



A PILGRIMAGE FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE¹

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Serendipity

It was easy to notice while sharing breakfast in Dromantine Retreat Centre in Newry, County Down, in March 2015, that these women were upset. Israeli women of Jewish and Muslim faiths, in Ireland to participate in a leadership programme. News of Benjamin Netanyahu's re-election had just been announced, and their hope for a peaceful future seemed to evaporate. I wondered what was happening in their broken country, the place that I knew as the Holy Land. I immediately decided that I wanted to go there, not on a tourist pilgrimage to the holy places that I knew by faith; I wanted to learn more about the lives of the people who struggled daily with the sad reality expressed by these women who still found a way to make a stand for peace.

Edmund Ignatius Rice is said to have found his call to action by following the request of Waterford woman Mary Power to look outside his window. My observation at a breakfast table in Northern Ireland was perhaps my window moment. I was drawn to look for a way to learn more, to be of service and to deal with my judgements and suppositions about life in Israel and Palestine.

I returned to Waterford and continued on with my work as a service manager with Brothers of Charity Services in Waterford. My job was my vocation – did I need another? A few days later, as I rounded Reginald Tower and drove up the Quay in Waterford, I was brought back to that window. Waterford Quay, so well known to Edmund Ignatius Rice and the scene of his work to educate the poor. In hindsight, it was serendipitous that it was there I was called to listen and to see a way to be of service.

As I drove on that beautiful sunny morning I listened to a woman called Jenny being interviewed by broadcaster Marian Finucane about her time as a human rights observer on the West Bank. I was transfixed. Over and over in my mind I repeated, ‘I could do that’ I parked the car, rummaged for pen and paper and scribbled out the initials EAPPI (The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel). With a little effort on Google I was in contact with the office of the programme in the Quaker Headquarters in London. They put me in contact with Jenny Derbyshire, the woman I heard on the radio. She was a tremendous encouragement and refused to allow me to be dissuaded despite only five from Ireland being chosen to participate in the programme each year. My application was successful and in August 2017 I flew to Tel Aviv to begin my three-month pilgrimage for justice and peace with the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme.²

Israel–Palestine peace issues

The history of the state of Israel and occupied Palestine is sad and complex. November 2017 marked the centenary of the Balfour Declaration when the British recognised that the Jewish people had a right to return to their homeland.³ The Balfour Declaration also declared in the same sixty-seven-

word sentence: ‘it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine’ The interpretation and practise of this right of Jewish people to return to a homeland has impacted on the lives of the Palestinian people who were already living there. Many have suffered displacement and now live in refugee camps. The Israeli military occupation of the West Bank commenced in 1967 and continues to this day, causing restrictions and loss of human rights in the lives of the Palestinian people.

Being present in the West Bank for the centenary commemorations in November 2017 made it clear to me that many of the Palestinian people view the Balfour Declaration as the defining cause of the current conflict. On the day of the centenary I attended an academic event in the National Palestinian Theatre in East Jerusalem at which scholars discussed the Balfour Declaration from many perspectives. Later I attended a service of penance in St George’s Anglican Cathedral, Jerusalem, which remains in my memory for two reasons. First, that it was there I was reunited with Jenny, the woman I heard on the radio. She was there participating in Amos Trust action: ‘Just Walk to Jerusalem’⁴ The second reason this event remains in memory is symptomatic of life under occupation. The magnificent choir from Bethlehem, coming to sing at the cathedral, was held up at a checkpoint. The congregation waited patiently until the choir finally got through the checkpoint and arrived to delight us with their songs of peace.

Background to World Council of Churches peacebuilding programme

In 2002 the Christian churches in Jerusalem made a plea to the World Council of Churches to send observers to

experience life under occupation and to monitor the human rights injustices that were taking place in Jerusalem and the West Bank in contravention of international law.⁵ The World Council of Churches responded by setting up the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.⁶ The vision of the programme is to see an end to the occupation and to secure a just peace for all Israeli and Palestinian people. The mission of the programme is to witness life under occupation, to engage with Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers and to encourage international communities' involvement in the conflict by urging action. Ecumenical companions representing twenty-three countries currently participate in the programme. Placements have been developed on request from communities who appreciate an international presence. When I was there the placements were located in seven communities in the West Bank – Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Tulkarem, Yanoun, Jericho, Hebron and South Hebron Hills.

Pilgrim stories

'Part of the journey entails meeting other pilgrims along the way and being shaped by their stories.'⁷ In deciding to make a pilgrimage we are called to walk with other people. The role of an ecumenical companion is about being an observer and a listener. In observing breaches of human rights that contravene international humanitarian law, we listen to, and bear witness to, the stories of those who have been mistreated. We also listen to, and bear witness to, those who strive to be peacemakers, many of them Israeli Jewish citizens. Each day, for three months, I encountered people and their stories. In this way, I, the companion, was also accompanied and transformed by those who welcomed me to share their lives. My mission in South Hebron Hills was to give 'protective presence' when requested using 'principled

impartiality'⁸ As an ecumenical companion I did not take sides in the conflict, I stood as an impartial observer but I was not impartial with regards to breaches in international humanitarian law.

The impact of the occupation on the communities of South Hebron Hills and the West Bank is evident in the daily lives of all who live there. Palestinian people live lives of restriction in terms of movement to school and work. Children and adults have to queue to pass through checkpoints sometimes for hours each day in order to access education or employment. The right to a new home is practically non-existent due to the arbitrary planning laws. House demolitions take place without any concern for people's needs or rights.

The Israeli people also suffer. Much of their economy is channelled towards security. Young adults endure compulsory military service. I came to know this impact over and over again as I met Jewish mothers, fathers and grandparents. What must it feel like for the Jewish mother of a newborn knowing that her child will, as a teenager, be put into uniform and heavily armed?

As I travelled I met people who lived their spirituality in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Their lives shone through as a beacon of hope for the future. The following is my witness to three women's stories.

The grandmother in the firing zone

It is a long drive to the Bedouin village of al Halaweh inside the Israeli-military dubbed 'Firing Zone 918'⁹ Much of the journey in this part of the West Bank is on dirt roads. Our driver appears uneasy. These roads are not good for his car, and without his car he has no livelihood. The Israeli military have a base less than one kilometre from al Halaweh; we do not want to meet them. As we pass two large cubes of mass

concrete our driver declares: 'We are now in the firing zone' Despite his misgivings, he agreed to bring us to the Bedouin village when we received a request to visit families and compile a report after the military demolished two houses. When we arrive, he directs us to the brow of a sand dune overlooking the village.

Here we meet Hiba, whose family has withstood one of the demolitions. She greets us and welcomes us to take photographs. She cradles her newborn granddaughter. Baby Dahlia is dressed in beautiful fabric and smiling up at her grandmother. 'The bulldozers arrived at 9 a.m.,' she explains. 'They gave us a half an hour to take out our belongings, but it was not long enough.' As she speaks my gaze rests on a child's blue bike still trapped in the debris of the family's two-roomed home. Hiba remains composed as she speaks. At her side stands her other granddaughter, Samar, a beautiful, smiling two-year-old wearing a 'Hello Kitty' top. Somehow Samar's grandmother manages to maintain family life, and this little girl remains smiling.

When I ask where she is living now Hiba says that the family of eight, comprising three adults and five young girls, have now moved into the caves adjacent to the demolition site. Scorpions and snakes found in these caves are a cause of concern as medical treatment is not accessible for those who suffer bites. Life in the military firing zone is unpredictable and chaotic yet Hiba and her family continue their daily life as best they can, creating a home despite the demolitions. Life goes on with the support of a tight-knit community where neighbours support each other through each tragedy.

As we continue to gather information for our report, we learn that the village elders had been working with a legal team who advise on responses to human rights breaches that the Bedouin people suffer. It turns out Hiba's home and

the other dwelling that was demolished on that day had been covered by a legal injunction not to demolish. All that appears capricious now. On the long drive back, I reflect on the immensity of it all. Not once did I hear a word of hate or even despair. I think of the lives of little Samar and her baby sister Dahlia. I wonder at the grace and determination of the Bedouin people of al Halaweh who continue to welcome the stranger and love their neighbours in the face of constant adversity.

The destruction or demolition of private and public property by the Occupying Power is prohibited under Articles 53 and 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and under Article 23 of the 1907 Hague Regulations, unless absolutely necessary for military operations.

The woman at the wall

Curious about a meeting for prayer that I have heard occurs every Friday at the separation wall, I travel up through Hebron and arrive in Bethlehem just in time to find out where to join the prayer group.¹⁰ It is almost six o'clock as I approach the group of about fifteen men and women, mostly Christian religious internationals, recognisable by their habits, gathering at the separation wall. 'Thank you for coming. Where are you from?' When I respond 'Ireland', a welcoming cheer rings out and the Friday prayer at the wall commences.

When Israel began building the twenty-foot-high separation wall in Bethlehem in 2003, Clemence, a farmer, was cut off from her land and neighbours. She pondered about what she could do. 'I realised that I could pray. So, each Friday, I pray with those who come and share with me. I pray for those who have lost their land because of the occupation. I pray for the

soldiers who work here at the separation wall. What else can I do?’

The group walks in procession along the part of the separation wall that divides Clemence’s land. A rosary is shared, each decade in a different language, representing the pilgrims who gather each Friday to accompany Clemence. As we come to the end of our prayer, we gather in front of an icon of Mary that was written on the separation wall by the British icon writer Ian Knowles in 2010. The icon of *Our Lady of the Wall* is situated here as a symbol of faith, hope and love.¹¹ It is a non-violent sign to express the need to overcome the injustice that the separation wall imposes on landowners like Clemence. It is a prayer for peace. It is a prayer that one day the wall will go away. This is the mission of the Friday prayer at the wall. This simple prayer action has created for Clemence and her people a community of love, solidarity and goodwill in the face of adversity.

Gatekeepers

Our work as ecumenical accompaniers is enriched by witnessing the actions of Israeli human rights organisations. One such organisation is Machsom Watch.¹² Hanna Barak, its founder, met us one stifling hot day. Hanna, a tiny grandmother, sat serenely as we entered the room, took our seats, and looked for water to cool ourselves.

In 2001, when Israeli checkpoints began to impact on the right to movement in the lives of Palestinian people, a group of Israeli Jewish women felt compelled to take action. Machsom Watch was formed to assist Palestinian people with permit denial and occasions of hostility or delay experienced at checkpoints. A phone line is operated by Machsom Watch for those who experience illegal restrictions. People are given legal support to object to the Israeli authorities about the

injustices that they are experiencing. Hanna explained that she is part of this movement because she is a good Israeli Jewish woman and she believes that what is happening at checkpoints is unjust and illegal. The work that Hanna and the other woman in Machsom Watch carry out is a lifeline for many Palestinians. It is also dangerous. Hanna has been abused and vilified many times and she has even been physically attacked. Hanna continues her work because she believes that Israel, as a modern democratic country, should not treat people with disrespect by impinging on their human rights. The presence of Machsom Watch at checkpoints serves to encourage Israeli security personnel to act with respect to the many thousands of Palestinians who have no choice but to pass through checkpoints to go to work, school or prayer.

As an accompanier, one of my most soul-destroying duties was to stand and watch men queue at a checkpoint in the dark of the night waiting patiently to be allowed to pass through to go to work on the buildings in Israel. Many of them are university graduates who need to work as labourers in order to support their families. Their days are consumed with getting through the checkpoints and hopefully picking up work on a piecemeal basis. Each time I stood at a checkpoint I observed men being denied entry. As they were rejected I asked why they had been denied. Some had been given a reason, others did not know why they had been denied. It was good to be able to offer those denied information about Machsom Watch. In a place where there seems to be no prospect for self-determination for Palestinians, Hanna and the women at Machsom Watch have created a possibility of expertise and care for calling out injustices and putting the goodness of their faith into action.

*To enforce movement restrictions, Israel instituted a permit system that requires all Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories to obtain a permit in order to enter Israel, including East Jerusalem, for any purpose whatsoever – including work, medical care and family visits.*¹³

Basic core of goodness

During my journey, I met people who were making choices for justice and peace even when it appeared that they were oppressed and without choice. Again and again, I was touched by the basic core of goodness in people that compelled them to respond in their own unique way to seemingly impossible situations in their lives. Pope Francis has marked his pontificate by his ongoing urge to live the word of God: ‘To follow Jesus, mere good works are not enough; we have to listen daily to his call. He, who alone knows us and who loves us fully, leads us to push out into the depth of life.’¹⁴ As I walked the Holy Land, I met people who chose mercy and love instead of hatred and despair. Leaving her family rudderless is not an option for Hiba. When all seems lost, Clemence continues to pray for the neighbour she can no longer meet. Hanna chooses to be an agent of justice and peace and change because she is good Jewish woman.

One more window

In October 2019 I visited Kraków in Poland. Something urged me to come and stand in the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps as part of my pilgrimage. While there, I also visited Schindler’s factory. Our guide was a tiny Jewish woman called Christina. At one stage she stopped at a window and explained to us that Oskar Schindler had looked out on the street and saw a woman crossing the road holding the hand of a little girl in a red coat. In that moment, he was immediately moved

to do something to save the children who were in danger of being removed to extermination camps. As I stood there listening to Oskar’s story I remembered Edmund and how he had been urged by Mary Power to look out the window to find his calling.

Conclusion

For three months, I shared life with pilgrims in the land central to the tenets of the three largest monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a contemplative, it was of no surprise that this ecumenical programme was the one to which I was drawn. It was an opportunity to reconsider my story, to connect with the biblical values of social justice in a parched landscape where people of all denominations suffer. Meeting people on a heart-to-heart basis went beyond the reasons for the conflict, beyond the labels of faith traditions, and brought me on a pilgrimage of love and respect for each pilgrim I met. Cistercian monk Thomas Keating puts it well:

The great treasure that interreligious dialogue among the world religions could unlock is to enable people to get to know and love other religions and the people who practice them. The attitude of exclusivity must be laid to rest. God is too big to be contained in one religion.¹⁵

Reflection

- *Lesley recalled that it was on Waterford Quay, so familiar to Edmund, that she heard about the programme that inspired her call to service. Looking back, can you connect to a moment, an encounter or a place that changed your path?*
- *In the Middle East, is a ministry of ‘protective presence’ and ‘principled impartiality’ a worthwhile approach in your*

opinion? The grandmother in the military firing zone had her house demolished. Would you have responded as she responded? The woman at the separation wall said she realised she could pray, if nothing else. What would you say to these women?

- *Both Edmund Rice and Oskar Schindler looked out a window and took action. Is there a window that you are looking out today that might move you to action?*

Endnotes

- 1 Some names have been changed in this chapter for privacy reasons.
- 2 The World Council of Churches is a worldwide fellowship of churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service. See <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc>.
- 3 The Balfour declaration was the first time the British government endorsed the establishment of 'a national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine. While many Israelis believe it was the foundation stone of modern Israel and the salvation of the Jews, many Palestinians regard it as a betrayal. See Jane Corbin, 'The Balfour Declaration: My Ancestor's Hand in History' *BBC News*, 31 October 2017 Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41763648>; accessed 11 February 2020.
- 4 See <https://www.amostrust.org/blog/just-walk-to-jerusalem-2017/>
- 5 See, for example, www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/advocacy.html.
- 6 On the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), see <https://eappi.org/en/about>.
- 7 Emily Welty, *Beginning the Pilgrimage towards Justice*, 2013. Available at https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Beginning_the_pilgrimage-E_Welty.pdf; accessed on 20 May 2022.
- 8 'Protective Presence – Our presence makes the costs of human rights abuses more apparent to the perpetrators, persuades them to act differently, and deters attacks on civilians'; 'Principled Impartiality – We do not take sides in the conflict. We do not discriminate against anyone and stand faithfully with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. See EAPPI, 'Our Model' Available at <https://eappi.org/en/our-model>; accessed 11 February 2020.

- 9 See EA Lesley, 'They knocked down the wrong house' *Eyewitness Blogs*, 6 November 2017 Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20180215030417/https://eyewitnessblogs.com/2017/11/06/they-knocked-down-the-wrong-house/>; accessed 24 May 2022.
- 10 See EA Paul, 'Bethlehem: "That the wall will fall into a bridge"' *Eyewitness Blogs*, 5 February 2018. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20180511161459/https://www.eyewitnessblogs.com/2018/02/05/bethlehem-that-the-wall-will-fall-into-a-bridge/>; accessed 22 May 2022.
- 11 See <http://sacredplaces.huji.ac.il/sites/our-lady-wall>.
- 12 The Israeli Machsom Watch group engages in similar work to EAPPI, monitoring the treatment of Palestinian workers coming through daily checkpoints from the West Bank to work in Israel. See <https://machsomwatch.org/en/content/bureaucracy-occupation>.
- 13 See https://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement.
- 14 Pope Francis, quoted in Inés San Martín, 'Pope Francis says the Bible is a "love letter" from God', *Crux*, 26 January 2020. Available at <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/01/pope-francis-says-the-bible-is-a-love-letter-from-god/>; accessed 25 May 2022.
- 15 Thomas Keating, *Consenting to God as God Is*, New York: Lantern Books, 2016, p. 5.