

Life on the Other Side

On a trip to Bethlehem, a young Jerusalemite witnesses the loss of hope

BY ILANA KURSHAN

Special to the *World Jewish Digest*

*Thus said the Lord
The heaven is My throne
And the earth is My footstool.*

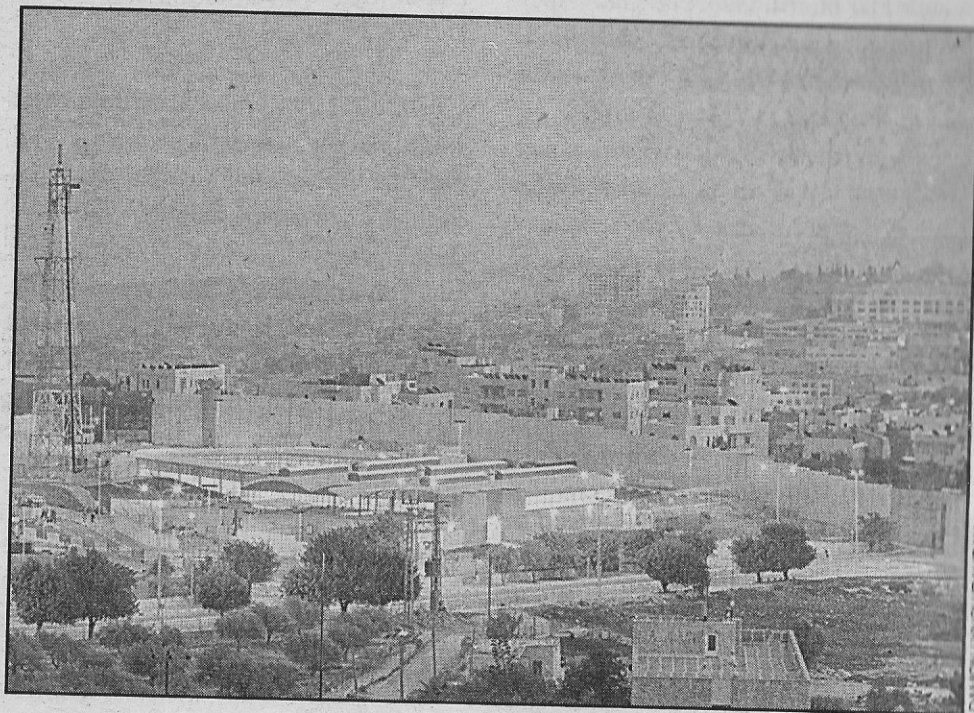
(Isaiah 66:1)

It is just hours before Shabbat on the eve of the Hebrew month of Shvat. I am reading over tomorrow's *Haftorah*, the final chapter of Isaiah, in an effort to prepare myself spiritually for the transition from weekday to holiness. In just two hours, the sun will set, and I will try to take the peace of Shabbat upon myself. But it is hard right now to feel that the earth is filled with God's presence.

I spent the past two days in Bethlehem on a two-day program called Encounter (www.encounterprograms.org), which brings future Jewish leaders to meet with Palestinians. We spent our days hearing from Palestinian political activists, professors, schoolteachers and parents, both Christian and Muslim, who live in Bethlehem. As a group of 40 American,

ed and sometimes prevented entirely. The city has periodically been placed under strict curfew, preventing residents from leaving their homes.

"It is terrible here," said Fadi, my home-hospitality host, who lives in Beit Sahour and works cleaning churches in the Old City of Jerusalem six days a week. "I have to leave my house at 6 a.m. to be at work at 8 a.m., even though work is less than a half-hour away. But I never know how long it will take me to get through the checkpoint. Sometimes the Israeli soldier is in a good mood, and I'm out in five minutes. Other times, there is a long line and I wait for over an hour." He does not get to eat breakfast with his wife or his two young sons, Michael and George, ages five and three respectively, because he needs to leave his home so early in the morning. And his children, wide-eyed and curious about the world around them, have never seen the sea, though they live just over an hour from the Mediterranean.



In Bethlehem, a security wall prevents terrorist attacks, but makes residents feel imprisoned.

grapes he harvested in his own vineyard. In the morning, we are treated to a full breakfast of fried eggs, pita, zaatar, labana, fresh coffee and steamed milk. When we rejoin the members of our group at 8 a.m., it is with full stomachs but heavy hearts.

through the area and impede Palestinian mobility. She points to the orderly rows of

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from Palestinian political activists, professors, schoolteachers and parents, both Christian and Muslim, who live in Bethlehem. As a group of 40 American, British and Australian Jews who kept together at all times, we had to work to maintain a low profile in a city that is largely hostile to Jews. We tucked in *tzitzit*, wore baseball caps over *kippot* and refrained from speaking any Hebrew except inside a private room in the hotel where we were based. At night, we were offered home hospitality with Palestinian families, who welcomed us with open arms and tried, as much as possible, to show us the situation from their perspective.

*Where could you build a house for Me?
And what place could be for My resting?*
(Isaiah 66:1)

Again and again, wherever we went, the same question turned itself over in my mind: how would this place ever become a place of peace, a place where a God of peace would want to dwell? Today, Bethlehem, along with the neighboring villages of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, is surrounded by Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks. Bethlehem residents are only allowed into Jerusalem with special permits that are very difficult to obtain. Travel to other parts of the Palestinian-controlled territories of the West Bank is also impeded

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Fadi dreams of leaving Bethlehem and making a new life in Greece, where he and his wife went on their honeymoon six years ago. They are troubled not just by the increasing Israeli military presence and the restrictions on their freedom, but also by the growing Muslim population. Christians, who were once the majority in the city where Jesus was born, now account for less than 30 percent of the population. "We wake up every morning at 4 a.m. to the sound of the muezzin," said Fadi, assuring us that we would hear it as well when we woke up in his spare bedroom the next morning. "They veil their women so they can look at ours instead. Can't they just keep to themselves?"

Fadi lives in a small house he built himself, with three bedrooms, an enclosed veranda and a living room with crosses on all the walls. Behind one of the old-style beige leather couches is a 3-D portrait of Jesus with spooky eyes that are either raised to the heavens or solemnly closed, depending on the angle of the viewer. Fadi, who is rightfully house-proud, has trouble imagining leaving his home and his life. "I have over a hundred cousins in Bethlehem," he tells us. "Everyone here is related to me." He shows us his wedding album and serves us white wine from

fresh coffee and steamed milk. When we rejoin the members of our group at 8 a.m., it is with full stomachs but heavy hearts.

*All this was made by My hand,
And thus it came into being,
declares the Lord.
Yet to such a one I look:
To the poor and brokenhearted
Who tremble at my words.*

(Isaiah 66:2)

"This place is very special to me," says Leila Sansour, who is standing on a large rock overlooking the valley that separates Bethlehem from the surrounding Israeli settlements. We stand clustered around her, watching as she overlooks the hills like Moses at the foot of the Promised Land. "In that green area over there, we used to come as children and play. It's the only green area in Bethlehem. But now it is covered with litter because we cannot afford sanitation. Much of the landscape terracing has been destroyed by the building of settlements. The Bethlehem where I grew up is not the Bethlehem I live in now."

Leila, who is in her early 30's, returned to her birthplace after studying abroad to found Open Bethlehem, a campaign to save Bethlehem from the Israeli settlements that surround it on all sides and from the settler-only roads that crisscross

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