Sewage Treatment Plant. The morning I arrived, Channel Two news, a conservative Israeli station, was doing interviews about the dangers of visiting Palestine, accompanied by soldiers.

Usama's oldest son Layth is 11. He and some of his friends wanted to join the protests, to show their courage in the face of such overwhelming oppression. Usama spoke with him and explained that Palestine needs courageous, intelligent young men like him to grow up – not be shot or jailed –

so that they can continue to resist the occupation and help work to free Palestine. He hopes his own work in non-violent resistance will help his son and other young Palestinians survive and some day see peace and justice come to their land.

Later that week Usama came to his parents' home very down and tired. The Israeli military had invaded the neighborhood the night before – as they do once or twice a week now – firing tear gas, sound bombs, storming into homes, terrorizing people. This sometimes results in clashes with neighborhood youth, trying to protect their community. The children had been so frightened they had been unable to sleep at all, nor had their parents. They didn't want to go to school the next day because they were frightened and very tired. This is a kind of ongoing torture and intimidation that happens throughout the West Bank; PTSD is becoming epidemic. Often these incidents result in Palestinians being arrested or shot and in the last two months more than 100 Palestinians have been killed (while 16 Israelis were killed) and more than 10,000 Palestinians wounded, some very seriously.

The first day of my visit we walked down to the Aida Refugee Camp. It has been there since 1948, when so many people were driven from their homes in the Nakba. The large key at the entryway is an important symbol: Palestinians often kept their keys when they left, looking forward to some day being able to return. What started out as 750,000 refugees now numbers in the millions and is the largest, oldest unresolved refugee population in the world.

One of the first things we saw were photos of a 13-year-old boy Abdul Rahman Obeidallah who had been killed in October by snipers shooting from the military towers. We later visited Abdul's grave in the adjoining cemetery next to the grave of another 13-year-old who had been killed last year. Lorette told me 19 children under the age of 15 had been killed by Israeli soldiers, settlers or extremists since October 1st.

The week before I was there, Israeli forces issued a message through a loud speaker to residents of Aida camp during a night raid, saying:

“Inhabitants of Aida, we are the Israeli occupation forces. If you throw stones we will hit you with gas until you die. The children, the youth, and the old people, all of you – we won't spare any of you.”

As we were leaving the camp, we stopped to visit a young man Usama knew who had just been released by the IDF. While sisters or cousins served us tea someone woke Mejd and he came down to tell us of his experience. He said he had just been walking home and was arrested (probably because four of his brothers are in administrative detention). As the police were taking him for questioning, he said, settlers were shooting at them, trying to kill him. At least 8 shots were fired at him. The police spent four hours interrogating him, beating him, breaking his fingers, threatening him. They finally released him . . . but it may not be his last experience with them.

After our visit to the refugee camp, we visited the Cremisan Valley, outside of Bethlehem. This stretch of fertile land on is home to a Salesian monastery, a convent and convent school, vineyards and a well-known winery that have been there for 150 years. The Israeli government is seizing some 3,500 dunams, about 800 acres of land belonging to 58 Palestinian families to build the wall and a

park for the illegal settlements on both sides of the valley. The wall will separate the Monastery, vineyards and winery from the Salesian Sisters' convent and a school and village. Despite a long court battle, the work on the wall commenced in August. In order to build the wall they are tearing out olive trees, some of which are hundreds of years old, some even dating back to the time of Christ. When we arrived and Usama saw the destruction, he was near tears. Palestinians have a huge respect for the land and growing things. It was clearly painful for him to see the destruction of these old trees.

We returned to Bethlehem and visited the Church of the Nativity, the Milk Grotto and Shepherd's Field in Beit Sahour. While there we spoke with some tourists from Germany who challenged the fact that Usama, as a Palestinian, was prohibited from traveling to the settlements, or Jerusalem or Israel. They adamantly refused to believe he couldn't travel freely. They also talked about the Jews' rights to the land as God's Chosen People. I pointed out very forcefully that we're ALL God's chosen people. And Usama and I both explained that the Palestinians are likely some of the descendants of those Jews who followed Jesus. It was very unsettling to experience the willful blindness of people. Usama later knelt down in one of the chapels near Shepherd's Field and prayed for the Germans; such kindness and compassion!

The next two days, Nizar Lama, a young Palestinian Christian, was my guide to Jericho and Nablus, which included visits to Bethany, the Jordan River, Jacob's Well, various other historical sites, and ancient monasteries amid the deserts and canyons. We drove on the separate roads for Palestinians, some of which are very dangerous, steep and winding. Palestinians are prohibited from driving on the newer, straighter highways that cut across the land and are enclosed by ugly walls – only those with Israeli citizenship who have yellow license plates are allowed on those roads.

We saw signs warning Israeli citizens not to enter Area A, a small part (18%) of the West Bank. Under the Oslo Accords the West Bank was temporarily divided to create three areas: the largest (now about 63% of the West Bank), was Area (C) under Israeli military control that was to eventually be given back to the Palestinian Authority but that has never happened; area (B) has about 22% of the land and is under Palestinian Civil but Israeli Security authority. Area A is supposedly completely under Palestinian Authority rule, but the IDF are still everywhere. The signs are a clear form of indoctrination . . . a way to reinforce the propaganda that Palestinians are very dangerous.

As we drove, Nizar told us bits and pieces of his life as a Palestinian living in the Occupied Territories. He talked about how hard it is for Palestinians to find work. He has friends with degrees in dentistry and pharmacy who end up working as waiters, in souvenir shops, etc. He talked about a girlfriend, a Palestinian woman who is a citizen of Israel since her parents did not leave during the Nakba. As a tour guide he has a permit that allows him to travel into Jerusalem during the day but he cannot stay overnight there. They were very much in love, he said, and wanted to marry. But he could not live in Jerusalem and if she left to live in Bethlehem with him, she would lose her citizenship and not be able to go back to visit friends and family, travel in Israel, and would lose what little freedom she has. There are many stories like this: families who are divided and cannot even see each other for weddings or funerals.

There are regular checkpoints on the roads and often random checkpoints where drivers are waved on or waved over to check their documents, pretty much at the whim of the soldiers. Every time we approached one of these, Nizar would visibly stiffen and make a comment that indicated his discomfort. When we weren't waved over, he breathed an audible sigh of relief. The one time we actually got waved over to stop, the young soldier was on my side of the car. When I told him I was an American citizen, he waved us on with a smile.

On Saturday I visited the Old City of Jerusalem and some of the Christian sites with Imad Nasser who, along with Nizar, also works for Wi'am. We entered through the 300 Checkpoint. On workdays, the long chute – very much like a cattle chute – is filled with Palestinians who have permits to work in Israel, usually at blue-collar, service or other menial labor. Since there are so few jobs in Palestine, they are willing to endure the daily process of arriving at the checkpoint as early as 3 or 4 a.m. to queue up and go through the humiliation of being treated like animals. Nizar had told us his father had worked in Jerusalem until he retired, showing up at 5 a.m. every work day to endure the degrading experience. At the end of the chute is a single turnstile and a screening machine and metal detector like we find at airports. Since it was Saturday, Imad and I and a couple of Muslim women were the only customers.

Usama and I visited Tent of Nations one afternoon. The Nasser family has owned this 100-acre farm with deeds going back to 1916, when they were registered with the Ottoman Empire. They reregistered the deeds with the British Mandate, with Transjordan and then with the Palestinian Authority. From their land you can see several illegal but thriving settlements in every direction. Israel has been trying to seize their land in spite of the deeds and the family has been fighting in Israeli courts for 23 years. In the spring of 2014, Daher Nasser told me, between 1,500 and 2,000 mature fruit trees ready to harvest were destroyed by the Israeli military. The trees were uprooted and buried. Nothing could be salvaged. The trees have since been replanted with donations from people all over the world.

Tent of Nations operates by the motto, "We Refuse to Be Enemies," hosting international visitors and volunteers, offering activities for local youth, and running educational projects for women. Their desire is to be able to farm their land in peace and for other Palestinians to live in peace and justice, according to Daoud Nasser, Executive Director and spokesperson for Tent of Nations.

Here's an example of the Palestinian response to injustice Daoud shared with me:

A few years ago, after working on the farm late into the evening, my children, mother and I were returning home to Bethlehem on a cold, windy night in our 1972 Volkswagen bus. As we slowly bumped along the road, leading from the barrier installed by the IDF in 2004 near our farm, suddenly Israeli commandos sprung out of nowhere in combat gear with hidden faces and automatic weapons. The officer of the patrol shouted an order for me to get out of the car and to hand over my Palestinian ID. I could see the laser beams reflected on my chest and felt the terror of the moment. After several pointed questions, the young officer told us to empty the vehicle so that they might search the car.

It was a very cold and windy night, and I explained that my children were asleep and that they would be traumatized at seeing the guns pointed at them and would have such a memory for a long

time, as many Palestinian children do after such terrifying similar encounters. I offered that the VW bus with windows all the way around would enable them to investigate without disturbing my children. The officer didn't see it that way, and shouted more loudly for my family to get out of the car, and to do so urgently.

As I bent over through the car door windows, I spoke to my children in English so that the soldiers could hear what I was saying to them. I don't know why these words came to me, but the conversation was a game changer for what happened next. I said, "You will wake up and see soldiers with guns. You shouldn't be frightened because they are good people."

A few minutes later, the officer called me over to return my ID and said, "Sir, I feel we need to apologize to you and your family, for what we did was not right."

This is the kind of response to the injustice I often encountered: the Palestinian people I met and spoke with just want justice and the peace to live their lives with the same rights and freedom as the Jewish Israeli citizens are allowed.

My final two days were spent in Galilee, visiting more historical Christian sites, including the Sea of Galilee, Mt. Tabor, Nazareth and the Church of the Annunciation, the ruins of Magdala and Capernaum. This is beautiful country, lush and tropical with banana groves, orange and lemon trees, avocado and mango. The soil looked rich and fertile, unlike the very rocky land in the West Bank areas we visited. The last church I visited was the Church of the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes which earlier this year had been attacked by Jewish extremists who set fire to the buildings.

My trip concluded with a stop in the old Port of Jaffa, after driving through the impressive seaside city of Tel-Aviv. It was similar to being in an expensive beachside city in Florida or Southern California with tall modern buildings looking out at the Mediterranean.

On the flight from Tel-Aviv to JFK I struck up a conversation with the woman who sat next to me. I learned she is a Jewish woman from Brooklyn and she and her husband had been visiting their son in Jerusalem. She talked of the beauty of Israel and then she said something about how horrible the Muslims are. Twice, in fact, she talked about hating the Muslims. I didn't challenge her, as badly as I wanted to, because I knew I was surrounded by Jewish people who probably felt the same way she did. I later wished I had asked her to elaborate, just asked her what experiences she'd had with Muslims that made her say that. But the bottom line for me is during all the time I spent with Palestinians, no one ever said a negative word about the Jews. The only person I spoke with on the airplane in a matter of a few minutes of conversation shared her hatred of people OTHER THAN. This spoke volumes to me.

Americans need to visit Palestine and support the people, to help them have hope. They so appreciate our support and encouragement and interest in their plight. It's one of the things that keeps them going, along with their trust in God.

And one last note: My favorite Arabic word, that I heard all the time, is Habibi – when I finally asked Usama what it meant, he said it means "my love," or "my dear," or "beloved." I like to think that's how God thinks of each of us: Habibi!!

