

Palestine and Israel 2019

Max and Jane Carter

FUM's 2019 "Living Letters" delegation to the Ramallah Friends School occurred 06/22 - 07/09 with 14 participants. Following are excerpts from Facebook posts during that time:

June 22

After 24 hours in transit, our final plane landed in Tel Aviv right on schedule, and with the kind ministrations of a security officer, we sailed through passport control. Seeing us as a group at the end of a long line, he opened a booth just for us, asked me the purpose of our trip, wished us a good stay, and sent us all through! And all our luggage arrived with us -- and I managed not to leave any behind, as I did last year!

Four of our total of 14 met us at the airport, having arrived earlier, and by 5:00 p.m. local time, we were all getting settled in at our quarters at the Friends School and a nearby hostel. After tea and scones at the director's home, we walked through town to Angelo's Pizza, followed by the requisite stop (first of many!) at Rukab's ice cream. This year, we have a group member who is distantly related to the family!

Before heading back to the School, we did a major shopping at various markets: cherries, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, eggs to hard boil, hummus, laban (a thick yogurt), milk, corn flakes, and tea -- with more to buy tomorrow when more shops are open. Tomorrow we'll head out early to get fresh flat bread, cheese, and maybe some za'atar and olive oil.

It's a great group -- a mixture of old and young; Quaker and other-than; newbies and old veterans. They are intensely curious and peppered Jane and me with questions on the bus ride from the airport. Their inquiries afforded early opportunities to discuss the politics of tree planting; the difference in appearance between Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jewish communities (It's all about the water barrels!); how corn grows during months with no rain (prompting comments about too much rain for corn from our Iowa and Indiana contingent!); how walls, separated road systems, and checkpoints form a "matrix of control" over a majority population; and how not to use the "loo" in Ramallah. The latter came after Jane asked me to "talk about the toilet paper." I dutifully said, "The kibbutz we'll visit is the largest producer of toilet paper in Israel."

Of course, Jane sighed and explained what she really wanted me to say: "Toilet paper goes in the rubbish bin next to the toilet."

There will be far more information asked for and dispensed. The group is flush with curiosity, and I am full of it when it comes to offering answers that may or may not be accurate!

After a good night's sleep -- although we'll probably be jolted awake by the first call to prayer from the mosque right behind our quarters -- we'll enjoy breakfast and devotions together before heading to meeting for worship, a meeting with government officials, a tour of the Arafat museum, and supper at the home of the Upper School principal.

I'll try to stay awake for it!

June 23

It's the end of our second day in Ramallah, and it has been a full one. We began with a breakfast smorgasbord of fresh flat bread, hummus, cheese, peanut butter, Nutella, fig jam, eggs, granola, cereal, carrots, bananas, cucumbers, tomatoes, and other items. Nobody went away hungry. Devotions were from John 4: 19ff, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. It was in preparation for Quaker worship "in spirit and truth." One of the Muslim members of our group commented on how Jesus' message about worship not being confined to particular places was very consistent with Muslim understanding, too, of G-d's presence everywhere.

Meeting for worship at the old stone meetinghouse was lovely as always. Twenty-five were in attendance, and with the exception of one message out of the silence (by the aforementioned Muslim!) and a request to sing "A Song of Peace," the hour passed in blessed quiet reflection.

Following worship and a raucous fellowship time over coffee and baked goods we'd picked up from a bakery on the way, we walked the mile to the governmental headquarters for a meeting with the staff of PLO executive committee member Hanan Ashrawi. That was a fascinating hour which I'll inadequately try to sum up:

Rasha, a Palestinian-American Emory University graduate, began by sharing about the impact on Palestinians of recent U.S. political decisions. The embassy move and declaration of Jerusalem as an undivided capital violated international law and went against long U.S. policy of delaying such a move until there was a two-state solution. Ending U.S. funding of UNRWA and USAid has had a devastating impact on employment and support for coexistence programs and education.

Such moves are seen by Palestinians as "economic blackmail," she said, "and we are a resilient people; we will not give in to it. If we weren't occupied militarily and were allowed self-determination, we would have a thriving economy and wouldn't need foreign aid." Rasha went on to say that this is the reason the Palestinian Authority is boycotting the Bahrain Economic Workshop. "The Kushner plan is disingenuous," she said, "and when it fails, the Palestinians will be blamed, even while in 1988 we recognized Israel, were ready for negotiations, and stated our willingness to accept a Palestinian state on only 22% of historic British Mandate Palestine."

Rasha's colleague, Abdallah, contributed stories to underscore the impact of the ongoing occupation on everyday life. "I couldn't attend the birth of my daughter, because my wife could get a permit to go to the hospital in Jerusalem, but I couldn't. I couldn't accompany my mother to the hospital for her heart condition. I can't take my family to the beach; I can't fly out of Tel Aviv." He went on to share about the experience of taking his young children to see the latest Mary Poppins film, the joyful experience spoiled by running into an arbitrary military checkpoint on the way home. Most poignantly, though, he told about his 4-year old daughter who loves police in uniform and always goes up to them to thank them. "Recently we had a permit to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and she saw Israeli police in the Muslim compound. She went up to them to shake their hands and thank them. We didn't discourage her or tell her she shouldn't have done that. We don't teach hate. But what do we tell them when they see the wall or have to come inside from play because of tear gas?"

As the hour ended, one in our group asked, "When is enough enough, and you put down the pen and pick up the sword?" Rasha responded, "We will always be resilient and be involved in popular resistance to the situation, but we are committed to nonviolence. We look to South Africa as an example. We aren't anti-Israel or antisemitic. We are anti-occupation."

After leaving the PLO offices, filled with information and with Arabic coffee and butter cookies, we toured the nearby tomb of Yasser Arafat and the new Arafat Museum, concluding with time in his bunker/office/sleeping quarters during the last three years he lived under siege before his death in 2004.

The day concluded with a delightful supper at the home of the Upper School Principal, followed by a check-in back at the School on the Grant Hall veranda in the cool night air -- just before the last call to prayer wafted from the nearby minarets.

Tomorrow we haul dirt at the Lower School after today's "getting the dirt" on the political and economic situation. Fortunately, it's not the rainy season in Palestine, so at least we won't be throwing mud!

June 24

This was our first voluntary service day at the Ramallah Friends School, and we earned our keep! A two-ton load of dirt and rock was dumped at the top of a flight of outdoor steps at the Lower School, and we had to begin moving it to an area where they are creating more green space. Our clever group quickly formed a bucket brigade, and with frequent breaks and work rotation under a hot sun, we got about half of the dirt

moved before the delicious lunch of falafal, hummus, pita, and various dips that the School provided -- topped off by a dessert of knafah!

Walking back to our quarters from the Lower School, we came across a huge demonstration in the streets against the Bahrain Economic Workshop that is part of Kushner's "peace plan," but which the Palestinians are boycotting. As I passed through the tail end of the demonstration, I recognized Mustafa Barghouti, a noted physician, former presidential candidate, member of the Palestinian National Legislature, and General Secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative. We've met with him often, and I greeted him, shook his hand, and said we were looking forward to our scheduled meeting with him later in the day!

And meet him we did -- along with a delegation of trade unionists from England, various countries in Europe, and South Africa. They were finishing up a week of fact-finding in the region. Their insights contributed a great deal to our discussion, but the most impactful statement came from the black South African, who said that he had grown up under Apartheid in South Africa and was shocked to see that Palestinians in the occupied territories were living under a system that, in his own words, "is worse than anything I experienced in South Africa."

After the trade unionists left for another meeting, we had Barghouti to ourselves, and our questions -- and his responses -- started flying. From a D.C. lobbyist in our group came the question, "If Congress called you today for advice, what would you tell them?" The answer was, "Respect international law. The U.S. imposes strict sanctions on Russia, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Iran, and other countries for supposed and actual violations of international law, but not on our occupiers. Why is that? Devastating sanctions are imposed on Iran for supposed nuclear intentions, but not on our occupiers who actually have nuclear weapons. Most of all, ask them if they believe that Israelis and Palestinians are equal human beings."

Of course, there was a question about the Bahrain Economic Workshop demonstration and why the Palestinians are boycotting it. "The Workshop is a part of the Kushner "peace plan," the goals of which are 1) Declare an economic plan, and 2) Normalize relations between Israel and the Arab states. The Arab Initiative of several years ago would have normalized relations with Israel, but only after it ended the occupation. Kushner's plan allows for normalization without an end to occupation. And the economic plan simply won't work. Ariel Sharon tried it while Israel's Defense Minister, and it failed dramatically. But let's say we did adopt it. How can it work while we have no control over our own borders, natural resources, customs taxes, and access to all parts of the country? Furthermore, Kushner's \$50 billion "incentive plan" is spread out over ten years, and comes as a loan! 22% of that amount is to other countries with the expressed intent of absorbing Palestinian refugees and neutralizing UNRWA and delegitimizing the Right of Return. After all is said and done, Palestine would receive \$800,000,000 a year in exchange for liquidating all our human and legal rights. And that's the amount of money we receive from countries already."

In the final analysis, Barghouti said, it's not a U.S. plan at all. It follows exactly the formulation in Benjamin Netanyahu's 1994 book that sought to delegitimize the Oslo Peace Accords. "It's an Israeli plan, pure and simple. There weren't even Palestinians involved in shaping it."

Folks in the States may get to hear him say some of this themselves, as he was interviewed by NBC and PBS at the demonstration. You won't hear him in person, though. Like many others in Palestinian leadership, he has been denied a visa to the U.S. Yet another "incentive" to forfeit their rights for a mess of pottage.

The day concluded with a bit of food grazing. We took the group downtown and gave them options of shawarma, falafal, and an assortment of goodies at Zayt u Zatr. Our bounty was then consumed in the Friends meetinghouse garden nearby.

June 25

Walking back through town from our morning's work at the Girls School campus, I stopped in front of the Hinn barber shop to ask the group if any of them knew of Benny Hinn, the flamboyant faith healer televangelist. Although he describes himself as an Israeli, he's Palestinian from Ramallah. Surprisingly, none of the folks had heard of him. As I described his antics of waving his suit jacket over fainting believers,

promising that they would be healed, a man popped out through the door and said, "Benny Hinn is my cousin!" I responded, "He doesn't make his money cutting hair, does he?" Laughing, his cousin said, "Oh, no; he does not!" and popped back in the shop.

Another day of shoveling dirt, with the wrinkle of having some clean up the School's arboretum. A good morning's work all around. Other than working and the requisite eating, the program was a meeting with staff of Al-Haq, an international human rights organization founded in 1979. They have field staff who monitor human rights abuses by both Israel and the various factions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Al-Haq's presentation to us, though, didn't focus on human rights violations so much as on the economic bits that somehow the Kushner "Peace to Prosperity" plan has left out. The gist of it is that if Palestinians had access to their own lands in "Area C" of the Oslo Accords rather than Israel's having essentially confiscated them (And Kushner's plan essentially gives Israel carte blanche to annex them), they could add more than \$3 billion to their economy and benefit far more from this boost than the "Deal of the Century" can promise -- even with its very vague outlines. Ending the occupation altogether would have the added bonus of the Palestinians' not having to forfeit their human and legal rights! The analysis Al-Haq shared with us came from the World Bank and is outlined here: <http://www.worldbank.org/.../Palestinian-Access-Area-C--Econo...>

There was a great deal more shared about restrictions on Palestinian daily life as well as the economy through Israel's control of all aspects of that life and economy, but I've shared much of that before. I'll just say that it's a very grim picture. Yet the amazing thing is that Palestinians continue to cling to hope -- and to their rights. They know that, eventually, in somebody's lifetime, justice will be served -- just as the prophets I've been reading from for morning devotions have envisioned.

Our group's great hope was for an enjoyable evening at the home of our program coordinator, Mohammad Salim, and he and his family did not disappoint! We had an incredible meal of Palestinian fare and wonderful conversation with Mohammad's wife, three of their sons and their spouses, and several of their grandchildren.

Walking home in the beautifully cool night air, we were greeted warmly by families enjoying the evening on their porches and in the streets. One young boy called out to us in English with a distinctly American accent, and I asked where he was from. "Chicago" came the reply. "Cubs or Sox?" was my response.

He gave the right answer. I'm still hoping for the right answer to the situation in this region.

June 26

I didn't think we could do it, but this morning we finished spreading a two-ton pile of soil in the gardens of the Ramallah Friends Lower School. It's not that I didn't have faith in our hard working group, but with every bucket of dirt we hauled, we were losing ground!

In other news, the PLO released its official statement rejecting the proposals of the Bahrain Economic Workshop. I know that many people in the U.S. will read the statement by the PLO rejecting the "Deal of the Century" proposed by Kushner, et. al. and say, "There go the Palestinians; they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." But that statement will be as wrong now as it has been in the past. I wish people could walk among the people we do daily during our service-learning trip and hear the "Arab street" laugh at the ridiculousness of the "Prosperity to Peace" proposal and say, "We are not sex workers. We can't be bought for money."

I wonder if more people might understand the wholesale rejection of the "peace plan" if they put it in terms of the Civil Rights struggle in the U.S. during the 1950s and '60s. Suppose the struggle of black Americans for an end to segregation, denial of voting rights, and other affronts to their human dignity and legal rights was met with an economic plan that kept segregation in place, access to the ballot box limited, and maintained their second-class citizenship. "Here's a wad of money, but it will be administered by the white supremacist power structure already in place -- and you have to forfeit your claims for equal rights."

How do you think people would have responded?

A day with many highlights in Ramallah. Breakfast with this crew is always fun, and sharing the devotional reading from Micah 4:1ff after having sat under local vines and fig trees was especially meaningful. Everyone

pitched in to finish up hauling more than two tons of dirt, and that felt good -- although we are continuing to feel it in our backs and legs!

Supper this evening at the Shammass family was the very epitome of Palestinian hospitality. The joy of their reception of our visit and the amazing amount and variety of delicious food overwhelmed us. Fun for me to see two former students who were also there.

And there was another speaker, whose insights I'll share at some length, as they were a very informative overview of the current situation and how things have arrived at the mess the region is in. Ghassan Khatib has met with us often and has a particularly valuable perspective on things, as he was one of the negotiators at the '91 Madrid Conference and subsequently served as a minister of health and economics in the Palestinian Authority as well as the spokesman for the PA. He is a Ph.D. scholar in economics who also does extensive political polling. He is the author of "Palestinian Politics and the Peace Process." Here goes a sometime synopsis, sometime verbatim of his presentation:

The past two years have been traumatic for Palestinians: 1) The "Arab Spring" caused the Arab world to pay far less attention and give far less support to the Palestinian situation, and 2) The current U.S. administration has taken the Israeli position on almost every issue and has devastated the Palestinian economy by cutting all aid.

The full "deal of the century" has not yet been revealed, but the Bahrain Workshop has revealed the economic parameters. The PLO and PA have already rejected it, and it will fail because 1) The sources for funding the proposed \$50 billion in economic incentives are not forthcoming, and 2) The Israeli occupation severely restricts the Palestinian economy. "End or relax the occupation, and then we can talk about economic plans. But when the plan fails, we will be blamed."

Another factor Palestinians are facing is that Israeli society no longer has one "land for peace" party and one in opposition. The last election displayed that there is no debate in Israel about leaving any Palestinian territory. There is no space now for negotiating with Israel. "It's a triple whammy: the situation in the Arab world; U.S. politics; and Israeli politics. But we will continue to resist nonviolently through steadfastness; appeals to the UN and the international community on the basis of international law; and the call for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions. Right now, we are inward looking and taking care of our own people."

There was a lively Q & A, during which Ghassan shared very forthrightly about mistakes the Palestinians have made in the past; the need for a vibrant democracy and elections; reasons for not holding those elections; and the split between Hamas and Fatah. He also addressed the issue of Iran, saying that Iran does back military operations by Hamas and the Houthis, as well as attacks in the Gulf, but he supports the Obama approach which had reduced tensions. The current U.S. approach is increasing Iran's popularity. "The situation cannot be solved by force, but Netanyahu is pushing for war."

Whew! Now to get some shut-eye before a big day in Jerusalem tomorrow, during which we'll not only "see the sights" but meet with an Israeli settler and with Israelis and Arabs who have lost children to the violence.

June 27

Jane and I tell our service-learning groups coming with us to Palestine and Israel that we will have a schedule for them but that they should be prepared for multiple changes as we go from Plan A to Plan B to Plan C -- with the alternative plans sometimes working out better than the original ones. Today proved that we weren't blowing smoke! We got pretty far into the alphabet before finally getting back to the School around 9:00 pm this evening.

It all started out like luck was smiling on us. Two young Palestinians who were accompanying us to Jerusalem on rare permits from Israel arrived right on time for our departure at 7:30 -- and a public bus was waiting for us with just the right number of seats for our 16! Then it started going wonky!

Just as the bus pulled out of the lot and was passing the School, Jane yelled back to me that one of the group had forgotten her passport! While I was being slow on the uptake as usual, she sprung into action, pulled her off the bus, and yelled that she'd meet us at Damascus Gate. And off we went!

Then it got wonkier. When our bus stopped at the checkpoint, we internationals had to stay on while the Israeli soldiers with big black guns ordered the two Palestinian young women off the bus and through the cattle chutes and electronic turnstiles of the checkpoint. We then proceeded through, only to have to get off and wait for another bus. While we waited for the two women, who should appear but Jane and the other group member!

But then we kept waiting for the other two, and waiting, and waiting. Finally, Jane said, "You go on with the group, and I'll catch up with you at the Southern Wall."

So off we went, leaving Jane by herself. We made it to Jerusalem without further hassle, other than bad traffic, and were walking across the street to Damascus Gate, when we heard Jane calling! She'd gotten the young women and had caught up with us! Thank goodness, for when we got to the Southern Wall site for our tour, it was closed for some special event that day! Not sure how we would have met up then!

But the closure of the Southern Wall meant we could visit the Haram es-Sharif/Temple Mount and see the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock up close!

The rest of the day went by without quite the same drama -- except for folks heading out in various directions to "do" Jerusalem on their own, leaving the co-leaders to wonder if we'd ever see them again! But they showed up at the Redeemer Lutheran Church right on time after the rest of the group returned from ascending the Mount of Olives.

At the Church, we met with three speakers about whom I'll write later. Following that, our plan for supper was scuttled as we found the restaurant closed. But the alternative place was wonderful, and all enjoyed a leisurely meal after a long, hot day. But that's not all! The bus we got on to return to Ramallah went only as far as the checkpoint and then let us off. We had to negotiate with two taxi drivers to take us the rest of the way. Thank goodness for one of the Palestinian women who jumped in and did the haggling! We finally arrived at the School with four in one taxi and 12 others in a van with room for 9! Some in our group who had been to Kenya compared it to a ride in a Matatu, minus the goats and chickens!

Quite the wild day -- and I haven't even talked about the speakers yet!

As we were leaving the Old City of Jerusalem, we passed a busker outside Jaffa Gate. He was a "Haredi," an ultra-Orthodox Jew with long beard and payot, black broad brim hat, long overcoat, and knee britches -- strumming an electric guitar hooked to amplifiers and playing "Hotel California"!

Seemed an adequate image for our bizarre day!

June 28

It felt like whiplash going from our first speaker yesterday in Jerusalem to our second, but it was a good exercise in the challenges of understanding the way different people respond to the situation here.

Teddy, a longtime Israeli friend from the settlement of Givat Ze'ev, began his time with us by stating, "We are at war with people who want to kill us. Imagine if rockets fell in any neighborhood of the U.S. You'd level 'em! The U.S. is terrible at creating collateral damage!" He went from there to a stinging description of Islam as an "illiberal minority" in which "there isn't enough oral Torah." That was followed by his statement, "We can tolerate Israeli Arabs, but we can't have a democratic society with upwards of 40% of such an illiberal minority."

It was rather a shock to our systems after the mostly conciliatory messages we've heard in Ramallah and the incredible hospitality we've experienced among Muslims. "You're in a bubble there in Ramallah," Teddy responded when this was noted. What was another head turner was his response to the question of where he would place himself on the political and social spectrum in Israel. "I voted Meretz in the last election! The only parties to the left of me are the Arab ones!"

The tone was moderated a bit by his sharing that a daughter is the coach of a mixed Jewish and Arab basketball team, and that after coming from a right wing settler mentality had been transformed by the experience to one of toleration and reconciliation. And to another question about the fairness of IDF soldiers' receiving light punishment for convictions of murder while children throwing stones are sentenced

to lengthy prison terms, he replied, "That's not good." He also laughed when yet another group member asked about the support of evangelical Christians for Israel while holding a theology that Jews who didn't convert to Christianity would be condemned to hell when Jesus returned. "I'm okay with that," he chuckled. "When the End of Days comes, we'll sort it all out."

While ending his time with us by saying that he realized that he lived under Israeli civil law while the Palestinians living in the village next to his settlement were under military law, and that wasn't just, he went on to say, "If the West Bank became a Palestinian state, it would become a launching pad for terror. What's wrong with Palestinian surrender?"

With only a brief break for coffee and tea, we launched into a meeting with two members of the Parents Circle, an organization of 620 families who have lost loved ones to the violence of the situation. Ben's daughter Ya'el was a member of the IDF when she was murdered by a Hamas suicide bomber near their home in Ashkelon. Moira's husband, a Palestinian Muslim, was murdered by an Israeli police officer when he got out of his car following a minor traffic accident.

Both detailed the initial emotions of losing a daughter and a husband: denial, rage, desire for revenge, depression, and finally coming to grips with the fact that none of that emotion would bring back a loved one. Ben commented that he was so angry at first that, as a trained sniper, he wanted to go out and randomly kill five Palestinians. "But if I kill five, or 50, or 100, it wouldn't bring Ya'el back, and then five innocents would be dead, and then there would be revenge from their families, and then the IDF would level a section of Gaza. Revenge would only perpetuate a bloody cycle of violence." He finally reached the resolution that bringing peace closer would be his best consolation, and he joined the Parents Circle. "The blood of both sides is the same," he said.

Moira joined the Parents Circle after she took the case of her husband's murder to the Israeli Supreme Court. And though she lost there, she noticed that there were Israelis who came to support her, even though she didn't know them. Learning that they were part of the organization, she joined and now works with the summer camps the Circle sponsors to bring Jewish and Arab youth together to learn about reconciliation, speaking with "the other" to tear down the walls of hatred of "the unknown."

Ben noted that another project of the Parents Circle is "Hello Peace," an anonymous computer phone questionnaire that enables Israelis and Palestinians to register their true feelings and talk with "peace partners" on the other side. To date, they have logged 1.8 million conversations. "Both sides have extremists," he said, "but they are the minority. Politicians see war as good for business; people want peace and must be the ones to bring it about."

In final statements to us, Ben said, "Tell Trump to renew USAid funding. It had supported our efforts in reconciliation and coexistence but was cut." Moira commented, "Israelis live in a bubble, yet here is Ben, who lives within the range of Hamas rockets and fire bombs, and he has gotten out of that bubble to know 'the stranger'." Ben's response was, "Until Ya'el's murder, I hadn't opened my eyes."

Our time with Teddy almost burst our bubble. The experience with Moira and Ben renewed our faith that, indeed, there are people who see others on our globe as 'sharing the same blood.'

My posts from Ramallah can be mighty "noisy" for a "silent Friend," so I'll try to keep it short and share just some highlights of the day:

1. Sixth-day prayers with the community of Muslims at the Al-Ayn Mosque. We were welcomed warmly, and the former imam, now a member of the national legislative council, spoke with us about the common beliefs and aspirations of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. He thanked Quakers profusely for the impact they have had on Ramallah and Palestine.
2. Lunch at the Samer Restaurant, with incredible Israeli journalist Amira Hass holding forth at the table next to ours.
3. The Greensboro News & Record accepted my letter to the editor about what we're learning regarding Palestinian response to the Bahrain Economic Workshop.
4. An amazing supper with our good friends, the Ma'alouf family. Their daughter, Tamara, who graduated from Guilford a year ago, has returned and is beginning a new job as the program coordinator for Hanan Ashrawi's Miftah organization. Miftah is an NGO that works to build democratic structures in Palestine.

Tamara's first task will be to coordinate a Congressional visit to Ramallah.

5. Informative conversation over sweets and tea after supper with the family about the situation in Palestine. In brief: "It's bad." The U.S. aid cuts, Israeli withholding of tax revenue owed to the Palestinian Authority, and the confiscation of Palestinian land and resources by the occupation has strangled the economy. The government has had to borrow money from the banks to pay salaries and will not be able to borrow much beyond three months from now; citizens depend on loans for cars and housing; it's all a house of cards. Still, the "Peace to Prosperity" proposals are seen as a sham; when analyzed, they will do nothing for the Palestinian economy.

6. Even with the situation, there is exactly one homeless person in all of Ramallah.

7. And the Palestinians maintain their sense of humor. A common joke about the "Deal of the Century," a part of which would have Palestinians leasing land in the Sinai is this: "Go to the Sinai? No way -- unless I get an apartment with a view of the sea."

Speaking of the sea, the wind over the Mediterranean 40 miles away is blowing moisture clouds over the Palestinian highlands, and they are racing low over the city, bringing a refreshing chill to the air and the illusion that it could rain. As the locals assure us: it will not.

Sadly, kind of like the promises of "Peace to Prosperity." Except that is full of hot air.

June 29

We completed the list of our workcamp tasks this morning by giving a thorough cleaning of the Ramallah Friends meetinghouse worship room, tidying up the garden, and doing a major pruning of the bushes and trees. It looks great! In the process of working in the garden, we kept a look out for the turtle that has taken up residence there at least since we first came across it nearly 20 years ago. I was the lucky one to find it under a bush I was whacking back; it had the distinctive scar on its shell that identified it as "our" turtle. The meeting secretary came out to see it and said that it didn't have a name; she asked if we'd like to give it one. Jane suggested "Kinky" -- not for some unspoken odd wishes she has, but for the misconstrued lyric she sang as a girl in the Baptist Church. "Lead on, O King Eternal" became for her "Lead on, O Kinky Turtle."

After the satisfaction of seeing the results of our hard work (and a trip to Rukab's across the street for ice cream!), we met with Jean Zaru, former clerk of the meeting and author of "Occupied with Nonviolence." She shared about experiences in the early years of the occupation when her husband, Fuad, was the Boys School Principal. One day the Israeli military governor came calling, and Jean hosted him and his entourage at their home on campus. He started right in commenting on the flower arrangement she had, saying "Arabs don't like flowers like we Israelis do. You have only one flower shop in Ramallah. We have 12 in Jerusalem." To which Jean replied, "You live in apartments in Jerusalem and don't have gardens to grow flowers. We Palestinians live traditionally with a large garden surrounding our houses. We don't need flower shops."

The conversation went on in that vein, with much jousting and parrying until the military governor rose to leave and told Jean's husband that he'd better watch out, his wife was a leftist and a radical! As he left, his gun dropped out on the couch, and he didn't notice. Jean followed him to tell him that he needed to retrieve it. "We have no need of it," she told the man. "We are nonviolent." Commenting on the discussion she had with him, Jean said that she applied what she learned about the rules of dialogue through her interfaith work with the World Council of Churches: "You have to listen to the other and take them seriously."

Jean went on to talk about the contemporary situation, concluding her remarks by saying that Israel needed to end the occupation, not only for the well-being of Palestinians but also for the sake of Israel. "Maintaining the occupation is destroying Jewish values."

In gratitude, Rausie Hobson from our group presented Jean with a ceramic bridge, symbolic of the bridge that Jean has been among people. There were tears.

Following her talk, we met with Sam Bahour (epalestine.com), an Arab-American businessman who has lived in Ramallah for the past 25 years and developed the country's telecommunication system. A short synopsis of his talk with us can't do justice to his clear articulation of the crisis facing all parties involved in the situation. I

encourage you to go to his website -- or simply look for his commentary in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Ha'aretz, or other international publications. But here goes an attempt:

"This is the most sensitive time in Palestinian history," Sam said. Here's why:

1. Palestinian society under occupation is collapsing. The average age in Gaza and the West Bank is around 19, but the leadership averages 79. The latter continue to embrace the "dead horse" of Oslo and the 2-state solution. The younger generation recognizes that there will be no Palestinian state and are ready for a one-state solution and to turn the struggle into one for civil rights.
2. Israel has become more and more right-wing with each election and rejects a 2-state solution, leaving only a 1-state possibility while denying a Palestinian majority equal rights. It will mean the collapse of either a democratic or a Jewish Israel. "What happens when a nuclear power like Israel collapses?"
3. U.S. policy towards the Palestinian/Israeli situation has completely taken Israel's side with a series of decisions, every move cementing the fact that the U.S. can no longer be an honest broker in mediating the problem. Empowering Israel to exercise total control over the situation, the U.S. is allowing Israel to "drive drunk over the cliff of the 2-state solution." "The U.S. is Israel's friend," Sam said, "and friends don't let friends drive drunk."

Sam went on to describe the weight of all this on the shoulders of Palestinians, and how amazed he is that they haven't reacted more angrily than they do. "If 20% of this happened in the U.S., can you imagine the violence?"

"If Israel and the U.S. continue on the path to a 1-state situation," he concluded, "then, indeed, this will turn into a 100-year civil rights struggle, at the end of which, Israel won't exist."

That the U.S. Congress is blind to all this, Sam believes, illustrates how broken the U.S. political system is. "It is captive to powerful lobbies."

Following a morning of hard work and two engaging presentations, we got to tour Donn Hutchison's museum of a 1936 Palestinian house and enjoy a wonderful meal and more good conversation at the home of the Musarsa'a family, whose son, Walid, graduated from Guilford three years ago and is now attending the Earlham School of Religion. The father served us "Family" brand juice from a start-up company he and partners have begun, using Palestinian-sourced fruit, labor, and ingenuity.

Kushner's "Peace to Prosperity" initiative arrived still-born. Palestinians don't need a bailout; they need an end to a stifling occupation and lack of equal rights to let native drive and ingenuity thrive.

June 30

Devotions at breakfast this morning were from the parable of the wedding feast in Luke 14, since I couldn't find any biblical references to 45th wedding anniversaries! In meeting for worship with Ramallah Friends later in the morning, ministry was given on Psalm 72, the message of which is deliverance to the poor and relief to the oppressed. I trust that was intended for the people we've been accompanying in Palestine and not for the anniversary couple!

The rest of the day was a tour of the villages to the west of Ramallah, beginning with a visit to two important archaeological sites in El-Bireh -- a caravanserai and the ruins of a Crusader church -- and a visit in the Jalazone refugee camp with members of the Popular Committee, the equivalent of a city council.

Our time in Jalazone, although longer than we'd anticipated, and a bit tense at times, was very important. For one, the camp is right across the street from Bet-El, one of the largest Israeli settlements deep in the heart of the occupied Palestinian territory. It is also the site of Israel's headquarters of the occupation in the West Bank -- and the recipient of some of Jared Kushner's largesse as well as the settlement where the U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, has served on the board. We were told what that proximity means for the camp; among other things, clouds of tear gas through the middle school near the settlement.

But the most disturbing was the matter-of-fact story the Committee's head told us of his son, Mahmoud. Returning from his job in a factory one day, he got out of the car near the settlement and was immediately

shot in the legs by a soldier. While incapacitated, he was shot in the stomach and left to bleed to death in the street while soldiers kept an ambulance and Mahmoud's father from reaching him.

And then we were served coffee.

Imagine. Mahmoud was probably killed by U.S.-made bullets by a soldier who is part of a military that receives nearly \$4 billion dollars in aid from the U.S. annually. And we visitors from the U.S. were served coffee and welcomed warmly. Unlike so many back home, others can separate the people of a country from the government of a country.

But Mahmoud's father was a bit more restrained than his friend, Hussein. He leveled a blistering deconstruction of U.S. policy in the Middle East, the Bahrain Workshop, the defunding of refugee services by the U.S. administration, and the 71-year wait for justice since they were expelled from their homes in what is now the modern state of Israel. "I have shared our story half a million times to visiting Americans," he said through a translator," and still nothing has changed! Why not?!" When he was told that we will share his story back in the States and that we hope the situation will change "shway, shway" -- in due time -- he was not impressed. "Why 'slowly'?! Isn't 71 years long enough?!"

We didn't disagree.

From there, we drove through the breathtakingly lovely olive tree-covered hills of the Palestinian highlands, past the Shuqba cave where Natufian culture began, to visit the fourth oldest village in Palestine, Aboud, and its Greek Orthodox church dating back to Queen Helena and the 4th century. There are Aramaic inscriptions on the walls! And it is still active.

Supper was in Deir Ghassaneh at a wonderfully innovative women's co-op started in 2007. They served us my favorite -- msakhan, a quarter roasted chicken on olive oil, onion, and spices-drenched "taboun" bread, a platter sized flat bread. Oh, my.

After a tour of the Ghassanid-era village, we finished our looooooong day by visiting Bil'in, a village made famous by the Oscar-nominated documentary "Five Broken Cameras" about the residents' nonviolent protests against the route of Israel's separation fence through their land. After weekly nonviolent protests over six years that resulted in the deaths of two villagers and injuries to 1,400 more, Bil'in won their case in international and Israeli courts. On one of our previous trips, we were privileged to visit the village the day the IDF was dismantling the fence, returning almost 150 acres of land to the town's use.

We were accompanied on our visit by Abdallah, the director general of the "Popular Actions and Resistance" committee of Bil'in. He took us through the regained land to the re-located separation barrier -- a tall concrete wall -- on the other side of which is the rapidly expanding settlement of Modi'in, also on the village's land.

All that, and we still had to postpone another important stop to later in the week.

Tomorrow we head to the Galilee by way of the Israeli Jewish/Arab coexistence community of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom and the Israeli Arab village of Ibillin, home of the school founded by Abuna Elias Chacour.

All-in-all, today was not a bad way to celebrate 45 years of marriage, 40 of which Jane has shared with me our commitment through visits and solidarity work back home to the search for a just peace in the Middle East.

All that, and she got an exotic meal in an exotic location, albeit with a somewhat less than exotic husband!

July 1

Devotions this morning were from I Kings 18 -- the Texas steel cage smackdown between the prophet Elijah and the priests of Baal. And now we're in Ibillin, overlooking Mount Carmel in the Lower Galilee, where the contest took place. "Ibillin, Ibillin, prettiest town (almost) that I've ever seen; people there don't treat you mean, in Ibillin!"

More later about our inspiring morning in the Israeli peace and reconciliation village of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom and our opportunities later this afternoon exploring a traditional home site in the town, enjoying one

of Badia's amazing meals, and meeting with Abuna Elias Chacour, founder of the Mar Elias School where we are staying and author of "Blood Brothers."

Ibillin, Ibillin, prettiest town (almost) that I've ever seen....If only the hills weren't so steep and the streets so narrow!

I always told the students on my J-term academic programs in Palestine and Israel what an Israeli Knesset member once told me: "One of the great tragedies here is that there are two narratives that are both true, but don't meet." Since our FUM service-learning group's meeting last week with an Israeli settler, I have had that statement confirmed over and over.

Both in his time with us and in two long e-mails since, Teddy has emphasized that we have been living in a bubble of progressive, liberal Palestinians and have a false sense of them as a people. "We are at war with them; they want to kill us" is his constant refrain. Yet in every interaction with Palestinians, whether in the cities of Ramallah and El-Bireh, East Jerusalem, the rural villages of Aboud, Deir Ghassaneh, and Bil'in, or in the Jalazone refugee camp, we encounter people who not only welcome us with unparalleled hospitality but are consistent in their message: "We don't hate the Jews; we aren't terrorists; we want to live together; but we want to live together as equal human beings."

That message was reiterated today among Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel who are internally displaced. At the peace & reconciliation village of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, Daoud and Rita shared their commitment to doing the very hard work of building and maintaining community with Arabs and Jews, even while living as second-class citizens desiring justice. And at the Mar Elias School in Ibillin, Abuna Elias Chacour shared the story of how as a young boy he saw his village of Bir'am in the Upper Galilee bombed to rubble by Israeli warplanes, even after the Israeli High Court affirmed the villagers' right to return after the '48 war -- yet his charge to us was to be both pro-Jewish and pro-Palestinian by working for a just peace.

I continue to wonder who's living in a bubble, but I can't discount Teddy's experience; it represents a consistent fear I have heard among many Israelis. Yet neither can I discount the consistent experience I have had over the past 49 years of encountering Palestine -- or that of the Israelis whose encounter with Palestinians has led them to work tirelessly for a just peace.

Two narratives? Heck; multiple ones!

But to end on a more positive note, the following narrative from this evening's interaction with Elias Chacour: A seventysomething widower introduced himself to Abuna by saying, "I came on this trip with high ideals about learning -- and I have learned that these Palestinian women are quite beautiful!"

July 2

Our breakfast reading for this morning was from Matthew 14, "the feeding of the 5,000." And about an hour later we were at Tabgha on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, viewing an ancient mosaic commemorating the story. The two fish and basket with four loaves in the mosaic under the altar of the church building had long baffled me, as Matthew's miracle story clearly states that Jesus turned two fish and FIVE loaves into a potluck for "5,000 men, as well as women and children" -- possibly upwards of 29,000. It was explained to me recently that the fifth loaf is the Eucharist on the altar.

Tabgha was followed by a short trip to the Mount of the Beatitudes, the supposed site of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. From that viewpoint overlooking the Sea of Galilee, we could see from the Golan Heights to the fishing village of Capernaum (where Jesus called several of the disciples) and across a full view of the Sea to the village of Magdala, home of Mary Magdalene. In that one panoramic view, we could encompass much of the geography of Jesus' life. As I commented to the group, he might as well have been a dairy farmer, as restricted as the physical circumference of his life was!

On the grounds of the Church of the Beatitudes, Jane and I always go to two spots as "sacred" to us as the whole site is to Christians. One is the root structure of a Banyan tree where our son Seth fell asleep on our trip in 1997. The other is the spot where Stoph proposed to our daughter Maia! Others found different spots to sit and read Matthew 5 - 7.

From there, we traveled north to the Lebanon/Syria border to visit Kibbutz Senir, passing through Kiryat Shemona, an Israeli city with a unique children's playground. As we passed it, I pointed out that it has three brightly painted captured Syrian army tanks incorporated into the play equipment -- an example of normalizing the military in a society.

At the kibbutz, we met with our good friend Lior, a 43-year old cattleman and tour guide born and raised there. As in the past, he described the socialist origins of the more than 200 kibbutzim in Israel and their successful collectivist social and economic way of life until the cotton market collapse of 1994, at which point most kibbutzim underwent a capitalist transformation. He misses the old way of life.

Lior shared with us his experience in two Gaza wars as well as action in Lebanon and Syria -- along with a childhood spent in bomb shelters as rockets fell on the kibbutz. "I can't be objective with you," he told us, and painted in stark terms the threats of tunnels, rockets, Iran's operatives in the region, and the necessity of responding with force. We then toured one of the bomb shelters as he explained that now everyone has an app. on their phone that alerts them when rockets are on their way, and they can go to their homes which, by government requirement, are built to withstand a direct rocket hit. "Fortunately," he went on to say, "they don't have very good aim, and we've never suffered any casualties." But he cautioned that more sophisticated rocket guidance systems are finding their way into the region, and the future could be "interesting."

About the Palestinian situation, Lior commented that he blamed bad and corrupt leadership, wondering why Palestinians hadn't risen up as Arabs in other places had to overthrow or challenge their leaders. At the same time, he leveled a blistering critique at Israel's current corrupt government. His recommendation for a "solution"? Get 20 "clean" people from both sides to sit around a table for a weekend and come up with a plan.

Two other comments stuck with me. When asked about the upcoming Israeli elections, he admitted that he would prefer simply to enjoy the good life he has on the kibbutz with his family and friends, lovely nature, his cows and avocado trees, and forget about the rest. And when asked what he had learned that was important to him in his military service, he responded that after his three years of active duty, he traveled to 54 countries over eight years and realized "There is probably a better way of doing things."

At our check-in tonight after another amazing Badia meal and spectacular Mediterranean sunset, the group expressed appreciation for what we have heard from the Israelis we have met -- adding to our total experience. Not that it makes it easy. As one of the Palestinians traveling with us noted, there are privileges others have that she can't share. "Seeing the beauty of a land that was taken away from us reminds me of how much we have lost -- and how difficult it is for me to even get permission to see it!"

We Americans, with no natural connection to the land, can travel freely while people born here can't. And others are able to put the political issues out of their minds while getting on with their lives.

A beautiful land; a beautiful sunset; beautiful meals; beautiful people. If only we could come up with a beautiful peace.

Soon the choral hymn to Mary will waft from the nearby Melkite Church in Ibillin, the community's welcome complement to the Muslim call to prayer, and another day will begin on our service-learning trip. Sadly, we'll be leaving the lovely accommodations of the Mar Elias Educational Institutions and Badia's cooking, but adventures lie ahead: passing through the Jezreel Valley near Mount Tabor and Har Megiddo (Armageddon!), driving through the Jordan Valley, visiting the archaeological site in Jericho, meeting with the monks in the Monastery of the Temptation of Jesus, seeing where the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in Qumran, floating in the toxic sludge of the Dead Sea, and winding up back in Ramallah.

In Ramallah this evening, we'll be treated to a pre-Fourth of Seventh Month cookout at the School. No big patriotic parade for us, but we have seen a lot of tanks over the past couple of days! And not just water tanks!

July 3

Devotions this morning were from 2 Kings 2:19ff -- because we would be seeing Elisha's spring in Jericho later in the day. If you happen to read the passage, you'll see why it was hard to "bear"! 😊;

After leaving Ibbilin, we drove through the Jezreel Valley, enjoying not only the lush agriculture but also viewing Mount Tabor in the distance. The lovely, symmetrical mountain was the site of the Transfiguration of Jesus and the battle mentioned in Judges 4 that features a female leader of the tribal confederacy (Deborah) and another woman, Jael, who had the enemy's general, Sisera, "pegged"! An added feature of driving through the heart of ancient Palestine's fertile fields was the commentary by our Iowa farmer about modern agricultural practices back home, including weed eradication. Just as he mentioned that new applications made crop dusters unnecessary back in Iowa, a crop duster flew over the fields we were driving by!

In the Jordan Valley, we viewed what several of our speakers had noted: settlements are spreading through the occupied Palestinian territory of the valley, usurping the limited water resources and covering the land with date groves and greenhouses that could have been the source of economic growth for Palestine had Area "C" returned to Palestinian control as Oslo intended.

Stopping in Jericho, we viewed not only Elisha's spring but also wandered the "tell" (rubble hill) that has resulted from 23 separate civilizations over the past 10,000 years building on top of the ruins of the previous one. Following that, we took two daredevil vans up a steep and winding road with no barriers along the side to the Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Temptation, constructed on the face of a cliff overlooking Jericho. I've driven on such roads in the Great Smoky Mountains, and this was scarier!

The current monastery was built in 1895 at the site of previous churches located over the cave where tradition holds that Jesus fasted for 40 days and was tempted by Satan. Only three monks still live there. I assume all the others fell over the cliff! We were tempted to find alternative ways down -- but the cable car was too expensive.

We had the requisite float in the Dead Sea, marveling at how far it has receded since I first viewed it 49 years ago -- and how people cover themselves in the slime on the bottom of the greasy body of water. When Justin did, though, we were grateful. It helped atone for the Stars & Stripes Speedo he was wearing!

Our stop at Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls community, coincided with a visit by a large number of IDF soldiers in full uniform and carrying their weapons. When we saw an area at the archaeological site set up for some sort of ceremony, I asked one of the soldiers what was happening. In a clear American accent, he said, "We are replacing our battalion commander." To which I replied, "Why? What did he do wrong?!"

He looked puzzled for a moment, stammered out that "No, he did great things," and then I explained that I was joking. Probably not a good idea to joke with someone carrying a big, black rifle! But I went on to comment that he sounded American, and he replied that he had lived in Dayton, Ohio, and West Lafayette, Indiana. When I asked if he had been a Boilermaker, he looked puzzled again before blurting out, "Oh! Purdue! My father was a professor there!"

A while later, Justin struck up a conversation with one of the women in the battalion, commenting on the heavy looking uniform the soldiers were wearing in the 109 degrees F. heat of the afternoon. She admitted that it was uncomfortable, but that it went with the job, and the job, as she clearly stated to us, "Is keeping you safe." Having escaped one encounter with the soldiers with no ill-effect, I didn't mention that the only time I have not felt safe where I've been staying is when IDF soldiers raid Ramallah, as they do almost every night around 3:00 p.m.!

Back in Ramallah, we were treated to wonderfully cool weather and a wonderful cookout at the School director's home. Even though he is Australian, and his wife is from New Zealand, they put it on for us as a pre-4th of Seventh Month celebration. Fortunately, Justin didn't wear his Stars & Stripes to the party. And even more fortunately, there have been no fireworks as of yet from soldiers "keeping us safe"!

July 4

It felt ironic today that while people in the U.S. were celebrating a violent uprising against a government that was oppressing them, we were hearing others talk about their nonviolent struggle against an even more oppressive regime, a government supported fully by the U.S. against those seeking their freedom and equal rights.

The first stop on our long day's itinerary was at Nabi Saleh, a Palestinian village of 500 that has held weekly demonstrations against the nearby settlement of Halamish's confiscation of their spring. Nabi Saleh's story is brilliantly chronicled in Ben Ehrenreich's award-winning book "The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine." We had breakfast in the home of the Tamimis, a family that gained notoriety two years ago when their daughter, Ahd, was arrested and imprisoned for eight months as an adolescent for slapping an Israeli soldier who had invaded their home. Her father, Bassam, met with us (as he did last year while his daughter, son, and wife were in an Israeli jail).

Sharing about the village's part of the national struggle for freedom and equal rights, Bassam addressed the controversy over the involvement of children in the demonstrations. "We do what people in India have done in giving children small doses of venom to inoculate them against snake bites. Our children are not hidden away from the struggle in order for them to grow to be strong. A recent Ph.D. study has even shown that children who participate in the demonstrations grow to be more well-adjusted and successful than those who haven't been involved." Bassam also shared about how he had once been involved in armed resistance but now advocates the nonviolent "popular resistance" adopted by Palestinian civil society in the early 2000s.

We were pleased when Bassam decided to join us on our bus for the rest of the day! It made for a crowded conveyance, what with two other guests plus our tour guides, but it was all well worth it!

Our first stop in our day's destination of Nablus was Jacob's Well, the well dug by the Hebrew patriarch 4,000 years ago and still producing fresh water. I drank some with a bit of trepidation. Not for the health of the water mind you; that was very sweet -- but for the reputation that it makes one fertile! In addition to enjoying the well and the beautiful Orthodox church built over the well only a few decades ago, we also heard the story of the conflict over the site between Palestinians and settlers who want to take it over. One of the icons in the church is of the priest who oversaw the construction of the new church being hacked to death by a settler.

We traveled from there to the top of Mount Gerizim, home to one of the two remaining communities of Samaritans -- the descendants of the ten northern tribes of the Israelites who once numbered in the millions but now total only 815. Hosni, one of the priests, and the brother of the high priest, talked with us, explaining Samaritan history, the Samaritans' contributions to world history, and their distinct identity separate from Jews. They consider themselves to be Palestinian, speak Arabic, support a two-state solution with East Jerusalem as the Palestinian state's capital, and exist peacefully in Nablus with their Christian and Muslim neighbors.

Joking with us, Hosni said, "You've probably heard about Samaritans from Jesus' teachings. Well, I'm the Good Samaritan!" He also checked our earlobes to see if any of us might bear the tell-tale mark of a Samaritan: earlobes detached from the head. He looked at mine and pronounced me as a possible 816th!

Mejdi, a Nablus historian and guide, led us on through the old city, taking us to one of the remaining olive oil soap factories. Treading carefully on the slippery floors and stairs, we viewed the process of pouring the liquid out on the floor to solidify and eventually to be cut, stacked, and wrapped. Fascinating. We bought a bunch; we'll be the cleanest and best smelling folks back in the States!

A walk through the Ottoman markets and various quarters of the old city took us past Turkish baths, exotic spice shops, memorials to the many young people who have died resisting various invasions of the city, especially the one in Fourth Month of 2002, and finally to a knafah shop, where we watched the traditional sweet being made -- and then got to sample some.

Along the way, Mejdi, a Muslim, spoke of how important it was to maintain the ancient presence of Christians in Nablus and in all of Palestine. But his concern was wider than that. "This is the Holy Land," he went on to say. "I can't imagine a Holy Land without Jews as well as Muslims and Christians. This land is for all of us; not just for one people. Call it Israel, or Palestine, or whatever you want -- just give everyone freedom and equal rights."

Mejdi also stopped by a large mural to explain its slogan, "Resist to exist." He told us that he had designed it to express his support for popular resistance against the occupation, "but the resistance must affirm life, not death." We'll hear the same message in Bethlehem when we visit the Al-Rowwad Center and learn about "beautiful resistance."

It was another long, hot day. We do pack a lot in. Our motto for these short service-learning trips might be "Go big or go home!" Well, we have a couple more days of "going big": tomorrow with former IDF soldiers in Hebron, and the next day all over Bethlehem. And soon (on the 9th) we'll be going home. But this is feeling like home, too, to all of us.

If only, like back in the States, this could be the "home of the free" as well as the brave -- and like the struggle of more than 240 years ago, this nonviolent resistance might lead to a recognition that "all people are created equal with certain inalienable rights; that among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

July 5

Hearing of Donald Trump's bizarre gaffe of praise for the Continental Army's victory in the air during the Revolution at his 4th of July extravaganza on the Washington, D.C. mall has reminded me while here in Palestine of the various aircraft that were in the Israeli air force while I was teaching at the Friends School in the early '70s. My students had the engine sounds memorized. One plane would scream overhead, and a student would say, "That's a French Mirage." Another aircraft would fly over loudly, and the verdict would be, "That's an Israeli Kfir." When a Phantom jet would pass overhead, I'd be informed, "Sir; that's one of yours!"

Probably too modern an aircraft, though, to have been used in the defeat of the British army's airports during the War for Independence.

In anticipation of our day in Hebron, this morning's reading was from Genesis 23, the story of Abraham's negotiation with the Hittites for a burial site for Sarah. I was struck by this statement from Abraham: "I am a stranger and an alien residing among you" -- and the Hittites' response of kindness and hospitality. There's a lesson in there somewhere for contemporary issues in the U.S.

And it stood in contrast to our experience of the segregated city of Hebron. We toured the ideological settlement of 850 residents that takes up 20% of the space of a Palestinian city of 120,000. Our guides were Merphie and Nir, two Israelis who have done their required military service and came out of their active duty convinced that the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has to end. As Merphie told us, "The occupation is morally unjustifiable and can't be supported by Jewish values." They are members of an organization of such former soldiers called Breaking the Silence (<https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/about/organization>)

Our tour and their commentary introduced us to the "microcosm of the occupation" that is Hebron. The streets through the settlement in the heart of Hebron are kept "sterile" (the army's word) of Palestinians so the settlers can move freely. The few remaining Palestinians living in houses along the main street that once was a bustling Palestinian market have had their front doors welded shut so they cannot exit onto the street. 1,200 former shops are now closed. Guarding the settlers are IDF units that sometimes outnumber the residents. And one of them surrounded us every step of the way on our tour.

As we began our walk down Shuhada Street, a settler car drove up next to us, and the driver rolled down his window to speak to us, clearly recognizing us as with Breaking the Silence. "I thank G-d for having given us Hebron!" he said. "It says so in the Bible." With that, he kissed two fingers, lifted them to heaven, and drove off.

Viewing the closed shops and propaganda signs the settlers have put up all along the street, it seemed clear that they did not have the attitude of their revered ancestor, Abraham, about being "strangers and aliens"! And it felt a little strange -- and alien to Quaker sensitivities! -- to be constantly surrounded by soldiers with big black guns, one especially often casually pointed at me!

At the end of the tour, we met with two Palestinians, one old and one young. The older, traditionally dressed man shared how Palestinians and Jews used to live together in peace before the political developments of the 1920s - 1940s. He invited our group of nearly fifty to his nearby house for coffee and tea. His translator explained the joke of the offer: "He satisfied the rules of Palestinian hospitality, knowing you couldn't accept -- because the army doesn't allow access to his home!"

The young man, a member of the organization Youth against the Settlements, shared how Palestinians have adopted nonviolent resistance as both a practical and moral strategy.

Before departing, Merphie told us why she and others in Breaking the Silence take the risks they do. "For some of us, it is to clear our consciences about what we did during our military service. But for all of us, it is because we remain optimistic that this situation must and will change. It may take 20, 30, or 50 years, but it will change."

Back in Ramallah, we were hosted for an amazing meal by a family whose daughter is a student at Guilford College. When the father was asked about his thoughts on what is needed to improve the situation, he had a simple answer: "Love." He and two of his daughters then gave us a concert of vocal and instrumental music. It was lovely.

Other activities of the day proved to be a microcosm of life in Palestine just as Hebron is a microcosm of the occupation. Two of our group attended the baptism of an infant this evening, while another went to a wedding, and two attended a traditional mourning reception for the death of a Friends School administrator's father. Birth, marriage, and death. The same cycle of life that is common to all humanity.

If only all could be embraced by love -- or at least by hospitality extended to "the stranger and alien."

July 6

Today was our last day of travel in Palestine before we leave for home early on the 9th -- and we packed a lot in. It was a day in and around Bethlehem, with the first stop being the requisite visit to the Church of the Nativity. As has been the case on most of our recent trips, the wait was too long to descend into the crypt below the altar where it is traditionally believed that Jesus was born. Given the number of Quakers in the group, passing up one "holy site" wasn't a big deal, and we took in other interesting aspects of the building: the cell where St. Jerome wrote the Latin version of the Bible and the still-visible bullet marks on the exterior from the time the IDF laid siege to the church and the people seeking refuge inside during the 2002 invasion. Along with the role the star marking Jesus' reputed birth site played in the start of the Crimean War, the pockmarked stone reminded me that not everyone has gotten the message that this was supposedly the birthplace of the Prince of Peace!

Our next stop was the Aida refugee camp and the Al-Rowwad (Pioneers) Cultural and Arts Center. The camp was established after the '48 war on 10 acres of land and housed refugees from the coastal plain. There are now more than 6,000 residents in the very cramped camp. If registered refugees living there do not have work, they receive the equivalent of about \$1.20 a month from UNRWA. Now, even that aid is threatened by the U.S. administration's decision to stop funding the UN agency that provides health, education, vocational training, and other services to the refugees.

Al-Rowwad was established in 1998 by Abdelfattah Abusrouf to teach "beautiful resistance" to the youth in the camp. He wanted them to resist the military occupation, but to do it in a way that enables them to live for their country rather than die for it. Drama, dance, videography, photography, vocational training, and youth and women's empowerment are hallmarks of the program. A second, beautiful six-story building has been built recently that houses a fully equipped carpentry shop, an educational commercial kitchen, and a mini-hotel that is already listed on Bookings.com.

As we were viewing the camp, the Apartheid wall that runs along the camp's northern border, and wider Bethlehem from the roof, I asked Abed if the IDF entered the camp very often. "Three nights ago they broke through the carpentry shop door to take up a position on the roof for surveillance," he said. "I'm sure they paid you for the damage," I said jokingly. Abed responded with a laugh, "They paid a visit."

From there we went to Palestine's first natural history museum, founded by Mazin Qumsiyeh, a bio-chemist who formerly taught at Duke and Yale and now teaches at Bethlehem University when he's not writing books or working seven days a week developing the museum. As always, Mazin began our visit by giving us an overview of the Palestinian/Israeli situation. And as a scientist, he put it in terms very different from our previous speakers. "Medically speaking," he told us, "if you treat the symptoms of a disease, you won't get at

the root of the problem. What you have been seeing in your travels -- the checkpoints, the wall, the segregated roads, the travel restrictions, etc. -- are symptoms of the underlying problem."

He went on to describe that problem as an occupying colonial power and that Palestinians have historically used 350 different forms of nonviolent resistance against occupying powers. "There are three possible outcomes of this situation," Mazin told us: 1) The Algerian model, with French withdrawal after millions were killed; 2) The Australian and United States model, with a genocide of the native inhabitants; or 3) The South American model, where the descendants of the colonizers and the descendants of the native population live together."

After that, we saw displays of cultural artifacts, flora and fauna, innovative sustainable agriculture techniques, and a hyena!

Our final stop was at the Tent of Nations, a 100-acre Palestinian farm in Area "C" that is surrounded by five Israeli settlements that want the land. The problem for the settlements is that the Nassar family holds title to the land and has the 103-year old documents to prove it -- even though they've had to defend that ownership to the tune of more than \$200,000 in legal fees in the Israeli court system. In spite of such difficulties, the Christian family has a sign at the entrance to their farm that states in several different languages, "We refuse to be enemies."

Failing to achieve their goals in the courts, those wanting the land have tried to make life so difficult that they would leave voluntarily: there is no water or electricity service; demolition orders are on all structures built above ground since 1967; shortly before the apricot harvest a few years ago, 2,500 of their trees were bulldozed. Still they persisted. The latest attempt was the offer of a blank cheque -- they could fill in any amount for the sale of the land. "We can't be bought; we have our rights on this land of our ancestors," Daoud Nassar told us.

That last "generous offer" struck us as an example of the ludicrousness of the "Peace to Prosperity" offer of a wad of cash to the Palestinians in exchange for their giving up their rights.

After a delicious supper with the Nassars while viewing the spectacular vista of the Palestinian highlands, we headed for home -- walking more than a quarter mile to our bus, as the IDF blocked the access road to the farm 17 years ago. At the checkpoint outside of Jerusalem, our bus was stopped, and a soldier got on. In lightly accented English, he told us, "Have a nice day. This is Israel, not Palestine."

I make it a practice not to talk back to people carrying big, black guns. It might result in a medical condition! One that went deeper than the symptom that the soldier represented.

July 7

After yesterday's visit to the Nassar farm and hearing how they had refused a blank cheque from settlers trying to buy their ancestral land, it seemed appropriate this morning to read I Kings 21 (Naboth's Vineyard) for devotions. I wonder if I should send that Tanakh portion to Kushner, Friedman, and Greenblatt.

This is a post requiring Mark 4:9 (coded language for this post, owing to the controversial nature of the speaker!)☺

Our last speaker for our time in Palestine and Israel today was a Friends School parent who is an expert on nonviolent activism and Palestinian intersectionality. He began by laying out the challenges for Palestinians in "the Trump era." "The U.S. has dropped its mask and is in bed with the far-right of Israel. It's imperialism taken to the next level. But the silver lining is that Palestinian issues are now being inserted into the anti-fascist concerns around the world. Young people, especially, are now involved in politics more than ever, and that gives us hope."

He then shared some of the strategies of Palestinian nonviolent activism, many of which have been borrowed from the South African struggle against Apartheid and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. Especially since Israel's Nation/State law has clearly embedded racial discrimination into the legal system, activists can link the universal struggle for human dignity and equal rights with the Palestinian quest for their rights. And there

have been several major successes. One of the most recent ones was the refusal of so many to perform in or attend the Eurovision contest hosted this spring in Tel Aviv. 40,000 to 50,000 were expected to attend, and only 10% of that number showed up. Many human rights groups in Europe led the campaign to avoid participation in the contest.

One of the most encouraging signs for our speaker is the fact that a growing number of Millennial Jews in the U.S. are asking "Why should we live with the inconsistency of our parents' liberal attitudes on all things except for when it comes to Israel's violation of Palestinians' human rights? While their parents' generation are typically PEPs (Progressive Except for Palestine), they are PIPs (Progressives Including Palestine)."

Also encouraging are the numbers of U.S. religious denominations who are beginning to examine whether their investments are supporting human rights abuses around the world, including in the Middle East. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is divesting from companies profiting from oppressing others, as is the United Methodist Church. Friends Fiduciary Corporation was one of the first. Common U.S. citizens should also examine their country's policies regarding Palestine and Israel, our speaker went on to say. "Our oppression here is 'made in the USA,' and there is a moral responsibility to address the fact that U.S. tax money is so deeply complicit in our situation. If U.S. financial support for Israel's actions and occupation were withdrawn, Israel's control would collapse within months."

As much as affecting U.S. foreign policy is needed, informing public opinion is also important. Jewish Voice for Peace, for example, began exposing the close ties between U.S. police departments and military-style training in Israel. The Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, MD departments are among many trained in Israeli tactics. As a result, Durham, NC's police department ended co-operation with such programs. We were encouraged to help folks back home see the linkage between Israeli policies and traditional U.S. support for civil rights. "Israel's legal system determines that the number of non-Jews must be kept to a minimum in order to maintain one race's superiority. Imagine if the mayor of New York said that Christians in the city had to maintain their numerical superiority over Jews and that laws had to be put into effect to insure that. Do people in the U.S. understand this?"

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

July 8

Yesterday, at our supper in Nidal & Hida's home, we experienced yet another incredible feast and had a lively conversation about engagement and wedding customs as well as a final "check-in" with the group after desserts on the veranda.

As we enjoyed the cool evening air overlooking the "wadi" (valley) running east towards the Jordan Valley from Ramallah and El-Bireh, we looked above the valley to the Pesagot settlement on the top of Jabal Tawil. That long mountain was empty when I first came to Palestine in 1970. Now it dominates the valley. Only 20 years ago, our groups would hike the valley below and see quail, foxes, gazelles, and the hermits' caves in the cliffs. Even local residents like Nidal and Hida don't walk in the valley these days. But it's not for lack of wanting to view the springs, the wildlife, the flora, and the ancient sites. They are forbidden because it is too close to the settlement.

I hope one day that a different reality dominates this amazing place, and all have equal rights to enjoy the "holy land."

Inshallah.

We've cleaned and packed; made last-minute shopping runs for olive oil and Hebron sandals, visited old friends in Ramallah to say good-bye, and had one last supper together at a lovely outdoor restaurant owned by a former student. Four of our number have already gone their separate ways, and the rest of us will be picked up at 3:00 a.m. tomorrow to head to the airport. I hope we get out of town before the army units that typically raid Ramallah around 3:00 a.m. come in!

It has been a fantastic trip, exhausting but exhilarating at the same time -- we've learned and experienced so much. It has been a great group; diverse in so many ways but a real community.

Always hard to leave -- even when it isn't in the middle of the night. But, inshallah, we'll be back. Mahsalama, ya Ramallah, malika Falasteen! Inshallah, bashufik kamaan mara ba'ad shway!

How does one pick scripture for devotions on the last day of a 2 1/2 week service-learning trip that has included so much? We heard speaker after speaker tell us their hope is for justice, equal rights, and unity for all in the region; we traveled the length and breadth of Palestine and Israel, extending all the way to Mount Hermon on the Lebanon border. On top of all that; Justin's 6' 9" frame bumped into a censer in the Church of the Nativity while I was standing under it, pouring oil all over me.

There was only one reading I could think of to encapsulate all of it: Psalm 133

1 How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
2 It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
3 It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.