



BY MEGAN BUCHHOLZ

Life Under Occupation

After living in the West Bank for approximately four months, I feel very much at home here. I have settled into a routine with my work week at the Helen Keller School and living in Ramallah. I feel very comfortable in my community here. However, there are certain things about life here that I will never feel comfortable with. I will never get used to the nervous feeling of going through a checkpoint multiple times a day. I will never get used to sitting in traffic or on busses for hours trying to get home from school through checkpoints. I will never get used to feeling guilty that I am able to cross through checkpoints with my American passport far easier than Palestinians who are simply trying to go to work or visit family. I will never get used to seeing respectable people humiliated on a daily basis and treated like cattle by teenage soldiers. The inhumanity of living within walls in sickening and infuriating on a daily basis, and that is something that Palestinians live with every day.

This is not an easy place to live, but it is **far** more difficult to live this life as a Palestinian. Something that comes up in just about every conversation with people here is how *hard* life is as a Palestinian. I constantly hear how difficult it is just to simply *live*. It seems that just about every activity of daily life is thwarted in one way or another. I often feel this way myself, though I recognize that I escape most of the trouble because I am an American. Imagine, living under military occupation, being dehumanized daily, being told that your culture and ethnicity is illegitimate, having your family's house demolished to make way for a dividing wall. Imagine, being called an 'invented people' by an American political and presidential

candidate. There is no wonder that the people here are frustrated and restless waiting for international recognition.

On a Journey to Understand

In an effort to better understand the situation here, I have been doing a lot of traveling around the West Bank and Israel. In addition to regularly spending time in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, other highlights of my travel are: Jericho, the Dead Sea, Hebron, Nazareth, and Tiberius to see the Sea of Galilee. Though the State of Israel is very small (roughly the size of New Jersey,) it is extremely diverse demographically- based on government imposed borders and zones. Each place offers unique experiences and ample opportunity to learn from different perspectives.

Hebron is one of the most fascinating and saddening places I have visited during my time here. It is located south of Jerusalem and is the largest city in the West Bank with approximately 165,000 Palestinians and around 500 Jewish Settlers. Hebron is the site of numerous acts of violence from both sides throughout the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. It is a holy city to Judaism because the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried there. It is because of this that Jewish settlers are aiming to reclaim the city as an important piece of their heritage.

Though Hebron is under Palestinian Authority jurisdiction, there is a heavy Israeli military presence in certain areas of the city. This military presence is supposedly to protect the Jewish Settlers from Palestinians as well as to protect Palestinians from the Settlers. The city is divided into several security zones. The "H2" zone is where the 500 Settlers live among 30,000

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Palestinians. In order to enter this neighborhood, one must go through a checkpoint, have bags searched, and



An interesting illustration of the conflict on a wall near a settlement in Hebron. First, a settler had painted "Free Israel." Then, it was changed to say "Free Palestine From Israel," Now, after words being covered by the Star of David, it again reads "Free Israel."



The souq in Hebron. There is a chain-link barrier covering the walkway because the Israeli settlers that live above the market regularly throw waste, eggs, and other debris from the windows to discourage business in the souq.



The beautiful city of Nazareth



Dancing on the Sea of Galilee



Me, Yara, and Nada at a 5th grade celebration for Yara's birthday



Two 2nd grade students – Hanan and Dima – eating potatoes after learning about starches in a nutrition lesson

show a permit (issued by the Israeli military) to enter the neighborhood. For the Palestinian inhabitants of the area, movement and activity is very heavily restricted. Not only are Palestinian residents not allowed to drive cars in this area, but they are also prohibited from walking on a main road in the neighborhood because it borders the settlement. As a result of this, 2/3 of the shops in the neighborhood have been forced to close.

While in Hebron, our group met with volunteers from the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The EAPPI volunteers are internationals who work to monitor interaction between Palestinian inhabitants and the Israeli army and report on any abuses of authority. They also work to moderate friction in high tension areas by simply being present. The volunteers in Hebron make it their mission to walk to school with Palestinian school children in the "H2" zone in the hope that their presence discourages the Israeli settlers from harassing the children or throwing rocks at them. In areas such as this where ethnic and national tensions continue to fester and get worse, a one state solution seems impossible.

In contrast, traveling to **Nazareth** gave a whole different perspective! Nazareth is a city in the northern district of Israel that is composed of primarily Arab Israelis. This means that the residents are Palestinian by ethnicity and Israeli by citizenship. Nazareth has been a part of Israel since the establishment of the State of Israel. In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Nazarene Leadership surrendered to Israeli forces in exchange for protection of the city's residents.

In contrast to cities in the West Bank, Nazareth is not a city under occupation. It is not difficult to draw distinctions between a city under occupation and free city. Nazareth does not have a wall surrounding it meaning its residents can come and go as they please. There are not soldiers – Israeli or Palestinian - placed periodically throughout the city with large guns. I do not constantly feel uneasy or anxious as I do while in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Many of Nazareth's residents have regular interactions and relationships with Jewish Israelis. This is something that residents of the West Bank do not experience because not only are most Palestinians not permitted to enter Israel, but Israelis are also prohibited from visiting the West Bank. One can imagine the dissimilarity of the psyche of Nazarene Palestinians and Palestinians living under occupation in the West Bank. After spending time in a place like this, a one state solution seems very possible.



We spent a lovely relaxing weekend seeing the sights in Nazareth, which is known as Jesus' childhood hometown. I really enjoyed walking the streets of the Old City, exploring the local Souq, and admiring the beauty of the Roman Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation - believed to stand on the site of Mary's home where the angel Gabriel was said to have appeared to her and announced that she would bear the Son of God. Also on our "mini-retreat", we traveled to the ruins in Tzipori National Park, and went on a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. Unfortunately, I was not able to walk on water, or catch any fish on the Sea of Galilee, though, while on the boat we learned to dance the Hora (traditional Jewish dance). The whole weekend was an enlightening experience.

Helen Keller School for the Visually Impaired

I continue to enjoy working at the Helen Keller School for the visually impaired. I am constantly learning how I can use my skills to most benefit my students and the school. I am primarily assisting in English classes where I work individually with students who need special attention. I also lead English conversations multiple times a week with the older classes. It is fun to see the growth in my student's language skills as well as their confidence in speaking with me in English. My Arabic also continues to improve (slowly). I have been spending time each day at school typing English books which can then be printed on the Braille printer for the older students to read. The resources for basic English language in Braille is fairly limited and this allows our blind students to be use the same materials as the partially sighted students. So far, I have typed shortened versions of Jane Eyre and Anne of Green Gables.



Rahaf, a first grader at Helen Keller School



My roommate Sara and I performing "Go Tell it On a Mountain" at our church's Advent celebration

The newly implemented after school program has been a huge success that past few months. I am an assistant coordinator for the program which allows me to put my camp counselor and arts and crafts skills to good use. Two days a week have nearly 15 students that come to enjoy crafts, games, activities, and of course help on homework when needed.

Working with students who are blind and visually impaired teaches me new things every day. One of my students that is completely blind, Amira, is extremely bright and hopes to go to university one day to study English. We recently went on a field trip on a beautifully sunny day. I asked Amira how she was enjoying the day and she responded, "I love it. It is so beautiful, I will never forget this day." Amira often tells me that I am beautiful and that she very much enjoys talking with me. These compliments mean so much more to me, knowing that she is not speaking of physical beauty. These things are a constant reminder of the beauty in the world that is not aesthetic or tangible. My students inspire me with their strength, positivity, and enjoyment of life.

Holidays in the Holy Land

In the past few months, it has been wonderful to celebrate the holidays in my new home. On Thanksgiving, I taught my students about the holiday and how we traditionally celebrate in the U.S. they were very receptive to the idea of giving thanks for our blessing as this is a central theme for the Muslim feasts. For the most part, my description of turkey being a central part of thanksgiving was lost (most of them have never eaten turkey). Our conversation about Thanksgiving mostly revolved around the topic of how American football is different from "real" football (soccer). I was blessed to have two nights of thanksgiving with wonderful feast surrounded by good friends.

As you can imagine, Christmas season in the Holy Land has been incredible – especially in Bethlehem! It was amazing to be in the place where it all began and to celebrate the birth of Jesus with thousands of people from countless faith traditions. I celebrated Christmas Eve in Bethlehem's Manger Square where thousands gathered for concerts and parades. The scouts,

marching bands, bagpipes, drum lines, and people of all ages, marched through the square.

The parade paused briefly at a few times throughout the day to observe and respect the Muslim Call to Prayer. In Bethlehem and throughout the West Bank, many Muslims celebrate Christmas alongside their Christian neighbors. Though it is a Christian holiday, I found the celebrations in Manger Square to be a beautiful interfaith event. When I asked some of my 7th grade students, who are Muslim, how they felt about Christmas, I was inspired by their answer. They stated that they were filled with joy and happiness because their Christian brothers and sisters get to celebrate the birth Christ. Though the majority of the students at the Helen Keller School are Muslim, we celebrated Christmas just as we had celebrated the Muslim feast earlier in the year. In fact, I was asked to dress up as "Papa Noel" (Santa Claus) to hand out presents to the students. Many of the partially sighted students could see that it was me under that mask, and spread the word quickly. As I walked the halls handing out presents, the students chanted "SANTA MEGAN, SANTA MEGAN!" It was quite a unique experience.

I also had the opportunity to be involved in many celebrations throughout the Christian community over the past month. My home congregation in Ramallah, Hope Lutheran Church, asked my roommate and myself to perform at our annual Advent party. I was also part of the Christmas choir at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. This was a tri-lingual service, in English, German, and Arabic and was attended by the Bishop as many other dignitaries from around the world.

Now that Christmas is over, I am traveling to Greece for the remainder of my Christmas vacation! I am excited to spend New Years in Athens with my friend Laurin-Whitney.

I hope you had a wonderful Christmas filled with peace, joy, and love and I wish you all a blessed New Year! Please don't hesitate to email me if you have any questions or would like to know more about my experiences in the West Bank.

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Christmas Eve in Bethlehem at Manger Square



Thanksgiving dinner at the "Stone House"



Me as Papa Noel celebrating Christmas at school

