

Letters from Palestine

2013-4-27 - After a few days in Palestine

Hello Friends! Over the next few weeks I hope to share some impressions from Palestine, where I am currently living for one month. My trip here has been funded by a grant I received from a US war tax resisters escrow fund through the group Carolinians for Peace and Justice in the Middle East.

Today and tomorrow I will share some information gathered on my impromptu tour with dozen Swedes who were on a 10-day Israel/Palestine tour. Yesterday I was to spend time with Mazin Qumseyah and his wife Jessie Chang, who lived and married (29 years now) in the US but came here to live 5 years ago. Mazin worked at Duke and Yale and other places and was in the stream to have a great, comfortable, successful life in the US. But he returned to his home village of Beit Sahuur in the West Bank where he now lives, "as the Palestinians say, a 'day to day' existence." He is a very dedicated, humorous, friendly person who gave his all throughout the afternoon to the group of mostly very quiet Swedes. While listening to a consistent dialogue from Mazin, we drove in the van through Bethlehem and out to two villages, where we visited with some men at their homes in Al Wallija and also walked down a long dirt road in Battir. Mazin's topics of discussion ranged from historical to botanical to political to linguistic to philosophical as he commented on various aspects of life in Palestine.

Downloading of some information for you: Though Bethlehem was designated by the UN to be part of Palestine, Palestinians are not allowed in 87% of what is now Bethlehem. The three towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahuur, all next to each other, were, historically, predominantly Christian towns. In fact, Santa Claus is from here. Don't look for his ancestors on the North Pole! St. Nicolas lived in Beit Jala. (The reason Palestinians no longer have access to much of this area is because the Israelis have colonized it, like they have done with the majority of Palestine. This is why many people are saying the "two-state solution" is no longer viable. With the Israeli colonies, or settlements as they are most often called nowadays, spread throughout the West Bank, and hundreds of Israeli checkpoints throughout this area, a contiguous Palestinian state is no longer possible. Instead, many people advocate a democratic, one-state solution in which Palestinians are given equal rights.)

Back to Mazin: One of the places where the process of destroying Palestinian villages in order to build Israeli settlements is visible is in Al Wallija village which is between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Israel has been expanding the borders of West Jerusalem (which is considered part of Israel) so that now Israelis say Al Wallija is part of Jerusalem. A few years ago, 100 people were arrested just for being Palestinian and being in their homes, because Israel had designated the area as Israel and where Palestinians are not allowed to live.

Thirty-three houses there have already been demolished. Yesterday I saw the rubble of three different homes where this has happened. 2,500 people still live in Al Wallija and many more houses are slated for demolition because Israel does not want the village to exist. Israelis have been increasing the pressure on this village by saying that the agricultural lands, the majority of which are amazing olive tree terraces, are now off-limits to them. Mazin pointed to a large pile of dirt and told a story about it: When the Israelis came to the village to build a wall next to Omar's house, which is along the new road for the Israelis, they dug up many olive trees.

Omar's father was out talking to the Israelis and asked that they be careful around his large fig tree, which was just above the road. Omar's father said he loved the tree, and went out to it each night to sit, and oftentimes talk with his grandchildren. The head contractor said the fig tree will be fine because they will dump the dirt below the road. The next morning that same head contractor came out and directed the men to dump a huge pile of dirt right on top of the large fig tree, destroying it. Mazin said this is very typical behavior, designed by the Israelis to let the Palestinians know "who is in charge."

On this first walk out of the van we saw wild chick peas. Mazin mentioned that civilization's very first domesticated plants were domesticated here in Palestine, in what is commonly referred to as "the fertile crescent." Domesticated wheat, barley, lentils and chick peas all originated here. This land and its people, rich in history, must be protected so that people can live here peacefully.

Love and hugs,

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