# O Little Town of Bethlehem

## Christmas in God's Holy Land

The final of three adapted blogs from Palestine

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**www.palden.co.uk/pop/**

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## Preamble

*Salam alekum* – peace be with you.

To which you respond, *alekum salam*.

This is a story of a five month period I spent in Palestine in 2011-12 – mainly in Bethlehem in the West Bank – as part of my ongoing work with the Palestine between 1997 and 2014. It tells a story of events, experiences, insights and quirks that I encountered while there.

It's one of three blogs, the first two being *Pictures of Palestine* and *Blogging in Bethlehem* (yet to be published). *Pictures of Palestine* is available in print and (for free) as a PDF and e-book. *O Little Town of Bethlehem* is available in PDF format only (also free).

I worked mainly at the Hope Flowers School in Bethlehem, a peace and democracy school and adult education centre. They specialise in trauma recovery, conflict-related psychosocial issues, community reconstruction and empowerment of women, youth and the disadvantaged. In these they have accumulated very real experience and, given Palestine's political isolation, they have developed methods that, while they do draw on ideas from abroad, are very much forged in the crucible of the real lives they have, in a country under military occupation.

I did international outreach for the school. I worked also with other people in Palestine, and with some Israelis, as a counsellor, adviser, healer and soul-friend, and as a writer and editor of English-language material. For want of anything better, that's how I would describe what I did but, really, I just placed myself there and did whatever came up for me to do, making myself useful and making use of what I am and what I can do.

After writing a blog about my visit in June-Sept 2009, I re-edited it into a book called *Pictures of Palestine*. This speaks to people who've had Palestine hovering in the periphery of their lives for decades, who want to get a readable taste of what's going on. Palestine needs its story to be told. You can see it and get a copy here: www.palden.co.uk/pop/. It's the first of a trilogy, of which *O Little Town of Bethlehem* is the third.

Thanks for coming on this journey! It's a journey of the soul. Welcome to the Holy Land.

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Cornwall, UK and Bethlehem, Palestine

# O Little Town of Bethlehem

Tuesday 8th November 2011

## Once more unto the breach

Eight hours on the night train from Cornwall to, after a change of trains, London Gatwick airport, then six hours wait, six hours flight to Amman, an hour into town and then at last I reach my hotel. That's the story for today. Then it's all different from here on.

On this trip to Palestine I have less of a sense of where the future lies than I've ever had on previous trips. I have packed up my home in Cornwall and know not where my next home will be when I return – though I shall return to Cornwall.

A few days ago I sat at Gurnards Head in Cornwall, a prominent headland jutting out into the ocean. I was watching the waves, imbibing the wide-open space, taking a break from packing up my life and putting it into storage, and wondering … Thinking back to times happy and sad, engaged and adrift, rained and shone upon, consigning them to the past, ready to move on.

That moment marked a transition from a time of anticipation to a time of activity and, apart from a sad day on Sunday as the appurtenances of my life disappeared into boxes, leaving empty spaces behind them, I've worked through my checklists and sorted out my life, leading me to the point where Miriam, Dave and their guest Manu dropped me at St Erth station for the 9.55pm night train from the end of the world, Penzance, to the rest of the world.

Off to Bethlehem, to a Palestine under pressure and to Hope Flowers, even more under pressure. I sent a message to Maram Issa telling her of my impending arrival and she said, both touchingly and dauntingly, "*I am glad, Palden – when you are here we feel safe*".

Yes, Palestine is in trouble yet *again*. Having applied to the UN for recognition as an independent country, it stands in limbo, and Israel has engaged in a series of punishments for its seeming audacity. The Israeli settler movement calls it simply 'the price tag': anyone opposing their designs will pay a price. So the Palestinian internet was knocked out for a couple of days by a coordinated hack-attack of proportions that only an organised operation could manage. Gaza is being bombed again. Settlement expansion is eating away at more Palestinian land – including that of an ancient monastery near Bethlehem, Cremisan, upon which the Israeli security wall is to be built, as part of the expansion of the Gilo settlement. Settler attacks on Palestinians continue and… well, life goes on. Situation normal.

Hope Flowers School meanwhile is nearly bankrupt. It has been a long story. In February 2011 a series of allegations started emerging, deliberately sent to international funders and supporters, accusing it of corruption and malpractice. Mostly rubbish or misconstrued half-truths, we managed to head off the attacks during my last visit in June this year, 2011, but the damage was significant. $90,000 of funding was lost, and further funding was withheld until the matter was cleared up (according to Western standards of accountability and transparency, which happen to be expensive). Ibrahim Issa, the director, had been asked to resign, the staff had their hours cut and the abyss yawns large. The worst bit is that Ibrahim is burned out after a decade of perpetual crisis management, struggle and dealing with the consequences of under-funding. This said, much has nevertheless been achieved and Hope Flowers is still, despite everything, making remarkable progress in fulfilling its aims.

This crisis was set in motion in connection with Israeli settlement expansion. A group of American settlement financiers who fund the settlement of Efrat, just over the wall from the school, co-opted an international meditation organisation to do its dirty work, to take over the school by benign trickery. This started in 2008. They wanted the land on which the school sits, where it protects the homes of some 200 Palestinians. This furtive plot was rumbled by 2010 and they were

thrown out, and then came allegations in 2011. When I came along in June, Ibrahim and I figured out the plot and I helped Ibrahim outwit them. They then resorted to working through Israeli intelligence connections, and in turn the Israelis worked through their Palestinian intelligence connections to tie up Ibrahim's hands with trumped-up charges of collaboration with the Israelis, to get him in jail. This too failed, thanks to Ibrahim's skill and experience in such matters.

But there were big consequences, and it is these that I go to Palestine to help deal with now. Whether I can genuinely help, I do not know. This wasn't what I joined Hope Flowers for, yet this is what I seem to be here to do – to support Ibrahim and his family, to ferret out the hidden threads, to mediate between the school and its overseas supporters and to do whatever it takes to move things forward.

The result might be breakthrough or breakdown for Hope Flowers. We shall see. I'm not being paid for doing this. I've *chosen* this, and there's nothing else I would prefer to do.

Well, not all of the time. Sometimes I wish I could find a partner and settle into a comfortable groove, to have my family around me, or have a good salary, or recognition or reward, but this wouldn't really make me happy. So here I am, at Gatwick, waiting to travel by a cheap flight on Easyjet to Amman, off to cover the backs of the Issa family in their battle against lies, deception and the forces of destruction. Also I wish to see my Palestinian and Israeli friends, and to see what happens next. It's now 7.40am: time to get some exercise wandering around Gatwick North Terminal until check-in time at 10.30. Wonders never cease.

*Same day…*
Tuesday 8 November 2011

## In flight

An interesting situation arose on the plane to Amman. When flying over Israeli airspace, airlines are required to 'secure' the plane – that is, set in

motion premature landing procedures where passengers must return to their seats, the toilets are closed, the crew must be seated in their places and the lights dimmed, whether or not the plane is close to actually landing. Someone asked why, and the stewardess said it was required by the Israelis. This caused a rumble throughout the plane – I should mention that these rumblings came more from Europeans than from Arabs. The Arabs just take it as a given, and they are no so insistent as Europeans about their perceived rights.

The stewardess realised she had a situation on her hands. I could see her thinking about what to do. Finally she said, "*Look, if we don't do this we will be forced to return home – anyone want to return to London? Oh, and I should mention, we don't have enough fuel to do so*". That sorted things out. The plane was secured quite quickly.

It was dark by now, outside. While flying over Israel, I was talking to an American lady next to me. "*Why are there bright yellow sodium lights there, and dim white lights there?*" she asked me. "*Ah, this is what apartheid is all about. The bright areas are Israeli, and the dim areas are Palestinian.*" She was shocked. She had read the word 'apartheid' in material about Israel, but she was right now realising it is something very real. It was hitting her.

I told her that the strangest thing about this is that most Israelis (except soldiers) cannot enter Palestinian areas (called Areas A and B), and most Palestinians (except those with special permits) cannot enter Israeli territory. But foreigners like me can go almost *anywhere*. I have more freedom of movement than Binjamin Netanyahu himself. This is one of many bizarre facts of life here – I'll tell you many more as we proceed.

I stayed two nights in Amman to get used to being in the Middle East again. I have a friend there, Shawki, a taxi-driver for humanitarians and aid workers – Shawki is very informative about the political situation in Jordan and he has plenty of inside stories from the Arab revolutions, which were going on at the time. He took me to the border, dropped me

off and I went through the process – a bureaucratic process on the Jordanian side and a security-fixated process on the Israeli side.

While in one of the many queues in the Israeli border terminal, two Germans chatted with me, asking questions about what to expect and what to do next. They were trying to figure out the logic of this country. I advised them to drop it – there's no logic to it at all. I advised them to suspend judgements, do their best and deal with what's in front of them.

Here's an example of this absence of logic: at Hope Flowers School the security wall extends across the panorama you can see from the school. The security wall, we have all been told, is intended to stop terrorists crossing into Israel. Well, there's a certain logic to that, whether or not one agrees. But just opposite the school the security wall just ends, and there's a significant gap in it. The gap has been there for some years now.

As it happens, there is a bizarre reason that gap is there. That's a story which will unfold as this blog continues.

*Two days later…*
Thursday 10 November 2011

## Following that, *ahem*, Peace Road

Much of this game involves finding good informants – people who can fill you in on anything you need to know and who can answer questions. In Amman I know two: Shawki the taxi-driver, and Oroub, an academic. I've learned a lot from them. Oroub is a Jordanian-Palestinian doing research for a doctorate at SOAS in London, concerning the conditions of refugee Palestinians in Egypt and Jordan. She's pretty switched on, and she enjoys my intuitive perspectives on things. She and Shawki have taught me a lot about the class structure the Middle East and the true background to the Arab revolutions.

The revolutions aren't quite as anti-regime as the media lead us to believe – Western media do find rebellions against autocrats newsworthy. The Arab revolutions are primarily about injustice and inequality – people simply want a fair deal. A regime that fails to address these issues is now in trouble. Extremes of wealth, poverty and power across the Middle East are excessive. Regimes have built up oligarchies, social pecking-orders and security services with a vested interest in perpetuating those regimes. Oppose the regime and you can lose your house, career, privilege or even your life, and you screw things up for your kids and wider family. The same is true in the West but it's less blatant – you don't usually suffer jail or death but you can experience serious disadvantage with jobs, money, status and rights.

Shawki mentioned that the average wage in Jordan was about 400 dinars (£400) per month. If you're in one of the extended families favoured by the regime, you can be paid 10,000 dinars per month, often in a symbolic sinecure that involves minimal work. This inequality affects education, permits, place of residence, influence and freedoms. In Jordan the privileged are international and capital-rich while ordinary people are localised – though I wouldn't say parochial). Thus has it always been, but it's the extremity of difference and inequality today that is the crucial issue, and the gap between top and bottom, and the wisdom of it. It's a global issue, though it is accentuated in the Arab world.

Where regimes have failed to respond to public pressure, revolutions have blown up. Jordan has thus far weathered this wave by responding with at least the right noises – though it could go further. The Gulf States and Saudi Arabia have responded with bribery and force – doling out billions in grants, raised salaries and social facilities to stop the dissatisfaction and unrest. If you keep protesting, it's jail and torture. The Palestinian regimes in the West Bank and Gaza have become somewhat enlivened by the Arab Spring, though they haven't addressed the key questions young Palestinians pointed to earlier this year. The change in the Arab world has only just started. Problem is, most

regimes are run by old men in countries where half of the population is under 20-25.

Oroub openly admitted that she came from a privileged Palestinian family who, a hundred years ago, had been feudal owners of whole villages and significant lands in the West Bank. They moved to Jordan with capital and advantage, and she went to a French Christian school (though she was a Muslim) and then to Oxford University. She researches Palestinian refugees, providing information which then informs policy-making amongst NGOs and international organisations. So she's doing her bit.

I met a British film-maker on the bus from the border crossing to Jericho. He was returning to Palestine to fill gaps in a film he had made. He complained of having too much disparate material and of needing to make sense of it. He was struggling to get to grips with the intricacies of the situation in Palestine – it is not as simple as Westerners see it. He asked for my phone number. I get the feeling he's going to visit me.

What happened at the border? Well, after the slow process of passing out of Jordan we travelled over no-man's land in the captivating landscape of the Jordan Valley to wait at the other side of the Allenby Bridge as our bus sought permission to pull up at the terminal. Then we piled out into a heaving mass of people – some of them early returnees from the *hajj* in Mecca. We lugged our cases over to the baggage dump, where our bags went in on conveyors for x-raying. Then we stood in a queue to have our passports examined. Then we emptied pockets and sent our hand-luggage through other x-rays, then went into the main hall for the real process. It's a bit like an unwelcoming airport. It's probably easier entering Iran.

We foreigners are lucky – we go into a VIP queue. I was ready to stand there for a couple of hours but, no, to my surprise there was no queue. The official looked at me as if to say "*Why are you standing there?*". I went up, said *Shalom* and handed him my passport. He leafed through it, then tapped on the computer. In an American accent he asked, "*What are you visiting Israel for?*". "*Oh, I have lots of Israeli friends, and I'm*

*going to visit a rabbi who has cancer, and an Israeli who's just had a baby, and friends in Jerusalem...*"

"*Where are you going tonight?*" "*Jerusalem*." "*Where will you stay?*" "*With a friend, who's picking me up.*" "*Where does he live?*" "*In a moshav* (collective farm) *west of Jerusalem.*" "*What's it called?*" "*I don't remember – I didn't pick up the name when he said it, and I haven't been there yet.*" "*Hmmm... How long are you staying?*" "*Perhaps two months*" – this was less of a white lie than most of what I had said. "*So what will you be doing?*" "*I'd like to go to Bethlehem for the Christmas pilgrimage*" – at last some truth! He looks at me studiously. There's a pause. Israelis consider foreign Christians to be relatively harmless and lily-livered, so a Christian guise is a good mask to wear.

"*Well, you look like you're alright...*" Bang, down goes a stamp on my passport. "*Welcome to Israel*", he said, with a rather bored tone. It was over. I'm not happy about having to tell porkies, but saying that I'm heading for the Palestinian Territories to work there is not a recipe for easy entry into Israel.

As soon as I get to the West Bank, my spirits rise. The atmosphere here is energising, stimulating, incredibly friendly and socially-rich. The scenery is remarkable too. There's another thing too: while people here are generally having a hard time, I experience Palestine to be happier than Britain and happier than Israel too.

It might be confusing or confronting to read this. Palestine activists don't mention it – they prefer to focus on the hardship and suffering, which is not the whole picture. Most Palestinians wouldn't agree that they are happy, and the majority haven't travelled sufficiently to be able to compare their lives with those of people in other countries, and they assume that everyone else must be happier than they are.

But I don't make this observation lightly. What I mean is this. Happiness isn't a product of circumstances such as prosperity and security, and rich countries have their unhappinesses too. It's deeper,

rooted in what we really *are* and what we really *do*, in our lives as humans. Palestinians have been through things that most humans haven't, and for longer than most humans who have. As a result, inside themselves they have squared with issues that other people avoid or fear to confront. Issues such as death, poverty, insecurity, atrocity, shortage and imprisonment… This means that, bizarrely, they carry less of a psychological load of fear – fear of things getting worse – than people in safe and rich countries. Amidst the ongoing tribulation that is their lives, Palestinians are strangely happier – more *human*. It's bizarre to say this.

I arrived in Bethlehem, loitered a bit at Manger Square seeing old friends, then returned to the school in Al Khader, a suburb of Bethlehem, to meet up with Ibrahim Issa. Ibrahim, the director of Hope Flowers, took me straight to a meeting at the Everest Hotel above Beit Jala to make preparations for an event the following day. This was followed by a meal with the event organisers, and then we staggered home tired. Nevertheless, I stayed up blogging, to get it all down before memory-lapse set in. Tomorrow I'm going with Ibrahim to a two-day meeting of the Centre for Emerging Futures, a peacebuilding venture, at the Everest Hotel.

Time for bed. It's 11pm Palestine time, but only 9pm UK time, and I have a slight two-hour jetlag. I'm going to lie in bed reading Karen Armstrong's book Holy War, about the history of the Crusades and the modern conflict – quite readable, actually. Happy to be back and wondering what's going to happen next. Into the fray tomorrow.

*Next day…*
Friday 11th November 2011

## Emerging Futures

Fireworks were banging away, from a nearby wedding. An Israeli ex-soldier comes out to take a look – a friendly guy. "*In this country you*

*can never tell who is doing the banging or why*", he said nonchalantly, and wandered back inside again. This wasn't the only profundity that came out during these two days.

Ibrahim had yanked me off to a gathering of the Centre for Emerging Futures at the Everest Hotel above Beit Jala – what had been, in the 1930s-40s, a watering-hole for British officers and administrators in the time of British Mandate Palestine. I had been to a previous CEF gathering here during my last visit in June.

CEF was founded by Whit and Paula Jones from Boise, Idaho, USA – lovely people. This is their fifteenth visit to the Holy Land, running the project. Proceedings were run by a team of Israelis and Palestinians, with about seventy people present in the circle. Whit and Paula just watched and made occasional contributions – they had done much of the spadework in former years and were now watching it unfold.

The first day, Thursday, was spent in a variety of group processes intended to help everyone get to know each other and build trust – a check-in, breaking down into groups, wandering round eyeballing one another, sharing, and a meal and get-together at the end of the day.

This trust-building is a bigger thing than folks like you and I are used to. For many Palestinians, the only Israelis they have met are soldiers, and often in scary situations. Israelis, meanwhile, have been brought up with the idea that all Palestinians are dangerous, ready to stab you in the back at any moment, and quite a few have never actually met or spent quality time with an Arab – unless they were armed, doing national service, but I wouldn't call that quality time.

There is a proportion of people from both sides who have much more experience and trust of each other than this – people in this land are very varied in their attitudes to one another. Amongst the participants today, everyone is open in their behaviour and accustomed to such moments. But it's a careful dance that still takes a day to get through.

At evening dinner I talked with an Israeli who had always seemed genial and interesting at the various times we had spent together thus

far. We talked over many things… and then we came to politics. Quite a shift suddenly happened. I was soon reminded of a characteristic of some Israelis: in daily life they can be friendly, humane and open, but in politics they can be quite (to a European) hardline right-wing and (to us) unreasonable, unbending and insistent. The contradiction between their daily-life behaviour and their politics can be startling. However, this isn't unique to them.

In such situations, I switch into a diplomacy zone. The secret is to yield a bit so that they relax from defence-attack mode. You let them talk for a while so that they get a feeling you agree – which, from their viewpoint is the only option – and you await your moment. Then you state your truth firmly and calmly in the best possible of ways, knowing that a long explanation of your wrongness will follow, and that you won't win. Then you wait, and perhaps do it again later when the moment arises, gently and firmly making it known that, on certain key issues, you're not going to budge and, sorry, you're not necessarily wrong. Sometimes I look straight in their eyes and simply say, in a slightly withering way, "*Everyone is entitled to their own opinion…*". With blue eyes in a dark-eyed land, that eyeballing can be quite penetrating for them, and they often pull back.

It's a kind of psycho-chessgame. This calm firmness tends either to increase their respect or it causes them to change the subject or go away. If their respect grows you're into different territory and six inches closer to each other. Its success depends on how clear-headed and alert you are at the time and what's wisest to do. It's a question of gentle, polite firmness.

This guy had been organising a tour for Palestinians to visit Israel for two days, as part of a project he ran with CEF. This was not easy – permits had to be arranged, as well as the logistics of the tour and looking after the participants on the day. The Palestinians loved it. They talked vividly of their joy when visiting the sea at Tel Aviv for the first time in their lives – some of them rushed into the waves fully clothed –

and of their experiences at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, clubbing in Jerusalem and walking round a shopping mall.

Two young guys got separated from the group at one stage, suddenly finding themselves amongst some *Haredim* – ultra-orthodox Jews (the ones in old-fashioned black clothes and funny hats). Soon they were surrounded by younger ones preparing to beat them. They were rescued by an older *Haredi* and a policeman. The Palestinians didn't seem too disturbed by it. They know what the deal is with some Israelis, and they also know that other Israelis can be really nice.

But when talking politics my friend reckoned the security wall and checkpoints were the best thing possible, and that peace would never come because Palestinians would never make peace with Jews. After all, "*They just want to drive us out and destroy Israel – I mean, Palestinians danced in the streets when 9/11 happened, which just shows what they could do to us*". I didn't quite get how he connected these two points, and told him so, as well as making clear to him that, in my experience, very few Palestinians want to drive Israelis out, and the rest are mostly testosterone cases who can be sorted out in due course, if only the vast range of injustices against Palestinians would disappear into history.

Even Hamas, the Gazan party of resistance, has stated its willingness to recognise Israel within the pre-1967 borders. "*But of course, Hamas are terrorists*", said he, "*and they cannot be trusted – they're just killers. They even sacrifice their own people by firing rockets at us while using them as human shields. As for the refugees, they just need to accept they lost the wars, lost their lands, and that's what happens in war. That's the past – we need to talk about now and the future*", he said.

"*So how do you feel about the Holocaust? Is that past and gone too?*" – this is me appearing to ask a polite question but actually stinging hard. He didn't take it up – someone interfered. Perhaps just as well…

It doesn't pay to get charged up about discussions such as these – it gets you nowhere, leading eventually to burn-out, ulcers or deportation. But

it's possible to make small tactical strikes that might sink in someday. It's important not to let these people mow you down or delude themselves that you agree with them. They also like to believe that you don't know what either they or you are talking about.

This is a country of conflicting certainties, and it's best not to get too caught up in this collective game of perpetual position-taking and argument, even if one is quite clear and settled in one's own beliefs and values. On the other hand, it's important not to resort to 'living in the bubble' – disregarding and blocking out the awkward issues and avoiding mention of them, just to avoid trouble and discomfort. That bubble is Tel Aviv, a comparable city to Miami, with its beaches, restaurants, precincts and nightlife, and quite nice German Bauhaus-style architecture (since Tel Aviv was founded and built by German architects. It's very strange, this bubble of bliss, with a conflict going on up the road only twenty miles away.

So we moved on to discussing the scenery around Bet El instead – Bet El (biblical Bethel) is the HQ of the Civil Administration, the Israeli military government of the West Bank, northeast of Ramallah – where he had done much of his military service. The country round there is bordering on mountainous, with deep valleys, olive-covered slopes and bright skies.

By the time we got back to the school that evening, Ibrahim and I were tired out. I was in bed as fast as my shoelaces, toothpaste and lights-off routines would permit. Welcome to Palestine – there's never ever a dull moment! Then there was a second day of the gathering next day…

*Next day…*
Saturday 12 Nov 2011

## Emerging Projects

What I like about the Centre for Emerging Futures is that it is action-oriented. In the Holy Land there are many talking, trust-building and

communication projects that bring together people on different sides to dialogue and get more used to relating to each other. They have their value but, in the end, I wonder how much real value they actually have. Such events have been taking place for 20-30 years and peace and justice have progressed only marginally, if at all – depending on who you ask.

CEF takes a social-entrepreneurial approach. It brings people together, encouraging them to engage in joint projects of their own design and initiative, and it supports them in these projects technically, with contacts and knowhow and also, when needed, with start-up capital (up to $5,000 USD).

The second day was devoted to initial project-design. They called for ideas, which people then proposed, then we split into groups so that each proposal could be explored. This is ‘open space’ working. In each group, the project proposer becomes the group host. Then everyone else can be a participant (they know they want to join that project), or a ‘bumblebee’ (they circulate, contributing ideas or specific skills or contacts), or a ‘butterfly’ (undecided, flitting between groups to see what is happening). All are relevant.

There are also rules and one law to help keep things simple. They are these. First, those who come to any group are the right people. Second, whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened. Third, when it starts is the right time. Fourth, when it’s over, it’s over. Then there’s the ‘law of two feet’: by walking in, you make a commitment, and by walking out you don’t, and both are alright.

Later on, each project proposer presented what their group had come up with. Here I’m going to describe the projects so that you get a sense of the scope of what was proposed. Four existing groups, started in earlier CEF meetings, were these:

- **The Tarqumiya Centre for Children**, organising cultural exchanges and social events for Israeli and Palestinian children in

and around Tarqumiya, a town in the south, on the border between the Palestinian and Israeli territories.

- **The Two Neighbours embroidery project.** This is quite established, now helping forty women generate income through a fair trade project making and selling embroidered sleeves for Starbucks-type coffee houses, with which to hold hot disposable coffee cups – they're on the edge of signing a contract with WalMart in USA. They hope eventually to employ 200 women, in Jaffa, Israel and in the settler-embattled village of Tuwani in the southern West Bank. The Israelis make up the sleeves and packaging and the Palestinians do the fiddly embroidery, and CEF does marketing in USA and overseeing of the process in Israel-Palestine. The project was financed by CEF and the start-up capital will be paid back through income earned by the project, at the speed it can pay. But the project is owned by the women, and they will eventually collect profits as well as being paid a wage for their work.
- **Cookbook for Peace**, containing traditional recipes from both sides, with personal stories from the cooks who supplied them – a large-format book is already published.
- **Hackathon**, a collective of Israeli and Palestinian programmers who cooperate to create software and solutions promoting bridge-building, dialogue and joint projects. It's part of an international network that carries out 'random hacks of kindness'.

Then we come to newly-proposed projects that arose at the gathering. These are:

- **The Al Aqaba Guesthouse**, an existing guesthouse in a 400-person village in the Jordan valley, near Tubas, where the project is to host visitors from Israel and elsewhere, offering tours, reconciliation meetings and volunteer opportunities. This was proposed by,

Morgan, an American volunteer living in Al Aqaba, with the idea that the project will replicate itself in other villages in future.

- **Our Story**, a cross-community narrative process proposed by an Israeli woman from Tel Aviv, with the aim of holding gatherings, collecting living history and helping people tell their story to people on the other side.
- **Computer Centre for Blind People**, proposed by an intelligent and active blind woman living near Nablus, called Takhlas.
- **Trip$^2$**, a second journey to the other side (following on from the trip for Palestinians to Israel described earlier), except this time for Israelis to visit Palestine.
- **Young Couples Project**, organising gatherings and joint projects for couples and young families.
- **Eco-leadership Course**, proposing to take a group of Palestinians and Israelis to Auroville in India, to learn environmental and community sustainability methods developed there.
- **Voices of Jaffa**, researching the social and cultural history of the historic town of Jaffa (now part of Tel Aviv), also planning to teach Jews Arabic and to allow refugees who originated in Jaffa either to return to visit or to share their stories of what happened to them after their flight in the 1948 *Nakba*.
- **A Social Networking platform** for CEF projects to communicate, pooling experience and resources. The proposer reported that she did not think there was a groundswell for this, so she would probably not take it further. In response, the CEF organisers said "*This is precisely what we want and have been considering ourselves, but we need it to come not from us but from you, so please come and discuss the proposal with us later*". This surprised the proposer, and it looks as if this project might take off.

These were the projects that came up. People exchanged contact details and each group was asked to state their next steps – they needed a strategy for moving forward.

At the end of the gathering all participants were radiant and glowing. They had bonded with each other. It highlighted something to me: frequently we think in terms of Israelis and Palestinians being in conflict, but there is another conflict too – between peacemakers (active or dormant) and conflict-makers (active or dormant) on both sides. There is a largely-quiet constituency of people on both sides who do not believe in reinforcing the psychology of conflict, and the majority keep their heads down, doing things discreetly or hiding and withholding – but they are there.

One day things will change and a rising wave of reconciliation and cooperation in this land will grow surreptitiously until it breaks out as a national consensus. Only some people will know what to do then, or have contacts on the other side, or know how to work with them. This wave will rise and break one day – it's mainly a matter of how and when.

The Arab Spring of 2011, in which a groundswell for change arose quite suddenly amongst ordinary people – especially the younger generation – demonstrates how such a wave can erupt quite quickly when the time is right, gaining a momentum that is historic in magnitude and irreversible in significance.

That is what gatherings such as CEF are all about – laying foundations for something to grow, sometime, somehow. I like its practical orientation. Their work is long, slow and complex, but it's going somewhere and making its mark.

At the end of the gathering we went back to the school, tired and pleased. The next day I devoted to settling in and establishing my workspace in an office downstairs, catching up with e-mails and mapping out my tasks for the coming weeks. I worked through to 8pm,

suddenly to realise I was hungry. The Issas had gone down to Tuwani for a meeting of Two Neighbours.

I walked down into Al Khader to sit at a café eating a falafel sandwich and talking with the owner. He was fascinated to find out why I keep coming back here. Of course there were the usual questions about how many children I have, where my wife is (what wife?), how long I'm staying and what exactly I'm doing.

A falafel sandwich is a wholesome kind of fast food, with falafels, hummus, chopped salad and relish stuffed into a pitta bread, for the sum of four shekels (at the time about 80p in British money, or one Euro). For a vegetarian like me it's a staple in my diet here.

Then I wandered back home, stopping to chat with the Palestinian soldiers at a checkpoint on the edge of Al Khader – that evening they had their eyes peeled for smugglers who shift goods between Israel and Palestine. Smugglers take stuff to Israel to avoid Israeli taxes, and to Palestine to bypass monopolies and Israeli supply restrictions.

Things in Palestine are often cheaper than in Israel, thanks to less tax and bureaucracy, lower wages and profits, but some things are expensive because of scarcity or restrictions, so smuggling is common. It's a leftover from the days of the *intifadas* – times when there were Israeli curfews and controls. To deal with them, Palestinians resorted to all sorts of avoidance tactics such as smuggling.

But it's not just this. Israel is a 'developed' country, with all the expense, complexity and sophistication that this brings, while Palestine, though under Israeli rule, is a 'developing' country with a very different and much more freebooting character – they're different worlds, separated by checkpoints and security walls. And Palestine isn't really developing much, economically. So this is quite a big border, even though technically it is an internal border within one country. That's *apartheid* for you.

Israel has occupied the Palestinian Territories since 1967 but it does not consider it has a duty of care toward inhabitants – the international

community conveniently covers that. This is strange, especially since this land is so small. Tel Aviv, a prosperous western city, is just 30km from Ramallah, but they could be on different planets. This is just one aspect of the crazy multi-paradoxicality of this place.

*Five days later…*
Thursday 17th Nov 2011

## Pause for Thought

Today I woke up with a streaming cold – sneezes, watering eyes, porridge head and a river of snot. I didn't feel like getting out of bed. My emotions and sensitivities were wobbling. It was also a lesson in looking after my basic security needs – something I'm not so good at. My resilience makes me quite a good humanitarian, prepared to put myself on the line and able to empathise with the situation and with others' needs, but it makes me weak at looking after my own interests.

Yet here comes the number one rule for a humanitarian working in a tricky situation: *everything is a process and you can get over anything*. Or, to quote a saying: *today is the tomorrow I worried about yesterday, and all is well*. Resilience rests not so much on strength as on the ability to change and turn difficulty to advantage. There's a simple question we can ask ourselves in such situations: *what is the gift here?* Or, even more profound: *in what way is this an answer to a prayer?* Next time you have a problem, try those.

So, a streaming nose gives an opportunity to catch up on this blog! In recent days I've been overwhelmed with events and I've been getting rather unfocused, diffused, not sure this time why exactly I am here. Well, that's not exactly true: I know precisely what needs to be done. But how to pull off a miracle is a question that's quietly bugging me at present. By its very nature, a miracle is something that is deemed impossible, or at least improbable – at least, until the moment it takes place. But I have some experience in this game, and there is hope.

Let me explain. Here's the recent story of Hope Flowers and its current situation – I shall sum up what happened during my last visit here in June-July 2011.

Hope Flowers is a school and adult education centre dedicated to war-trauma recovery, peace and democracy, education of the whole human being and post-conflict reconstruction. Founded in 1984, it has made it through two *intifadas* (uprisings), and it is, in my estimation, a world leader in its field – not least because the Palestine conflict has been going on for a hundred years (depending on where you reckon it began), and they have a lot of real-life experience. I'm dedicated to helping Palestinians but it's the global significance of it that really brings me here. I'm not here because I have a particular bias toward Palestinians or against Israelis, but because I support *humans*, whatever side they're on.

Hope Flowers has had a weakness concerning 'core funding'. It has been funded by a constellation of largely Western trusts, foundations and individuals, but most like to support specific projects with a limited time-frame. So funding the building of a water cistern or the running of a three year course has been supported, but funding the overall running of the buildings, the wages bill, the administration and other ongoing core expenses has been difficult.

Ongoing funding is unexciting to trusts. It goes on forever and, unless a school charges substantial fees, which Hope Flowers cannot and does not wish to do, it is the domain of governments or big organisations to fund it. But governments and big organisations would change it to suit their own aims and requirements, and that is not what Hope Flowers exists to do. So we have always been under-funded and under-staffed, accustomed to getting by on a shoestring. This is fine while there is the energy and determination to overcome obstacles and discouragements, but it's a perpetually weak situation. We've now reached crunch point.

The school has always maintained an independent line. It is not affiliated with the Palestine Authority, churches, mosques, NGOs, political interests or social groups. This has meant Hope Flowers has

been able to develop its own unique techniques, hammered out on the anvil of demanding circumstances. Affiliation with other organisations would have constrained or even ruined this, since naturally they have their agendas and master-plans and they are mostly controlled from outside Palestine. The price of Hope Flowers' independence is that it does not receive the ample and consistent funding, support and protection that affiliation with other bodies can bring. This is a problem. It led to the following situation…

In recent years there was an attempted hostile takeover of Hope Flowers by a well-known international meditation organisation – or by individuals within it. Even so, knowingly or not, the organisation permitted this to happen, even if only by omission or commission. They served as a front organisation for someone else: the driving force was Jewish-American financiers with an interest in settlement-building and taking over Palestinian land. They also had an interest in suppressing peace-oriented organisations on both sides. Hope Flowers is one of the older ones.

It started with an offer to teach meditation to students and teachers. That fitted well, so the offer was accepted in 2009. Then it progressed to an offer of substantial funding. This was needed, so this was accepted. After a while it moved on to a request for the school to buy some nearby property – and this suddenly exposed the designs of these people. This is how Israeli settlers take over Palestinian areas, by buying a piece of property through a seemingly harmless proxy, gaining a foothold and then expanding from there. Then it was discovered that the meditation teachers had been mistreating some of the children. The school threw them out. But, by then, things had gone too far – the school had already received an amount of funding from them. These guys were determined, but the school had rumbled them.

Then came round two. In the first half of 2011 a series of allegations of corruption and malpractice were circulated by e-mail and letter around many of its international supporters. They accused the school of misappropriation of funds, exploitation of teachers, property-buying

heists, failing to run funded courses, and more. It was bad, murky stuff – shocking. It fell on me to investigate, initially on behalf of the school's legitimate international funders and supporters.

On visiting the school in June 2011 it quickly became apparent that these allegations were false and malicious. This was a coordinated attack, not a disconnected series of complaints. I announced to the funders that I would have to switch priorities from investigating the school's affairs to protecting Hope Flowers against serious attack. Our future was in question, and this was critical.

What was the aim of these people? They sought to separate Hope Flowers from its international supporters. Allegations of corruption are an excellent way of activating Westerners, who have anxieties about such things. Why attempt such a separation? Because, over the years, whenever there has been a threat of demolition of the school or of other harm coming from the Israelis, the school has activated its supporters, who alert their congressmen and MPs, who alert their governments, who contact the Israelis to demand that Hope Flowers be left alone. Thus, the motive was to undermine this protection from abroad. Between Ibrahim Issa, Hope Flowers' director, and I, we cracked it and headed off the threat. It took a lot of work, many late nights and a lot of communication with funders and supporters.

Then came round three. These people pulled strings through elements in the Israeli and Palestinian security services, trying to get Ibrahim arrested. Some in the Palestinian security services suspected him of collaboration with the Israelis. Actually it was *they* who were secretly collaborating with the Israelis – it's good money. This would mean Ibrahim would be treated as a traitor.

This goes back a bit. Both Ibrahim and his father Hussein, the founder of Hope Flowers in 1984, believed in reconciliation and keeping up dialogue with 'the enemy'. They were as loyal and patriotic as anyone, though they believed in building bridges and preparing for peace – a peace which has never come.

Hope Flowers did indeed make a few errors – mainly in terms of failing fully to uphold the stringent levels of transparency and accountability required by Western funders. This was partially Hope Flowers' fault, and partially it arose because this is an occupied country with severe restrictions, chaos, insecurity and shortage of money and resources. So maintaining such standards is difficult.

At times Western organisations demand too much or fail to understand the circumstances under which Palestinians operate. Hope Flowers had reformed its accounting and auditing systems in 2009-10. But doing things the Western way in a place like Palestine is, well, challenging, laborious and expensive. Also, Palestinians don't really need auditors, since they work on a basis of integrity, honour and trust – a breach of these brings shame on your whole family.

After many years of running Hope Flowers under difficult circumstances, members of the Issa family were burned out. In 2009 one made some serious errors, and I remember her bursting out crying, saying that she hadn't had a break for eleven years. In 2011, when the allegations came up, Ibrahim, his wife and mother were also burned out, unable to marshal themselves to fight off the attack. This is the root of the problem – burn-out. A challenge can be overcome if energy is available but, if it isn't there, there's a problem. It's as if the immune system of Hope Flowers was worn out, with insufficient resistance to attack.

Many Western funders withheld funding. They didn't withdraw, but they weren't paying up as arranged. They demanded figures, analyses and assurances that mistakes were being corrected. A few asked for Ibrahim's resignation. He would have loved to resign, to get his life back, though his sense of responsibility to Hope Flowers stopped him from doing so.

All this meant that, by November, Hope Flowers had a cashflow crisis and was near-bankrupt. If we couldn't find an answer to this, quickly and easily, it would all be over. The Issa family would feel it had broken its honour and brought shame on itself – an important issue for

Palestinians. The pioneering educational and social work would end. People would lose their jobs and children would lose their school. For me, my work of recent years would come to little, except as a learning experience.

This was my purpose for being here. I was here as an adviser, to help the Issas deal with the situation. Now I was waiting for Ibrahim to sit down with me to evolve a strategy – a Plan A for reviving Hope Flowers' fortunes and a Plan B for closing it while causing the least possible damage. I was here to see if I could catalyse a solution.

Perhaps that's why I had a streaming cold! Viruses open up different parts of the brain and heart, forcing a rest, permitting reassessment and making space for new insight, or an emotional and spiritual shift. This can be useful when one is faced with pulling off a miracle. Somewhere, somehow, there was a way through this minefield.

I believe it is possible to pull off a miracle, but I don't yet know how to do it. We need to find new funding to carry us through this crisis. Ibrahim needs a rest, a rethink and recuperation from the shock, shame and emotional battering he has been through, from too many years of overwork and too much responsibility – he is 36 years old and carries the responsibilities of a fiftysomething.

Meanwhile, the school and the centre, both of which are doing well in their core work, need to be kept going. We need to find someone to manage them so that Ibrahim can pull back to become a guide and leader to the staff and supporters – a vision-holder. Ibrahim has lost much of his will to continue. He tries his best. Each evening I see him falling asleep over his computer, worn out. His wife, Maram, perseveres in supporting him and looking after their three lovely daughters. The boss is at the end of his tether, out of steam.

So, here we have the preconditions for a miracle – an absolutely impossible situation where the odds are stacked against us. This is why I'm here, to find a little chink of light and opportunity which could get us through. Now I am going to proceed with the next step in pulling off

such a miracle: I'm going to make a cup of tea – the British solution to everything. It gives a chance to think and get ready for the next bit. This process is a one-step-at-a-time thing. Stay tuned to this station to find out how the story unfolds…

*Next day…*
Friday 18th November 2011

## Rain does fall on saints and sinners alike

It's rather like Cornwall. It's misty, drizzly, rainy and rather still. It started two evenings ago when a dramatic thunderstorm rumbled around, flashing, banging, dimming the lights and throwing down gallons of enormous wet droplets. We were caught out in it and soaked in minutes. It was wonderful. The storm changed the charge of the land from *yang* to *yin* and brought in the rain, and it has been raining on and off ever since.

The ground needs it. This region has over half a year without rain, so the water tables sorely need topping up. This is important not only ecologically but socially and politically. The West Bank is a highland region – most of its towns are around 2,500ft (800m) up, on limestone plateaux with significant underground water systems. The problem for Palestinians is that they supply 30% of Israel's water – and they have no choice in the matter. Put another way, Israel and the settlements take 80% of the West Bank's water, leaving 20% to be rationed out, resold at extra cost to the Palestinians – and Palestinians' water charges subsidise the water bills of Israeli settlers. Financial inducements such as these – cheap water bills – are one of the factors causing many Israelis to move to the settlements. It's a good deal for young couples and recent immigrants.

The other person who got caught out in the rain was John, a Scot whom I met on the bus from King Hussein Bridge to Jericho on the day I arrived. He came to stay for two nights. He has been making a film

about Palestine, returning here to fill gaps in the material he had collected. Also, though he was well-versed (by British standards) in the details of the Palestine conflict, he had discovered that there was much he didn't understand, much that didn't make sense. Discovering me, he realised he could pick my brains, and this he did when he came to visit.

We had long discussions over the two days he stayed. I think he rather liked the relative peace of the school – staying with Palestinians, he had been overwhelmed by the frenetic intensity of their lives. I had to remind him to stop trying to *understand* the situation. There are so many inconsistencies, paradoxes and frankly insane facets to this multiplex, unreal situation that logic needs to be suspended. This way, you start to understand more.

I enjoyed his company – we saw eye-to-eye on many things. I helped him comprehend the situation here, and he helped me gain insights into my own situation as a Brit getting absorbed into the Palestinian way of life – an 'honorary Palestinian', as Ibrahim and others label me. Yet, although I am a dissident and detractor in my own country, and culturally broad-minded, I'm still British. I like my muesli and tea for breakfast and I'm not becoming a Muslim (or a Christian), neither fully concurring with all of the cultural assumptions that Palestinians subscribe to. But I love this nation and people nevertheless.

Bizarrely, the best way I could stay in this country would be to marry a Jew, not a Palestinian. But these aren't options for me – I'm a Brit and, no matter how much I learn Arabic and adopt Palestinian ways, a Brit I shall stay. As John aptly put it when talking about his own life, how would I explain to a Muslim about the number of relationships I've had, and the fact that I have kids by more than one woman? How immoral!

John returned to Scotland. I arranged for him to be taken to Jericho by Ismael, my trusty taxi-man (to cross back to Amman in Jordan). But first Ismael was going to take John round some key sites in Bethlehem, to catch some video of Deheisheh refugee camp, the security wall around Aida refugee camp and the landscape panoramas visible from Beit Jala.

It's rather quiet now. I've been hanging out at the school, catching up on work, ruminating, wiping my oft-dripping nose and preparing myself for a series of quite engaging experiences, discussions and encounters to come. Today it is Friday, the Muslim day of prayer. The calling to prayers sounds out longer on Fridays, though today it is muffled by the rain. I have a suspicion that the quietness around Al Khader is a symptom of a lot of people sitting at home watching TV.

Life goes on in this occupied land, amazingly. People do indeed suffer from the effects of the occupation, but the image that many foreigners have of Palestinians can be pretty inaccurate. In most cases, people here don't hang around worrying about the occupation – like everyone everywhere, they worry about their bills, kids and the fortunes of their families. They live in well-built and at times quite elegant houses, driving around in their cars (even if some are old wrecks that would fail a test in the West), doing their shopping and getting on with life.

But there is still, in the background, an acute awareness of their situation. As I read on a piece of graffiti a few days ago: "*Palestine – some are dead, some are living, but most are not yet born. This land is not for sale*".

*Same weekend…*
Sunday 20th Nov 2011

## Lord Balfour's Blooper

Yesterday I went down to the Alternative Information Centre in Beit Sahour for their Saturday lecture and get-together. The AIC is a campaigning organisation and gathering place for mostly-foreign volunteers and activists who come to Bethlehem area to do their bit. I met a Dane who was teaching computer animation techniques to kids, and an English lady here with her husband, who visits regularly as an activist. She said he was a sucker for getting tear-gassed in demos against the Israeli army. Another is a young Basque woman who writes

columns for a Basque newspaper, and another was an Irishman who works with disabled kids.

First, I had a little lesson in the magic process of setting an intent and then letting things unfold. During the last week it has been really cold – such things as good heating don't exist here because houses are built to deal with the heat of summer, not the cold of winter. So I needed to buy an extra sweater. On the way to Beit Sahour I asked Ismael where to get one. Palestine has *real shops* in it, run by *real shopkeepers* – no supermarket chains as we have in Europe – so you need to know where to go to get what you want. Ismael said that, come Monday, he would accompany me to find one. He's a good man to know! He also gave me my latest Arabic lesson on the way: he had asked me *Keif halak?*, or 'How are you?' and I didn't have a good answer, so he taught me *Hamdulillah*, which means 'Thanks be to God' or, 'Mercifully, I'm okay'.

He dropped me off in Beit Sahour and I waved him goodbye. Turning round, I noticed a shop called *Just 4 You*, with male mannikins in the window wearing woollen sweaters. Problem solved: within ten minutes and the obligatory five friendly conversations with different people in the shop, I emerged with a new sweater! I had found what I was seeking without looking for it, and Ismael had helped me without knowing it, by dropping me where he did! Magic.

The lecture concerned the Balfour Declaration, written in 1917 during the First World War, on the eve of the British takeover of Palestine. My maternal grandfather was part of General Allenby's invading British army (and my paternal grandfather was in the Battle of the Somme).

Dr Adnan Musallam of Bethlehem University, a professor of physics, was a longtime activist and the founder of several Palestinian organisations. He outlined the context of the beginning of the Palestine problem a century ago – mainly concerning the geostrategic interest of the British and French in taking over the Middle East on the downfall of the Ottoman empire.

The British then had two priorities: safeguarding the Suez Canal (linking Britain with India and other Asian domains) and gaining control of the oil deposits discovered in Iraq, the Gulf and Iran – motor cars, tanks and airplanes were the new technologies of the time. Palestine wasn't of great interest except inasmuch as its control stopped anyone else getting in. And British Christian Zionists of course wanted to stick their oar in.

The Middle East had been united under the Ottomans for centuries, divided into provinces. When the British and French sectioned it up (France gained Lebanon and Syria and Britain got the rest) they intentionally split the region into small nation-states, identifying minorities in each country who would then be promoted to rule the rest. In Lebanon it was Maronite Christians, in Syria it was Alawites (today's Assad regime are Alawites), in Jordan it was the Bedouin and in Palestine… well, the Jews looked convenient, and over time decisions were made to commandeer some of them from Europe, since increasingly they wanted to get out. Zionist interests in Europe, including Lord Rothschild, promoted this idea too – and, as it happened, since Rothschild was lending large sums of money to the UK government to help finance WW1, the Brits needed to keep him happy.

There was a further issue back in Europe: Jews weren't popular. Many European politicians knew that they should do something to ease this brewing problem. Some Jewish thinkers (the Zionists) believed that Jews needed an identity and nation of their own. Some British agreed, though they thought Uganda, Argentina or Mauritius would do. But the Zionists wanted their historic home, Palestine.

This was doable, conceivably, but enormous mistakes were made. Look at the proviso in the Balfour Declaration which said "*…Nothing will be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine…*". The British meanwhile worked on a 'divide and rule' principle. What was needed instead of divide and rule was moderate and gradual Jewish immigration, with an integrated approach to building a new nation of Palestine, such that both

communities could coexist as happily and productively as possible. This didn't happen.

Dr Musallam pointed out a problem in Europe. There was the option to resolve the Jewish problem in Europe, or to export it elsewhere. It was exported. Europeans needed to address their own tendency to override minorities and deny their rights – a problem that arose around the time of the Crusades, 900 years ago, and continues today with our neuroses over immigration and Muslims in Europe. The problem was exported and dumped on the people of Palestine – and this went out of control when the Russian pogroms and the German 'final solution' came along in the late 1930s, making Jews desperate to get out and find a safe haven. Zionist leaders, promoting the idea of a Jewish national home, spoke of '*a land without people waiting for a people without a land*' – a serious misconception which continues today in Israeli attitudes toward Palestinians.

Yet Palestine and the lands around it are multi-ethnic, multicultural places. They have been so for millennia and they always shall be, located as they are at a nexus-point of the whole of Eurasia. For this reason, Musallam and many others believe that the much-vaunted 'two-state solution' cannot work, because the different peoples of the Middle East simply *must* live together. Ethnically-defined mini-states aren't a solution. He added that, if a 'one-state solution' were employed, the Israelis, being richer, more organised and distinctly capitalist, would probably dominate the Palestinians at first, and the outcome of that is unpredictable.

But in time the numerical advantage Palestinians possess would probably win through, and the Israelis would need to integrate with the Arab world – meaning that a true balancing of Jewish and Arab interests could unfold over the generations. In addition, some form of Arab Union is becoming likely, which would give Palestine advantage, whether or not it is a member. Israelis would be obliged to drop their sense of superiority and control – unlikely at present, though time and circumstance have remarkable ways of changing things.

In passing, he mentioned the paradox that, genetically, a proportion of the Palestinian and Bedouin populations is genetically descended from Jews – the ones who stayed behind during the Jewish diaspora 2,000 years ago, later to merge with the surrounding population. Also the dominant Ashkenazi element in the population of modern Israel, originating from Europe, is not solely descended from the Jews who were exiled from ancient Israel. He underlined that worrying about genetics is futile, since we *all* are mongrels, and what concerns us is the present and the future, not ancient history and the supposed rights it confers.

One thought passed my mind: why did the British not favour Christians instead of Jews, as a client overclass in Palestine? We shall never know, but here are two clues. The first is Rothschild and his role in the British elite at the time – the British government was beholden to Jewish financiers. The second concerns Chaim Weizmann, a leading Zionist and professor of chemistry at Manchester University – Balfour was MP for the area where he lived, and they knew each other. Weizmann invented a chemical, synthetic acetone, used for making cordite in explosives and, this being WW1, it was very valuable to the British. So Balfour asked what he could do in return for Weizmann's contribution. "*Give us Jews a state*", was the answer.

There's a third factor here too, which I raised at the end of the lecture. Palestinians tend to believe that the British were pro-Jewish in their Palestine policies. This isn't entirely true. For more than a century, the British foreign office has been plagued, and still is, by an ongoing rivalry between Arabists, pro-Jewish interests and business interests, none of whom has ever won. Lawrence of Arabia and Glubb Pasha were typical Arabists, who understood the Arab cause, advocating the founding of a united Arab nation, before being overruled by high-ups back home who took a 'divide and rule' approach – pressured by the Jewish lobby and fuelled by business interests who wanted control of the oilfields.

This is why Balfour wrote an ambiguous declaration, promising a Jewish homeland while also seeking to guarantee the rights of Palestinian Arabs. In the 1920s-30s the Brits made promises to Arabs and separate promises to Jews that were entirely irreconcilable. When the Arabs started revolting against Jewish settlement and British rule in the 1920s-30s, the Brits arrested, exiled and killed the Palestinian leadership, suppressing ordinary people's protests and making good use of the immigrating Jews to reinforce this.

So the British made a big mistake by never resolving their own internal conflicts of interest. This resulted in increasing polarisation of Arabs and Jews. It led eventually to a proposed UN partition of Palestine in 1947 which, to foreign diplomats, seemed fair and sensible, but it was a recipe for disaster – the Palestinians could not accept partition and loss of half of their land. Meanwhile, the Jews wanted the whole lot from the sea to the Jordan River or even further, and in 1948 they took far more than they were given. The UN in effect gave Jews inadvertent permission to ethnically cleanse their new land of Israel.

My own work in Palestine seeks to redress some of this enormous historic mistake my own nation made back then, not long before I was born. I believe in multi-ethnic, multicultural societies, in justice between people, and in the primacy of the human race as a whole. My work doesn't make an enormous difference to the political landscape, but it still pushes toward healing, understanding, justice, equity and cooperation for all peoples. I might work with and for Palestinians, but that doesn't make me anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic.

Many Brits believe the British empire was largely A Good Thing. Well, we were beneficiaries, not victims of the empire, so we *would* believe that. Trouble is, we made enormous errors, costing the lives and lands of millions of people, ruining whole cultures and driving forward the exploitation of our planet, all for British profit. We shouldn't stand around feeling guilty for that today, and we have indeed brought benefits to other peoples too. But we should work to right many of the wrongs we wrought – this includes wrongs in our own society, with its

inequalities, lies, illusions, materialism and, frankly, social and spiritual poverty. It is in our own best ultimate interests to do so.

Musallam mentioned one other thing. Settler societies are *resolute* (Americans and Australians are good examples), and you can't just expect settlers to go home or let up. Settlers have made a big choice to leave their homelands and improve their lives by emigrating to other lands. They hang together, work hard, suffer together and never give up, whatever happens. Thus he gave an insight into Israeli settlers, whom many people find to be incomprehensible in their sheer assertiveness, sense of superiority and their impositions on Palestinians. They cannot be denied or shoved aside. This presents a problem, and it isn't going to go away – Palestinians as much as Israelis are going to need to change, to encompass the *others* in their midst.

Peace negotiations won't solve the Palestine problem – this is an illusion clung onto by foreign politicians, diplomats and journalists. It's good cover for the Israelis, who use a decades-long appearance of a 'peace process' as a way of quietly undermining any prospects of peace by establishing 'facts on the ground' – a comprehensive takeover of Palestinian land. What will solve the problem is a generational shift of values, priorities and perspective.

The big problem we face in today's world is global in scale. In the end, the perceived rights and priorities of individual nations are secondary to the survival of the human race. If sea levels rise, both Gaza and Tel Aviv are affected. If a massive earthquake happens in Palestine (likely sometime), it will affect Israelis and Palestinians alike. If there is a collapse of oil supplies, Palestinians and Israelis will be affected alike – and paradoxically we're likely to see, in such a scenario, Palestinians rescuing Israelis from their plight, simply because Palestinians are far more adept and experienced at dealing with crises and hardships.

Peace will come about because the old agenda of conflict will be superseded by much greater issues. It's tragic that it has to be this way, but this is the gift of the future. Fasten your safety-belts: we're in for one helluva ride. Military actions to protect the interest of the people on

top will become obsolete, with costs vastly overriding benefits. Welcome to the New World. 2012 could be the year that we all properly step into it.

*Three days later…*
Wednesday 23 Nov 2011

## Sunshine and shadow

Yesterday the sun came out and the atmosphere changed. In the sunshine it is quite warm, around 20 degrees, but when it disappears the temperature goes down to about 5-8 degrees. Yesterday evening I had a good long chat with my son on Skype – he told me that it's milder in Britain than in Palestine right now.

It was good to talk with him. He was fifteen and working hard at examinations, day and night, so there had been a silence from him. I missed him. He's getting to an age where he's too busy to think about his Dad, busy rising to the challenges of adult life – many of them imposed by people who, of course, know what's best for him. During his free time from examinations, he's filling in applications for apprenticeships and colleges. He's just found out that the intake of apprentices at his first-option company has been reduced from forty to six, so the competition is intense. He's emerging into manhood at an uncertain time. My parental fear is that he will become discouraged by circumstances. But he'll be alright, actually.

For some years I have wanted to bring him to Palestine, not just to see what I am doing and to meet the people I'm involved with, but also to see some of the effects of the conflict here. He has always been interested in military issues, and I have wanted him to see some of the real stuff that goes on in militarised, polarised environments. In particular, I wanted him to see what it's like being on the losing side, and how people cope with it – since we Brits consider ourselves to be winners, and there's a certain hubris to that.

But of course, in Britain, it's regarded as dangerous, even irresponsible, to bring a young person to a country such as Palestine, and his education is, of course, far more important. Yet visiting Palestine would probably educate him far more, in what is truly important in life.

One of the biggest learning experiences to be had here concerns how to deal with people on the other side, and how to deal with a collective psychological framework where '*if you aren't with us, you're against us*'. In the last few days I've fallen into awkward situations with a Palestinian and an Israeli, both of whom I like and respect. The first was the lecturer about the Balfour Declaration, with whom I shared my understanding that the British, during the Mandate period of the 1920s-40s, erred by having a confused and duplicitous approach to Arabs and Jews and to nation-building. I don't believe they were clearly anti-Arab.

However, to many Palestinians, the British were pro-Jewish. Indeed some were, and the 1917 Balfour Declaration reinforced this impression. No, they were confused, implementing a colonialist divide-and-rule policy which, on balance, harmed Arabs more than Jews. There was a conflict between Arabists and Zionists, acted out in colonial policy. It was not exactly a pro-Jewish, anti-Arab policy – had it been so, there's a good chance that the Brits would have ceded Palestine to Jewish rule and then made proper provisions for the Arabs, and this might well have avoided the serious ethnic cleansing the Jews entered into in 1947-50, forcibly clearing enormous numbers of Palestinians from what was to become Israel.

Arguably, this ethnic cleansing and mass-murder was facilitated by the partition of Mandate Palestine by the UN, to whom the British had handed the question because, having divided and ruled, they were unsure what to do next. This was not dissimilar to what happened in India at the same time – an ambivalence that caused the deaths of many thousands and the separation of Muslims and Hindus into two nations (Pakistan and India) that have been at loggerheads ever since.

It was actually the reforming Labour government under Atlee that did this. Yet when the British saw the UN partition plan, they voted against

it, knowing it was wrong – but it was already too late, and the Jews, determinedly staking out their new state, were already precipitating events. They didn't want to wait for others – they had waited long enough for a homeland and wanted self-determination. This tragedy was a manifestation of British confusion. It was also the beginning of Israeli exceptionalism – a belief that Israeli is exempt from international law. Other settler countries such as USA, South Africa and Australia are rather like this too.

Then there was a comment about my blog, sent to me by an Israeli friend, with whom I share interests and an 'alternative' background. It highlighted to me the problems involved with writing about the Israeli-Palestinian situation – you can never please everyone. I write mainly for Westerners, to try to shed light on the realities behind the situation here, and it is difficult to avoid annoying someone – especially certain Israelis or Palestinians, who can see things very differently from Westerners. Even if sympathetic and not annoyed, some have to swallow hard when they read my stuff. There is also great variation of attitude within each of these three groupings – Western, Israeli and Arab. The risk of attracting opprobrium can cause one to go silent, but this is no solution.

My friend didn't *attack* me – she shared a perspective, with care for what she said. But it still went in. She got hooked on a point which is valid, and it arose from a slip on my part. I had mentioned that Jews were unpopular in Europe, and she said this was an understatement. Certainly it was, in the light of the Holocaust which arose in the 1930s-40s. But I was referring to 1920, the period of the Balfour Declaration and the establishment of the British Mandate. At that time, few could imagine that the Holocaust would happen. So I erred by leaving out a few words that would clarify that I was referring to 1920.

This kind of thing reinforces an Israeli feeling that Europeans seek to underrate the importance of the Holocaust. This understatement indeed does happen, partially from affluent indifference, partially from underlying collective guilt and partially from historical laziness and a

modern tendency to disconnect the past from the present. Indeed it is true that many Europeans conveniently forget the Holocaust – and in the case of Brits, we are relieved that it was the Germans, not we, who did it. But we Brits inadvertently *permitted* the Holocaust by a failure of wisdom and principle on our own part in the 1920s. We also had mixed, contrary views about Jews.

There is a quote I use in instances such as this, from Michael Herr, the scriptwriter of the film *Apocalypse Now*, about Vietnam. Herr said: "*Everyone who remembers Vietnam should forget it, and everyone who has forgotten it should remember it*". An obsessive preoccupation with events of the past, especially when they affect events of the present, needs to be released. But the horrors of the past must never be forgotten or repeated – and here, the people who brush former horrors under the carpet should be reminded of them, so that we learn from history.

The British had a dualistic attitude toward Jews. They had a discriminatory ineptness around Jews which, when Zionists proposed the idea of a Jewish state and refuge, made some Brits support the idea, as a way of getting rid of 'the Jewish problem'. Jewish businessmen, bankers, scientists and professionals were useful and integral to the capitalist system, and British power-mongers didn't want to lose the advantages that Jews brought. So there was a duplicity here which made the British fail to complain when the Nazis started eliminating Jews and the Soviets performed pogroms against them. This was a criminal omission conveniently covered up by the triumphalism of winning WW2 – Brits became goodguys, Germans became badguys, and there was an element of cover-up here.

Europe has in recent times had largely a pluralistic attitude toward minorities, believing tolerance to be a key positive feature in democratic societies. But there is another, shadowy side, left over from the time of the Crusades, which seeks to exclude people they disapprove of. In the last twenty years this has extended to Muslims, replacing blacks as bogeypeople. For a long time it has applied to the Roma, and it still

does. It has applied to hippies and dissenters like me too since the 1960s, criminals that we are.

This exclusionist tendency is unacknowledged in Europe – extreme right-wing parties are duly disapproved of when they openly advocate discriminatory policies, but the overall pattern of discrimination and exclusion still continues to lurk in the British and European psyche. This applied to the Jews a century ago, eventually permitting the Holocaust and pogroms to happen. By the 1940s it led to extreme alienation and desperation amongst Ashkenazi Jews, who proceeded to migrate to and found their nation of Israel in ways that now are regrettable. In the Israeli psyche, the matter of ethnic cleansing and military occupation is an elephant in the room that costs them far more than they are aware of – and the price tag today is rising.

But I mustn't be hypocritical. I come from an imperialist nation. We have in recent years been killing innocent people with our 'smart' missiles and invading their lands with a self-righteous rationale, instructing them that we are bringing them freedom and democracy. In a sense we're little better than the most assertive of Israelis, who believe their occupation of the West Bank and siege of Gaza is thoroughly justified.

We must own this hypocrisy. We must look at the dark side of European liberal-democratic beliefs and our politely-concealed sense of superiority. This emerges even in quite seemingly enlightened modern ways – such as attitudes some European women have toward Muslim women, who are regarded as oppressed, helpless and suffering at the hands of Muslim men. It's a stereotype which is only partially true, and it's questionable. Line up a group of Muslim and a group of modern Western women and examine the furrows in their foreheads, and you would see little difference between them – except perhaps the Westerners wear more make-up. Sure, women in Saudi Arabia may not drive cars, and many Muslim women must gain permission from their fathers and husbands to do what they want to do. But women in the West are nowadays anchored to busy lives and work routines that give

them little time for their children, inadvertently creating a lost generation of young people who lack basic emotional security and a sense of being cared for – so is this freedom?

We can argue about the details of this, and it's easy to call me a male chauvinist for saying so – and this would be misplaced – but the point here is that, if 'free' Western women are significantly happier than Muslim women, I'm yet to see it. The 'oppressed Muslim woman', a stereotype used amongst other things to justify the NATO invasion of Afghanistan, is not incorrect, but neither is it correct. It is used to justify the Western way and obscure its shadow aspect – the sheer, subtle unfreedom that exists in the 'free' West, enslaved as we are to materialism, business, the System and servility to the One-Percent. This same shadow-denial caused Europeans to permit the Holocaust by omission, and this then played a part in bringing about the disastrous behaviour of the founders of the modern state of Israel, fronted by their equivalent of Winston Churchill, David ben Gurion.

It's important to harp on about this because many Palestine activists in the West can tend to look on all Israelis as assholes, fascists, oppressive colonisers and self-obsessed Zionist militarists. Another stereotype. Western activists can suffer a divisive attitude that even many Palestinian activists would not subscribe to – I find the understanding that many Palestinian activists have toward Israelis to be at times impressively forgiving and understanding. Western activist stereotypes don't necessarily help the cause of Palestinians because they make Israelis feel misjudged and thus justified in their actions toward Palestinians. Alternatively, like Europeans, many Israelis block out and ignore hard truths about their nation so that they can live more comfortably in their own secure bubble.

*We are all sick, damaged humans.* The problem isn't *over there* with the 'others' – it's *right here with us*. Truth and reconciliation needs to happen within all of us. Even Palestinians, especially when getting heated about the wrongs done to them, need to understand that, actually,

the majority of us on all sides of the conflict are *all* oppressed and exploited, together.

We are oppressed and exploited by those who foment polarisation to assert control. Thus, the 'war on terror' has oppressed Americans, not just Muslims in the Middle East. Conflict is a way in which the complex considerations of human life can be reduced to simple, black-and-white dimensions – there is 'them' and there is 'us', and 'we' must teach 'them' a lesson.

War is an evasion of the real questions. When times of reform and change approach, it is often the case that a war is declared to stop them in their tracks. World War One was an example.

Conflict is a failure of society. On the surface it is a failure of our relationship with the 'other', but deeper down it is a failure of our relationship with ourselves. This is tragic. It brings the whole world to the brink of disaster. Also humanity, over-producing and over-consuming, is conducting a war against its own home planet.

Today I am off into Bethlehem to see a few people. It's time to sort out a few things and to do some more digging to uncover the true purpose of my being here. But before I go, I wish to thank my new friend in Tel Aviv for writing to me frankly to share her and her nation's pain, and for doing it in a way which nevertheless reached over the divide. I am here with the Palestinians, therefore on the 'other side' from her, yet she and I share perspectives, so we are also both part of an 'us' where we are natural friends. A tricky truth-sharing such as this actually brings us closer.

Thanks also to the Palestinian lecturer on Saturday who did not resort to saying that I was a self-justifying Brit who didn't know what he was talking about. These profound behavioural acts of bridge-building are the means by which true peace comes. We all have to incorporate the 'other' within ourselves. We *are* the 'other'. This way, we will save humanity from a sorry future. Amen, amen to that.

*Same day…*
23 Nov 2011

# Bearing Witness

When I went to town to check out various friends, many of them were gloomy, beset with problems. It was *one of those days*. Each person had their own particular issues, but they all add up to a morass of collective difficulty which the customary Palestinian good humour cannot penetrate.

Naturally, our perception of life is made up of an interaction of circumstances and our feelings about them, and these are two rather different things. For Palestinians living under occupation, the circumstances side of the equation bites and scrapes harder than for most people across the world. Especially since the occupiers deliberately go about making life difficult, complex and insecure for the occupied, in military, administrative, legal and quite everyday ways. This is what Jeff Halper, a critical Israeli thinker, calls 'the matrix of control'. The ultimate goal is to make Palestinians submit to Israeli rule, give up, go quiet and preferably leave the country.

But they don't give up, despite the muddy mire of problems they can be beset with – or perhaps it's a dust-storm where it's impossible to see far and sand gets in the engine and all the moving parts. Palestinians have a life-philosophy which is admirable. But some days they go down into the doldrums and they need a good moan.

That's one of the roles of foreigners who come here: *bearing witness*. This often means letting Palestinians have a good moan, describing to you with a full spectrum of feeling how difficult everything is. It can be quite challenging though if you have something in your own life that's nagging you too – happily, this wasn't the case for me today. So I was able to listen fully and, when a person ground to a halt, I could start up something that might change the context of things, so that they see the situation in a different way – for the difference between a situation and a problem lies in our state of heart and mind.

There's a Christian grocer in town who stocks a lot of things I like, so I went to his place. While wandering around looking through the densely, intricately packed shelves, a guy comes in and starts up. I don't understand much Arabic, but the tone of his voice translated easily – he was on a down day, overwhelmed. He and the grocer were so engaged in this man's inventory of problems that I had to stand there patiently waiting to pay, listening too.

Little did he know, but in the process I did a little psychic healing on this man – smoothing out his aura, shifting the movement of his energy and the orientation of his aura from downward to upward and reconnecting him with his guardian angel. After a while, the grocer turned, noticed me, apologised and started totting up my buys. Suddenly, his friend said to him (it could have been), "*And guess what…?*". The grocer grunted, to say *go on*, and the guy burst out laughing and said something. The grocer turns to me and said, "*He tell me all these problem, and now he say his wife just got pregnant again – fifth. He say only now. Why not before, eh?*". Well, looks like the healing did something to loosen things up.

With goods in hand, I wandered off down Faraheih Street, turned left through the market, to be *how-arre-youed* and *wherre-you-frommed* by stall-keepers as I strolled past. Mid-afternoon, they were all sitting around wondering whether to close for siesta.

I'm always amazed that being British is regarded positively by Palestinians, despite what we've done in the past. Announcing *Britaniyya* to them always seems to elicit a good response. Perhaps they think we're less bad than others, therefore good. Just as well. A Danish guy I met a few days ago had complained that Denmark is notorious for offensive cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, and he often had to prove to people that he didn't agree with it.

Down the passageway and some steps leading from the market I was accosted by a sweet-seller. He asked *how arre you*, as they do, and I joked back *hamdulillah* – thank God (I'm okay). It was a joke because, last time I was here, I couldn't manage responses in Arabic. He has a

hand-pushed cart parked at the top of the main steps down toward the Omar Mosque and Manger Square. Palestinian sweets are gooey, rich, soft cakes of honey, almond and who knows what, often eaten by dropping a cubic inch of the stuff straight into the mouth and swilling it down with coffee. I got some, in order to augment my weight-gain programme. Yes, folks, one of the ways I differ from many people is that I'm thin and bony, so I actually have to eat calorie-rich things to gain weight.

I then proceeded down the steps and met up with a shopkeeper I know who was sorely troubled by the lack of trade. The pilgrim and tourist business is down and the Israelis have creamed off most of the business. Most visitors come in shepherded groups for just a few hours in an Israeli coach from Jerusalem, visiting the Church of the Nativity and an approved souvenir shop, from which 30% of the takings are paid to the Israeli tour operators. Then they're shuttled back to Jerusalem. The Israelis have niftily captured the income from Bethlehem's pilgrimage tourism.

Independent travellers who arrive here – not exactly in floods – tend to run on a tight budget, so they aren't big consumers. Norwegians seem to be the richest at present. Instead of money, these visitors mainly bring 'witness' and interaction, a social currency, worth perhaps more than money, if truth be known.

The shopkeeper complained that he had made only 100 shekels today – about £20 or $30. He thrust tea before me and carried on. Usually he has quite positive attitude, but this time he was struggling. I let him run with it, and it did him good. It does give them some assurance to be able to offload like this and to gain some understanding from another person – it helps them objectivise their lives.

Then I went round the corner to a café run by Adnan's brother. I had falafel, hummus, pitta, salad and sage tea, as a late lunch. In came Adnan, plonking himself straight down and huffing. He starts up. His story is always complex, but he's in the tourist souvenir trade too and he's almost bankrupt. I know some of the things he could do to improve

things (such as trading on eBay), and I have told him about them, but he doesn't get it. He perpetually hopes things will work well next time, things will get better, but they don't. Or someone else is making his life difficult and he wishes they would stop. So I usually let him blurt out his complaints, in the hope that some relief of pressure might lead him to form new conclusions.

The souvenirs he sells are lovely – especially if you're a Christian. Lovely hand-carved olive-wood effigies of Jesus, Mary, the saints and the Nativity. Bedouin carpets, lovely Arabic dresses, inlaid boxes – all made within a few miles of here. But they don't sell, the overheads are high, the checkpoints scare visitors away and, if your spirits are down, it's a disaster.

Round and round in loops he goes. Adnan requires perseverance because he's quite resistant. It's the world that's wrong, not him. But he appreciates the listening ear anyway, and soon we were talking about other things – mainly about the carpets his grandmother had diligently woven throughout her life, adorning the floors of many of his vast Bedouin family's network of homes. Well, that's that done. Now to see Jack, down in the Christian Quarter.

Jack is not a complainer, but he is in a sorry state. One year ago he had a major accident at work, fracturing his skull, haemorrhaging his brain and breaking some ribs. Then his wife, who had suffered MS, had died. Understandably, he had plummeted. His capacity to work is now much reduced, though he carries on all the same. He's 52 and worn out. He works as a security guard for UNRWA, and he also clears out old wells and builds walls for a living. His spare-time obsession is billiards – his friends come round to play. He's a real character – altruistic, humorous, maverick, but nowadays much faded. I cannot tell whether this is a low patch of life, or whether he's on his way to dying. Bless him.

But he doesn't moan. In fact, we started up a really good conversation, but it was still about his difficulties. He talked about how, at the bottom of some wells – many of them centuries old, some millennia old – there is no air and he has sometimes nearly suffocated. In a few others there

are underground toxic flows of petrol or sewage, which he refuses to work with. At his work at UNRWA a few days ago, he was caught sleeping – not a good thing for a security guard – and given a warning. But they seem to like him too.

But then he started up telling his stories of former days. There was one time he took his wife to an Israeli hospital without having a permit. He managed to get her in by a combination of charm, bluster and play-acting and then, having sat with her for hours, made his way home. But in the lift he had a heart attack – he was found lying there by a doctor, who rushed him to a ward and saved him. When Jack came to, the doctor came to visit him and simply said, with a wry smile, "*Next time, get a permit if you're going to have a heart attack, won't you?*" The doctor fixed him a lift to a checkpoint, to get back home. You do indeed get remarkable acts of compassion in this strangely conflicted country.

Jack's son came in, looking really annoyed – fuming, in fact. I understood he had had an argument with his sister in his grandmother's house next door. He's 21 and quite a special young guy – plays Liszt and Chopin on the piano and works with computer hardware – but he had recently flunked his mathematics at college and, for reasons I couldn't quite fathom, could not re-take the exam. Which meant he couldn't go to university, and they couldn't afford it anyway. So he was in a state.

He sat there listening – his English is good – and then he perked up when he told me about the free trip he had had with the Salesian Brothers (a Catholic order) to see the Pope in Spain, visiting Italy on the way. He was selected from a large crowd of applicants and he was away for three weeks. He's a Sagittarian, our Shukry, and travelling the world is what he would love to do – but he's imprisoned behind walls instead, living in a world-famous city, Bethlehem, that's strangely isolated. If I could wave a magic wand I'd love to fix him three years at the Royal College of Music in London. He deserves it, and his frustration at getting nowhere in life was probably the underlying cause of his argument with his sister.

Jack was falling asleep. The drugs the doctor had given him to deal with the after-effects of his brain haemorrhage last year make him drowsy. I told him to get to bed instead of forcing himself to stay awake. "*Yes, doctor*", he replied, and we parted company. I made my way out, walking back through the narrow stone streets of the Old Town to Manger Square. Another shopkeeper tried waylaying me but, by this time, I was tired and I didn't want tea. I wanted a taxi home.

But even then, the taxi-driver, whom I knew from previous years, had a tale to tell. One of his children had died – I think about a month ago. Of what, I don't know, because the word he gave me was in Arabic. In limited English he said he had not had enough money for the hospital. I could tell by the tone of his voice he was cut up about it, probably feeling like a failed father.

When we got to the school at Al Khader, I asked him how much he wanted for the trip. Thirty, he said – the evening rate (usually it's twenty shekels). I only had 25 in change, and otherwise only a 200 shekel note (£40), which he couldn't change. So I dug around in my bag, leafing through my carefully-stashed collection of Euros, Swiss Francs, Pounds, Kronor and Dinars to find him a Jordanian ten dinar note. He smiled. This was worth 50 shekels. "*God bless you, Mister Balden. I like you. Thanks God. Ma'assalam.*" The only trouble is, I'm not a banker or an oil sheikh, but it was worth it – even a bit of money can raise the spirits sometimes.

Sometimes I wonder what good I bring by being here. It's as if the mountains of life-obstacles people experience in this place is too large to make a difference. But then, as the Dalai Lama is quoted to have said: "*If you think you're too small to make a difference, try spending a night in a room with a mosquito*".

*Two days later…*
Friday 25 November 2011

## Busyness

In case you needed to know what I have been doing this last 36 hours, here it is. I have cleaned out one blocked drain and one dysfunctional, smelly toilet, washed dishes and tidied up, entertained two visitors (one Palestinian, one British), fixed arrangements for one of them (her phone wasn't working right), sorted out a piece of diplomacy with one of our funders, coaxed Ibrahim into thinking about longterm strategy and dealing with a questionnaire sent by another of our funders, amended three web-pages, corrected an essay for someone's university course, done my clothes washing and shopping, stood quietly witnessing an argument, dealt with an anxious lady who was in a fix, missed my evening meal, written several e-mails (one delicate and awkward), researched an issue online, read a chapter on the Mamluk period in Jerusalem's history, got nine keys cut and then went around the doors trying to figure out which key was for which door, talked with three students at Bethlehem university about their forthcoming essay on order and disjuncture in the development industry, lent someone some money, written my last blog entry, taken some photographs, did my meditation and had some sleep.

That's what humanitarian work is all about – at least, the way it unfolds for me right now! This does not include personal thoughts – mainly about the value of what I am doing here, finding a place to live when I return to Britain in March, organising a trip away from here for a day or two, making sense of my agenda and finding someone to live here with me when the Issa family move out into their new home. Now it is time to do some more web-pages and then get to Bethlehem for a meeting.

I love it, all the same. It is newmoon today, and something new is starting.

*Three days later:*
Monday 28 Nov 2011

## What's the Use?

The Western notion of a weekend doesn't exist here. We have three separate days that are holy days for each of the three faiths: Friday for Muslims, Friday sundown to Saturday sundown for Jews and Sunday for Christians. So you need to know what to do and what not to try doing on each of those days. Palestinians are rather a driven lot, and they don't necessarily stop for holy days – rather like Europeans nowadays with our Sundays, they use the holy day for catching up on all those things that didn't get done during the week.

On Saturday, chaos ruled and I had to give in to it. This was best because, if you adhere rigidly to plans, you simply get worn out and frustrated and you achieve nothing anyway. I had been roped into fixing a few things to help in the staging of a carnival in Bethlehem by some Brits, who were bringing some Palestinians up from a village near Hebron to do a children's parade. Except things didn't go according to plan.

In fact, I never found out what actually happened. I was supposed to fix the loan of a wheelchair for a disabled kid and, luck would have it, I found a way of doing it and was to phone Adnan about it on Saturday morning. After ringing him, followed by a few calls with the carnival group, I found out that a wheelchair had been found. Oh, okay then. So back I had to go to Adnan to cancel the arrangement. Slightly embarrassing, that.

Then I was supposed to help a lady I knew (Sheikh Bukhari's widow Hala) to come from Jerusalem to join the event, but there was so much toing-and-froing and changing of plans that she withdrew. That took five phone calls. Then I was supposed to meet up with one of the British people in the group but, by the time I had finished work and could do so, she told me on the phone that she and her group were suddenly returning home to Hebron. Oh, alright, then. So I went into

town anyway and did other things. Later I found out they hadn't left Bethlehem after all and I could have met them.

Oh well, so much for all that. I did some important work amidst all of this, so all was not lost. Did some shopping too, had some amazing fresh pomegranate juice, took some street-scene photos and got accosted by some PA security guards who thought I might be a spy, and I walked around a part of Bethlehem I hadn't visited before. I returned home to get on with more work.

The next day, Sunday, I was supposed to accompany Ibrahim and Maram to Tuwani, a village in the far south of the West Bank which I visited last June. This place is rather moving to visit. But it didn't happen. So I got on with more work – fixing a website for a good friend back home in Cornwall.

Then in the afternoon I went with Ibrahim to the Issa family's new house. At present it is still being built. Ibrahim tells me that, although he's not really in a position to buy a house at present, he knows that, if he doesn't do it now, he probably never will. Their current house is too small and it is in Duha, a rather crowded part of Bethlehem. The new house is on top of a hill on the edge of Beit Jala, with views in every direction and a fine feeling of being on top of the world – which it is, being on one of the higher locations in the West Bank.

It is customary for parents to support their children by providing a home for them when they marry. Now Ibrahim's kids are just aged six to nine, but in ten or more years' time they will be at marriageable age, and now's the time to get a big, multi-level house, so that when that time comes the family can accommodate everyone. That's why Ibrahim needs a new house – and to have it paid off by the time the weddings start happening.

It was good to spend time with Ibrahim – he's so often busy barrelling around juggling things. We didn't talk at length, but I know he appreciates my steady, empathic, intelligent company. In some respects I feel his father stands behind me. Hussein, the founder of Hope

Flowers, was just two years older than me – he died at age 50, twelve years ago. Now Hope Flowers is in its third existential crisis – the first two were the first and second *intifadas* – and I'm aware that Ibrahim, while being very capable, is somewhat out of his depth. A paternal influence, understanding and unflappable, is valuable in such circumstances. But I don't take it too far.

2011 has been, for the Issa family, an *annus horribilis* – a year of problem after problem, with few let-ups. Ibrahim feels quite justifiably disheartened with what has happened, and he's struggling with that corrosive "*What's the use?*" kind of feeling. First there were allegations of corruption and malpractice which, after a few months of hard work, we managed to deal with – though the devastation and complications have continued. Then another event knocked the stuffing out of the family, and we're busy dealing with that now.

Trouble is, some of the funders of Hope Flowers are making far more of a fuss about it all than is due (in my opinion). They insist on having Ibrahim and others run around doing their bidding, and threatening court cases, the freezing of people's assets and other sanctions, without realising that they are actually becoming part of the problem, not the solution. They think they're right, of course, and in many issues they are, from a Western viewpoint, but in other issues they are not, and they fail to see it or to fully own their own small part in causing the problem, and they're not recognising that in their actions. Westerners are, of course, *right*, and Palestinians need to pull their socks up. But times are also changing, and Westerners are less aware of this change than people outside the rich world.

This is one of the problematic aspects of seeking funding from benefactors: they consider that, since they are *giving* money, the recipients of their charitable giving have no rights and are obliged to do everything the donors wish and require. They forget that carrying out the mission they are funding is a very difficult thing, and these people in Palestine have risked their lives for this. Much of the money might be coming from abroad, but the biggest investment is being made by those

who are doing the actual work, here in Palestine – a place where you can get your nose picked by the bayonet of a soldier's gun. But the funders' position is valid too, and old Muggins here seems to be mediating across a rather yawning gulf, trying to reconcile two conflicting valid positions.

It's a delicate matter. I hope I'm getting things right, and sometimes wish I had someone to talk to about it or to check what I've done. I need a line-manager! But I must remain confidential and, besides, few would really understand the issues without being here and knowing the background details and nuances. Things that make sense and seem logical in the West don't add up here, and it's complex. So I'm persevering.

Today, Monday, we went at last to Tuwani. This rather special place is a small, poor village in the hills down south of Hebron. It's under attack from settlers in a nearby Israeli settlement called Ma'on. Ma'on's settlers are so extreme that even the Israeli government has disowned them – though it still does nothing about them. These settlers have been attacking the village, pulling up olive trees and damaging land, picking fights and generally giving the villagers a hard time. But help comes to Tuwani in two main forms: the first is the Two Neighbours Project, and the second is Operation Dove, an Italian Christian peacemaking group.

Ibrahim and Maram are officers in the Two Neighbours project, a women's joint economic development venture involving Palestinians and Israelis. The women produce coffee-cup holders, for use with disposable coffee cups. The holders are made up in Israel, embroidered at Tuwani and sold in USA. It's a good project involving the women in this very traditional part of Palestine, and Hope Flowers participated by providing a women's empowerment course for the Tuwani women.

Operation Dove is one of several Christian projects in Palestine. They set out to 'to suffer with those who suffer' by living with them, carrying out civilian escort and people-protection work, and working with reconciliation and non-violent direct action. Some of them are Italian conscientious objectors who work with Operation Dove instead of

doing military service. I admire them because they put themselves on the line, following their Master Jesus' words 'By their works shall ye know them'. While waiting for Maram to finish with the Tuwani women, Ibrahim and I sat in the Doves' wee house drinking sage tea and watching a video that one of them had taken about the demolition of some houses and a mosque in a local village over the hills, called Umm Fagerah.

The video was distressing. You can see the Italian Christians arguing the toss with the Israeli soldiers, many of whom are settlers. As soon as the soldiers went away, the activists joined with the villagers in rebuilding the mosque that had just been demolished.

After visiting Tuwani, we came back and I settled down to writing a firmly diplomatic letter concerning a problem we're working with. I did my best. Tomorrow it looks like I'm going over the wall to Tel Aviv, to see some friends there, and to raid a wholefood store for some herbal supplements and tofu! Despite all the religion around here, I'm surrounded with animal flesh-eaters who fail to realise that animals are also God's little children, and the tofu is my answer to what could otherwise become a cumulative protein shortage. Well, this is not the greatest of issues in this world, but it's still worth slipping through the checkpoints to do something about it!

To complete this assortment of tales, let me tell you about a photo of something strange. I took it one morning with my telephoto. This was a group of Israelis on a coach tour, standing there by the Israeli watchtower on the other side of the valley, looking over our area. They stood there listening to a lecture in Hebrew from a tour-leader with a loud-hailer which resounded around the valley on this rather quiet and crisp day. It makes you feel a bit like an animal at a zoo. I wonder what he was telling them?

They might have been liberal Israelis with an interest in the occupation and its effects. Some Israelis go hiking around the land simply to assert a presence. Or they might have been Israelis who regard Palestinians as an obstacle in their way, that should be got rid of and taught a lesson.

They might have been American Jews, coming for a razzle in the homeland. Either way, I hope they found it interesting. I wonder if the man told them that this was a peace school, or that Al Khader is one of the most tolerant and peaceful parts of the West Bank?

Al Khader, by the way, means St George – it was here that St George, an Anatolian, lived for quite a long time, long before the English adopted him as their patron saint. Why the English adopted him, I do not know – he never went to Britain, and we have loads of our own saints to choose from. The Crusaders, when they exercised their stallions around here 900 years ago, had something to do with it. We Westerners are good at crusading. But we're not quite so good at picking up the mess afterwards.

*Next day…*
Tuesday 29 Nov 2011

## Tel Aviv

A cat approached me, mewing ferociously in cat-Hebrew, but it's not getting my kosher sandwich. I'm at the train station in Tel Aviv, taking a welcome break in a café, having travelled from Bethlehem via Jerusalem, with the help of a taxi, a bus, a tram and another bus.

I find this rather a difficult country to get around. In some respects it is easier to get around the West Bank because, although things are more chaotic there, people are so helpful, even excessively so, and if you go with the flow, things always work out and you get there somehow. But here, it's not just that signs are in Hebrew, but also there aren't many of them – you're supposed to know where to go. In Israel, everyone moves around studiously ignoring one another. I find myself asking the way of soldiers, and some have been very friendly.

Back in Jerusalem I took the new tramline from the Arab bus station in Sheikh Jarrah, just by the Damascus Gate. It said it was going to the Central Station – I sought a train to Tel Aviv. But when I got there, it

was a bus station. I asked a man where the train station was and he looked at me as if I was crazy. "*You want a train? Don't take a train, take a bus – the trains here are no good*", and he walked off. Thanks. So I asked a soldier who was standing there chatting with his girlfriend, both of them with sub-machineguns languidly slung over shoulders, and he told me where to get the Tel Aviv bus, the 480.

Earlier today, back at the Gilo checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the soldier who examined my passport took a cursory look at it and said "*How're you doing? Have a good day!*", with a pleasant smile. Something is changing in this country: the lengthy searches, interrogations and security queues seem to have loosened up, and soldiers and security people seem more relaxed and, frankly, bored. It's perhaps an unwitting response to the fact that the Palestinians have stopped fighting – they want a normal life, as do Israelis. So even though Israeli conventional wisdom determines that Palestinians are a threat that must be countered at all costs, the Palestinians aren't like that and, intuitively, many Israelis know it, even if their conditioned belief says otherwise.

Nevertheless, the security scanners you have to pass through to get into bus and train stations are tedious, with long queues – the one at the Jerusalem bus station took 25 minutes to get through. Most Israelis were more upset about it than I, and the poor security workers, most of them the guest-workers replacing Palestinians in the more low-paid and tedious jobs, had to deal with the protestations of Orthodox Jews and old men who, in their own eyes, should be exempt from security checks.

Then, when I arrived in Tel Aviv, I sought a café. I asked an old man. "*Café? You want a café? This is a bus station, can't you see?*" he said, looking at me as if I were crazy.

"*Well, yes, but isn't there a café here?*" Again, he looked at me as if I were from another planet. In this he is not incorrect but, to me, where people are waiting for trains and buses, I'm accustomed to cafes being there. "*Go to the train station, there. There's a café there. It's lousy.*"

So then I had to go through the security scanners again. "*What's in your bag?*" asked the soldier. "*Computer, camera, personal things…*" "*Got batteries in there?*" "*Er, yes.*" For some reason he accepted my word, nodded and let me go. Ah, today I'm not deemed a terrorist – that's good news. Now for another session of returning the contents of my pockets to their proper places – how many times a day must this go on?

Nevertheless, Tel Aviv is a very different place from Jerusalem. It's a pleasant, modern and cosmopolitan city, built in a modernistic style based on a grid of five main streets running parallel to the Mediterranean shore, with wide boulevards crossing them at right-angles. People don't advertise their Jewishness here as much as in Jerusalem – it's a city of business and culture beside the Mediterranean, and a good deal warmer than Bethlehem this time of year. Also it's a very different environment, a different planet just 50km from Bethlehem – a good place to reflect on what I'm doing, and to get ready for the next phase.

When you walk down these genteel tree-lined streets, in some parts lined with four-storey blocks of apartments built in the German Bauhaus style, or a 1950s-60s modernist style, it's difficult to remember that, just 25 miles eastward, there is a military occupation going on. Joggers prance along in the park, cars drive hither and thither, and high-rise offices and flats pierce the skyline with a certain elegance. In Jerusalem you get a greater feeling of polarisation and edginess, while here you get a sense of the good life being lived – there's hardly a sense of the ongoing hardships and atrocities of the occupation, and soldiers in uniform are not such a common sight. Here one can 'live inside the bubble', as if all is well on Yahweh's good earth.

But my hostess Ora feels differently. She certainly doesn't favour what's going on in her country, and she comes from a leftist, liberal-thinking family who have never approved of the occupation and Israel's Zionist tendency. She lives her life very aware of the elephant in the room and the mass of gloop under the Israeli national carpet, and she has difficulty finding people to talk to about it. Most people either

support the Zionist agenda or they keep their heads down and don't look at it.

I think that's why she's enjoying my visit. Since I'm not one who pits himself against Israel, she can speak her truth without having to deal with the otherwise rather fixed and polarised anti-Zionist mindset that many overseas Palestine activists have. She can speak of the issues she encounters as an anti-Zionist Israeli without feeling she's treading on glass or feeding the prejudices that some foreigners have – such as the belief that all Israelis must be fascists, or channelling dark forces, or severely disturbed.

She's constrained by being an Israeli. She cannot travel freely in Palestine. She can break the rules and pass beyond the signs which say 'Entry to Israelis prohibited', standing at the entries to Palestinian Areas A and B, and she does do so, but she cannot easily feel secure there, knowing that, when she's there, she relies on the goodwill and trust of sympathetic Palestinians to keep her from trouble – and she could get into double trouble with the Israeli authorities if things go wrong.

She doesn't actually get much trouble from Palestinians, since they judge others on manifest behaviour more than on religion or nationality – but it's still a nagging insecurity in the back of her mind. Palestinians also don't tell her everything or fully open up since, to them, every Israeli is a potential risk, and Palestinians too can feel pressured by their peers if they mix too much with people from the other side.

Also Ora, a computer techie, had served in the Israeli army in radio monitoring and eavesdropping, back in the 1970s – so she herself has been part of the problem even if she now means not to be so. I first met her at the meeting of the Centre for Emerging Futures in Beit Jala. We're both aged hippies with a similarity of viewpoint and a similarity of experience too, where the respective societies we live in have a serious case of denial over the issues we talk about and hold to be important.

She was born in the 1950s at a time when Israel was a brave young nation struggling to build itself up, to establish its patch, in the shadow of WW2. It was a brave time of nation-building, of bringing Western ways to the Middle East, and of reviving from the horrors of the Holocaust. She told me of older people she had grown up amongst, who had been together during the dark years of WW2 and then migrated to Israel traumatised and huddling together for protection while starting a new life. For example, one neighbouring household when she was a child was composed of a married couple together with the wife's sister, and everyone wondered what exactly their relations were – but they had survived a nightmare together and become bonded in mutual self-protection as a result. Little did many of the earlier Israelis know of what was taking place or brewing as Israel, in the late 1960s, transited from being a small, struggling nation into a relatively rich and invincible regional power.

Israel has gone through roughly three phases thus far: in the first two decades it established itself as a largely secular, left-wing refuge for Jews drawn from many countries, particularly Eastern and Central Europe; in the second two decades, the 1970s-80s, after Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (and, for a while, the Sinai Peninsula), the country developed further and became more set in its ways as a developed country and an occupier of Palestine, gradually becoming more capitalist and right-wing; and then in the last two decades, the 1990s and 2000s, the country became exaggerated in its rather schizoid polarisation between capitalist materialism (in Tel Aviv) and religious and right-wing nationalism in Jerusalem – the days characterised by the leaderships of Ariel Sharon and Binjamin Netanyahu.

The West Bank settlement project started after the 1967 Six Day War, during the second phase, and it grew immensely from 1990ish onwards as the Israeli occupation and the Israeli settlement of the West Bank was consolidated, even under the nose of the wider world, which naively believed there was a peace process going on.

Ora finds it difficult living in this environment. Her grown-up son moved to London ten years ago – one of the strategies many more free-thinking Israelis resort to. She looks at his virulent Facebook postings about Nazism in Israel, in essence agreeing with them, though also deeply upset that, while these postings were phrased in an extreme way, this description of her country is horribly true. Yet here in Tel Aviv you would not think so. You could live here in this city of cafes, culture centres, computer-industry start-ups and the modern good life, turning a blind eye to it all, if you so wished.

Events of the occupation are hardly covered on TV, and many Israelis don't know what's happening in their name. It's all covered by that ubiquitous term 'security measures', as if necessary and justified thereby. But she cannot turn a blind eye. I reminded her that, in a less acute way, we Brits live in the same state of self-delusion: we are a military nation too, though our battles and occupations are further away on foreign shores, well out of sight, and our arms industry is conveniently rationalised as a business providing jobs and profits for the British economy. And my beige Marks and Spencer chinos are made by faceless low-paid workers in Bangladesh. We are by degrees the same as Israelis.

In the morning we went to a pleasant outdoor café down by the beach to have a late breakfast and meet two other ladies, both of whom were activists against the occupation. I was interested to discover that one of them, though she has been involved in opposing the occupation for some years, knows very little about Palestinians – she asked me questions about Bethlehem and listened with rapt attention when I talked about Palestine, Jordan and some of the history of the conflict. After all, Israelis are the third tranche of foreign occupiers of this land in recent centuries – the first two being the Ottomans and the British. Each occupation has been worse than the previous one.

We wandered around the old port of Tel Aviv – now a harbourside precinct of cafes and service outlets – built by the British in the 1930s when the Arabs of Jaffa stopped permitting Israelis to land there and

trade through the ancient port. We'll visit Jaffa this afternoon – something that interests me because, in my studies of the Crusades and other times of history, Jaffa, with Acre, has been a prominent place. This evening, I shall sit in on Ora's Arabic conversation class, and then we're going to a world music concert together with some leftwing anarchist friends of hers.

I find myself a little restless to get back to the fray in Bethlehem though, so I'll leave tomorrow, go to visit my friend Yitzhaq in Jerusalem and proceed back to Bethlehem. I'm concerned about Hope Flowers and my role in helping them keep going through the crisis they now face. I don't know whether I'm a sucker for punishment or simply dedicated, but hanging out in comfortable Tel Aviv, while interesting, is not what I came to this land for.

*Two days later…*
1st December 2011

## Jaffa and a Jam Session

I went out with Ora to see the ancient town of Jaffa – it's 4,000 years old. It sits on a rock outcrop on the otherwise sandy, flat Mediterranean coast. Jaffa has for many centuries served as a port for Jerusalem. Here Christian pilgrims used to land after sailing from Italy, Greece or Constantinople, pent up before reaching their final destination. Boats also came from Egypt and Anatolia (Turkey), and the Phoenicians traded here 3,000 years ago, linking this area with the west Mediterranean and even places like Britain and Denmark. Through the Pillars of Hercules came copper and tin from Europe (some from Cornwall, where I live), and in the other direction went silks, spices and valuables. Crusader kings such as Richard the Lionheart and German Emperor Frederick II came here during their military escapades in the Holy Land 800 years ago.

Nowadays Jaffa is engulfed by Tel Aviv, founded in 1909. Sephardic Jews had lived with the Arabs and other minorities in Jaffa for centuries but, by the 1880s, Ashkenazi Jews began immigrating from Europe and the idea began to found a new, Western-style city with a modern design and services. Tel Aviv developed rapidly during the British Mandate period in the 1920s and 1930s, designed as a modern-style garden city with well-planned streets. By Israeli independence in 1948 the city had 200,000 people, and now it is the centre of a metropolitan region of three million people.

Jaffa was a fortified town with narrow passages and stairways weaving between the solid sandstone buildings. It was a town of traders, artisans, fishermen, soldiers, sailors, hostelries, armouries and churches. Nowadays it is the Muslim sector of Tel Aviv, and Jaffa's historic centre has been converted and sanitised, gentrified into a tourist and leisure quarter for Israelis to enjoy. It's full of cafes, flea-markets and antique stores.

It sums up the situation of Arab Israelis which, in some ways, is worse and less clear than for people in the West Bank. Arab Israelis number 1.3 million, comprising 20% of the population of Israel proper. Though they are the indigenous people of this land, they are treated like immigrants. Technically they have similar rights to Israelis, including the vote and the full range of civic services, but in practice their lives are restricted and disadvantaged, laws are applied differently to them and social facilities are not even-handedly provided.

Though comprising 20% of the population, they occupy just 3% of Israel proper, and expansion of their towns and villages is highly constrained, making their lives overcrowded. What's most difficult is the erosion of their identity and security by Jewish Israelis, who behave as the dominant sector of society. This is not just an economic class structure but an ethnically discriminatory system – even the richer, more successful Arabs fail to share the opulence many richer Israelis possess.

In comparison, most West Bank Palestinians live in their own territory, possessing a stronger sense of shared identity and, up to a point, living under their own laws and government. But really the PA is just a large-scale local government with limited powers extending mainly to education, social services and policing.

The Palestinians of Jaffa are surrounded by Tel Aviv and feel like half-welcome guests in their own land. Some Israelis regard them as a security risk and a threat to Israel, liable to turn against them, and growing faster in numbers than Jews. So while some of the facilities and advantages of living in modern Israel bring some benefit, discrimination and disadvantage plague Arabic Israelis, with the values and norms of the dominant culture profoundly affecting their daily lives.

The main contact most Israelis have with Arab Israelis is in hospital, since Palestinians form a large proportion of the doctors and nurses. They are quietly debarred from professions deemed a security risk or demanding personal contact with Israelis. Though many go to university, their prospects are not the same as those for Israelis.

So the Palestinians as a whole are dominated by the Israelis in three different ways. Israeli Arabs are swamped, an underclass in Israel; West Bankers are cantonised, controlled by checkpoints, legal and administrative obstructions and the security wall, with their land incrementally nibbled away; meanwhile Gazans are impounded and besieged in their own territory, deprived of supplies and periodically bombed. These are all Palestinians, but they are successfully split into three groupings with different woes and different needs – in a word, disempowered as a people.

Yet in Tel Aviv it is possible to be entirely unconscious of what's going on for Palestinians. This cool, 24/7 city is a reality unto itself, a distinctly Western enclave, and you cannot travel far without your journey coming to a stop at a border that most Israelis consider unwise or impossible to pass. So, to get out of the city, many Tel Avivim catch a plane to further shores.

That evening we went to a rock concert, a one-off event staged by various well-known Israeli rock musicians playing together. It was brilliant music, good medicine for an old Sixties veteran like me, and crowded with a range of Israelis who, Ora said, all shared a common experience – they had spent time in India, in most cases following their thirty months of national service. They go to India to forget. It's paradoxical, since India is such a multi-ethnic, multicultural place, while Israelis as a whole regard themselves as fundamentally distinct, embodying the opposite of multiculturalism. But these are not ordinary Israelis: this social subgroup forms a 'tribe' of clubbers, creative people, technology innovators and alternative types at the heart of the night-life in Tel Aviv.

But, talking of national service, Ora later told me that about one quarter of younger Tel Avivim avoid national service, by doing social service, serving time in jail or leaving the country – her son had taken the last option, moving to London. This has a troublesome and unforeseen consequence: the army has in the last decade or so swayed toward right-wing, religious settlers – Israeli rednecks – with a vested interest in giving Palestinians a hard time, since these settlers live in the West Bank and share a vested interest in furthering the Israeli settlement project. Meanwhile, liberal-thinking Israelis leave or keep their heads down, avoiding the army. So the army has become unrepresentative – an enclave for those who drive the conflict and a no-go zone for those who prefer reconciliation and peace.

We arrived home at 2.30am, chatted a while and went to bed. Next day, rather groggy, I set off back to Bethlehem. Though the distance is not that far it's a long journey. First you catch a bus along the busy motorway linking Tel Aviv with Jerusalem – with the dubious privilege of sitting in lengthy traffic jams as the motorway winds tortuously up and along the side of a steep hillside, climbing 2,000ft in the process. Jerusalem is 2,500ft up, sitting atop a plateau.

Then at Jerusalem you catch a tram from Jewish West Jerusalem to the Arab bus station at the Damascus Gate in East Jerusalem. Then it's the

21 bus to Beit Jala and Bethlehem. This bus travels only 10km but, once you pass through the Gilo checkpoint and turn left up the road to Beit Jala, you're entering a different world – you're in Palestine. When you step down from the bus, it isn't the fend-for-yourself individualised atmosphere of Israel – instead, you get accosted by taxi-drivers and swim through a melee of bodies, all chattering wildly.

I saw a taxi-driver I knew, and he picked me out as his next customer. But no, inconveniently for him, I wanted to eat. In Jerusalem I had gone to a food court in the shopping mall at the Central Bus Station, but all the menus were in Hebrew and, being vegetarian, I didn't right then feel like receiving the strange looks one gets when asking for animal-free food, or going through the complication of returning one's dish to the counter and arguing because, after all, it does have meat in it. I had found an unappetising cheese pie and made do with that.

So by the time I reached Bethlehem I was hungry. My taxi-driver friend walked me to a falafel and shawarma café – probably owned by relatives of his – and left me there, telling me where he would be when I had finished. I sat reading about the economic crisis in the Eurozone, reflecting on the way that stable, mature old Europe had at the time become the Number One risk area in the world – an irony not lost on the people in the troubled Middle East, who are gradually acquiring a sneaky feeling that they might now be more part of the solution than part of the problem. It's the Europeans' turn to be troublesome and endangered.

Finished, I paid the man ten shekels (it would have been double that in Jerusalem) and wandered along to catch my friend's taxi. He drove me back to Al Khader. But after all his efforts, he didn't have change for my fifty-shekel (£10) note – for some reason, Palestinian taxi drivers are always short of change – and I had only twenty shekels in coins. This is at the low end of the range of flexible prices one might pay (the high end being thirty, even forty). So he lost out there – all for the lack of a cash float. But it was good to be back.

There's one thing that troubles me, on my return. I seem to be waiting, waiting for my real work to start, and time is ticking away. Ibrahim and other people are too busy to pay attention. I've been through this before, two years ago. Yet it is they that I have come to help. I began wondering whether I should go away again – perhaps up to Tubas and Jenin in the north or to the Hebron area down south, to see friends and fix a few things.

I need to buttonhole Ibrahim and oblige him to make a plan. Otherwise, things will be left to the end of my stay, and then there will be a panic and a rush, with people looking at me quizzically, wondering why I am leaving. That would not do.

*Three days later…*
Sunday 4th December 2011

## Codgers in Beit Sahour

Sometimes when the jets rumble over, which is not too often, I wonder whether it's serious – perhaps an outbreak of military madness with Iran. But tonight I'm not bothered to check the news, even though we're likely to get fried if madness indeed has broken out, since a prime target is not very far away from here. It's the nuclear facility at Dimona, where Israel's 200-odd, definitely non-existent, nuclear bombs are made – non-existent because, of course, Israel is not a nuclear power, even though everyone knows it is. Located conveniently on the West Bank just southeast of Bethlehem, it's as far from Israeli cities as it can be in this small country – but quite close to Bethlehem, Hebron and a quarter of a million Palestinians.

Tonight is not a night for military and nuclear disasters, I trust. Nevertheless, I heard a daunting story from Ismael, my taxi-driver. He told me of the time when he was eight years old, when the Six Day War took place in 1967 and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank started. Beforehand, the West Bank was occupied by Jordan. Palestine has been

occupied by some foreign empire since the time of Nebuchadnezzar – it has never been a nation in its own right. In fact, as an entity, it didn't exist until 1920, when the British occupation started. Before that it was a pair of Ottoman provinces, before that a peripheral part of Fatimid Egypt, before part of the Abbasid Baghdad Caliphate, and earlier still part of the Byzantine, Roman and Greek empires. But one day in 1967 Jordan's rule suddenly ended.

Ismael grew up in Deheisheh refugee camp. The refugees there generally came from the lowland area of Mandate Palestine, east of Tel Aviv. It became Israel in 1948, during what Palestinians call the *Nakba*, the Disaster, and what Israelis call the War of Independence. Ismael's family fled from Zechariya, near Beit Shemesh, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, to Deheisheh camp in Bethlehem. It was just 30km but, once the border of Israel was established in 1948, it was suddenly a world away, and they were never to return home.

Hussein Issa, the founder of Hope Flowers and Ibrahim's father, also grew up at Deheisheh, as did Ibrahim – their family fled from near Ramleh, now an orbital town to Tel Aviv, just along the road from Zechariya. The Issa family managed to get out of Deheisheh by the 1980s, but Ismael's family stayed there.

In 1967 the people of Deheisheh knew there was a war on. There had been a year of more of escalating incidents building up to it. A defining event was an Israeli attack on a small town in the far southwest of the West Bank, destroying 500 houses and killing many people. Ismael's uncle had fled on foot, reaching Deheisheh camp next day. At the very start of the war, Jordanian troops were firing cannon toward Jerusalem from the hill above Deheisheh, where the Palestine University is nowadays located, and Ismael and other boys went up to watch. But then suddenly the guns went silent and the Jordanians went away.

Next day the people of Deheisheh heard military activity, and word came of troops marching down the Hebron Road toward Deheisheh. Everyone expected them to be Iraqi troops supporting the Jordanians but, when the troops came round the corner they were Israelis, who

apparently were saying *Shalom* in rather friendly way, sincerely believing at first that they were liberating these poor people. The refugees looked on in horror. Panic took over, and little Ismael watched the melee, only partly comprehending. Fearing a repetition of the murderous ethnic cleansing of 1948, half of the population of Deheisheh fled to Jordan, but Ismael's family stayed behind and took their chances.

Later, the Israelis came round with buses, offering to take people to Jordan. Some went. But the Allenby Bridge had been bombed by the Israelis, and Palestinians were dumped by the River Jordan and left to wade over and fend for themselves in the heat. People drowned, were pushed in, trampled or shot.

Ismael's face was deeply troubled when he told me about this. It had clearly been a stirring formative moment for him. He grew through his teens and twenties under the occupation at the camp, and only in his thirties, in the 1990s, did things promise to improve – this was the Oslo peace process, when foreign development money came in and peace came in sight. So everyone hoped. But from 1995, when Ismael was 37, with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing settler, it started falling apart.

By the time he was 42, the second *intifada* had started, petering out after four years of curfews, troop incursions, house demolitions, men being carted off, tanks in the streets and shoot-outs in the streets of Bethlehem. Now he is 53, and the occupation has been contracted out to the Palestine Authority: the West Bank is ultimately controlled by the Israelis, but a proportion of it is run by the PA, as a kind of local authority aspiring to be a government.

He had taken me to The Tent, a big restaurant down in Beit Sahour, to have coffee. Before that, we had gone to a café to eat Palestinian sweets – a kind of cheesy, moist cake in this instance, the name of which I've forgotten. It was kind of him to do this, and it suited me well – for the last two days I had been sitting working at my computer.

Yesterday night, Saturday, I was also in Beit Sahour. I went for an evening of music by an Irish-Palestinian band from Nablus – it sounded enticing. Except they didn't come – there had been checkpoint problems, apparently. A number of people sat around at the Alternative Information Centre, waiting for the start of a replacement event, a talk about the olive-harvesting campaign, in which overseas volunteers come to Palestine to pick olives and give backup to Palestinians living and farming in hotspot areas.

However, something else had started happening, and I didn't attend. In rolled a Swedish guy I had met a few days before in the street in Bethlehem. Then in rolled an English guy I had met a few weeks earlier at the AIC, who had an English friend in tow, who had arrived earlier in the day from Jordan. The first two were, like me, longterm volunteers who come here for several months per year. I didn't manage to figure out exactly what the Swede was doing in Bethlehem – his main achievement seemed to be circulating around dinners and lunches at various of the churches and Christian missions around town, becoming quite a connoisseur of Palestinian wines, though I'm sure there probably was more to his story.

The Englishman is a classic activist type, from Yorkshire – he comes over to join in the protests and non-violent resistance activities that perpetually unfold in the West Bank. There is a small rolling army of such activists, some staying a couple of weeks to join in the more dramatic events and others staying months, pitching in on a variety of activities, including enjoying themselves in Beit Sahour on Saturday nights. But the Englishman and the Swede also had a shared interest – they liked going walking together in the country.

This is rare amongst Palestinians. Why one should wish actually to *walk* places, without accepting lifts, is a matter of fascination and amazement – life here is, after all, quite rigorous as it is. But these two like to range out and about in the hills south and east of Bethlehem, exploring canyons and *wadis* and hilltops, and observing animals.

Once they were exploring some ancient caves, originally populated by early Christian monks of 1,700 years ago, and they found the remains of a porcupine, seemingly dismembered by a lynx. Recently one of them spotted a woodpecker – a rare bird here. I'm going to try to join one of their adventures – this is something I haven't had enough of. Partially because I'm surrounded with Palestinians, while these two, living down in Beit Sahour, live amongst a small concentration of foreign activists with foreign ways – such as drinking beer, doing café-crawls, attending protests and going on walks.

The second Englishman was an old friend of the first, finally making it to Palestine to see what his friend is up to. I would love some of my own friends to do similar. This man lives near Inverness, Scotland, and he has travelled widely, working recently in China, but he had never been to Palestine. He had a jet-lagged look and listened, slightly dazed and, judging by his occasional comments, making silent comparisons between China and Palestine as he listened to our tales. If, that is, they *can* be compared.

Half way through the evening, we discovered the strangest thing: all four of us were the same age (61-62 at the time). We were all born 1-2 years after the *Nakba*, and we had all been about 17 when the Israeli occupation of Palestine started. The Six Day War had come along at an impressionable age, watched on TV, and we had all taken it in and then watched subsequent events unfold from there, as we grew up. Now here we all were, a few veterans of the revolution gathered together round a table in Beit Sahour, involved in subsequent events which have dragged on for 45ish years and shown no prospects of reaching a conclusion.

The Swede was surprised to find an Englishman speaking Swedish to him and knowing the faraway village outside Gothenburg that he came from. The Yorkshireman was amazed to find out how much he and I had lived parallel lives in the last forty years. It's always fascinating to meet one's fellows in far-off corners of the world. The Palestinians running the café watched our deliberations with interest – it was empty apart from us.

When we parted company I hailed a taxi at the souk and a young driver stopped, with three other young men in tow. One was actually going somewhere – he got off in Bethlehem – but the other two were there just for the ride and the music, cruising around plucking up and depositing passengers and tapping their fingers on their knees.

"*Eh, I remember you – you Eenglish, yes?*". He had picked me up once before, back in June, on precisely one of these late-night trips from Beit Sahour to Al Khader, a rather circuitous trip past Bethlehem, Duha and Deheisheh. "*That's me.*" "*You at that school, Al Amal, yes? I take you there, last summer?*" "*You got it.*" *Al Amal*, Hope, is the Arabic name for Hope Flowers School.

His friends had never been to our part of Al Khader before – it's a bit off the track. They looked at the Israeli settlement over the wall, and the watchtower, now deserted apart from its surveillance cameras, smoking cigarettes and shivering in the cold. Then they went off, to find some more passengers. I went up to bed for a cuddle with a good friend of mine – my hot water bottle.

*Five days later…*
Friday 9th December 2011

## Blessed are the Peacemakers

The law of unintended consequences worked in my favour today – Bethlehem gave me a brilliant photo opportunity. The light was just right – with bright patches scudding over an otherwise beclouded landscape, and quite clear air. So I took lots of photos of the Bethlehem landscape from the high point at the Everest Hotel above Beit Jala.

Except there's a problem – it's the modern photographer's dilemma, summed up in three simple words, *wires, antennae and cars*. They can foul up the best of photos. Cars weren't a problem today, but wires and antennae, well, Palestinians put them all over the place in haphazard fashion. Our brains usually edit these out of our vision, disregarding

them, but a camera doesn't. So I had to do some climbing feats, perching on tops of walls and piles of earth, to focus either under or over them – much to the amusement of a few builders who were fiddling around with bits of metal and concrete and fascinated with this foreigner who went to such lengths to catch good shots.

While we're on the subject of builders, Palestinian buildings are solidly built – they put other nations' buildings to shame. I'm not exactly sure why, but one advantage is that they're more likely to stand up to an earthquake than many Israeli buildings, including those in the nearby settlements of Gilo, Har Homa, Efrat and Betar Illit. This is not a trivial matter, since there is a chance of a Richter 7 or 8 earthquake in this vicinity anytime, focused on the Jordan Valley – the last was in (I think) 1923, and a big shake is expected by geologists sometime soon. The paradoxical thing is that it could affect Israel more than Palestine, since the West Bank stands on solid rock while much of lowland Israel (such as Tel Aviv) stands on softer ground, and quakes are often amplified by such soft, malleable terrain.

There's an additional factor. Though the Palestinians are economically poorer than Israelis, they are more accustomed to survival – they still have donkeys and know how to tough out hard times – and they tend to live in places where survival would be easier if serious problems struck. Such as a break in oil supplies. If such should happen, the Israeli settlement project in the West Bank is in difficulty. Why?

Because settlements are dependent on oil. They depend on it for reaching the settlements by road, for powering settlements with electricity and, most important, for pumping water. This is critical, because the Israelis have a habit of siting settlements on top of hills – hills the Palestinians never settled, because of a lack of water. They are not served by ancient springs or wells as are many of the old Arabic towns and villages (often lower down in valleys).

I went to a one-day conference in Beit Jala today discussing peace plans, of which there are many. In 2010 a website called The Best Plans Project listed 22 different peace plans – some of them theoretically

quite doable, others rather more, shall we say, *visionary*. Many of them overlap and could be merged. It was this project which organised the conference, attended, I'm sad to say, by only fortyish people, of whom only about ten were Palestinians. But the good news is that all of those people without exception were interesting and good people, all genuinely committed to reaching over the walls and creating a positive future.

My old friend Yitzhaq presented a rather mystical 'Twelve Tribe' solution, based on the ancient Kabbalistic idea of the twelve tribes of Israel. The heart of Jewish tradition has it that, if certain factors are in place – such as a twelve-tribe nation – then the mystical Israel, a state of perfection can come about. His idea didn't excite the Palestinians very much. Yitzhaq is a fine, open-minded man who does a lot to build contacts with religious Muslims and Sufis, but despite this he sees things from a Judaeo-centric viewpoint, half expecting the whole world to get excited. Nevertheless, there's something in what he says: the idea of intertribal confederacies has also been proposed by others, such as by my old friend the late John Michell – the man who brought ley-lines into public knowledge in Britain. There's something in the idea of building mystical conditions of harmony. But this doesn't grow corn or convince Palestinians that all will be well.

One old chap, Raphael David, who presented a detailed variant of the two-state solution, was a Dutch Jewish Holocaust survivor, and he had clearly thought this matter through for a long time, producing a reasoned and rational, thoroughly Dutch-style plan. But, sad for him, it's unlikely to fly because, whatever foreign politicians and commentators might think, the two-state 'solution' is well and truly dead. Please, everyone, drop this one: it won't pass either Israelis or Palestinians because this plan had its big chance in the 1990s, and it was dead by 1995, when the Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin, a former senior army general with the clout to pull off some sort of peace, was assassinated by a young right-wing Israeli settler (not, please note, by a Palestinian).

The possibility that is now being explored is a one-state solution, or variations on this theme. The best of these, I believe, is presented by a group called Palestinians and Israelis for a Federal State. It's a proposal for a *three-state* solution: that is, a federal setup where the land of Israel and Palestine is united under one federal administration. This is not territorially difficult because it is already united under the Israeli government, whether Palestinians like it or not. Then the Palestinians and Israelis will have two federal states without territorial sovereignty – that is, wherever Israelis are will be Israel, and wherever Palestinians are will be Palestine, and these two countries will be defined by law and culture, not by territory. Jerusalem will be under direct federal rule.

This is quite a good idea, and reasonably doable. Sure, extremes on either side will doubt or oppose it, but the secret is to unite the middle in both communities because that is where the majority are. Actually, to be honest, the majority has given up, suspending interest and judgement, and only a proportion of people, perhaps 20-30% on both sides, believe a peace deal is possible or foreseeable. But that middle ground in both populations is the constituency on which such a plan can be based.

One plan was theoretically interesting, though thoroughly non-doable. It noted that the pain in this land is so deep that it will take a complete lifetime to heal – so the proponent, a rather bright-eyed Jew called Eitan, proposed changes with a 20, 50 and 70 year perspective. This has some wisdom to it, but the chance of selling it to ordinary people is not far from zilch. As one young Palestinian put it: "*I need a job now, I want to go to Jerusalem freely, I want to find a job in Tel Aviv and, if it should happen, I want to be able to marry an Israeli – and I want to do this soon, not in fifty years' time, when I could be dead*".

This sums it all up. The problem is this. Well-meaning Israelis treat peace as a spare-time activity, and they can afford to wait for it because life is okay for them now. So they love discussions and befriending Palestinians, and this is good, but it doesn't solve the problem for people on the other side. Meanwhile Palestinians have real-life, hard-

hitting realities to live with every day which make their lives very difficult, and they cannot afford to wait or sit around talking indefinitely. They need change now: if your wife is suffering cancer and is not permitted to get treatment in an Israeli hospital just five miles away, she will die – it's that straightforward. Many Palestinians are admirably patient and realistic, knowing a solution will take time, but they want improvement to start now or soon. And it's time. It has been time for a change for twenty or forty or over sixty years, depending on how you view it (the Oslo Accords of 1993, the Ramadan/Yom Kippur War of 1973 or the *Nakba* of 1948).

Personally, I don't believe that peace processes will work. If they could work they would have worked by now. The likely way peace will come is simply through changing world trends and defining events. The West is in decline, China and India are on the rise, the declining oil industry is changing things in the Middle East, and Israel-Palestine risks getting stuck in its own inward-turning, self-preoccupied vortex, locked in an ongoing conflict that is going nowhere. Meanwhile other global priorities such as climate, ecosystems, migration, pollution, economics and population are busy changing rapidly – and these global-scale issues small nations have little influence over.

Then there are defining events. Possibilities are an earthquake, a toxic or nuclear disaster, a serious drought, a significant rise in sea levels, or something unpredictable – all quite possible. Two earthquakes, one in Turkey and one in Greece, ended the longstanding conflict between them ten years ago. The Chernobyl disaster and an earthquake in Armenia were instrumental in the fall of the Soviet Union. Another issue is landslides – social-political ones. There come points in history where everyone together – or at least, significant minorities or majorities – decide that something has to change. This isn't a conscious, planned process: it bubbles up from beneath, often sparked by a small defining event with big symbolism to it. In early 2011 it was a young, poor, provincial Tunisian who set himself alight and, through this sacrifice, started a wildfire of revolutions across the Middle East. No one saw that coming.

I don't really believe peace plans of any kind are going to work – there's too much resistance and distrust, and people are tired of them. There are two extra factors we must consider. First, the ruling elite in Israel – eighteen families own 60% of the Israeli economy – is not interested in resolution of the issue. They support the occupation of Palestine. So any change that's going to happen depends a lot on them. But, being part of the nowadays much-maligned 1%, their position is not secure.

The second is that, in the end, what ends conflicts is *weariness*, and what changes history is that old people die and young people grow up, and with different values. In these days of social networking and mobile phones, young people are global in perspective, contacts, travel and aspirations. The security walls and checkpoints work only to an extent. Meanwhile, between young citizens of Sderot, Israel, and Gaza, Skype and Facebook are helping in the building of bridges underneath the overarching dominance of the Israeli army, the politicians and international diplomats.

So, I have some hope that peace will come, and by means we cannot predict. Many would say it's impossible, but this has been the case for many things – the fall of the Iron Curtain, the end of the Ulster conflict, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the uniting of previously warring nations in Europe and, further back, the fall of the British empire. All of these were impossible once upon a time.

So, blessed the peacemakers, for they do try hard. But I have a feeling their noble work might not be what in the end brings peace. Not because conflict will continue forever, but because it could well end by entirely unforeseen mechanisms, by the *power of events*.

At the end of the conference I rang Ishmael for a lift and he took me to his home in Deheisheh, fed me with food and coffee, and we watched Al Jazeera together. He teaches me Arabic, and I help with his English. In his role as a taxi-driver I also bring him business, and I'm beginning to worry what might happen to his pocket when I leave for Britain. He's a lovely man. He produced an atlas so that I could show him where

Cornwall lies – it's funny seeing Penzance and Truro spelt in Arabic. I showed him photos of Cornwall on my computer. He was rather stirred when he saw pictures of stone circles the same age as the Egyptian Pyramids.

Then he took me home and, guess what, I resorted to customary security measures. Not of the military kind the Israel Defence Force resorts to. These were typically English security measures. I made a cup of tea. Now that's a good way to come down from a peace conference. Come visit me, and I'll make one for you too. Now there's a thought.

*Three days later…*
Monday 12 December 2011

## Challenged are the Peacemakers

The lunar eclipse on Saturday 10th December was captivating. At first it was not visible because of the general murk in the sky low on the horizon as it rose – the Middle East has, under some weather conditions, quite a pall of pollution and dust hanging over it. But the moon emerged from the murk, becoming more visible as the dusk darkened.

Ibrahim has gone to Germany, accompanying some trainers from the Hope Flowers Centre to attend a trauma-therapy course in Berlin. The school and centre have for a long time practiced trauma counselling, and now they are extending into trauma therapy. Ibrahim came to pick me up for a chat before he went. The car was full, with Maram, his wife, their three lovely girls and Muna, their domestic helper.

When I opened the door, the girls lit up. "*We miss you*", said Zena, the eldest, nine years old. My heart wobbled. I miss them too – and I miss the noise, bustle and chaos of a family of five. Until several days ago they had been living with me at the apartment at the school while their new house in Beit Jala was being readied. But now they have moved, it is very quiet at the apartment. I gave them each a squeeze and we

chatted as we wove through the streets of Al Khader to reach the Barbra restaurant in Beit Jala, where Ibrahim and I got out. We found a table and sat there, silent, wondering where to start. Ibrahim didn't want to start, but he knew we had to talk. So I started off, trying to restrain myself from blurting out the full list of things I needed to discuss with him.

Ibrahim is deeply tired and worn out. This year has been a nightmare for him. At times I have seen him drowsily staring at the wall, struggling to muster his thoughts or falling asleep where he's sitting. He needs a sabbatical, a profound rest-and-recharge. But there is no one to stand in for him and no funds are available to hire the right kind of manager to take over many of his duties. He's stuck with his responsibilities.

Crises are surmountable if there is energy and drive to overcome them. But the batteries are flat and the situation continues to be complex. I have had to wait patiently, trying not to drum my fingers: Ibrahim has been busy, unready to brainstorm longterm strategy planning. So I am beavering away with the things I can do without his involvement, on the offchance that I'm getting things right.

I am glad he is going away. The break might do him good, giving him a chance to think, get some inspiration and meet new people. When he goes abroad he is reminded of the significance of the work of Hope Flowers – people are amazed at what the school and centre are doing. Here in Palestine, amidst all this ongoing sandstorm of events, it's difficult to remember this.

In the West there are many wonderful theories about bringing peace to conflict zones, and there is good theoretical understanding of the psychosocial issues involved, but at Hope Flowers we do this stuff in a hands-on way, in the thick of it, applying and honing it at the coalface. By dint of the long-lasting conflict, Hope Flowers has accumulated experience and knowhow for a longer time than most comparable organisations.

But that doesn't solve our crisis. Numbers of children and teachers are reduced because of financial cutbacks, yet the school is going well, and the adult education centre down in Deheisheh is thriving. The crisis lies with funding, organisation and leadership, and with the proliferating requirements of overseas funders. Hope Flowers is being reorganised but it takes time – more time than anyone would like. We are, after all, operating in an occupied country, and life here is beset with complications that other countries do not experience with such intensity. There's an example coming below.

In the end, the chief complication is the state of mind of Palestinians themselves. They're all quite fundamentally worn out. I see many broken men who have lost their hope and self-esteem. Meanwhile, women bravely struggle on, with a child in one hand and mobile phone in the other. They're encouraged by the tide of change in the Middle East that increasingly favours women and gives them new opportunities, but life is not at all easy for them.

In this country everyone busily deals with the next crisis, and then the crisis after that, while lacking hope or a clear idea of where things are going. The possibility of peace and resolution – always elusive – has evaporated. They feel let down by the international community, which has failed yet again to do right by them, and at times a feeling of hopelessness rumbles under the surface, clouding the atmosphere and testing everyone's forbearance.

Ibrahim's state is simply an expression of a general situation. But he is a resilient man: he was an engaged teenager during the first *intifada* and in the second *intifada* he and his family admirably steered the school through very difficult times – even at one stage with a gun-battle going on around the school while the kids were there (they were given a twenty minute ceasefire to evacuate). He has remarkable patience and perseverance.

At the restaurant, he perked up slightly as I made him aware I was thinking about things on his behalf – as much as I am able. But he had no responses. I decided there and then to take a different strategy from

now on: instead of waiting to have brainstorming sessions and discussions with him, I'll get on with a strategic plan anyway, doing what I can, identifying the gaps and then presenting it to Ibrahim or the school board for taking on from there.

We parted company and Ibrahim has now gone off to Berlin for ten days. Meanwhile, following the eclipse, the weather here has been beautiful, with crisp, golden, sunny days and a profound stillness. Last night the bells of the monastery down the valley in Irtas could clearly be heard wafting over the hillsides like auditory balm. I went for a walk in the sun, down in the valley, and all around me were twittering birds flitting from tree to tree amongst the fruit orchards. Yet there was a deep sound of silence. Cats were sitting in the sun preening. In that moment, all was well and life was at peace.

But at night it gets cold. The apartment on the top floor of the school is large and spacious, with concrete walls and marble floors, and it gets cold after sundown. It is difficult to heat because of its size, and buildings here are made for withstanding the summer heat, not the winter chill. So I sit here wrapped in a big blanket, with double sweaters on, even at the computer. I'm used to cold countries, but I wonder how well I shall manage here in January and February. I'd like more friendship too.

We live in times of accelerating change, and the difficulties the world faces seem to be going critical. Palestine could do relatively well in coming times, thanks to its collective experience in dealing with challenging circumstances – this is a perverse, painful benefit the Israelis have brought them. Fundamental to this is *attitude*. The big word is *sumud* – steadfastness, resilience and hanging in there. It's an attitude of survival, of solidarity under duress. In other words, if all you have to eat is bread, then enjoy your bread and don't worry about things you don't have.

It could be that Palestinians will teach the world about survival one day. They might even land up rescuing Israelis. After all, in times of lack and global economic woes, truckloads of food aid and equipment might

no longer be likely – what will be important will be the sharing of survival knowledge and experience, the human stuff. In this, Palestinians are strong. It starts with attitude.

It might be that the crisis at Hope Flowers is a God-given gift. Perhaps we're being prepared for something without knowing it. When you're down, there are only two directions to go: out or up. One of Ibrahim's problems is that he cannot head out – resign or close Hope Flowers. If he did so, it would mean the failure of a 27-year old organisation founded by his father, and he would also be seen by Palestinians to have betrayed the cause, and the Israelis would probably get the land the school is on.

So the only direction available is up. But the challenges continue. On my way to town with Ismael today, he told me that he had heard last night that the Israelis were going to build houses just over the wall from the school, expanding the settlement of Efrat. It's part of their master-plan to surround Bethlehem with settlements, even eventually to stop Palestinians using Route 60 from Bethlehem to Hebron.

What wonderful news. We have another challenge before us. Perhaps it's good Ibrahim is away. Perhaps I have some work to do. I'm going to give it a day or two to think this through and do some research. And, please, someone, tell me to stop working and go to bed.

*Four days later…*
Early Friday 16 December 2011

## The Intricacies of Arabic

I took Aisha to the neighbours' house – I had picked her up in town. She stays one night a week with me when she teaches English at the Hope Flowers Centre – otherwise she lives near Ramallah. An Englishwoman who has married into Palestine, she speaks Arabic well. This meant I could ask her to help with some translation.

My neighbour's fourteen year old daughter had written a pretty good letter to me in English, asking me to give her a hundred shekels (£20) so that she could go on a school trip to visit the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and then to Tel Aviv and Haifa. It was her first trip into Israel, and I knew it would be important to her. So I agreed to support her – she and I have been friends for six years and I have watched her growing up. She has spark and potential.

But I needed Aisha to help me explain to them that I'm not a rich Westerner, and they can't lean on me repeatedly. This is a delicate matter: it's common for Palestinians to assume that Westerners are rich when, in fact, those of us who come here are usually toward the lower end of the Western income spectrum. If Palestinians sting us for money we're less likely to return. In the end it is more important to return than to blow money around, since the best gifts we bring are psychosocial, not financial – and it's important to avoid reinforcing a culture of dependency.

It's also important to divest Palestinians of the idea that most Westerners are rich and free. Conversely, it's important to divest Westerners of the stereotype of 'the suffering Palestinian'. Some Palestinians do suffer immensely, but the majority are kinda middly – life is hard but it is generally manageable. Life is harder in Egypt than here in Palestine, economically. This said, Palestinian GDP is at the same level as it was in 1999, thanks to the effects of the *intifada* of 2000-2004, the building of the separation wall from 2002 onwards and other throttling devices applied to them by the Israelis and Western countries, Britain included.

Some Westerners are shocked to see my photos, showing amply-built houses, streets dense with cars and well-stocked shops, with real people doing ordinary things – where's the war and suffering? They're surprised to learn that Palestinians are one of the world's most highly-qualified ethnic groups. Sure, an average employed Brit might earn £25,000 per year, which sounds like a lot, but such people aren't rich

and fat – they're chained to a treadmill of payments, taxes, rising prices, debt and keeping corporate executives and shareholders alive.

Poor Palestinians do have a really hard time, since there's no social welfare system and the Israeli occupation is oppressive, especially for people in some areas. The oppression is mainly psychological: the experience of being controlled by another nation, with its soldiers, bureaucrats, walls, checkpoints and the sheer inconveniences involved in living here are what are most degrading. Yet, paradoxically, depression is more common in Britain than here.

So my young friend is now able to go to Al Aqsa and Israel next week. That's good. Aisha and I stopped at their house and had the customary tea with them – and I was given some home-made flat-bread, a wonderful gift. We chatted. Through Aisha I was able to ask a question I had wanted to ask for a long time: here was a mother with four children, but what had happened to their father? I had never seen him.

It turned out he was upstairs. Some years ago he was imprisoned by the Israelis and, while in jail, he was obliged to wear the same clothes all the time and was disallowed even to wash for over a year. As a result he has skin diseases which have not gone away after nearly ten years. This prevents him from working and gives him a lot of agony and shame – he is marked for life. He has probably lost his self-esteem too. This family is poor, subsisting on the meagre earnings of the mother who, amongst other things, is a cleaner at Hope Flowers School. A bright personality, she buzzes around the school doing her cleaning. But life is tough for them.

So, despite what I wrote above, life for many Palestinians isn't easy. Even those who are better off often have painful stories to tell. These people are traumatised. But the good news is that they seem to deal with it quite well. They have the right attitude. Unlike people in the West, Palestinians know and acknowledge that they have a problem, and they do what they can to overcome both the problem and the psychology of resignation and depression. In the West there is still a lot of collective self-delusion and denial going on.

A couple of days ago I looked out of the window and, on a neighbouring house, there was a rather large, elegant flag flying. I looked at it, wondering if this was something about Palestine that I didn't know – do they have another flag that means something special to them? The Palestinian flag is a good one, but this one had genuine panache. Eventually, today, I found out. I asked a young boy, Mahmoud, the son of the family we had visited, who comes out to see me every time I walk past. He told me it's the flag of Barcelona football club. Oh well. Palestinian men are football crazy. When they hear I grew up in Liverpool, they assume I must be a great footballer. Well, I can manage a few tricks – the standards were high where I grew up – but frankly football does not interest me. They can't understand this. I seem to be a heretic in more ways than I originally thought.

There are lots of things they don't understand about me. For example, that I'm a man who is perfectly capable of running a house, washing my clothes and feeding myself – to them, this is weird. But hang on, it's good for me to do this – it's a way of grounding myself. I wear quite colourful clothes too. The most incomprehensible thing is that I'm a vegetarian – *and* I'm still alive!

Recently I've wanted to buy a few clothes, but men wear really boring Western clothing here, and there's nothing available that suits me. The women, on the other hand, wear lovely dresses which are embroidered, colourful and graceful. I decided to come out with it to a shopkeeper I know, who sells such dresses. He smiled, thought for a moment and then rummaged around in the back, emerging with a lovely man's waistcoat, embroidered all over, looking proud as punch. Well, that was a step in the right direction. I told him what I was really looking for, a warm jacket to replace a lovely felted Tibetan jacket which, after many years, I have worn almost to shreds. So we arranged to meet up on Monday and he will take me to a dressmaker to get measured up and have a bespoke job done for me. Fingers crossed that it's going to be alright. This might cost me a bit, but hopefully I might get my dream jacket. It will give her some work too, and he'll no doubt collect his cut.

Then there was the taxi-driver who drove Aisha and me back from town. He picked me up at Manger Square, the centre of the Old Town of Bethlehem, which is getting festooned with lights and Christmas paraphernalia right now. He was unhappy about it. A big Christmas tree has been erected, decorated with gaudily flashing lights, which apparently cost $70,000. It was paid for, I understand, by donors from Italy. The old taxi driver remonstrated about this at length, just about missing other cars as he waved his arms around.

What angered him was that Westerners can be really generous with dramatic gestures like the Christmas tree but, he said, look at the holes in the road and the dark places round Bethlehem where there's no street lighting! As if to prove his point, he had to swerve to dodge a dead cat in the middle of the road. Indeed, he's right. This big-gesture generosity pleases Italians more than Bethlehemites.

We went to the Hope Flowers Centre in Deheisheh to pick up Aisha after her English class. She introduced me to her two star students, one from Hebron and the other from Yatta, just south of Hebron. Suddenly these guys had struck the jackpot: they had two well-spoken English in their midst, and launched into a discussion in English. Well, for a while. The taximan was waiting outside, smoking and still fuming about the Christmas tree.

"*Wanna go in the front?*", I said to Aisha, when we came out and approached the taxi. "*Better not*", she said. "*It'll be too weird for the taxi-driver having me in front and you in the back.*" So I sat in the front. Aisha calmed down the taximan by chattering to him in Arabic. It's going to take me a while to get to her stage – I'm still trying to decipher syllables and words, and the problem is that Palestinians jabber at great speed, and only some of them enunciate their Arabic clearly enough for an ignoramus like me to disentangle. Looks like Aisha is coming to Bethlehem not only to teach English at the Centre, but also to explain Arabic nuances to me. I'll probably have a load of notes and questions for her when she comes next week.

She explained one problem I had had earlier in the day. I had gone to an Arabic perfume shop, looking for rose-scented oils to take home. They're useful small gifts for the various ladyfolk in my life. The man didn't understand what I sought, so he hauled in another guy who spoke passable English. They kept on giving me a variety of scents to try, some of which were lovely, but they weren't rose. Eventually they got fed up with me and I beat a retreat – this is tricky, because they expect you to buy something if you enter a shop. Later, Aisha told me that the word for 'rose' is the same as the word for 'flower' – it's *warrd* (with a hard, trilled 'r'). Aha. But I still haven't quite figured out how to convey that I want *rose*, not flowers. Well, this is not the greatest of challenges life can throw my way.

I learn a new word or phrase and then my rusting brains forget it within an hour. But somehow there is an absorption process going on, and one day I might start uttering Arabic intelligibly. At present I'm reluctant. If, for example, someone says *keif halak?* (how are you?) and I answer *hamdulillah* (thanks be to God, or 'fine thanks') they immediately start rabbiting at me as if I am fluent, and I don't yet know how to say 'I don't speak Arabic'. Is it possible to have an intravenous injection of Arabic? Or perhaps I could install an Arabic flash-drive behind my left ear. Well, the great patriarch Abraham didn't speak Arabic either, so perhaps it's alright.

*Later that day…*
Friday 16th December 2011

## Gush Etzion

It's easy to fall into the idea that Palestinians are chaotic but, no, Israelis can be similar. I had an arrangement with Joshua for him to pick me up just down below Jabal al Khader at 1pm, but no, he rings up at 12 noon and says, "*Are you ready?*". So I had to get down there quick.

On the way, my phone rang and it was him. "*Hurry up! The soldiers here don't like me hanging around.*" Hmmm, soldiers? I rounded the corner to go down the hill, and there were four Israeli soldiers at the bottom, just where the border sign is, where it says 'Entry forbidden to Israelis'. I live in dangerous territory – as you can see, I get blown up twice a day.

I walked down the hill, playing my English gentleman act, confident, relaxed and polite. They were okay: they just looked at me and didn't seem to be concerned to see a European walking out of a Palestinian area. I got in the car. Joshua's wife was with him. We were going to see someone at Givat HaDagan, the Israeli settlement outpost over the valley from the school. This was going to be interesting.

We drove up the road to the boundary checkpoint marking the edge of the settlement of Efrat. They're quite often unmanned, there to look imposing and just in case there's trouble. However, a couple of soldiers were there. What's this? We speculated whether they anticipated protests or reprisals from Palestinians, concerning the rather controversial extension of Efrat settlement which had been announced earlier this week.

Later it turned out that the soldiers weren't guarding against Palestinians: they were there to stop extremist settlers going in the other direction and getting into Palestinian areas to commit incendiary 'price tag' crimes against Palestinians. Recently, in other areas, reckless settlers had been attacking people, torching mosques, painting offensive graffiti and burning farmland to assert a 'price tag' on Palestinians, for the latter's resistance against land seizures and settlement-expansion. After all, how dare the Palestinians refuse to move off their land when the settlers want it!

The settlers are declaring a manic war of their own. This bodes ill, because they could also turn against the Israeli government – signs of which are already happening. So Bibi Netanyahu, a Zionist who supports the settler movement but also has become aware that things could run amok, has set the army on them, to get them under control.

Except the settlers are pretty uncontrollable – probably more dangerous to Israel's future than all the world's Arabs put together. So that's why the soldiers were at the bottom of Jabal al Khader – they were protecting Palestinians! This is a crazy land.

We turned left onto a narrow road uphill to the settler outpost of Givat HaGadan – a collection of trailers and cabins called, for some, home. This land used to be owned by Palestinian neighbours, just down the hill from the school, until it was appropriated and the security wall went up. I have never been on this side of the valley before. It's quite a mess – wire fencing, junk, trailers, rubble. Unloved and unpresentable. By this time, Joshua had been on the phone to establish that we weren't going to meet the settler he was taking me to see. She had gone somewhere else. More chaos. I caught some photos of the area and we headed off into Efrat.

Efrat is a privately developed settlement, less religious than many others around here. It is part of the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, a chunk of Palestine that the Israelis have appropriated. Sooner or later they will annex it to incorporate it formally into Israel – it lies on the Palestinian side of the Green Line but it borders onto 'Israel proper'. It is made up of quite a few Israeli settlements, big and small, the biggest being Betar Illit, population 38,000, inhabited by ultra-orthodox *Haredim*. Efrat has 8,000 people, Alon Shvut has 3,500, Elazar and Neve Daniel 2,000, Nokdim 1,300 and the rest have populations in the hundreds.

This whole area is topographically and geographically very confusing and, although it's Israeli-dominated there are plenty of Palestinians living here – it's a patchwork of fenced-off settlements interspersed by Palestinian farms and villages. It's quite fertile, with orchards, vineyards and farms. This is the first time I've been here properly and Joshua was a good guide. He's American by origin, made *aliyah* in 1971, and he lives on the *kibbutz* of Kvar Etzion, the oldest settlement in the area – it dates back to 1967, immediately following the Six Day War. It had been founded in 1935, abandoned because of Palestinian

pressures and then reoccupied in 1943, then to be abandoned again in the 1948 war when the Jordanians took over the West Bank.

We cruised through Efrat (which Joshua informed me boasts 37 speed-bumps) and wove around the circuitous roads, crossing over Route 60, eventually reaching Kvar Etzion to drop off his wife, who had been working in Jerusalem. They're both good-hearted people, and they are anti-settlement activists, yet living in a settlement. There wasn't the opportunity to discuss this – too much was happening – so I'll have to pin him down sometime to have a proper discussion about why and how he's a settler who seems to oppose settlements.

To Europeans this might seem logically inconsistent, but logic is not what works here, so forget it. Later I discussed another inconsistency which he acknowledged to be strange. It concerns the ultra-orthodox *Haredim* – the ones dressed up as if they still live in the late 1700s. How, I asked him, can the *Haredim* live by 600-odd strict religious rules and live with decidedly antiquated ways and values, while occupying a thoroughly modern settlement such as Betar Illit? He mentioned how they're big on mobile phones and internet and they seem to use modern appurtenances freely. But he didn't really understand this either.

Kvar Etzion seems a happy enough place. People were out and about doing things. As a *kibbutz*, it is a collective, unlike many settlements – *kibbutzim* were formed in the early days of Israel, up to 1970, when it was more of a secular-socialist than a religious-nationalist place. The intense religiosity of some Israelis is something that has moved into the foreground since the 1980s. At the entry gate Joshua stopped to talk to someone and picked him up. It turns out he was a Palestinian going to a house at the other end of the *kibbutz*, and that it's not easy for him to cross the *kibbutz* on foot – he can get hassled. So he was waiting for a friendly Israeli to come along to give a lift, which Joshua did. This illustrates the strangely mixed nature of this area, where Israelis and Palestinians live cheek-by-jowl in a very socially-cellular landscape, close and quite interdependent yet largely separated.

Joshua then took me to Gush Etzion Junction on Route 60, the main artery from Jerusalem to Hebron. This is the hub of the Etzion bloc, the location of a shopping mall hosting a big discount superstore called Rami Levy, which has branches throughout Israel. This, unusually, is a mixed supermarket, Jewish owned yet permitted to Palestinians and with part-Palestinian staff – many Bethlehemites come here for bulk buys. Before you think peace has suddenly broken out and *apartheid* has disappeared, it's not quite like that.

Rami Levy is clearly an astute businessman who knows where the sales are. Like any good capitalist, he doesn't mind who people are as long as they buy his stuff, and he employs Palestinians to help attract Palestinian customers. But he also demonstrates how business can cross boundaries – after all, in the end, it was the business community in South Africa who tipped the balance in the ending of the *apartheid* regime there, around 1990.

However, ultra-orthodox and right-wing Jews don't like the idea of meeting up in the aisles with Palestinians – this would cause them to see that Palestinians are *real people* who do *ordinary things* like shopping. It's more comfortable to maintain stereotypes than to deal with real-life people. Some Palestinians don't like their own people giving business to Israeli companies either. Apparently an Israeli and Palestinian on the staff fell in love and it caused an uproar. They were fired, and all Palestinian staff were fired too, to prevent recurrences. However, business fell, and once the dust had settled the Palestinians were re-hired. Rami Levy is obviously a pragmatist.

We then went to visit a Palestinian family living on a hillside surrounded with settlements. The ladies sat in a horseshoe, smiling and very welcoming. The place was quite un-modern and basic, but homely. We started talking to a young man, and more men appeared. We were served coffee, then tea, then coffee again. I couldn't understand everything that was going on, but the animated conversation between Joshua and these Palestinians seemed interesting.

Joshua told me two stories that came up in the conversation. One Palestinian visitor had told him that a Jewish settler family had once moved onto his land. He had lodged a complaint and the judgement went in his favour, surprisingly – the army came and threw out the settlers. Time went on and the same settler family returned again. He doesn't reckon the authorities will judge in his favour this time. Settlers are persistent. He was vexed about this because this could be the beginning of the end for him and his property.

Palestinians have lived here for ages, but they are not allowed building permits to accommodate their growing families. However, one chap managed to obtain permission from the local mayor, which surprised him. He then went to the regional council for their approval (these things are never simple), and permission was refused. The mayor later told him, with classic *chutzpah*, that he had granted permission knowing the higher authority would refuse it, because he wanted the Palestinian to accept him as a good guy. Hmmm, that's not much consolation.

Israelis are an individualistic and argumentative lot. During the British Mandate period they deliberately organised themselves in small cells, to stop the British penetrating them and also because they differed from each other over values, plans, preferences and politics. This didn't end when the state of Israel was founded in 1948 – arguments were so intense that a constitution was never agreed. So Israel has no single, coherent aim and direction. Everyone, including state employees and different units in the army, does what they feel best. What unites them is a shared opposition to the enemy – which is one reason they make such a fuss about the enemy seeking to annihilate them. This man's story is thus quite typical: one person says yes, and another says no, and that's the way things are. This is one reason why extremist settlers take their own initiatives – dissonance is an institution.

The local Palestinians want to establish a village on this hill but they are disallowed. If their families expand, that's their problem, and sons and their own families must move away. That's a big issue because Palestinian families are large. But Palestinians look at settlers who

move into the area, establishing outposts without permission, and they ask, *why can't we?* Well indeed. Planning laws do have their virtues – they can stop a landscape being ruined by development – but the rules cannot be selectively applied.

What amazes me is this. Israelis frequently question whether Palestinians have been in the area very long – they still labour under the mythology that this is 'a land without people waiting for a people without a land'. Yet, look around much of the landscape of the West Bank and you see the hillsides covered with old agricultural terracing. It's all over the place, demonstrating that the land has been intensely farmed for centuries, producing significant agricultural output.

In parts this will have started millennia ago, done by Canaanites, Jebusites, Jews and the full multi-ethnic range of peoples who have lived here. The people who account for much of the terracing were the predecessors of those we now call 'Palestinians'. Historically it is a flimsy assertion that the Palestinians are somehow new migrants here. Paradoxically, some are descended from Jews who remained behind after the diasporas of two millennia ago – it was mostly the elite and urban Jews who were forced to leave.

Joshua then took me to see some landscape views, knowing I am a photographer. I could see why this area was being fought over. It is hilly, fertile and scenic, with views toward the Mediterranean, and it's not far from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. We looked over Betar Illit, the largest settlement, home to thousands of *Haredim*, then we went to Rosh Zurim, a smaller settlement built for another kind of Orthodox settlers. Then we followed a track called the Patriarch's Way. Allegedly this was the route that Abraham followed when travelling from Hebron, his home in ancient times, to Jerusalem. It still has Roman milestones along it.

On the edge of Alon Shevut, where one of his daughters lives, he showed me the site of a demolished Palestinian house. The owners now live on the land in a tent. It was something to do with the abstruse legalities the Israelis use to claim land for the government, and quite

frequently they refuse to accept property deeds as evidence of ownership. Sometimes they serve a ‘stop work order’ prohibiting improvement of land or property, then they claim the land is unused. According to an old Ottoman law, unused land reverts to the government.

In Israel’s early days, founded as it was on socialist principles, government ownership of land made some sense – it heightened Israel’s control over its territory. The government and the Jewish Agency still own most of the land of Israel, and most Israelis live on properties with a 99-year lease. Since most Israelis have been here less than 60 years, this is not yet a problem, but a time will come when those leases need renewing, and that could get complicated.

Then he showed me a Palestinian house which had not been demolished. Here the orchards and farm were thriving. Yet it was overlooked by the settlement of Elazar, and there were signs that the settlers had their eyes on this land – Joshua pointed out seats which had been placed around the property, nominally for people to sit on but actually a preliminary announcement of intent to take over.

Later we passed a sign in Hebrew announcing a settler outpost called Netzer – it’s illegal and unrecognised but in due course it will probably be legitimised. In this way the settlers act as proxies for the government, taking initiatives it cannot rightly take, then having their actions legalised once time has passed and everyone has forgotten how things were before. It’s all part of the process of laying down ‘facts on the ground’: the Gush Etzion bloc could, after all, suddenly find itself on the wrong side of the line in a peace agreement, requiring evacuation – and we can’t have that, can we? This is why Israel drags its feet over peace agreements – delays allow time for more and more facts on the ground to be established. The greatest expansion of settlement building took place while the Oslo Agreements were being thrashed out in the 1990s. Security measures, of course.

Joshua drove me back to the edge of Al Khader. The soldiers were still there. As I got out, he gave his excuses to the soldiers. I did my trick of

looking them in the eyes and giving a gentlemanly smile, saying hello. One of them asked me something. "*I don't speak Hebrew*", I replied. "*Where are you going?*" "*Up there, to the Hope Flowers School, where I'm staying.*" He asked nothing more, nodded, and I walked up the hill. After all, as mentioned earlier, he was simply protecting Palestinians from settler extremists and their price tags.

This is a crazy land. Have I said this before?

*Four days later…*
Tuesday 20th December 2011

## Peace and Goodwill to *All*

Today I woke up with the intention of writing a lowdown on the position and role of Christians in Bethlehem, but I got diverted onto dealing with important enquiries and other work. It's a busy time. So that will have to wait.

It was prompted by the interesting fact that, although Bethlehem is nowadays 90% Muslim, Christmas is quite important here for the Muslims. This is not just because Jesus is one of the prophets of Islam or because Christmas has gone global, or because Bethlehem is the epicentre of Christmas – Bethlehem's worldwide name-recognition is important to all Bethlehemites, walled in and abandoned as they are. It's also because Christians and Muslims here get on in a salutary way, and they care about supporting one another.

Of course they have their tiffs – it's not just that they have different faiths, but there's also an ethnic and social-economic difference between them – but the overriding atmosphere is one of tolerance and harmony. This a wondrous aspect of Bethlehem and its atmosphere. I wish more people would come from round the world to experience it – Christians or not.

*Two days later…*
Early Thursday 22nd December 2011, winter solstice

## Capital of the Christians

Bethlehem is an ancient city going back to the time of the Canaanites, first mentioned in the Egyptian Amarna Texts from the time of Amenhotep III and Tutankhamun, around the mid-1300s BCE. But it's older than that. It is located on a hill 2,700ft (800m) up in the limestone highlands of the West Bank, watered by wells which go back thousands of years. It was a holy place long before Jesus's parents ever got here.

To our modern knowledge, its first claim to fame was that it was the birthplace of King David, king of the Judaeans – he first ruled from Hebron but then, on uniting the Jewish tribes of Judaea and Samaria, he took Jerusalem as his capital from the Jebusites, who had been ruled by priest-kings, the most famous of them being Melchizedek, the initiator of Abraham.

I'm not sure whether the story of the census, causing Mary and Joseph to come to Bethlehem, is true – it might have been convenient as a narrative to portray Jesus being descended from the royal line of David while being born and raised in humble circumstances. There's also something wrong with the dates of the census and Jesus' birth around 6 BCE. This royal heritage would distinguish Jesus from the priesthoods and nobles of the time, portraying him as a religious reformer and holy man standing outside the constraining traditions of the time.

Much of the Jesus story was written and re-edited by the early founders of the institutional Church, in the decades and centuries following his life. But there's one thing I have observed here in Bethlehem (with my lifelong interest in power places and earth energies): *this isn't a place of Jesus but a place of Mary*, and of the archetype of the mother and child. I get the feeling Jesus was born here because of that atmosphere. It was a goddess place long before Jesus came along.

Today, the matriarchal nuance of the place is good and strong, and children have a strong presence here too. Though men do the usual things that men do, if the women disagree or disapprove, it definitely doesn't happen. It's a nice town, friendly, nurturing and familial. As soon as you get off the 21 bus from Jerusalem you notice it: someone comes up saying welcome, asking your name, where you're from and how long you're staying. There is plenty of room at the inn. People's hospitality and generosity is at times overwhelming.

Bethlehem is now a small conurbation of around 100,000 people. It is made up of the joined-up historic towns of Bethlehem (Beit Lahem), Beit Sahour (Shepherds' Fields) and Beit Jala, plus several expanded villages such as Al Khader (St George's) where I live, together with refugee camps such as Deheisheh and Aida, with infill building everywhere. Then there are many surrounding villages – to the north, many are separated off by the separation wall or they're being encroached on by settlements or cleared by settlers and the Israeli army. But to the south there are lots of villages in what is still Palestinian territory.

Bethlehem used to be 80-90% Arab Christian but no longer. It was populated by members of the Syriac, Melkite, Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and other churches of Christianity. Now it's around 10%. This is not the fault of Muslims except inasmuch as, around 1948, they flooded in as refugees, tipping the demographic balance of the place.

The main reason the Christian population has declined is *emigration*. Being culturally and ethnically more closely connected with Christian countries (many are descended from ancient Greeks, Romans or medieval Crusaders), more have left Palestine than is the case with Muslims. Many Palestinians you meet in the West are Christians. They have been Christians far, far longer than people of European stock.

Churches and Western NGOs have helped and encouraged Christians to leave. There has been a tendency common to many emigrants whereby, once an enclave is established somewhere in a host country, members of the wider family, community and clan follow them there. Nowadays

Christian families in Bethlehem have networks of relatives abroad, and young emigrants get passed around the family overseas and protected by them, even entering businesses owned by them. The churches have played a key role in this emigration.

It was motivated no doubt by compassion and care but there is a regrettable side to this inasmuch as the Palestinian Christian community has thus been weakened and, slightly more sinister, it frees the churches from feeling responsible for supporting their members in the Holy Land. This political, rooted in historic frictions between the Church and Jews and, nowadays, between the Church and Israel – the Church seeks to avoid confronting Israel.

This is questionable. It frees the Church from walking its talk – Christianity is after all a religion of peace – and from incurring economic and political expense. It also renders the Israel-Palestine conflict into a two-sided rather than three-sided situation where the Christian element could conceivably act as a balancing and mediating force between Jews and Muslims.

Israelis, if they think about it, are fine with Christian defection, and they have helped it. Muslims regret the emigration, though they understand why Christians have left and many Muslims wish they could follow. Here and across the Middle East they have, throughout much of history, got on just fine, at least at street level.

There have been scrapes between the Muslim and Christian communities. But it has largely taken place during periods of conflict-intensity. One example took place in Beit Jala during the first *intifada* in the late 1980s, when Palestinian Muslim Tanzim fighters fired at the Israeli settlement of Gilo from near a church, knowing that the churches worldwide would make a fuss if the Israelis shelled it back. Beit Jala Christians didn't like this.

Muslims get on fine with Christians in most circumstances. At Christmas, they happily swell the diminishing crowds of Christians simply because Christmas is a phenomenon where Palestine comes into

the spotlight – and it helps that Jesus is a prophet of Islam. It brings energy and fun to Bethlehem – and people need it. Muslims accept Christian ways, and vice versa, and both interact freely with each other.

Bethlehem needs its Christians back but they now live on faraway shores, and many of their young, born in Europe and the Americas, no longer have personal memory of Palestine or feel strong links with it. There's not much future here. Bethlehem has become Muslim, though the Christian presence and holy sites here are under no pressure from them. It's rather sad: the Christian quarter in Bethlehem is rather empty and quiet, and Muslims have not moved in and settled it as Jews might.

It's sad also about Christian pilgrims coming from abroad. Many ignore or are under-informed about the situation in Bethlehem. Some erroneously believe Bethlehem is in Israel – an idea reinforced by such things as Google Maps, which subtly highlight Jewish places and downplay Palestinian places. Yes, the conflict even plays itself out in supposedly authoritative maps.

The Israelis have also captured the pilgrim trade, and they generally discourage Christians from visiting Palestine – the two other main Christian sites, Jerusalem and Nazareth, are in Israel. Christian pilgrims come to Bethlehem on luxury coaches from Jerusalem, to be shunted through the Church of the Nativity in large guided groups, then they are taken to approved souvenir shops, perhaps to an approved café, and then back to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, shopkeepers serving pilgrims, such as my friends Adnan, John, Mohammed and Alaa Din get hardly any business, and the ordinary townsfolk are prevented from having meaningful interaction with pilgrim groups. The pilgrims are fed stuff about the Palestinians and their streets being risky and dangerous.

Another tragedy is the wall and settlements. Bethlehem has been encroached upon by the wall, which at one point at Rachel's Tomb stretches right into town. It has been impinged on by settlements such as Gilo, Har Homa and Efrat. This confinement means that property prices in Bethlehem have shot up, making life more difficult, and population density has increased. Just next door to the school a three-

storey house is being raised by an extra two storeys to accommodate new generations of the family, simply because there is no space to spread out.

*Peace and goodwill to all*. This message emanates from this place and, at Christmas, people sing of that Little Town of Bethlehem lying sweetly in the peaceful landscape of the Holy Land. *Silent night, holy night…* But Christians worldwide should come here to take a look and see what has happened. The capital of the Christians, while still alive, is not well. Christian advocacy of peace has led to a sort of indifference in the Christian world, a turning away from awkward facts that have arisen in the Holy Land.

I have a lot of respect for 'true' and courageous Christians who come here to carry out humanitarian work – such as the Christian Peacemaker Teams who accompany and assist Palestinians in dealing with settlers and soldiers. But Christians implicitly support Israel in its invasion and oppression of Palestine, either actively amongst Christian Zionists and American Neocons, or passively by simply turning away. Jesus needs to have a word with them.

Meanwhile, many humanitarian volunteers here in Bethlehem aren't Christian – they're *people*, many of them young and secular with a sense of justice and human rights, with a good smattering of older oddbods like me, a citizen diplomat with a caring heart. So be it.

Here's wishing you all a very Merry Christmas from Bethlehem. Please put in a prayer for the people of this town. Come over to visit sometime – it's not dangerous. Interestingly, more women than men tend to come to visit, stay or volunteer. Even if you just talk, listen and give people a little business, and even if you're on a budget, you're bringing good to these isolated people. European pilgrims used to spend years journeying here a thousand years ago… so in these days of cheap flights, it's not difficult. It might be the best trip you ever made.

*Later the same day…*
Thursday 22 December 2011

## Another Visit to Patriarch Ibrahim

All the service taxis were full. We were standing on the main road at Al Khader, trying to wave one down for a ride to Hebron, 25km away. But service taxis wait in Bethlehem until they are full and then set off so, of course, they were full when they came past Al Khader. Eventually a guy in a car stopped and gave us a lift. But he had a motive. I was standing there with a fanciable blond.

He saw a marriage opportunity in my friend Morgan and, while travelling along Route 60 toward Hebron he tried her out, asking her hand in marriage, in Arabic – she speaks better Arabic than me – but he was polite with it. She's used to it, but I guess she must be fed up with it. To many Palestinian males, marrying a woman from Amrika, Britaniyya or Allemanni (Germany) means a passport to heaven, where they can get rich and feel free. I try to disabuse them of this belief, but they don't want to know – *anywhere* must be better than here!

Morgan is an American living in a village called Al Aqaba, near Tubas in the northern West Bank. She has been teaching English there and has evolved a plan, with the village mayor, to develop the village guesthouse to welcome guests and parties from abroad so that they can have a genuine Palestinian village experience. It's a noble plan. She outlined it at a meeting at Beit Jala of the Centre for Emerging Futures, where we had met more than a month ago, and a load of us are going to go up to Al Aqaba soon to act as an inaugural group – and we're promised a shadow-puppet show.

We were off to Hebron. Morgan had never been there and I felt it was time to visit my old friend Ibrahim the Patriarch, father to the Arab and Jewish peoples, who lies in his tomb in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron – Islam's fourth holiest place. Eventually we arrived in Hebron, Morgan remaining thankfully unmarried, and we walked the streets down toward the souk, the old centre of town.

Hebron is the West Bank's largest city. A full-scale city it indeed is, friendly and bustling. Historically it has been a great trading city, where in ancient and medieval times traders from Egypt and Arabia met with traders from Mesopotamia and the Levant – but nowadays it is relatively isolated because of the appearance of Israel in 1948, its subsequent forced insulation from surrounding countries, and the insulation of the West Bank within Israel. But Hebron still bustles – it's the West Bank's main industrial city, where they do engineering, glass-blowing, food-processing, crafts, textiles and ceramics.

We stopped for a falafel sandwich at a cafe, a very friendly one but certainly not complying with British-style health and safety regulations – though the payoff was that our meal cost less than most British cafes would charge for a mere cup of tea. Then we headed off down into the souk. This is an edgy, tragic place, the historic heart of the city, now besieged by soldier-protected settlers of a particularly aggressive kind, notorious amongst Palestinians.

Jews lived in harmony with Arabs in Hebron for centuries. They were eventually moved out by the British following a massacre in 1929, arising partially from Britain's own colonial policies. In Jerusalem there had been a blood-spilling dispute over access by Jews to the Western (Wailing) Wall, in which people on both sides were killed. This unrest overspilled to Hebron, where 67 Jews were killed – though another thousand Jews were sheltered by Arabs too. They had been friends and neighbours for generations. The British moved the Jews to Jerusalem for their safety, ending an ancient Jewish presence there and increasing the sense of social separation between Jews and Arabs – a trend which was to lead to the eventual creation of two sundered peoples with a high wall between them, decades later.

Moving Jews out of Hebron led to a situation long afterwards, shortly after the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank, where aggressive Israeli settlers moved into Hebron, led by a mad rabbi and backed by the guns of the IDF. They occupied the main hotel in town and started spreading out from there. But these people were different. The original

Jews in Hebron had been Palestine's indigenous Misrahi Jews who for centuries had played their part in its multicultural landscape and were integral to it. The settlers who moved in were immigrant Ashkenazi Jews from France and America, led by a ferocious radical rabbi, Moshe Levinger. They had no intention of coexisting in a mixed community: they wanted to take Hebron and drive Palestinians out. Had the British left the original Jews in Hebron, this might not have happened – or at least, not in the same way.

There are only about 600 Israeli settlers in Hebron [2011] yet they control 20% of the city, with the help of the IDF (the army). Just outside Hebron lies the settlement of Kiryat Arba with around 6,500 inhabitants, swelling the numbers. Meanwhile, Hebron's Muslim sector, taking up 80% of the city, has nearly 200,000 people. The areas were formally separated as part of the Oslo Accords of the 1990s. They are divided by urban roadblocks, most of them barred gates, barbed wire and piled-up rubbish. But some Palestinians still live in the Jewish area, doggedly refusing to be ousted and going through significant humiliation and insecurity for doing so.

It's a heart-rending situation. It's not exactly the *presence* of Jews that is problematic: it's their attitude – one of arrogant certainty, provocation and hard-heartedness. Their technique is to provoke incidents, drawing in the IDF to protect them and do their dirty work, then to occupy properties as if justified to do so by the incident. I find it hard to understand how even the settlers can live like this, raising their children in such an atmosphere. But they do, and one thing that happens in Palestine is that people are regularly faced with a choice: you can eat your heart out over what's happening, or you can get on with life and make the best of what you've got – and survival is best furthered by getting on with life.

Quite a lot of the souk has been closed by the settlers, who have a nasty habit of welding shut the metal shutters in front of Arabic shops. The whole area has distinctive Ottoman architecture. The souk follows a covered lane passing down a valley leading to the Ibrahimi Mosque. As

you walk down you pass people who are exceptionally friendly and welcoming to visitors, though what's distasteful is that, as a Westerner, if you get money out of your pocket to buy something, other shopkeepers swoop in demanding you buy from them too and, since visibly you have money, you can get to feel you're duty-bound to support them by buying something. This is sad, and sometimes it's necessary to be firm, drawing a line and shaking them off. However, this kind of thing is unusual in Palestine – most Palestinians would consider it an ignoble thing.

What affects me most about this is that this happens on the way to a holy place. I find that, once I have been to the Ibrahimi Mosque, I'm in quite a sensitised state, and encountering these guys on the way back is a bit like psychic attack. But there are other Hebronites who recognise this and assist – they know that if foreigners get hassled, they won't return.

Returning later from the mosque, at one point a young chap came along, leading us along a side-street to show us the empty shops and then a roadblock – an unsightly tangle of barbed wire and rubbish preventing access to the Jewish zone. Then he showed us an urban Israeli settlement through a gap in the old Hebron buildings, resplendent with Israeli flags. Then he led us up some old stairs into a house, up some more stairs and out onto a roof with a view.

On the flat roof of the next building was an Israeli soldier – he looked like a Druze from the north of Israel. They are used by the IDF in sensitive areas like this where Arabic and the conflict-management skills of the Druze are useful – they are by degrees more proportioned and principled than many Israeli soldiers, and better for certain delicate operations. Further down in the street a situation was developing – an Israeli soldier was searching a few Palestinian youths while other soldiers looked on, with guns trained. Here it was before us, a normal day unfolding under military occupation. It wasn't even tense – it was just boringly routine.

Eventually we reached the checkpoints preceding the mosque, but it all worked quite well this time. At the first you go through a turnstile where a soldier with a machine gun eyeballs you, saying and doing nothing – I'm not sure why he's there. It must be a killer to wear those helmets all day and every day.

Then you come to a checkpoint where usually they examine your bags and the contents of your pockets. I readied myself to open my camera bag but, no, the female soldier just smiled and asked whether I had anything sharp. The soldiers were quite friendly this time – I had a nice chat with the woman, who was more interested in us as people than as potential security threats. Then we progressed up the steps to the final checkpoint at the door of the mosque, where the soldiers, one Russian, one Ethiopian, were just plain bored and waved us through.

Then came a surprise. The Muslim warden at the door, usually cagey and nervous about non-Muslims entering the mosque whenever I've come here before, was very welcoming. I think he recognised me. He produced a light hooded cloak for Morgan to wear, to cover her head and the profane jeans and sweater she was wearing, then he took us through to the place where we removed our shoes. He was smiling and seemed happy to have foreigners visiting. We entered the carpeted main hall and wandered around. The arched ceiling is lovely, and the tombs of Isaac, Rebekah and others of Abraham's family are there, containing remains thousands of years old. It's a bit like a carpeted cathedral.

Then we went to Abraham's tomb. I find this place stirring – the energy here is so dense with holiness and power that it makes me feel weak in the knees every time I come here. Two other guides were watching, fascinated at how this (they thought) tourist had obviously gone into a deep meditation, standing quietly before the tomb, transfixed. I stood there awhile, losing track of time. I love the Ibrahimi Mosque. It's deep, profound. The sense of *presence* is captivating. If you want to experience true holiness, come here.

Before long we were out. Time was pressing. We needed to get back to Bethlehem because Aisha was coming to stay the night and I needed to

let her in. I collected a camel-hair rug which I had bought from a trader who has become a friend. He's a Palestinian with the nickname 'Manchester' because that's where he lived in *Britaniyya* before returning to Hebron. He has lovely, colourful, traditional hand-woven rugs and hangings made in the villages south of Hebron – I'd love to buy a truckload of them. But I bought just one for 350 shekels (£70), which I shall treasure. We continued up through the souk, emerging into the crowded main streets of lower Hebron and soon to sit in a bus for Bethlehem.

I feel I have a past-life connection with Ibrahim the Patriarch. It felt right to take Morgan to see him – almost as if ordained. She has been really taken by Palestine, and this event will be a highlight, methinks. An old friend from Glastonbury is coming in January, and I think I'll bring her here too. I have sent out so many signals to old friends, offering a place to stay for free, and a memorable adventure, and she's the only one who has acted on it. A rather unorthodox Christian, she's a dedicated community activist in Glastonbury, where I used to live, and I know in my bones that this will be a pilgrimage of the heart for her, a journey of reconnection with something deep down. Perhaps she's starting a new chapter in life. I'm privileged to play my part.

When we got back to the school, two of Aisha's English students were there in their car with her. That evening I was honoured to cook for and look after two ladies. Morgan visited Palestine a year ago with her brother, returned to the States and came back here on her own as soon as she could, and she is thinking seriously of finding a way to stay here longterm. She has fallen in love with her village of Al Aqaba. It was valuable for her to meet Aisha to find out more about the ins and outs of marrying into Palestine. Aisha (pron: *Ay-**ee**-sha*), who is English, seems happy to have done so. Whether it's right for Morgan I cannot tell, but she's not entirely American, having grown up in Japan, Hong Kong and India. It's a big decision to make.

Whenever I go to Hebron, my soul gets rumbled, shaken and quaked. Something goes on inside me. I don't know what it is, but it feels

alright. Perhaps my angels are rearranging my inner circuitry. Or perhaps I'm making a decision I'm yet to become aware of. Or perhaps I have a case of immaculate concussion. Whatever it is, 2012 is starting soon, and I don't think this feeling is going to go away.

*Three days later…*
Sunday 25 December 2011

## The Christ Mass

The day following our trip to Hebron, Morgan went home and Aisha and I went into Bethlehem. The town was crowded, mostly with Palestinians, Christian and Muslim, who come from around the West Bank, Gaza and in Israel, but also with a much larger number of foreigners than usual. Eventually 100,000 visitors hit Bethlehem by Christmas Eve, apparently the largest turnout for at least a decade.

We went to the Nativity Church but it was packed with visitors. There are two halves to the church, Orthodox and Catholic, and the place was crowded with Italians, flashing their cameras and forming long queues to visit the shrines. We didn't stay long. I don't think Jesus would have done so either – though I can't really speak for him. I reflected on the strange fact that, whenever I come to this church, I seem to be brought here by Muslims.

Aisha had to go home to Ramallah, so we had hummus and falafel at a friend's cafe and then trogged up through the Old Town to Bab-al-Sqaq where she caught the 21 bus to Jerusalem. She was trying out this route because, though it requires passing through two major checkpoints near Bethlehem and Ramallah, it's shorter and cheaper than going along the circuitous Palestinian main route around Jerusalem, staying within the West Bank.

I walked back as darkness fell toward Manger Square, taking photos and chatting with people. The square was heaving by now, with people streaming in from all directions. I spent much of the time with an

enterprising young coffee seller, Mahmoud, who places his charcoal-fired coffee pot on a concrete pedestal and does a roaring trade, selling coffee for a shekel (20p). We have an ongoing dialogue, and he likes his pet Englishman – except that I don't support Real Madrid, but no one is perfect. I somehow doubt that Jesus supports Real Madrid either, or Barcelona for that matter, and told him so. "*Ah, but Mohammed the Prophet supports Madrid!*", he joked. Perhaps so.

Soon a weird and very loud concert cranked up, by an Indonesian Christian rock band. The concert was sponsored by an Indonesian evangelical foundation. I heard the best rendering of the Lord's Prayer that I have ever heard, quite tastefully done. One of them gave a lovely rap about harmony between Christians and Muslims, and everyone cheered, even though there was an embarrassing moment when he asked Christians, then Muslims, to stick up their hands, and the Muslims outnumbered the Christians by three to one – oops!

Before long I had had enough of harking to herald angels, soon degenerating into Santa and sleighbell songs, even though the music was rocking and rolling with vigour and aplomb, Indonesian style. Do Indonesians, or Palestinians for that matter, actually know what sleighbells are? I took refuge at my friend Alaa ad-Din's shop, sitting people-watching as the endless crowds streamed down the narrow street. An old taxi-driver I knew drove past and I asked him to return in twenty minutes to pick me up.

I've never been one for Christmas – usually I go quiet and into retreat. This year I have felt more sociable about it but, suddenly, I realised that Bethlehem was becoming a nightmare. Why, in this source-point of the Christmas tradition, do they have to import all the Santa razzmatazz, all the commercial crap that has so ruined the spirit of Christmas, burying peace and goodwill under a mountain of consumptive amnesia and artifice? After all, this is Bethlehem, the home of Christmas – it doesn't need to import anything, and in fact it should set the tone. When I had mentioned this to Aisha, she had said I was welcome to come to

Ramallah to escape. Suddenly I knew I was going to Ramallah tomorrow, on Christmas Eve.

The taximan never came. After an hour of waiting – allowing for Palestine Inshallah Time – I waved goodbye to my friends at the shop, who were duly worried that I wasn't enjoying myself, but I was just fine. In truth, if they stopped deluding themselves, most people in these crowds didn't seem too happy to me either. But then, as someone aptly wrote recently, *if you live inside a myth it looks like reality*. Yet this rendering of Christmas, in my judgement, has more to do with growth-economics than with Jesus, peace and goodwill. Or perhaps I'm just being Scrooge-like and grumpy?

It took a while to find a taxi, and then we had to weave around backstreets dodging the traffic-jams. People were nominally enjoying Christmas perhaps because they felt they had to. It's tragic too that the majority of people here were Muslims. In one sense it's a blessing, saving the Christmas celebrations from moribund decline. What's sad is that the Christian presence is so thin.

I had an image of Jesus coming down the street ranting at the desecration of his memory, vaulting onto the stage in Manger Square to unplug the amplifiers and tell the privileged visitors in their allocated seats to yield them up to the poor and needy. Or perhaps just to go home and get on with the job of building Heaven on Earth and acting on His teachings. I'm sure there are spiritual moments for many people here, when they contemplate the tender meaning of the Christ Mass, of the shepherds who came up from Beit Sahour to see the newborn babe and of the Holy Mother and Child, but *this*… this is something else. I was glad to get out.

So, my apologies for omitting to give you a warm and toasty image of Christmas in Bethlehem! I'm sure it has its finer side, and it certainly puts this walled-in city on the world map, at least for a few days each year. It's good to make a bit of a fuss about peace and goodwill, but why don't we do this all year?

Next day I pottered around the apartment tidying up and exercising my fingers on my computer keyboard, then I rang Ismael and left with him for the service-taxi station, to go to Ramallah. Ismael was a happy man – his son Tareq had just been released early from jail, thanks to Hamas' clever politics in exchanging a thousand Palestinian prisoners for one woe-begotten Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. This says something about Hamas' strategy: they doggedly hold out without budging an inch, and this time it worked. Israel, which believes Hamas is a bunch of terrorists, did the deal and paid the price. Ismael's son was free.

Ismael had driven with his wife to the prison near Ramallah to meet him, but the Israelis kept everyone waiting until late into the night, to prevent an outburst of celebration and protest – though it hadn't worked. There had been a near-riot outside the jail, and Ismael and his wife had beaten a retreat until things calmed down. But they found Tareq and brought him home at last. Their house had since then been busy for some days as people came by to congratulate the son and family, bringing gifts and partying. Released prisoners are heroes in Palestine. Tareq had been wrongly jailed for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers who were raiding Deheisheh refugee camp. But of course, Israelis always have to be right, and Palestinians, the UN and much of the rest of the world is wrong, so that's that.

Ismael is trying to get Tareq into Abu Dis university. He's worried because the jail term has delayed his son's entry into university, meaning that one of his daughters has reached the age for university too. He can't afford to pay for both of them. This is deeply vexing, because Palestinians value education very highly. A while ago I had given Ismael 400 shekels toward an 8,000 shekel (£1,600 or $2,000) fine that he had to pay for his son on release, except the Hamas deal had cut this short and saved the fine, so I told him to put it into Tareq's self-help fund. He was so grateful. It was touching, and we both cried a few tears together.

Bethlehem was choked with traffic. The place was crawling with armed security men because Abu Mazen, the president, and Salam Fayyad, the

prime minister, were on their way to deliver annual Christmas speeches – a tradition started by Yasser Arafat. There were loads of big SUVs everywhere, the cars of the PA hierarchy – people who do very well from the Western and Gulf subsidies that support this nation. Unfortunately the subsidies support the hierarchy more than the nation. There isn't a lot of crime between Palestinians, and this creaming-off is pretty much the biggest.

Eventually we reached the service-taxi station. I bundled into a van and we were soon off, down through Beit Sahour and onto the main trunk road northwards. Most of the traffic was coming the other way – not least the armed motorcade of the president and prime minister, with flashing blue lights and a swarm of big motorbikes out in front and in the rear.

This is a trunk road not because of its quality – in British terms it's a bumpy old 'B' road – but because it's the only road from the southern to the northern West Bank, from Bethlehem to Ramallah, avoiding Israeli controls. Most Palestinians are not permitted to enter Israel proper or Jerusalem, the shortest route – 25km instead of 70km – so they have to go round Jerusalem along this convoluted mountain route.

The road is dramatic, a tremendous ride. At first it weaves along the top of the limestone plateaux east and north of Bethlehem, with a view down into a deep valley and then, on the other side, high up, the walled-off outskirts of East Jerusalem. This is vivid enough in itself, but then the road suddenly plunges dramatically 1,000ft (300m) down a steep switchback into *Wadi Nar*, the Valley of Fire, where it changes from a winding old road into a new USAid-modernised dual carriageway heading north to Abu Dis and Al Azariyah, winding tortuously through Wadi Nar until it eventually joins the Israeli east-west Route 1 from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to the King Hussein Bridge and Jordan. This modern dual carriageway was financed in the 1990s by the Japanese government as a peace road linking Jerusalem and Amman. Peace never came and, as far as I know, the Japanese never asked for their money back.

We cannonaded down the peace road, past the Ma'ale Adumim Israeli settlement, perched on a hilltop to the right, then we turned left toward Ramallah. More dramatic landscape, and a few impoverished Bedouin shack-villages. This certainly is a memorable trip, this road. It weaves around hither and thither, and the service-taxi drivers do it at breakneck speed – mercifully they seem to be good drivers. Eventually we reached Ramallah – and it suddenly started raining hard! It was the first rain for over a month. It was tipping down. I waited to meet Aisha at Manara Circle, the centre of town – a funny bi-directional roundabout with a monument in the middle, dating back to British Mandate times. The British used to come to Ramallah to get out of Jerusalem and enjoy themselves – rather like a hill-station in the Indian Raj.

Aisha took me to a Latin (Catholic) church for the Christ Mass. It's the first time I've been to a church service for, er, well, must be over a decade, heathen that I am. The service was in Arabic and the church was packed. I floated off into another world, standing up and sitting down when required, looking as if I knew what I was doing. I had been in rather an altered, spaced-out state during the day – I think my ET angels were probably operating on my psyche – so it was rather nice to let myself drift along with the choral singing.

Again, I had been taken to a church by a Muslim. I didn't understand a word of the sermon, but the priest, dressed in white robes with lovely embroidery on it, spoke quite clearly and slowly – useful to listen to, picking up Arabic words I'm beginning to recognise. I hadn't realised until now that Christians also use the term 'Allah' in Arabic. But then, he's the One God, so why shouldn't they? For your interest, *Al-lah* means 'The God' – with a slightly different nuance to the Western personalisation of 'God'. Allah started out as the greatest of the gods, Top God, morphing into a One God around the time of Mohammed the Prophet.

We emerged from the church into the pouring rain, dodging torrents of water, and found a taxi to take us to the village just outside town where Aisha and her husband Ahmed lived. He's a web-designer and film-

maker, and we had lots to chatter about. They're moving to England in a few months' time to work and study (if, that is, the British do the right thing with his visa, at a cost of £800). Ahmed likes the relatively high educational and intellectual standards of the English. The idea of living in London gives me a sinking feeling, but perhaps I'm just a provincial country bumpkin.

Next morning, Christmas Day, I sat writing my blog – I was falling behind – while Aisha went out and Ahmed updated websites. It was raining hard – not a day for sightseeing. It was a slow, do-nothing-much day. The calling to prayers at the local mosque was tuneful – though Aisha later told me that, unlike Bethlehem where it is sung by live singers and therefore quite variable in quality, this was pre-recorded by star *muezzin* from Mecca or Medina, and subsidised by Saudi sheikhs. Then we had a chat and late lunch, and I bade them farewell to return to Bethlehem. I was still feeling rather wobbly inside, and wanted to get home.

At the service-taxi station I had to wait some time for the taxi to fill up – it has space for eight passengers. The driver thought I was German, but when I told him in German that I wasn't, and came from *Britaniyya*, he didn't understand, so I stuttered it in Arabic. Eventually people came and we started out.

It was still swilling down with rain and progress was slow. Palestinian roads aren't built for handling rain, so there were massive pools and floods around, and we had some great moments of aquaplaning. Heavy rain in a desert landscape is weird. When eventually we reached the steep, winding switchback at the far end of Wadi Nar there was a big traffic jam. People had ground to a halt on the 1-in-3 hill and, the road being covered with a film of rubber and oil from the customarily hot weather, they couldn't get up. Neither could they back down because of the traffic jam behind them. But Palestinians are good at crises, and it sorted itself out.

When we reached Bethlehem the taxi-station was closed. Since it was still bucketing down the passengers nagged the driver to take them up

toward Manger Square, which he duly did, and we tipped out into the monsoon, running everywhichway. By now I was not just wobbly and vulnerable but cold and wet and, being a thin pile of bones, I decided to run for the nearest shelter to ring Ismael, to ask him to come and rescue me. The nearest shelter was a coffee bar called – wait for it – Stars and Bucks, a Palestinian chain that has taken the name to dig Starbucks in the ribs for avoiding setting up in Palestine. Some global corporations (such as Coca Cola, Wall's ice cream, Volkswagen or Nestle) come to Palestine and others don't (Starbucks being one), and the Palestinians do their best to let the latter know they're getting things wrong. So it looks like Starbucks has lost its chance for business in Palestine – though they probably don't care.

Whatever, Stars and Bucks had a heater on and served a good cup of tea, and I waited for Ismael. The guys there interviewed me about what I am doing in Palestine: Palestinians are so interested in foreigners, especially the ones who stay a long time and return repeatedly. The usual questions came about my family, my (non-existent) wife, and the customary surprise when I said I had grandchildren (since to them I look young), and the questions about my work, where I was staying, and then the riveted attention watching me lighting my pipe.

Ismael arrived at last and off we went, weaving around the Old Town, slowing for the virulent speed-bumps, stopping at a shop to get a few provisions and then water-skiing back to Al Khader. I promised to come to visit his son soon. We waved goodbye. Ismael and I are becoming like brothers of the soul – he looks my age but he's ten years younger. I'll miss him when I go back to Britain, since it's so good having someone who thinks of me and rings me up regularly to make sure I'm alright. He also knows that, as an old dissident who has had his own problems with police and authorities, I understand his son and I have a few survival secrets to share with him.

The apartment was quiet and cold but, once I'd had a bite to eat and a cuppa, I put my hot water bottle on my lap and wrapped a big blanket around myself, finished and uploaded my blog about Hebron, processed

my latest photos, did a few e-mails, did my meditation and then staggered off to bed.

Next day was quiet and I didn't even change out of my *jalabiya* – a long, flowing, dark red robe with gold embroidery. This means I'm off-duty. This is what Ibrahim Issa needs to learn – how to be decidedly *off-duty* and *unavailable*. While in Germany he had had heart problems, and on Christmas Day after his return he was in hospital. He has worked and shouldered too many worries and responsibilities for far too long, and now his soul is telling him to stop. He came round today and I hugged him. He had a troubled look. Yet he's getting the message. He doesn't know what to do about it yet. The trouble is, people turn to him for answers and he never says No. But he must, or Allah will take him away.

I told him that it's no longer a question of *whether* he should pull back from his duties. It's now a question simply of *how* and *when*, and he has little choice. I said that the universe holds back with solutions until we're 100% clear about what we need to do. It does this to oblige us to get to a state of 100% commitment, without reservations. But once we get there, once we make the commitment, the solutions come. He understood.

Bless him: Ibrahim is a hero, an altruist who now must attend to his own interests, or die. I told him I'd stand by him, whatever happened. He went away feeling a tad lighter. Hope flowers even in the darkest of times. So much for Christmas. Next comes 2012.

*Five days later…*
Saturday 30th December 2011

## Nablus

I was eating my breakfast and suddenly noticed something strange. Over by the separation wall, 400 yards away over the valley, about sixty people were weaving their way along, following the course of the wall

on our side. Where the wall ends, just below the settlement outpost of Givat HaGadan, they cut up to the road by the outpost. They weren't soldiers – they were hikers of some sort. Out came my camera on full telephoto.

I couldn't tell whether they were Israelis on a gloat tour – sometimes they come to espy the land in the valley, possibly to size up the next land-acquisition – or whether they were Europeans on a conflict tour – groups touring Palestine to visit the conflict hotspots – or perhaps just hikers on a razzle. Clearly they had a purpose, for if you wanted a pleasant hike you'd walk somewhere else, such as along the top of the hill. The only non-political reason for walking alongside the wall would be lizard- or ant-spotting, since the area adjacent to the wall serves mainly as an unintended nature reserve. This world, and this Holy Land, runs mostly according to the law of unintended consequences, if only we could acknowledge it.

Just a few weeks ago, the land just over the wall from the school was officially designated by the government for settlement-expansion – houses will be built in the next couple of years. Our land on this side of the wall is, I suspect, next on the list. This is one of the reasons the wall has not been completed over the valley, in order not to fix the border. Some years ago the Israeli government stated that the wall would not constitute a border, yet it does establish facts on the ground, no matter what the international community might say about its legality. But then the Israelis aren't exempt from the law of unintended consequences either.

Anyway, I didn't have time to pursue the matter further, and perhaps it was harmless. Ismael was coming to pick me up at 9.30. I was on my way to the village of Al Aqaba in the northern West Bank, and it would be a three hour journey. But first I had to go into Bethlehem to confront a classic problem. More unintended consequences!

I had asked for an embroidered coat to be made for me and the price had sky-rocketed. I had anticipated this and set a price above which I was not prepared to go. The shopkeeper had arranged it with two ladies

living in a village close to his own, south of Bethlehem. He had rung me to ask for a second down-payment to help the ladies pay their bills. Okay, fair enough. Then he added in passing that the price had nearly doubled. He insisted that very special work was being done, and the ladies were working very hard. Well, okay, that might be true but I wasn't happy about this and told him so, in a firmly diplomatic way. I didn't want to stall the project, but I needed to speak my truth. He didn't get it. It was a delicate situation: one must never cause shame for a Palestinian. I needed to speak to him about it some more.

This highlights a classic Palestinian problem in interacting with the rest of the world. The idea of working to an arrangement and to a budget is alien to them. What they tend to believe is that, if they do a good job, the buyer is almost honour-bound to pay for it. What matters to Westerners is to make an arrangement and stick to it – or to renegotiate if there is to be a change. I had been clear with him but he hadn't understood. He didn't *want* to understand. Westerners are walking ATMs, and the deservingness of Palestinians matters most. Well, this kills future business, and Palestinians then wonder why Westerners give up and walk away.

I arrived in town and my friend the shopkeeper wasn't there – his brother was standing in for him. I presented my case carefully and he looked unsettled, defensive. I had to turn the tables round, to help him understand. "*Look*", I said, "*If you order a Volkswagen for a certain price and the man comes along with a Mercedes at double the price, telling you it's a better car and you'd better pay for it even though you don't want it, you won't be happy, will you?*". He got the point. I spoke on the phone to his brother the shopkeeper. He understood, but I have a feeling it's too late. This is going to be an expensive culture-clash. I'm hoping the coat will end up being worth it.

Off to the north. I walked through Bethlehem's Christian Quarter to the *serrveese* taxi station and took a service to Ramallah. Off we went along the dramatic main road to Ramallah, swirling, dipping and rising along through the Judaean hills and valleys for an hour. Ramallah

means ‘Hill of God’, though frankly this town is probably the most profane of all Palestinian towns, being the PA capital and the main sink-hole for foreign funding and influence.

Nevertheless, when I got out of the *serrveese* Friday prayers were in full swing, with a sermon going on in the nearby mosque, packed out. Hundreds of men were crowded around in the streets outside, listening to the sermon blasting out through the mosque’s loud speakers. It’s moving to see hundreds of men in the street praying together, and listening intently to the sermon. I’d have loved to photograph them, but there are some things it is disrespectful to photograph, so I didn’t.

Eventually I found a *serrveese* to Nablus, ready to go. I sat in the wrong seat. A service taxi has two front seats, one of them for the driver, then a middle and a back row of seats for three people each, and the guy in the middle row by the sliding door has to get out every time someone else wants to get in or out. The seat I was sitting on pulled up to let people out from the back row. Oh well, good exercise, and I performed this ritual at Suwaya, Huwara and two spots in Nablus.

The scenery north of Ramallah – called Samaria by Israelis – is lovely, and this time of year it is relatively green. The hills are high, the valleys deep, and the ancient hillside terracing speaks of centuries of occupation and farming. I can see why the Israelis want Samaria – not only do they see it as a Jewish heartland, but it is far more scenic and lovable than lowland ‘Israel proper’, which is relatively flat, urbanised and unexciting. But Samaria is the Palestinians’ home, and they still form the majority there.

The road winds and pitches tortuously along the valley-sides, and service-taxi drivers cannonade along in a freestyle and artistic manner – they’re good drivers though. The taxis are powerful six-gear VW vans. When they’re driving along mixed Israeli-Palestinian roads they scare the hell out of some Israeli drivers.

I had learned something from Aisha about these drivers a week ago: I had always wondered why most of these guys seemed to be around the

same age, in their early forties. Her answer was that most of them were students around the time of the first *intifada* twenty-plus years ago. Their universities were closed by the Israelis (as hotbeds of revolt) and many of them got jobs in the then new business of service-taxi driving. As time went on they stayed in the trade – it's a bit like being a boat skipper in a maritime nation, with some kudos attached. They get you to your destination fast too.

In an hour we arrived in Nablus. I was on my way to meet Morgan at Al Aqaba, where she works. She was the American who had visited me at the school just before Christmas. I rang her from Nablus to check out the details of getting from Tubas to Al Aqaba. "*I'm in Ramallah!*", she declared. "*Aha*." "*We're coming up soon!*" "*Oh yeah? Who's we?*" "*I've got some people who are couch-surfing at Al Aqaba tonight.*" "*Okay, so shall I wait for you in Nablus?*" "*Yeah, okay – see you soon!*".

So I took the opportunity to introduce myself to Nablus. I've never been here before, though the place has always tugged at me. It was founded as Neapolis in Roman times, located in a deep valley between two ancient holy mountains, Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. The town is long and thin, with a population of 130,000.

Today's city is less prosperous than Ramallah and Bethlehem, not least because it is frequently blockaded and roadblocked by Israel. Though religious Israelis claim it as their ancient Jewish birthright, there is no evidence of early Jewish settlement there – if anything it is historically more important to Christians, though few Christians now live there. Jews and Samaritans were quite numerous a thousand years ago.

However, religious Jews claim it as the site of the biblical city of Shechem, and two sites, Joseph's Tomb and Jacob's Well, crop up in the news when army-backed settlers enter in coaches, officially to make their prayers. There's a provocative aspect to it, including desecration of mosques. Perhaps this is retaliatory, since Nablus was a centre for militant actions in the second *intifada*, during which 522 residents were

killed and 3,000 injured. In the last municipal elections in 2005, 13 out of 15 representatives were from Hamas, and only two from Fatah.

Nablus is unpretentious – for some reason it reminds me of Swansea in Wales – and it receives few foreign visitors. Yet its valley location, with buildings clinging to the edge of the mountains, makes it special, a city to remember. It's rather pleasantly unmodernised. One rather nice aspect of it is that foreigners are treated as objects of friendly surprise rather than as walking ATMs.

There's a lovely Ottoman old town in the centre. I love Ottoman architecture. They were big developers, the Ottomans, whose 300 year rule ended during the First World War. What's so nice about Ottoman urban areas is that they're human-size, built for pedestrians. They have lovely arches, domes, courtyards, alleyways, buildings, nooks and crannies.

So I wandered around Nablus taking photos, having some food and enjoying the ambience of the place. Then I rolled along to the service taxi station for services heading north, bought some Arabic sweets (small, sticky cakes) to take to Al Aqaba, went to a coffee stall where I received a lecture from the man about how bad Britain is – though he accepted that this was one reason I was here sitting with him in Nablus – and finally I sat at the bus station watching doves and waiting for Morgan & Co to arrive from Ramallah.

When they came we didn't have to wait for the service taxi to fill up because we filled it up! Morgan had four people with her, and the driver's friend and I made a full complement. So off we went, screeching along the winding roads through the inspiring landscape, this time to Tubas. When we got there the driver asked where we were going and agreed to take us there for an extra five shekels each. Al Aqaba is in an inspiring hill landscape with a big gap to the east, where the land falls away into the Jordan valley, Earth's lowest place.

We met the mayor of the village, Hajj Sami, a staunch campaigner if ever there was one – he's in a wheelchair after having been shot in 1971

when he was young – and we had dinner with him. At least, the others did – it was chicken and rice. The usual looks of horror appeared on villagers' faces when Morgan said I was vegetarian. I ended up eating rice and salad. Well, I'm used to it.

I spent the evening with five lovely twentysomethings from Chile, Switzerland, USA, England and the Czech Republic, chattering, watching videos and playing cards.

We watched an instructive video about Jews' perception of anti-Semitism, called *Defamation*, by an Israeli called Yoav Shamir. To me, the most important statement in the video was an observation by a Jewish lady who definitely felt the world was against her and other Jews: she said that, since the Jews had suffered so much, the suffering of others was of less consequence.

Well, that's one way of looking at it. Unfortunately, contrary to this lady's belief, it justifies nothing in terms of the way Israelis now treat Palestinians.

*Two days later…*
Sunday 1st January 2012

## Joyriding

Arab Israeli *cheruts* aren't as good as West Bank *serrveeses*. They're a big bigger, with room for twelve, but they're not as well-loved, and they're often older and more decrepit and rattly. But I don't mind, because catching a *cherut* from Damascus Gate saves heaving across Jerusalem on the tram to reach the central bus station, to catch a bigger bus crowded with soldiers. At least I'm on my way. Been travelling a lot. Yesterday morning my journey started in Al Aqaba.

It is a really nice village in a lovely landscape. I took a wander around before the others woke up. It was misty and dampish – not very good for photography. I noticed the flocking birds in the area, and the

blossoms on some of the nut trees – it's different up here in the north. Yes, here, blossoms come in winter, which is wetter. In a way summer serves the same purpose that winter serves in lands such as Britain – a time in which nature rests and pulls back – except it's the dryness and heat that kills everything off, not the cold. The two-month winter, which this year seems quite mild, serves the same purpose here as the European spring, and then spring, rather like the European summer, is the growing season. Then many things die off for summer and the birds migrate, the cats stay indoors and the land rests under the glaring sun.

I waved to an old gent with glinty eyes who was going about his farming tasks, and sat on a rock watching a family in a shack going about their morning routines. I found out later that their house had been demolished by the Israeli army, and they were awaiting an opportunity to rebuild in a place where demolition, *inshallah*, would not happen.

I returned to the village centre and encountered Hajj Sami, the mayor, wheeling along in his electric wheelchair. He invited me into his office, where his assistant was busy doing admin. Tea was brought in by a midget of a man, and Hajj Sami asked for my help with an e-mail. Two of the wheels on his wheelchair needed replacement, and he needed me to look underneath for a serial number, which I duly did and wrote down. Bless him, Hajj Sami works dedicatedly for his village, and he's up against quite big odds, what with his disability, the Israeli army, foreign funders and the realities of life in Palestine.

By the time I left and returned to the guesthouse, the others were up. We went down the road with Hajj Sami to look around the village lands. A tractor passed. A flock of birds wheeled by, doing pre-mating rituals. A little boy about two years old was called by his mother in the shack, and then he came out bearing a freshly-baked flatbread, which he took to Hajj Sami.

A friend in Cornwall, to whom I had sent a photo of the child, wrote back to say "*Can you kidnap that child in the photo for me? Pleeeease!!*" – joking, of course. But if any child molesters should think of coming to Palestine, they need to consider one thing. If they come,

they land up dead. It's simple. Palestinians care that much about their kids.

The bread was duly broken up and passed around. Regarding the kid's parents in the shack, Hajj Sami told us how they were concentrating new building close to the mosque, where demolition was less likely, *inshallah*, and about his long negotiations with the army to stop them using the village for military practicing. We spoke of solar powered street lights and the greenness of the hills at this time, then wandered up the road, only to be intercepted by the old gentleman bearing a tray of mint tea in small Arabic tea glasses. We duly stood around in the middle of the road drinking tea, and his old wife, with leathery skin and equally glinty eyes, came out to join us.

We went to see the village clothes factory, a large room in the communal building where villagers run a clothing cooperative to earn an income for themselves and the village – another fruit of Hajj Sami's labours. Then we saw the council circle where meetings are held, and where Hajj Sami takes visitors for discussions. Then, after tidying up the guesthouse, it was time to leave. Three of us were going to Nablus, two to Ramallah and I to Bethlehem. It turned out that a *serrveese* was coming to pick up the administrative assistant, so we all piled in, out of the village to the neighbouring village of Tayasir, then on to Tubas.

Here we transferred to another *serrveese* to Nablus. When we arrived there, three of our friends split off and Morgan, Marjorie from Switzerland and I walked down through the streets to the other service-taxi station in town, dropping into a sweets cafe on the way – Nablus is well known for its *kanafe*, a cheesy sweet cake. When we reached the taxi station, funny stuff started. There was no *serrveese* for Ramallah – most strange.

At *serrveese* stations there are no timetables, bays or signs. You just stand there in roughly the right area and then wait for someone to come along recruiting passengers for his *serrveese*. Eventually a guy came promising a *serrveese* to Bethlehem, offering to swing by Ramallah on the way. This turned out to be inaccurate.

Actually, he went to Qalandia, a godawful place where the main checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem is located – worse, it's a major intersection where traffic jams are common, since the Ramallah to Bethlehem main road passes the checkpoint without going through it. It is a ripped-up, unsightly area, overshadowed by Israeli watchtowers and littered with rubbish and traffic jams. The driver flagged down another *serrveese* to take Morgan and Morjorie into Ramallah, muttering something to me in Arabic that I didn't understand and driving me to another intersection a few miles down the road, suddenly to stop there and let me out of the van. He tried flagging down *serrveeses* heading for Bethlehem but, no, they were all full.

It took a while, and it was getting dark. Cars were speeding around everywhichway. He eventually found me a car to travel with, saying it would cost nothing, but actually it cost me 50 shekels (£10) – usually the *serrvesse* charge from Ramallah to Bethlehem is 20 shekels (£4). I had the dubious fortune to travel with four young Palestinian soldiers, whose English was as bad as my Arabic. They showed me pictures of themselves on their mobile phones, bearing guns and looking tough. Riding with them was like a teenage joyride, with the music volume going up and down, mobile phones ringing – at one point all four of them were yelling down their phones. I was glad we were in the Middle East, because if they had been drunk they would have been obnoxious and dangerous, but the only things people get out of their heads on here are coffee, religion and a kind of bipolar energised excitability.

Half way through our journey, when we approached an Israeli checkpoint, I could see them shrinking into their seats – Palestinian soldiers are not allowed to fight with Israeli soldiers. I think they were hoping that, if there was trouble, a mature international (such as I) might be able to save them. But the Israeli soldiers were in a bored, slightly jocular mood, and there was no difficulty.

The trip was entertaining. I landed up showing them the way to Bethlehem. On mixed Israeli-Palestinian roads, of which there are a lot in the West Bank, the road signs almost all point to Jewish places, so

there were no signs to Bethlehem until we reached Al Azariya, where the road becomes Palestinian-only. I couldn't figure out how these guys could be Palestinians in such a small country, and soldiers too, without knowing their way to Bethlehem. But it was true. They were fascinated to have an Englishman show them the way – for all these guys knew, I could have been a remnant of the Mandate period before 1948, the old days that their grandfathers talk about.

We eventually reached Bethlehem and I bundled out of the car into sheer pandemonium. Bethlehem was filling up with people for New Year. Suddenly my phone rang. It was Maram. Ibrahim was experiencing his heart complaint again and had to rest, so please would I not come for the New Year celebration they had invited me to? Ah, that was what I had come back to Bethlehem for. Otherwise I would have stayed an extra night at Al Aqaba or I would have headed straight for Tel Aviv, my next destination.

Oh well. What next? Get something to eat. I wandered over to Manger Square and tumbled into a falafel restaurant, rather weary. I had falafel and hummus with freshly-squeezed orange juice to drink, followed by Arabic mint tea. The boy helping the man chop onions over on another table was suffering with smarting eyes. I went over and showed him not to bend over the onions but to sit down and slice them from the side. He was chuffed finding out about this solution, and slightly proud at the attention he was suddenly receiving from this rather avuncular Englishman, and we chattered together in English. His elders suddenly discovered that he had the best English in the family. The grandfather looked on with amusement.

Then I went to visit Adnan and his family, who were all sitting around moaning about the lack of business from tourists. But who wants to buy souvenirs on New Year's Eve? Being New Year's Eve – resolutions and all that – I told Adnan that he really ought to get out of the tourist business – he was complaining about how he had made a loss guiding a group of Chinese around Bethlehem, and how they hadn't wanted to visit many of the places he wanted to take them. They just wanted to

visit the Nativity Church and someone else's souvenir shop. I told him many foreigners don't have much money any more, and neither do they have much room in their luggage, nor enthusiasm for explaining to officers at Ben Gurion airport why they are carrying Arabic souvenirs. He listened but I could see he was reluctant to hear it. He kept wanting to believe that the tourist trade would suddenly, magically, change for the better and he would at last hit the jackpot. No, my friend, *forget it*.

Eventually I went home. Bethlehem was packed with revellers and I didn't feel like being a part of it. I found a taxi-driver who knew me and he took me home, dodging the traffic jams. Guess what, I spent New Year working, catching up on some website tasks. I noticed midnight by the banging of fireworks and celebrated with a lump of Egyptian dark chocolate. None of my British friends or family were on Skype, so I wound down and went to bed. Tomorrow is another day, and I'm off to Tel Aviv, for a change of scene and a couple of days in the West.

*Five days later…*
Friday 6th January 2012

## If indeed It is the Will of God

Night falls over Al Khader and, apart from the howling of a distant dog, all is quiet. The calling to prayers sounded out as the sun was setting, coming from at least five different mosques and clashing rather badly, but you get used to that, and I hope Allah has done so too. I don't know what proportion of Palestinians actually go to the mosque for prayer, but I'd guess it to be 20% or less. Yet it's a salutary thing, this matter of prayer five times each day – it represents a pause in life, an alignment to something higher and greater than ourselves. Busy secular Westerners might do well to incorporate something like this into our own lives. It changes the subject and reminds us of a dimension beyond our own little bubbles of existence.

I find myself observing the prayer times too. I use the moment to pause, clear my psyche and reorientate to the next chapter of the day. The timings of the calling to prayers break up the day into practical segments – times for work, for family and community and for rest. This is important here because Palestinian lifestyles are pretty frenetic. It also adds some order to an otherwise rather disorderly life.

This disorder has two main components. The first is the earth energy and situation of this Holy Land – it's an energetic land, lying at a fulcrum-point of the Old World, between Asia, Africa and Europe, and a crossing-point, a meeting-point for people over many millennia. When, as we are told by anthropologists, humankind moved out of Africa, they came this way.

The second component is the fact that Palestine is an occupied country. The effects of this are not as marked as they were 7-10 years earlier during the second *intifada*, but they are still here. The effects of occupation take two main forms, external and internal.

The external effects involve roadblocks and checkpoints, troop incursions, administrative controls and other forms of mayhem imposed by the Israelis. These have by degrees lightened up, thanks mainly to international pressures, but they still have their impact. Most official impositions are by now reasonably predictable – when you go through many checkpoints, the soldiers are bored, performing cursory searches and checks, and there is no longer much delay. If you want to build a house outside Areas A and B, the chances of getting permission are random and few. If you are the President of the Palestine Authority, you don't even know whether the due tax receipts, collected by the Israelis, will be delivered, so that you can pay people's wages.

But there are unofficial impositions too, and one form of these is increasing – settler incursions and attacks. We had one in our area last week – I was away at the time, up in Al Aqaba. But I did notice an unusual group of hikers that morning before leaving, as reported in an earlier blog – perhaps they were connected to this. Some 200 armed settlers, apparently from Efrat, got into the area just down the hill from

the school toward Al Khader, around Solomon's Pools. They were claiming that Solomon's Pools – a major local water-source already tapped by the Israelis – should be under Jewish control. They claim that the name refers to King Solomon. It doesn't. It refers to the Ottoman Turkish invader of this area in the 1500s, called Suleiman (Solomon) the Magnificent, a monarch living at the time of Elizabeth I in England. An engineer, he brought about many great works as a way of consolidating Ottoman rule, and he rebuilt the pools just down the hill in Al Khader. The water-source was first built during Roman times, but not in Solomon's time.

The settler invasion last week was not very important – most locals just shrug their shoulders and look heavenwards. However, back in 2007 some settlers invaded and burned down a 700-year old mosque in Al Khader – a serious intentional damage to local society. But the recent incursion is ominous inasmuch as it announces future trouble – and the more extremist of the settlers in the West Bank are building themselves up to create more trouble, not only for Palestinians but also for Israel.

They are increasingly defying the state of Israel. This defiance has been permitted thus far because the initiatives of settlers are a useful way in which right-wing Israeli interests have been able to promote their agenda of extending Israel into the West Bank, through exploiting the proxy activities of settlers. But settlers are now beginning to fight Israel and its soldiers, to impose their ways on Israelis and to cause trouble which, bizarrely, is becoming more of a threat to Israel and its longterm interests than it is a threat to Palestine.

The settlers left after making their point, but we expect them to return. If they return and the Palestinians in Al Khader – normally a peaceful place – start resisting them, the Israeli army will come in and start firing at Palestinians. That's what has usually happened to date, but something funny is happening.

As I mentioned earlier, the Israel Defence Force is being reduced to the dubious role of being a defender of Palestinians against Israeli settler incursions. This means that, although Israeli soldiers are unlikely to fire

on settlers, they certainly want to stop the settlers from carrying out incendiary actions against Palestinians, because it is upsetting the apple-cart.

Israel has realised that it is scuppering its own chances by generating bad PR internationally. It did this in 2006 with its war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, against Hamas in Gaza in 2009-10 and in its over-response to the Freedom Flotilla in 2010, driving ordinary people worldwide against them and causing diplomatic pressure. Now this: Israeli extremists carrying out 'price tag' attacks on Palestinians, establishing new settler outposts where they shouldn't be, and even fighting the Israeli army. The settlers give Israel a bad name – especially since Palestinians are doing little to upset anyone. International diplomats and jurists are thereby realising that it is Israelis, not Palestinians, who are the main obstacle to peace.

What's worse is this. There are many centrifugal forces in Israel – it is not a united country and, being a young country, its population's basic consensus is weak. So it has to build a consensus by artificial means. Israelis come from many different countries and backgrounds – the main sources being America, Russia and various European countries, together with Middle Eastern and Maghrebi Jews, as well as the small population of Jews who have always lived in Palestine over many centuries.

Israelis have a wide range of beliefs: there are various kinds of orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews, together with liberal-religious Jews and secular Jews, and all shades in between – including quite a few 'alternative types' too. Israelis emphasise their differences and disagreements more than they emphasise their commonalities ('two Israelis, three opinions'). This happens in a small, walled-in country with just seven million Jewish inhabitants.

What unites Israelis is their visceral fear of the enemy – Arabs (and Iranians). To reinforce this, the idea of anti-Semitism is pumped to death, reinforcing the feeling that the whole world is fundamentally set against Jews. But there's a problem, since Arabs, and Palestinians

amongst them, no longer want to play enemies. Conflict gets tedious. This changed in the second *intifada*. Even Israel's greatest enemies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, don't actually want to invade Israel – all they want to achieve, whatever they say in their tub-thumping rhetoric at heated moments, is the good behaviour of Israel and a fair deal for Israelis' Arabic neighbours. Though many Israelis believe Arabs want to push them into the sea, even Hamas is willing to accept Israel's existence as long as it ends the occupation, withdraws behind the Green Line and vacates East Jerusalem.

So Israel has, in a way, lost its enemy – except in its own head. It keeps the enemy there by mistreating it, to arouse anger, hurt and resentment. Losing the enemy is problematic because fear of the enemy is what unites most Israelis. It means that the centrifugal (pulling-apart) forces in Israeli society can outweigh the binding or centripetal forces. These centrifugal forces are weakening Israel. The extremist-nationalist settlers constitute the greatest threat to Israel today. It's ominous. The president, Shimon Peres, recently called it a 'battle for the soul of the nation'. An Israeli friend recently downplayed this, saying it was just the kind of thing Peres *would* say. But I wouldn't be so sure – one of Israelis' biggest dangers is hubris.

Earlier I mentioned that Palestinians suffer an internal effect of the occupation. 'Palestine Syndrome' is a collective psychological condition which some Palestinians suffer more than others. I've had a case of it recently, myself. It arises from living in perpetually-disrupted living conditions. The Israelis use disruption and unpredictability as a tactic, militarily, administratively and politically - psychologically. This strategy was at its peak ten years ago but it's still around. It reverberates around Palestinian society, and everyone is at it, co-disrupting each other. But the source of the problem is largely Israel.

It's a deliberate strategy to make planning, regularisation and normality difficult for Palestinians to achieve. Some years ago, when I first came here, if you set out on a journey from Bethlehem to Hebron or Ramallah, you'd never know *if* or *when* you would get there, as a result

of flying checkpoints, closed or queue-infested checkpoints and other restrictions. It still hovers around because Palestinians just do not know what will happen next – they've pretty much given up on both war and on peace processes, and on the support of the international community. What next? Will Israel go mad, or will it suddenly get a yen for peace, or will something else happen?

Palestinians don't know whether, if they start a project or make a plan, it can be completed, or whether some official, some judge or settler will come along and scupper it. Even for those who have lived in the same place for 300 years, it's impossible to know whether trouble is going to come their way, causing their house to be demolished. This unpredictability has fallen on Al Khader, where I live, a peaceful town where people just get on with their lives. Settler incursions have started, and no one knows where this will lead next, or how far it will go.

Palestinians have a 'firefighting mentality'. That is, instead of making plans, they deal with whatever is in front of them *today*, or whatever shouts loudest to be done *right now*. If you want to succeed in anything, you must out-disrupt all competing disruptions and respond instantaneously to whatever is called for in that moment. This has its magic – it's an honouring of the law of unintended consequences – but it leads to an unfocused psyche, a tendency to run around like a headless chicken, a propensity to give up, or to act in quick-fire, impulsive ways before something comes along to get in the way and stop you. This is why Europeans like me are valuable to many Palestinians: we help them think through what they seek to achieve, how best to do so, and how to evaluate the results afterwards. Well, sometimes. The rest of the time I'm never really sure what's happening or what benefit I bring – but I love it anyway.

Even though many of the objective pressures on Palestinians have died down, this mentality still prevails because no one knows what will happen next. I make an arrangement with Ibrahim and he doesn't turn up because something else happened. I call for a taxi and the man forgets. I try to get to a place on time and all sorts of diversions and

disruptions happen. So, inside, part of me gives up trying to work according to plan, and I resort to doing whatever I can do in that moment to progress things… *anything*. This leads to a long list of unfinished, pending issues, dropped threads, forgotten agendas and goals unachieved.

I've even forgotten what I was intending to write about today! But magic happens anyway. There's something to learn from this. Back in Britain, where Brits believe they have things under control and where things are supposed to go according to plan, they don't actually. But Brits and other Westerners still live under the lie that life is orderly and organised, going according to plan. At least Palestinians, faced with chaos, are honest about it. Meanwhile, Brits and Westerners – Israelis too – still labour under the methodology of planning-execution-result and, here we are in 2012, where the forces of change and chaos are accelerating, still harbouring this belief. *Yes, everything will return to normal. Yes, this is just a recession and things will pick up again. Problems? – well, hopefully they'll go away.*

In a sense Palestinians are thus better kitted out to face the future than Westerners are – they're well used to improvising, making do, accepting what they've got and living in the moment. They're also pretty good at staying happy under difficult circumstances – it's vital, as a Palestinian, never to lose heart or give up. But it isn't easy. Nevertheless, *inshallah*, it's the way of things here, and this is one of the things that a foreigner like me has to learn if I'm to succeed here in my mission. For the *de facto* benefits that people like me actually bring are not the same as the benefits we thought we were bringing.

Now, what was I going to do before I started writing this blog entry? Ah yes, I was going to have dinner. That's why I seem to be feeling hungry. Better get on with it before something else happens.

*Three days later…*
Monday 9th January 2012

## On Wings and Prayers

As the sun went down, a wonderful atmosphere settled upon Bethlehem. The town was in a genial mood – people chatting and hanging out in the streets. At Cinema, a busy intersection with taxis and taxi-vans, I saw a six year old girl standing on some steps simply singing out loud to the street. This was not only touching but also rather refreshing because, for some reason, Palestinians tend not to sing.

Aisha, an English friend who teaches English at the Hope Flowers Centre and stays at my place one night a week, uses the large, empty, echoey conference room in the school for practising opera – she's an accomplished singer but, living in Ramallah and surrounded with people who would find opera rather strange, doing her scales and practicing her arias doesn't quite work easily. So she loves practising at the school, where she won't be heard – and the conference room echoes quite nicely too.

Nevertheless, a neighbour discretely enquired of me what was happening. I explained and he smiled. He'd seen opera on TV, and was interested when I said that operas were like plays sung out loud, with stories to them. I asked him why Palestinians tend not to sing, and he said back, "*Since the Nakba we haven't had much to sing about*". Well, true, but I know that's not the real answer, which I am yet to find out.

The *Nakba*, by the way, was 'The Disaster', the 1948 war during which the Israelis staked out their nation militarily, by ethnically cleansing and killing the Arabic inhabitants of hundreds of villages and towns in what became Israel. In the space of a few months, the population of Bethlehem quadrupled with refugees and they have never gone home – there's no home to go back to. As a symbolic act, refugee families keep the keys to their old, lost houses, like a family totem, proof of having torn-up roots in their own land.

This afternoon was one of those times when people set their cares aside and enjoy the moment. That's one thing I like in Palestine: people do their best to keep their spirits up and enjoy life. There is no alternative. Or at least, the alternative, dwelling on your problems, is far worse.

As Ghada Issa once put it, at a time when she was feeling pessimistic a few years ago, "*In Palestine we don't have up days and down days, we have down days and worse days*". She was at that moment manifesting symptoms of the strange collective bipolarity Palestinians live by, thanks to their circumstances: generally they keep their mood positive in spite of everything, but when they lose their strength and fortitude, they plummet into deep despond. That was where she was when she said this.

Palestinians wear their emotions inside out: love and sadness, friendship and disgust, humour and anger, they share them openly, men perhaps more than women. Their feelings spill out liberally. Mercifully it's their positive emotions they show most. I have never seen a sign of violence except on a couple of occasions when Israeli soldiers are around, acting pro-vocatively, but even then Palestinians suppress it because they usually don't feel like getting shot, beaten up, arrested or hounded. They got tired of that ten years ago, and it doesn't achieve much.

But on a lovely, tranquil afternoon like today, there was still a problem. On the way home, passing through Deheisheh and Duha, there was smoke everywhere. People were setting fire to the skips in which they put their rubbish. They do this because civic rubbish disposal is patchy at the best of times, and the skips were full. It's not only smoky but dangerous, since so much of their rubbish contains plastics and other toxic materials, and the slow smoulder of the rubbish means that it doesn't even burn properly. They have a blind spot around this issue. When Westerners like me raise the matter, they shrug it off as if it is no problem. But it *is* a problem and a big one.

Before you disapprove of these apparently backward people, let me remind you that we in the West started seriously addressing issues such as this only 20-30 years ago, when it was already too late for us. Before

that, we trusted in modernity and slavishly paid the price in smog, toxicity, fumes and ugliness. Even today, when I speak to Westerners of the dangers of mobile phones, microwave ovens, wireless internet and electro-smog, people smirk or frown, as if to say "*Oh no, he's one of **them***", since this is a current blind spot. One day an enormous scandal will erupt about it and people will yell "*Why weren't we told? Who is responsible for all this?*". We *are* responsible. We *know*. But we don't want to face it.

So blind-spots – areas of life that people deliberately ignore, ultimately to our own cost – are not unique to Arabs. In fact, Arabs look on Westerners as backward because we turn our backs on God – Europeans by becoming increasingly secular and Americans by turning God into a heavily-armed, consumptive patriot with conservative politics.

Every race and nationality covers its insecurities by looking on others as inherently deficient. The less contact they have with other kinds of people, the stronger the negative projection on outsiders – this is one reason for the separation wall, so that each side can project its fantasies about the other onto a concrete screen untainted by reality. This is why Iran is currently a bogeyman – no one goes there to meet the people, so it's easy to dehumanise them.

This said, Palestinians must still address the issue of rubbish – creating less of it and disposing of it properly. Battery recycling, vegetable waste composting and plastics disposal? Forget it, it doesn't exist here. But probably it will exist in 10-20 years' time – Palestine is at a similar stage to the West in the early 1970s. Yet regarding social values, sharing and human warmth, Palestinians are advanced, at a stage that I hope the West will reach in a few decades' time.

I went into town to do my shopping. I've been sitting slogging away at the computer for the last week, so I don't have many events to report. The trouble with computers is that people hardly see the results of your work because it's digitally concealed, distinctly not in your face. Much of the work is for people far and wide, so that people around you see little significance in what you're doing – you're just sitting at a

computer, twiddling fingers and looking serious. I've been building a website, dealing with issues for Hope Flowers, doing bits of work and answering questions online – many questions, from many people.

When shopping I went to an old lady I visit regularly. She has a small stall on the streetside in the Old Town. By *stall*, I mean a stool and a few boxes and bags. She sells herbs and figs. She's a lovely old lady, clad in her embroidered traditional dress. She walks into town daily with her husband, who leads their donkey, which carries the herbs – then he returns home to work on the land, and he comes back to pick her up later.

Palestinians are big on herbs – they have mint or thyme in their tea and they eat parsley, sage, coriander, spinach and chillies copiously. I buy my herbs from her – big bunches of them, far too big to use on my own, for 1-2 shekels per bunch (20-40p in British money). She likes her pet Englishman. She eyes me closely when she thinks I'm not looking. I think she knows intuitively that I'm roughly the same age as she is, except she's an old woman and I look younger – apart from a rather wrinkly face which has clearly seen some things. She hasn't figured me out yet. Life wears out Palestinians.

Then I went down to the market to get vegetables. Two stallholders were trying to steal me off the stallholder I usually go to, but he has the best vegetables. One thing many Palestinians don't quite understand is this. They tend to think one is obliged to shop with them out of a duty to support them – after all, fair's fair, isn't it? Well no, I'm a Westerner, and I go for the best stuff and the best deal. Sorry about that. Also, annoyingly, I buy things only when I need them.

The souvenir shopkeepers down in town think similarly. I'm a Westerner, therefore I have money, therefore I ought to buy from them. Not so. I buy presents only because there are people I know and love to whom I wish to give things, and I buy specifically for them. There's also the question of how to get it back to England, so I cannot buy much. I'm not a buying machine – well, at least, not in my own head.

Dear reader, this might seem elementary, but it's not so for Palestinians. This is a walled-off cooperation and mutual-support economy, an economy where everyone depends on everyone else for keeping each other alive, so the emphasis here is on supporting your fellow citizens by trading with them, to some extent whether or not you need what they're selling.

Nevertheless, when one of the traders, a young chap of seventeen who helps his elder brother run a shop, moaned to me today about having no money to buy schoolbooks, I took pity on him. He had said there had been no business today, and he needed 50 Jordanian Dinars (250 shekels or £50) for the books tomorrow. He was worried and depressed. So I wandered off to do other chores, including raiding a bank machine, and slipped him 50 JDs on the way back. He lit up and hugged me, shedding a tear. Now he could get his books.

I told him that this is a life-lesson we all need to learn: *solutions often come when you've given up*. When you give up, it means you're opening up to Allah, handing over your problems since you couldn't solve them yourself. This money is a gift from Allah, through a random Englishman. So give thanks to Allah.

"*You are a good man, Mr Balden. I pray that Allah, he will pick you up when you have a need.*" Well thanks, I might need your prayer to come true one day. This young Palestinian, poor yet intelligent, has better English than some of the 17-year old Brits I know. Good luck to you, mate – I sincerely hope you get a future.

*Next day…*
Tuesday 10th January 2012

## Alternative Information

I've just been sitting with a Czech, a Dane, an Austrian, two Italians, a German, a Basque, two Palestinians and a Hutu refugee from Rwanda living in Denmark. Yes, even in walled-off, quarantined countries like

Palestine it can get quite cosmopolitan. In particular this happens at the Alternative Information Centre down in Beit Sahour, where many of the internationals in Bethlehem gather on Tuesday and Saturday nights. Most of them are in their twenties and thirties, doing internships, volunteer work or non-violent activism. To them I proved to be an interesting oldster – my formative years in the Sixties, in Liverpool and the LSE, are ancient history to them, just a bit more recent than the Roman empire.

The Rwandan was fascinating. There wasn't opportunity to prise the full story out of her, but her family had been accused of involvement in genocide and, her life being in danger, she found refuge in Denmark. Now she's in Palestine volunteering as an X-Ray technician at Beit Jala hospital. A roundly bumptious Hutu, she had a lot of character, zest and courage.

At the end of the evening I asked her how she would get back to Beit Jala – 4km, and a climb of 1,500ft from Beit Sahour – and she said she would walk. "*But you said you start work at seven in the morning…*". I hoiked her out and insisted on her sharing a taxi with me. We got a lift from one of the Palestinians up into Bethlehem – a 500ft climb – and flagged down a taxi there. Not easy at eleven at night – life shuts down quite early in winter in Bethlehem.

The taxi driver, learning I was British, asked whether Cornwall was near Newcastle on Tyne, where his son lives. Er, not exactly – about 10-12 hours' drive. His eyebrows rose. Now, I'm not used to thinking that I come from a big country – Britain is diminutive by most standards – but by Palestinian standards, a ten-hour drive is pure fantasy, since one could drive up the long axis of the West Bank from end to end in three hours. This is a journey few Palestinians would bother to make – most movement is between neighbouring towns, the longest stretch being from Bethlehem to Ramallah.

We dropped the Rwandan at her home in Beit Jala and wove down to Al Khader. There were a lot of Palestinian soldiers at the Palestinian checkpoint tonight – we have to pass through it to get to the school,

since the school is in Area C (a Palestinian area under Israeli control) and the checkpoint is at the boundary of Area A (under Palestinian control). Though, to be honest, the checkpoint exists mainly to intercept people smuggling goods between Israel and Palestine. But they might also have been there to keep a look-out for further settler incursions.

The taxi-driver gave me his card, asking me to ring him and give him my British phone number so he could visit me in Cornwall when he visits his son in Britain in five months' time. Well, Cornwall, to a Palestinian, would be a wonderful place to visit. He has a daughter in Sweden too, so we had another connection there (I lived in Sweden in the 1970s).

Having sat slaving at my computer all week, I was glad to get out and about. At the AIC the weekly lecture was about black Palestinians. Yes, there are some. The speaker came from Jerusalem, where the small black community goes back to the 1700s, started by African Muslims from the Sahel. They made the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca (a major journey in those times), then proceeding to Jerusalem and getting sucked in there, marrying into Jerusalem society. This was possible in the days of the Ottoman empire, since travel around the Muslim world was open and free. More Africans came in the 1930s at the time of the British Mandate, since colonial passports gave them freedom to travel, some coming here to serve the British as policemen and guards and, again, getting stuck here. In those times Jerusalem wasn't as vexed and tense as it is today.

The Jerusalem black community isn't big but they stick together. Most have African fathers and Palestinian mothers and they were born here in Palestine, slotting into the multicultural landscape of Jerusalem – Tajiks, Armenians, Syrians, Turks, Persians and sundry Europeans have grown into the local landscape too and, a century ago, Jews were one of those minorities. Now they are the dominant race, and the speaker talked of how the Africans have shared the tragedies of the last sixty years with Palestinians and thus feel involved with them – besides, they have nowhere else to go.

He spoke of identity issues. Palestinians aren't exactly racist with blacks, since they're such a mixed bunch themselves and their Muslim values discourage discrimination, at least toward fellow Muslims. But some can be parochial – people from Nablus and Hebron look on each other as distant strangers. So while Palestinians are not unfriendly, black Palestinians can nevertheless gain the feeling they're *different*. I heard this at another lecture at AIC six months ago, this time from a young black woman from Jenin, where she reported that the poorer Palestinian refugees there, notably conservative in their values, distinctly disallowed intermarriage between Africans and Arabs – this gave her a problem finding boyfriends. But in Jerusalem, with a history of being visited by foreigners for 3,000 years, it's not like that.

There's another identity issue too – and in this respect the life of an Israeli Arab is more difficult than that of a West Bank Palestinian. When the Israelis took over West Jerusalem in 1948 and East Jerusalem in 1967, they offered two alternatives to Palestinians, to take on Israeli nationality (anathema to most) or to retain their Jordanian nationality, receiving residence papers but no passport. Most Palestinians hoped the nightmare of Israeli occupation would end and the Jordanians would return, so they stayed Jordanian, but the Israelis had other ideas. In recent years this has turned nasty, since indigenous Jerusalemites now have few rights. They are regarded by many Israelis as foreigners, even 'infiltrators', even though they've been there far longer than the Israelis. Many Israeli settlers in Jerusalem are themselves quite recent immigrants, particularly from USA.

Technically Jordanian, arising from the Jordanian occupation of the West Bank from 1948 to 1967, most black Palestinians haven't been to Jordan and don't want to live there, and Jordan doesn't want them – Jerusalem is their home. But they are pressured and squeezed – including by settlers moving into the Old City and East Jerusalem, carrying out an incremental takeover. The Old City is being staked out with security cameras – to protect the settlers of course.

So this small community, having had some status as police and guards for the British, now have near-zero status as anything. As a community they have decided to identify with the Palestinians, with whom they have shared the horrors of the last sixty years, and they consider themselves Palestinian. They're in for the long haul.

The stories one hears from Jerusalem are not good. Arab areas, ruled and dominated by the Israelis, do not receive the same civic services as Jewish areas. Palestinians are being pressured from all sides by Israelis, who pursue a deliberate policy of isolating Palestinian communities to decimate their political power and outnumber them with Jews.

As the speaker said, the occupation takes two forms, physical and psychological. The humiliation, belittlement and disempowerment of Palestinians in Jerusalem is an occupation of the psyche, an *apartheid* psychology, and he told of his own struggle as he grew up to break free within his own mind of the inferiority complex and perpetual uncertainty of being a Palestinian growing up in this environment.

In a sense West Bank Palestinians, separated from their Jerusalem kin by two security walls and an apartheid pass system which makes short distances seem like a thousand miles, are more secure in their identity. Jerusalemites are not even permitted to call themselves Palestinians – they are 'Arab Israelis', and those without Israeli passports are technically stateless. When they travel they receive a travel document accepted by many countries, but it still denies them the right to full status as the national of a country, and if they encounter difficulty abroad they can't go to the Israeli embassy for help.

West Bankers and Gazans *know* they are Palestinians. They have diminished status as residents of an occupied non-country, yet they know who they are and, while Gaza and the West Bank suffer their own pressures, at least they can call their hometown their own – well, sort of, though even that is not clear or secure.

The speaker said that, while he breathes a sigh of relief when he enters the West Bank, he didn't want to move here because he's a Jerusalemite

– that's his identity. It is after all a special city. The Israelis have succeeded in atomising the Palestinians, boxing them into small areas not only geographically but also psychologically. Nowadays, a West Banker from Abu Dis, once an outskirt of Jerusalem, rarely meets people from East Jerusalem, even though the distance involved is just 3km. Most Bethlehemites cannot visit Jerusalem either, 10km away.

I have become something of a Bethlehemite, psychologically. I have freedom of movement as a foreigner – more even than most Israelis – but going the short 60ish kilometres to Tel Aviv is, psychologically, almost the same distance as the 2,500km back to Cornwall. So I have imbibed some of the psychology of *apartheid* myself – the mental barriers which, in Jerusalem, mean that a Jew and a Muslim can pass each other in the street without acknowledging, let alone noticing, each other. But as a foreigner who can go home, I can maintain a certain perspective on this too.

Even when I visit Tel Aviv to hang out with Israeli dissenters who distinctly disagree with their country's actions, I find them looking hard at me, almost as if they're thinking, "*He's living in the West Bank – and he's still alive? He seems to be quite happy with it too*". They question me about what's happening over there, and what it's like. While they sympathise with Palestinians and carry out actions to support them, they rarely meet them. They get a Brit instead, doing some alternative ambassadorial work.

Yes, I am happy being in Palestine, as you might have gathered. The idea of living in Israel just doesn't occur to me. But I cannot stay, and if I overstep the mark, I'll be chucked out, never to return. Which would break my heart. So, bizarrely, to be able to return I mustn't stay long, and I must prioritise staying beneath the Israelis' radar by looking innocuous, an innocent, stereotypically eccentric, semi-retired English gentleman traveller writing books – that's my ruse.

Even this simple matter is risky to write about. I regret to tell you that there are things I don't say in this blog. My need to be able to return here outweighs your need to know certain details. No one pays me, so

it's my choice. I can drop a hint though that what I don't write about concerns settlers, computers, detective work and other quiet activities, and that's all you're going to get.

Time for bed. In my book *Pictures of Palestine* I mention at various points about late nights sitting up blogging – and the groggy mornings that follow. I'm at it again. It's one in the morning and my eyelids are drooping. Goodnight!

*Five days later…*
Sunday 15 January 2012

## The Green Intifada and the Witches of Beit Sahour

The weather has been dreadful the last few days – windy, rainy and cold. As my Anglo-Palestinian friend Aisha says, it has been *Scottish* weather, not even English. But today the sun appeared and the air is calm and benign, and it's like emerging from a long tunnel. Friday was one of those days when you had to run for it because you'd be utterly soaked, top to tail, if you didn't. That day, I went up to Beit Jala with Ibrahim for a follow-up meeting of the Centre for Emerging Futures, and it was bucketing down. Torrents raged down the streets and people stayed indoors shivering – not that their heating is much good. Ismael said he stayed in bed with his wife all day. Well, it keeps people warm. However, days like that can make the birth rate rise in nine months' time.

The CEF organises get-togethers for people on both sides of the wall, first to meet and build relationships, and secondly to start joint projects – some of which are one-off or small in scope, and some of which develop into something quite significant. But there is a problem, a big, delicate problem. It concerns *normalisation* – giving people on both sides a normal life. In the 1990s, when it looked as if peace might be coming, normalisation projects grew and, after things broke down in the

*intifada* of 2000-04, they revived afterwards, but now we have entered a new, problematic phase. Let me explain.

In peacebuilding, it's necessary for people of goodwill on both sides to meet up, building interpersonal foundations on which future peace and social reconstruction can be built. This is critical in Palestine and Israel because, since about 2002, the Israelis have built the separation wall and reinforced the *apartheid* control system, to enormous and intricate proportions. This means that people don't actually meet. Even if they pass each other in the street, as between 'Arab Israelis' and Jews in Israel, they don't interact. Most Palestinians meet only soldiers on duty – mostly psyched-up, propagandised, fear-driven, over-armed youngsters in body-armour. The wall serves as a mirror in which people on both sides see a reflection of their projection of the people on the other side, which is so often based on their own state of being.

Establishing contacts across the great divide is often called 'normalisation'. This sounds like a good thing but, for Palestinians, it isn't so, because there is still a war going on in which they are perpetually the losers. It isn't open war (except at times in Gaza): it's a furtive war where people get killed and injured in ones and twos, land gets taken dunum by dunum, trees get uprooted and land defiled, and Palestinians are humiliated and driven over by the relentless bulldozer of Israeli progress.

Mostly it doesn't hit the headlines, internationally or in Israel – and that's why it's designed this way. Many Israelis are not aware of what's happening, even when it's just 10km away, and a proportion of them don't *want* to know. Most westerners don't want to know either – they live in peace-loving, democratic, civilised countries like Britain, France and America, haha. They have big arms industries, but we'll keep that bit quiet, okay?

In recent years Palestinians have given up fighting (not least since they usually lose and are punished horribly) and they've also given up on negotiation (they usually lose, or they're blamed for obstructing peace when, actually, most blocking comes from Israel). Documented,

videoed, photographed evidence statistically and factually backs this up, coming from international bodies like the UN or EU, or by NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or Christian Aid. To give one small example, there's a massive joint military exercise happening right now and in the coming months involving US and Israeli forces, and the low-flying jet activity today over Palestine is part of that – they're noisily flying over us as I write this.

This ongoing loss by Palestinians happens in friendly normalisation-oriented activities too. Israeli participants are generally materially comfortable and secure (though there is poverty in Israel too) – while Palestinians have genuine hardships and grievances applying to them, so there is an asymmetry of relationship where the Israelis grant permissions and concessions and do favours while the Palestinians are largely powerless to do much. Even amongst enlightened, friendly Israelis there is an unwitting tendency to welcome Palestinians to their way of seeing and doing things but not to stretch themselves or, they fear, endanger themselves, to cross the threshold to the other side's way of seeing and doing things. There are some notable exceptions, and the CEF arena is one of them.

So one of the offshoot projects of CEF, the Hackathon, was supposed to hold a conference this weekend at Beit Jala – a get-together of computer programmers from both sides to engage in joint programming and web projects. But it didn't happen. A proportion of Palestinians believe that such contacts aren't helpful and, as part of their current non-violent strategy of resistance, they are pitching *against* normalisation and projects like the Hackathon. From now on, for Palestinians to attend such meetings, they must obtain a permit from the PA in Ramallah. The hotel where the meeting was to be held was threatened with retaliation if it hosted the conference, so it pulled out and the Hackathon was postponed. But it wasn't killed.

In many cases, avoiding normalisation doesn't mean rejection of *all* contacts with Israelis. In the longterm, contacts *must* be made, not only to give Palestinians some eventual peace and security, but also to begin

integrating Israel into the Middle East – an inevitable process that must happen sometime. It doesn't mean rejection of the existence of Israel, but it does mean that Israel should make serious adjustments to accommodate to the facts of where it is located and what it has done to its neighbours. It must be held off to stop the incremental process of forcible colonisation and oppression it currently practices. In other words, it must at minimum withdraw behind the 1948 Green Line (the internationally-recognised border between Israel proper and the West Bank), come to an acceptable deal over Palestinian refugees and East Jerusalem, and stop the settlement-building project in the West Bank – these are basic positions that Palestinians now take regarding any peace deals they will agree to.

This anti-normalisation campaign, which is related to the boycott and disinvestment campaign you might have heard of, is affecting all grass-roots contacts between the two sides and also the organisations that promote them, including CEF and Hope Flowers School. It personally affects Ibrahim Issa, who has been accused of collaborating with the enemy, as a result of building wall-straddling joint projects. There are those who think their way through this issue carefully and discerningly, and there are others who are more extreme and emotive, and in the heat of the moment the latter can gain the upper hand.

So various projects of CEF are affected. At the meeting we discussed this, as the rain monsooned down outside and the owner of the Everest Hotel fluttered around fixing coffee. The general consensus was that we must act carefully but never give up, since the real war isn't between Israelis and Palestinians but between those who promote conflict, division and oppression and those who work for multicultural interchange, peaceful coexistence and humanity in relationships.

This became a gentle, firm and agreed consensus between all of us, respecting the principle of the anti-normalisation campaign but begging to differ over its application. We're quietly carrying on. The two project groups for whom this follow-up meeting had been planned – a group arranging two-day trips for people on each side to visit the other side,

and a group arranging family get-togethers for parents and children on both sides – would continue their work. These joint projects are as important for the Palestinian resistance as banning them is.

There is another interesting asymmetry that we discussed, concerning CEF. The core of the Israeli side in CEF is made up of former Israeli soldiers who have seen the light and decided to work another way – many of them in their forties. One of the CEF leaders was a senior IDF officer for twenty years – a likable guy who takes considerable risks for CEF. But the energy from the Palestinian side comes from younger people, many of them students. Even Ibrahim, a CEF leader on the Palestinian side, is only in his late thirties. These people are driven by the ethos of the Arab Spring, which overstretches the old political divisions of their parents and the past – it's the mobile-phone generation, who have a lot of willpower and clarity but less political ideology, influence or experience than many of the Israelis. This asymmetry is something we cannot really change, but it adds a challenge that must be overcome. The organisers of the above-mentioned trips said that they had to do more work than the Palestinians – this is to be expected, since the Israeli authorities issue the permits, and it is only Israelis who can fix them.

I returned from that meeting fired up. I sat alone at home working as the rain swilled down outside. It got inside too, in various places, with the wind howling ferociously, and there was even a four-hour electricity cut at one stage. I wrapped myself in my big blanket, sitting at my desk and warming my fingers on my hot water bottle, which sat on my lap. It was a hunkering-down day. Bethlehem was quiet. Even the over-flying jets stopped.

Then on Saturday I went to a talk at the Alternative Information Centre in Beit Sahour about the Green *Intifada*. This was given by a British woman, Alice, who helps run a permaculture farm down below Beit Sahour called Bustan Qaraaqa. Here is one arena where the British and European alternative movement plays a significant role in Palestine and Jordan.

Alice talked about the historic deforestation of the Middle East. It was recorded even in the Epic of Gilgamesh of 300 BCE, but it has been seriously rampant in recent times. Jordan's forests were decimated a century ago to build the Hejaz railway from Damascus to Mecca, and Israel has focused on disabling Palestinians' farming and food security for decades. Israel's strategy has been to drive people off the land, especially in Area C (Palestinian areas under Israeli control), which is 62% of the West Bank, into the cities, ripping Palestinians away from their rural birthright. This is happening right now in the Negev area of Israel, where Bedouin villages and lands are being appropriated and destroyed, while the Bedouin are being herded into townships to 'civilise' them and rip them away from their cultural roots. One Bedouin village has been destroyed by the Israelis and rebuilt by the Bedouin, helped by Israeli and international supporters, *thirty times*.

Palestine's natural forests included oak, olive, cedar, pistachio, almond, fig, pine and moringa trees. Many trees were domesticated and farmed long ago – figs in 9000, olives in 4000 and almonds in 3000 BCE. Sylvicultural products included frankincense, balsam and other medicinal extracts, and woodland-dependent herbs. The rise and fall of cultures in the Middle East has been intimately connected by historians with the health of forests.

What's necessary is not just a revival of farmed trees but also a propagation of shade-inducing, humus-building, land-regenerating, soil-fixing woodland trees. This is difficult because the Israelis deliberately oppose and destroy such work – they often plant pine and eucalyptus plantations over old Palestinian villages and farmlands to judaise and 'redeem' the land. In doing so they also kill the sub-soil and render land useless to further farming by Palestinians.

When forests disappear, the water table sinks and rainfall declines, increasing desertification. Israeli settlement-building, often on hilltops, many of which were previously wooded, destroys water-sources, leading to rapid run-off and soil erosion lower down and causing rain to fail to infiltrate the ground and the water table. They take water from

the West Bank highland aquifers for irrigation and modern urban water-usage, charging Palestinians high rates when they sell it back to them and using the money to subsidise water prices for Israeli settlers. The Israeli offensive focuses systematically on disabling farmers and driving them off the land into towns or, preferably, out of the country.

Deforestation thus represents *dispossession*. It started long ago and, when armies have rampaged over the land, as in Roman times or during the Crusades, wrecking the land and destroying farms and villages, people stop investing effort in the longterm. They stop practising sylviculture that would sustain the forests and farmland. Much of the hilly West Bank is festooned with ancient terracing which, if not maintained, falls apart, leading to soil erosion, land-defertilisation, loss of trees, lowering of water tables and agricultural decline.

The revival of Palestine is intimately connected with a green *intifada*, a new resistance movement that builds sustainability and re-fertilises the land. Except there's a problem: Palestinians are not very aware of the need for it. [I think this has changed quite a lot since I wrote this in 2012.] They tend to think that ecological action is superfluous to their more pressing human rights and material problems. Ecology is something Westerners go on about which is irrelevant to them, or a luxury consideration. Yet they suffer cancer from toxins, dense urban populations, land-loss, dependency on imported food, psychological damage arising from loss of emotional contact with wilderness and open space, a preponderance of litter and rubbish and a general social disempowerment which re-ruralisation could ameliorate.

So, somehow, it's necessary to spark a new green awareness in Palestine, an awareness which becomes incorporated into the resistance movement. By *resistance* I don't mean warfare and polarisation but a social-cultural revival amongst the Palestinian people, a strengthening of society such that, whatever is done to them, they have an improved resilience, adaptability and survival power.

Ecological revival is a core issue, not a peripheral one: the whole world needs to understand this, but Palestinians in particular, with their special

problem as an occupied, colonised people, need to become leaders in this field. Palestinians who have lived abroad and returned home are crucial catalysts of this. This is the next level of the resistance movement in Palestine, the agenda for the coming generation. So good on you, Alice, for articulating this issue so clearly and doing your bit to spread the word – not least through the exemplary work they're doing down at Bustan Qaraaqa.

After the lecture I met two delightful English ladies, 'the witches of Beit Sahour' – and Alice, a 'green witch' from North Wales, made a third. Suddenly I was with people with whom I could be open. Most Westerners and all Palestinians don't want to hear about my psychic work, about my being an astrologer, healer and political mystic, a dissident powered by vegetarian food, meditation and holistic attitudes, with a a bunch of perspectives that are right off most people's map. Not to mention the curled-copper, phi-ratio, anti-gravitational energy-harmoniser I wear round my neck, tucked under my shirt!

One of the witches asked me how I had started my involvement with Palestine. I thought a bit before answering and then came out with it. It was ETs and cosmic beings, the 'Council of Nine' to be precise, that started the process in the early 1990s. This was followed by the late Pam Perry, a disabled Glastonbury astrologer who campaigned for Palestine by phone and laptop from her bed, who benignly tricked me into pursuing this game, bless her. It was also a calling from former lives in this region, a jiggling of the soul and a grinding process in my heart which caused me to cut out of the bill-paying, treadmill duties of a typical Westerner and to get involved with this mess.

They lit up when I told them this, and suddenly they came out with their own secrets about the consciousness and healing work they do. One of them is married to a Palestinian (a nice chap) and the other is a legal advisor and researcher for a rights organisation in Bethlehem called Badil – but even there they keep quiet about their core beliefs. Their activities and beliefs are not deemed credible, whether from a Western-rationalist viewpoint, a Muslim viewpoint or even a modernist-

Palestinian viewpoint. So people like us keep quiet. But we had a profound sharing together, like a secret cabal, and it was refreshing.

We had a fine time in our corner at the AIC until it was time to go home – Bethlehem closes down early, and the chances of finding a taxi back to Al Khader decrease rapidly after 10pm. Nevertheless, as I wandered out, steeling myself for a long and chilly wait, a taxi drove past and stopped for me. It turned out, as is nowadays increasingly the case, this taxi-driver had carried me before in a former year, and we chattered on the way back, he in his broken English and me in my patchy Arabic, until we reached the school. The lift to the top floor was defunct, thanks to the recent electricity cuts, so I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. There was another electricity cut while I was writing this piece, and I gave thanks for being on a laptop with a good battery!

Hot water bottle time, and the customary shivering as my bed warmed up. Ah, I love living on Planet Earth – well, sometimes, at least. Other times, my guardian angels watch me fascinated as I struggle and persevere through the facts of worldly existence, and wondering what's to come next.

Ooops, the lights have just gone out again. The mobile phone network goes down too, at the same time. Well, one thing is for sure: it's probably not the Israelis – it's crummy power equipment, suffering a hangover after the wind and rain. A funny consequence of this is that many of my neighbours emerge from their houses when this happens, because their electric heaters and TVs have gone off! We really do need a green *intifada*, and PDQ.

*Four days later…*
Thursday 19th January 2012

## Ancient Sights

I went down to Jericho to meet Liz, a friend from Glastonbury (where I used to live), who is coming to visit. She's on a trip in search of clues

about Byzantine icons. She had travelled by train from Britain to Romania and then on to Istanbul, then made a quick visit to a Sufi sheikh in Cyprus, then back to Istanbul, then a flight to Amman in Jordan and over the border to Jericho. When she emerged off the bus we stood there chatting, waiting for the taxi driver I had befriended, who was coming in five minutes half an hour ago, as they do. We talked to a policeman too, who told us of his Bedouin boyhood as a shepherd and who seemed rather uncharmed by the job of a policeman, even though Palestinian uniforms are pretty smart.

Then we went to Tell es-Sultan (the Mound of the Sultan), the site of one of the world's oldest towns, founded in 8000 BCE. I still haven't found out how this ancient city happens also to be in the lowest place on Earth (1,200ft or 400m below sea level). Perhaps I never will.

We stopped for tea and a munch at an outdoor cafe and then went up onto the Tell. The atmosphere is palpable – the place-memory of souls who have lived here for countless generations since not long after the end of the ice age, right up to relatively recent times. The view was spectacular: here we were in the world's lowest place, looking over the flattish floor of the rift valley to the majestic mountains of Jordan on the other side. Looking the other way are the cliffs of the western side of the rift, with the Judaean massif rising 2,000ft before us. Around us it is green, with palm, banana and date trees, watered by copious springs.

One segment of the cliff above Jericho is called the Mount of Temptation, where Jesus went through the temptation after forty days and nights in the Judaean desert. An Orthodox monastery is perched up there, together with caves in which the earliest Christian hermit monks lived, in the centuries immediately following Jesus' life. Our taxi-man took us up there. It was stirring. The limestone cliffs and a canyon cutting into them, with ancient caves up its sides, hollowed into the rock, were high and daunting. Just to spoil the magic of it, the Israelis have stuck an ugly, inappropriately-placed surveillance station on top of the mountain, to keep their eyes on Jericho and the border.

We milled around amongst a group of Greek pilgrims, drank fresh orange juice and then spent ten minutes dissuading our taxi driver from taking us on a tour of tourist sites. Though he did show us one historic site of a recent kind. It was the compound to which Yasser Arafat had moved when he first returned to Palestine in 1994 following the Oslo Accords, after his decades-long exile in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. In the Accords the PLO recognised Israel, a two-state solution was agreed and the 'peace process' began, which was supposed to lead Palestine to independence by about 2001. It never happened.

But the compound is significant to Palestinians because Arafat's return meant they were regaining control over parts of former Palestine, which was a big step forward, as things then seemed, after the military occupation they had lived under since the Six Day War of 1967, when Israel took the West Bank and Gaza from Jordan and Egypt. The bit that went wrong was that the Palestinians were supposed to receive more of the West Bank than they got and to have independence, which never came. Twenty years later, we're still waiting.

Our taxi-driver was convinced there was no direct service taxi to Bethlehem but I knew he was incorrect. I wanted him to drop us at the terminal where the buses come in from King Hussein Bridge but he wouldn't have it, dropping us at another place and declaring that a bus would go from here in one hour to Hebron, via Bethlehem. I had my doubts but we didn't complain, got some coffee and cakes and sat talking. It's much warmer down here in Jericho, 3,500ft lower than Bethlehem, and I was rather enjoying it. But we got restless and a taxi driver agreed to take us to Al Azariya (Bethany) on the way to Bethlehem for 40 shekels each (£8 or $10).

On the way, convinced like the previous driver that all Westerners do tourism, he swung off the main road to take us into the desert to Nabi Musa, and it was worth it. Stuck out in the hills amidst the utter desert silence, this Muslim shrine, dating back to at least the 1200s, had a hospitable numinescence to it that was surreptitiously uplifting. For centuries it had served as a travellers' hostel and a hospice for the

infirm. It claims to be the mausoleum of Moses, though I thought he was buried over at Mount Nebo in Jordan or even in Kashmir. Whatever, it's a power place, and clearly pre-Muslim in origin – its placing makes it obvious that this site was significant from the very first time humans trod these parts.

Eventually we arrived in Al Azariya and, after a wait followed by a virulent argument between two service-taxi drivers over who should take us, we went by a roundabout route to Bethlehem, had tea in Manger Square and returned home with a taxi-driver who had been looking for me for two weeks. On my last trip to Jerusalem I had bought a pipe for a Palestinian friend and I had lost it on the way home – I'd guessed in this man's taxi, but wasn't sure. He had kept it for me and now proudly returned it to me. The next day I gave it to the gentleman I'd promised it to. This was a boon for him because, when he entered his cafe, where I was sitting with Liz waiting for him, he was in a foul mood, and he chirped up immediately. "*Until you came along, Mr Balden, this was a bad day.*"

That wasn't the only heartening compliment. Another man called me wise and a true Palestinian. Another said that it was good that I didn't fall for all their appeals for money, because it taught them to see Westerners as *people*. When Liz and I were strolling along Milk Grotto Street, round the back of the Nativity Church, looking at olive-wood carving work-shops, one workshop owner told us to go up on his roof, adding, in an Australian-Palestinian accent (if you can imagine that), "*It's alright, you don't have to buy anything!*". It took something full cycle for me – after all, I've moaned in previous blogs about being treated like a walking ATM and a buying-machine.

We struggled up the steep, uneven Ottoman steps to the rooftop and beheld an impressive sight. The day was clear, with a soft golden radiance and patches of light and shade under a part-cloudy, part-sunny sky – a photographer's gift. In one direction, two church towers and the minaret of the Omar Mosque stood upright over the town, with the hill of Beit Jala behind, making a perfect shot. In another direction the

Herodeon towered majestically over the countryside, and in another we could see over the Judaean Desert to the Dead Sea and Jordan. All around the fine buildings of Bethlehem, with their softly light stone, practised architectural relaxation under the afternoon sun. Bethlehem was glowing.

Later, in the Nativity Church, it was the Armenian Christmas (celebrated on 18th January). In a lightly layered mist of frankincense, the priests' singing was superb, almost operatic, enchanting, echoing something anciently reminiscent somewhere deep in my soul or in the history of this place. I remarked to Liz that, although the deep interiority and devotion of Muslims is impressive when you see hundreds of them praying together, the Christians certainly put on a remarkable show, with candles, bells, robes, incense, chanting and ritual. Though my spiritual preferences are simple and I prefer the rustling of the leaves in the trees to ceremonial drama and high religiosity, as an historian with a nose for cultural depth, human roots and deep memory, this stuff fascinates me.

That day we made progress seeking out an icon painter for Liz too – this was one of her quests while here. I took her to see John, a Christian in his sixties who runs one of the better souvenir shops in town. At first, with a mystified look on his face, he thought we sought an expert on coins. After tea he took us to the municipal tourist information centre. *Hmm*, I thought, *we're just going to get an official answer*. But no, the husband of the Polish woman at the desk was Bethlehem's top icon painter. Good on you, John! An arrangement was made to meet him and another icon painter from near Ramallah and, *inshallah*, it might even work – watch this space.

That was yesterday. Today we went to see two further ancient places. Ismael picked us up, with one of his delightful daughters in tow, called Duha. I had invited him to bring a member of his family because we had a spare seat and one of them was sure to enjoy the trip. Ismael had thought, for some reason, Liz needed the company of a woman because she might be afraid. This doesn't fit Liz at all – on a journey alone

through five countries, she hardly batted an eyelid at Palestine's rougher edges. But the daughter had a fine time with us anyway, and it was the first time she had ever visited the Herodeon and Mar Saba. We went first to Irtas, down the valley from the school.

Irtas is a tranquil Catholic monastery village, populated mainly by Muslims, and it's a verdant centre for market gardening. The statue of the Virgin Mary still had Christmas lights draped around it, making her look vulgarly tied up. The best bit was a visit to the spring at Irtas – the springwater was slightly warm and very clear. Ismael told us that, when he was a boy in the Six Day War, his family and many other refugees living in Deheisheh came down to Irtas to shelter from the Israeli bombing. They would collect water from this spring. I think that war deeply traumatised him, judging by his tone while recounting this.

We progressed then to the Herodeon, through Hindaza, Assakira and the countryside south of Bethlehem, populated by a large population of settled Bedouin. The Herodeon (or Herodium) is dramatic. It is a natural, geologically anomalistic hill that has been shaped by humans in ancient times, with the ruins of a dug-out palace in the 'cone', dating back mainly to the time of Herod the Great – the final heyday of ancient Israel before its dismemberment by the Romans. It compares with a British hill-fort, except the stone buildings inside the cone are far more developed. Around its base was a Roman-period town, until it was destroyed.

What a location: the 360° view is outstanding, and the hill is unassailable. You see a wide sweep over the Bethlehem conurbation, the Bedouin countryside southwards, two Israeli settlements (Tekoa and Nokdim) and many Palestinian villages, the Judaean Desert, Dead Sea and Jordanian mountains – a landscape photographer's paradise (but bring a telephoto). Down inside the hill is a series of tunnels leading to the internal water system in the hill.

As a sensitive who feels the atmosphere at ancient sites, despite the bitingly cold wind I could sense an ancient power here which must have made this hill important long before Herod's time. Its Arabic name is

*Jebel Fereidis* or 'the hill of paradise'. The hill dominates the landscape, drawing the eye toward it from a distance – much like Glastonbury Tor. With internal water springs higher than the surrounding plateau, it has levitational or upward-vortical energy properties which are uncommon, suggesting a very special hill.

Traditional descriptions say it is 'like a woman's breast' but, frankly, it is far bolder than that, more thrusting and masculine. It was the site of a last stand of the Jews in the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132-136, after which many of the remaining Jews in these parts were driven away by the Romans, ending the ancient story of Israel. No wonder two strategically-placed Israeli settlements now lie just below the hill – it's a kind of reclaiming.

Then we progressed to Beit Sahour on the eastern edge of Bethlehem, turning right along the main road through Dar Salah to Ubeidiya, and right again along a winding road into the desert hills to Mar Saba.

Mar Saba is a Greek Orthodox monastery perching on a cliff overlooking a deep gorge through which a river flows. It's the Kidron valley, which begins at Jerusalem – it's the valley that separates the Old City from the Mount of Olives – and it flows down to the Dead Sea. This place has an intense stillness that easily explains why the early Christian hermits came here to live in the caves – some of the caves have been expanded, and some have walls and doorways at the opening. I went down into the gorge and inside one of the caves and it was quite warm, very quiet and a wonderful location for a meditative life. The caves are similar to those at the Mount of Temptation above Jericho – the kind of places where ease of access to and from the wider world is definitely not the intention. These guys would live on a flat-bread cooked on a stone and a few dates each day. The gorge hosted perhaps some forty hermits, by the look of it, about 1,800 years ago at the very beginning of the monastic period.

We were all quite spaced out after an hour or two here. It transports you to another world. The high desert location is somehow purifying, stilling, enclosing yet starkly wide-open. Back along the road at

Ubeidiya is the St Theodosius monastery, which must have been related to Mar Saba, overlooking a dramatic valley 2,000ft below – Wadi Nar, the Valley of Fire. On the other side is the Mount of Olives, a seriously high mountain, and Jerusalem, with the desert and the Dead Sea in the other direction. An otherworldly landscape, it's the kind of stuff that people write things like Bibles about – and it's now quite densely populated with Palestinians.

We went back to Ismael's family home in Deheisheh camp for tea and home-made Arabic sweets. The whole family sat with us – a warm family circle. One of them remarked that I'm bringing a stream of English through their home. "*Yes, actually it's a secret invasion. We've decided to reoccupy Palestine, to give you a slightly better occupation than the Israeli one. Except there's a problem: you'd probably start fighting against us and I don't want that. So it looks like we'll have to leave you with the Israelis.*"

"*No, if you were in charge*", said Tareq, who had recently been released from Israeli prison after serving eight months for throwing stones at soldiers, "*it would be alright – better than having Abu Mazen and his gang in Ramallah*".

No chance, Tareq, but good try. I'm here to ferkle around in the background quietly pulling the few strings I have available to jiggle. Reoccupying Palestine would be a war Her Majesty's armed forces wouldn't fancy. Meanwhile, it has been good having a break, seeing some sights and filling another few gaps in my advancing collection of pictures of Palestine. Tomorrow I must sit down and write a report.

*Four days later…*
Monday 23 January 2012

## Walking on Broken Glass

I woke up this morning with mixed feelings about what I'm doing here. It's really cold at present and my usual positive attitude has gone away

somewhere! But it's also a nagging question of whether this visit to Palestine is productive. Over the last year, here at the school, we have spent a lot of time and energy working to comply with Western donors' escalating standards of accountability – using up time, money and energy we don't have – and sometimes I've found myself wondering whether I'm here to help improve life-conditions for Palestinians or whether actually I am simply working, at personal expense, to satisfy the slightly neurotic security-needs of Westerners.

Perhaps my feelings around this are confused, affected by a number of factors which I haven't yet sorted out. One is my own perplexity over where my home and allegiances lie – Britain is not very welcoming to me at present and Palestine cannot itself grant me residence (that's an Israeli decision and I'm not Jewish, so the answer is No). But there's more.

Here I'm going to get political because the politics affect the way Palestinians perceive a Westerner like me, a local representative of the Western powers that give them a lot of problems. Mercifully, they distinguish between ordinary Western people and their governments, so they don't blame folks like me for what our governments do. But they sometimes wonder what side I'm really on. My feelings about my visit here are highlighted by the strategies the West is engaging in right now over Iran, Iraq, Syria and Palestine which, in my view, are counterproductive and will lead to trouble, causing grief and hardship for Arabs and ultimately loss for Westerners too. It's all about oil and geopolitical power, and the prospects aren't good.

The West talks about freedom, human rights and democracy but it doesn't practise what it preaches. Here's the list. It scuppered the Palestinians' democratic choices back in 2006-07, when they voted for a political party (Hamas) that the West and Israel didn't want; it has supported regimes around the Middle East that are neither democratic nor acting for the good of their people; it has propped up Israel in its wars, occupation and settlement-building project; it has flooded the region with arms and money to support ruling elites who act as proxies

for the West; it has failed to deal with nuclear disarmament over the last 60 years and now it contemplates waging war against one country, Iran, over Iranian nuclear ambitions, while quietly supporting Israel in its own nuclear arms monopoly in the Middle East; it has wrecked Iraq and Afghanistan and recently intervened, with mixed results, in Libya; and, worst, it will not desist from this century-long habit.

Meanwhile, Middle Eastern people want to sort out their problems without foreign intervention – everyone knows Obama, Cameron and Sarkozy are more interested in their election prospects and clubability than the welfare of paltry Arabs. Since the fall of the Ottomans around 1920, this region has been under Western dominance and it's time for this to end. Western world hegemony is declining, but Western countries still retain a grandiose belief in their right to call the shots, even when things are going wrong at home and the West cannot afford such dominance. It has lost the plot. But it has arms, influence and vested interests. Dying dragons, thrashing their tails, are dangerous, desperate to reassert their greatness and deluded with expended grandeur.

Here in Palestine there have been many good peacebuilding projects, and I have been involved with a few of them. I am deeply involved with one, the Hope Flowers school and centre. But there is a problem. These worthy efforts have little effect while the people at the top in the West, the now-famous One-Percent, block change and pursue their self-interest. Dear reader, please do not fall for the belief that Western countries are altruistic, concerned for the welfare of others – except when it is in their interests to do so. The Palestinians are more or less ready for peace and coexistence, wanting instead to get on with life and build their future. But this is stoppered not just by Israel but by Western countries too – advocating peace processes, justice and democracy while actually creating the opposite.

Palestinians make up nearly half of the population of this land but we see no democracy here. Someone once said, "*Israel is democratic for Jews and Jewish for Arabs*" but even the 'democratic for Jews' bit is

inaccurate, with 80% of the nation's resources controlled by sixteen families and narrow interests dominating the nation. In 2006 Palestine had the cleanest and most genuinely democratic election the Middle East had seen for years, as verified by international observers, while in Israel's last election the party getting the most votes didn't even get into power.

In 2006 Israel and the West decided to intervene and scupper the Palestinian elections. Twenty elected parliamentarians are still in Israeli jails, five years later, together with 'Palestine's Mandela', a man called Marwan Barghouti, who has been ten years in jail. Hamas, the winning party with a thumping 60% majority, whatever its merits, is *still* deemed by the West as a terrorist organisation when, in the experience of the majority of the people of the Middle East, the terror actually comes from the over-armed West. Hamas is a social-reform party and, like any political party, it has its plusses and minuses, but it didn't deserve this. It is the 'party of resistance', which in previous years fought Israel, but if another country were invading yours and killing your citizens, wouldn't there be a similar party in your country? Britain's great hero Churchill took the same line against Hitler as Hamas has done against Israel.

It's happening again in Syria. I don't support the Assad regime in Syria or what it is doing. Any regime that indiscriminately kills its own people is heading for demise and disgrace. However, the fact is, as discovered by a British polling institution (YouGov), a majority of the Syrian people [in 2012] wished to retain the current regime – this has not been clearly reported in the West. Many Syrians support or accept Assad because they have seen the new governments that have taken power in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, even Egypt, and they don't see progress there. They don't support the Assad regime, but rightly or wrongly they prefer the devil they know than the devil they don't.

Syrians look at the Arab League, led as it is by undemocratic governments in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Sudan, and they don't

want to submit to its pressures. They watch the two biggest Arabic satellite TV stations, *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*, baying about human rights, but these stations come from the undemocratic oil sheikdoms of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, hardly the homes of human rights.

There's some wisdom in Syrians' perception, and they want to sort out their problems themselves without foreign intervention. It is precisely this which the West and its Arabic proxies do not like. The West doesn't like independent players: it wants control. This was what lay behind the West's war against Saddam Hussein who, though a thorough asshole, has been replaced by men who are no better, leaving Iraq in a mess.

But Syria has a big problem: its people are divided, the regime has lost legitimacy and it is firing on its own people. This issue is not easily solved, and putting a Western-supported regime in its place is a naïve solution – as we are now seeing in Libya. Funding and arming the Syrian opposition is a geopolitical strategy which isn't necessarily best for Syrians. This is *business*. The West also wants to keep China, Russia and India out of the Middle East. It wants compliant, business-friendly regimes.

For the twenty years since the fall of the Soviet Union, the West has been railing against Islamists, calling them terrorists. This has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and untold hardship. The Western development model feeds rich elites, binding increasing swathes of the world into capitalism, but it doesn't necessarily benefit ordinary people or bring the justice, democracy and other goodies that are promised. It has everything to do with money, oil and geostrategic considerations.

The Islamists will prove in coming years that they are mere politicians with the usual flaws. The promises they have made, to bring justice, fairness and prosperity to all, will come up against hard reality. Within ten years, the Islamists, like the socialist parties of Europe in previous decades, will prove to be a mixed bag, and not the Big Solution. However *it is the people of the Middle East who must decide this*: this is

the core principle of democracy. The West doesn't know best: its interventions have been bad for ordinary people here and it has no inherent right to entrain everyone to its own ways. Imperialism is a thing of the past.

The crucial indicator here is Palestine, which has experienced the effects of forty years of Western-sponsored peace processes. Twenty years of aid and development money in Palestine, since the Oslo Accords, has simply bred a new elite in Ramallah, softening the blow of the Israeli settlement project in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Aid has acted like morphine rather than medicine. British JCBs have demolished Palestinian homes, American arms have besieged Gaza, German guilt-money has supported Israel and Israel's nuclear bombs were developed with the help of France. Thanks, guys.

Palestine has been one of the causes of the Arab Spring: the people of the Middle East have grown tired of living under puppet regimes that fail to deliver the goods because they fear stepping out of line in the West's eyes, and these regimes have failed to solve the Palestinian question. This is a core issue for Arabs: Palestine symbolises the treatment they all have received over many decades.

Three resisters of Western dominance have been Libya, Syria and Iran. These have not been good regimes, yet they all came into existence as a result of earlier Western interventions. Now, the West doesn't want them, and it is willing to impose hardship on ordinary people to get rid of them. Because of oil, money and geostrategic control, not because of justice, peace and human rights.

Yes, Westerners do genuinely believe in justice and human rights, and this is good, but our governments do not practise what they preach – they bomb people and wreck countries, and Western electorates generally do not hold their governments to account over foreign policy issues. Electorates want cheap oil and steady supplies of it for their cars, so anything goes, and Arabs don't matter much – they're only primitive, stupid, dangerous Muslims, after all.

It would be easy right now for someone to say that I support bad regimes in the Middle East – I don't. But I believe the West should go away and attend to its own problems, leaving the people of the Middle East to sort themselves out. Most of all, the West needs to cut its support for Arabic puppet elites and for Israel, both of which constitute a big problem for ordinary people in the Middle East.

If Western support for Israel were cut, then the playing field would level out and Israel would have to make some big decisions. Peace would come closer, for simple, realistic reasons. The propped up Israeli economy would weaken and the West Bank occupation and the siege of Gaza would be less viable. Israel would be obliged to trade with its neighbours and make friends with them, for its own survival. Most Arabs don't want to drive the Jews out – they just want some normality, equality and justice. The separation walls must come down, the five million Palestinian refugees need restitution, Israeli control over Palestinians' lives should end, and the outrages of the Israeli army and settlers should be curtailed. That's what needs to happen. Oh, and the return of East Jerusalem.

But it isn't happening, and it affects my current mood. Someone like me cannot do much to help Palestinians get a decent life unless something changes at the top, with regimes and vested interests in Israel and the West. It's as simple as that. I'm getting futility feelings.

It impacts on this school. I work here not only because the school helps Palestinian refugees and disadvantaged families. I work here because I have worked for peace for forty years and this school is a world leader in dealing with war trauma and the psychosocial causes of violence, and I think that's worth working for. Palestinians are world leaders in dealing with hardship and the effects of conflict, with ninety years of experience.

This morning, Mahmoud, a child from a neighbouring house and the son of Amal, the school cleaner, called me downstairs and handed me a letter. The letter was written by his fifteen-year old sister, who has quite good English. It asked whether their mother could borrow 100 shekels

(£5) until the end of the month. There are two reasons for this. First, their father, once imprisoned by the Israelis, was not allowed to change his clothes or clean himself for over a year, meaning that now, as a free man, he has a skin disease preventing him from working and thoroughly undermining his self-esteem – and they cannot afford treatment. He hides away, hurting. So the family is poor. Second, Hope Flowers School has had recent funding problems necessitating serious financial cuts (with a staff cut and reduction of kids at school from 350 to 150). Amal's working hours have been reduced (though she still works as hard as she did before). So she has less money. So they don't have enough to get them through the cold weather. So they needed to borrow from me.

Of course I lent them the money. I expect repayment will be difficult, so this will be a gift. I do so wholeheartedly because Amal and her family have been friendly and have helped me over the years. Mahmoud returned two hours later with some home-baked bread. Bless these folk. But it presents a dilemma: here am I, a 'rich' Westerner, reinforcing the aid-dependency that Palestinians experience. They are dependent thanks to the Israeli occupation, which deprives them of the capacity to build their own economy and support themselves. Westerners support Palestinians because they do not want to force Israel to stop what it is doing, and Israel fails to carry out its duties as an occupying power by providing social, health and educational facilities on an equal basis to its own Jewish citizens. Bluntly put, Western aid to Palestine supports the Israeli military regime by keeping the Palestinians quiet.

So today I had 100 shekels-worth of dilemma. I'm happy to help Amal – she's a fine lady. But in so doing I implicitly absolve others of responsibility for the crimes they are committing. That's not what I am here for. I am here to work toward the ending of war and military oppression. But I land up implicitly supporting it.

Which is why I wonder what I am doing here. Yes, I know my presence here is bringing benefit, and it's worth it. But it is compromised. I do not like this.

Meanwhile, I'm trying to decide whether to go back to Britain when my Israeli visa expires on 10th February, or whether to go to Egypt and try to re-enter, grovelling suitably, to stay until late March. Back in Britain, I have no home, job or partner to return to, and arriving back will be quite a challenge. I'm doing my best to resolve this, particularly to find a home, even if temporary, but no positive answers are as yet forthcoming. So I have a few humanitarian issues to sort out with myself.

Liz, my visitor from Glastonbury, left for Egypt today. Aisha and her English brother are staying two nights with me, and they're off tomorrow. A friend in Europe skyped me for help with some personal issues and I felt rather clueless to help. I have work to do, but I'm struggling over it. I could do with a hug. Well, life goes on. After all, if one chooses to be a tightrope-walker, it's to be expected that things will get wobbly!

But I must remember something I got clear years ago, when I first entered into this Palestine business. *Do not expect results.* If you hope for results, you inevitably get disappointed. I think I'm being tested on this now.

*Six days later…*
Sunday 29th January 2012

## Messengers in the Sky

Pathologically altruistic workaholic that I am, even on Sundays, I was sitting at my desk practising keyboard-slavery when something caused me to look up. There, outside the window, was a mid-sized raptor – perhaps a hawk or falcon – doing that characteristic wing-quivering hovering that only raptors can do. Now, as every photographer knows,

the best shots appear when you don't have your camera at hand. Yes indeed, by the time I'd dug it out, the bird was gone. Sorry, I can't show you a photo! But it felt like a visitation, a blessing.

Eileen in Warrington asked me about birds in Palestine, and I discuss wildlife a lot with Suzy, my friend in Falmouth. In response to their promptings I pulled together some pictures of Palestinian animals. I hadn't focused on animal photography while here but, like a hunter, a photographer shoots anything interesting and I've caught a few animals over time. Photography is in a sense harder than hunting: a hunter just has to kill the poor thing, but a photographer needs to shoot it at exactly the right moment and from exactly the right position to get a good picture. Often it's luck or a kind of lens and shutter magic. The animal survives the experience too – it even perhaps thrives psychically from the positive attention of faraway people when its photo goes up on internet.

People in Palestine sometimes ask me why I'm a vegetarian – as if I'm slightly bonkers, missing something, or another example of the weirdnesses of Westerners. I simply tell them, "*Well, humans treat animals like Israelis treat Palestinians*". They get the analogy immediately, and you can see them thinking that one through.

Though to be fair, there are fine Israelis who don't abuse Palestinians and who help them, sometimes to be accused by Zionists of being self-hating Jews or even traitors, and there are good humans who not only avoid harming animals but also go to great lengths to help them.

Yet there's one thing Israelis and Palestinians *don't* do. They don't hunt. All the guns around here are for using on humans. Compared with France or Italy, even peaceable Sweden, this country is a haven for animals – at least regarding hunting. There's tremendous habitat destruction, but the only hunters around here are oddbods like me with telephoto lenses who have a crazy habit of photographing animals. So conflicts have their positive unintended consequences – in this case, animals are spared the dubious pleasure of being hunted down by voracious killer humanoids.

During this trip, I seem to have been focusing on cats. This might be the good influence of Polly, a Cornish cat who died last July, who tugged at my heart and made me more aware of cats. But it also has something to do with the character of Palestinian cats – they're not pets and they have to fend for themselves, so they have some zing and character to them. Some of the town cats are pretty scraggy though – country cats seem to do better than they.

I also like photographing donkeys. Perhaps they remind me of myself. Silent load-bearers they are, who occasionally bray plaintively to remind everyone they're still here. People still ignore them, but at least they try. Or, having been born next door to Winnie the Pooh's Hundred Aker Wood in the Ashdown Forest in Sussex, England, part of me perhaps adopted the persona of Eeyore. It matters little, in the grand scheme of things. But donkeys are another subject that has been sucked into my lens.

I get into trouble occasionally with some of the rather politically-correct Palestine activists back home because I don't bellyache about all the bad things the Israelis do to the poor, suffering Palestinians, and how we must stop this, ban and boycott that, and how we must see Palestine as a terrible field of horror, injustice and genocide with no redeeming graces at all. Sure, there are terrible things going on here. But donkeys are part of reality, and they happen also to be a wise reserve mode of transport in case oil supplies break down or the Israelis impose a total shutdown of normal economic activity. They haven't done this for a few years, but you never know, the Israelis like to keep everyone guessing, including themselves.

Besides, what really engages me is not railing against bad guys but building the foundations of the future and helping Palestinians see where their strengths are. Seeing your strengths and the advantage in your situation is the beginning of a change for the better. Moaning about what's wrong and what's gone is simply a recipe for depression, defeat and victimhood. Growing up in 1960s Liverpool, a failing city

and home to many a comedian, made me aware that humour, even as wry as mine, can be just as sharply political as righteous tub-thumping.

What are Palestinians' strengths? Perseverance, resilience, adaptability and spiritedness. This puts them in a strong position to meet the future. We're going to see some tough, exacting and tumultuous times ahead, worldwide. The people who will best ride out these increasingly insecure times are those who are most practised at doing so, who have developed the psychology and values within themselves to enable them to handle whatever comes and turn it to advantage. In this, Palestinians are in a strong position.

They will have a lot to contribute to the aid teams of the future. It won't be food and building materials they dish out but *knowledge* and *experience* – psychosocial input. They'll show people how to take things by the horns, tough it out and find their own solutions. This is the aid and disaster-relief of the future. It is a strength that Palestinians have. Meanwhile, many people in Europe and America, and in the Dubai, Mumbai and Shanghai belt – people who are 'successful' – will be lost if the electricity and internet go down, or if it all boils down to making a feast out of a bag of potatoes.

There are lots of positive things about Palestine, many of them arising from the conflict. Palestinians have a strong society. If something goes wrong, they improvise and cooperate. If a crisis is afoot, they don't stand around expecting help. They've even learned how to stay calm and restrain themselves if their houses are raided by Israeli soldiers.

Talking of which, as I write late at night, two helicopters are hovering around, about 2,000ft up and a mile away. They have that deep thumping sound of military helicopters and, guess what, the Palestinians have none, so it's not them. They've been hovering and circling around for twenty minutes over the southern edge of Bethlehem. Doing surveillance, I'd bet. They might be after someone. They plant a device on a car, or connive a collaborator to carry a specially-fixed mobile phone, and they track people. One helicopter has now come over this way, with the other remaining where it was. It's

doing a loop to go round the north edge of Bethlehem, and there's another one coming in from the west, quite low. Any advance on three?

Well, some people would panic at this, starting to wonder whether their time had come. It prompted me to put the kettle on. Other people round here simply note the intrusion and carry on with life. Which sums up the resilient attitude of Palestinians: you can eat your heart out, year after year, over all the atrocities big and small that happen here, or you can get on with life. If you get on with life you'll live longer, achieve more and be happier. Never mind what *ought* to be, what *shouldn't* be, what *might have* been or what *wasn't* – this doesn't help. After all, it's the Israelis (or American taxpayers) who are paying out to keep those helicopters afloat, and it's the pilots who are sweating more than the people underneath them.

Meanwhile, the kettle having boiled, I made myself some Saudi Arabian cocoa with honey in it, to help generate a few endorphins. I could swallow a mugful of endorphins right now, if I could, but cocoa will do. One of the helicopters is now window-rattlingly close. The pilot's kids back home are probably experiencing a gap in their lives where their father ought to be standing. It's all so farcical, so tragi-comic.

Over the wall, just over there, are some smug, hubristic settlers who think they're winning their war to retake the land that God allegedly gave them. Yet, the social subgroup in this land with the highest incidence of family violence is the settler community. I don't get the feeling *that* was part of God's design. Meanwhile, on this side of the wall, these losers, these Ay-rabs, who've lost five wars and a thousand small battles, are sitting at home with their grannies, kids, cousins and in-laws, watching *Arabiya TV*. They've lost, so they're making the best of it.

We humans are really mad, but at least we have the capacity to explain things to ourselves. We can say, "*Ah, that's a helicopter*". But animals cannot do this – they don't know what these noisy monsters are. Even

the wild dogs around the separation wall must be cowering, fearing the worst and hoping these fearsome dragons will fly away.

Little do they know, these dragons each cost 10,000 shekels (£2,000) an hour to keep afloat up there – and, in the end, *for what?* For sovereignty over someone else's land? To fulfil a covenant with God? To create happiness and security for the Chosen People? No, it's human delusion at its worst. It frightens the animals – even ants will feel the thudding resonances of these choppers deep in their anthills. I bet a few of the settler kids over the wall have been woken up by it too. "*Dad, is this what God meant the world to be like?*"

If my friends and I have anything to do with it, in our future lives we'll be living in a very different world, where military helicopters are as distantly incredible as medieval Crusaders on their steeds are to us now. Palestinians will be amongst the creators of that world. The people at the butt-end of the 'progress' we've had in recent times will probably be the people who save the day, even saving those who have so generously given them a hard time.

Yes, Palestinians could one day rescue Israelis from a sorry, partially self-created fate. It happened in a small way just recently, down south of Hebron – an Israeli settler bus caught fire, and guess who rescued them? Palestinians. Just today I saw a bumper sticker on someone's car: *After all, we're all humans*, it said, in English and Arabic.

I'm off down to Egypt in a week's time. I'm going for a break, to warm up, to hobnob with Germans and, hopefully, *inshallah*, to renew my visa until spring equinox. If, that is, they let me back in – alien, hazel-eyed *goyim* that I am. So you might get a week's break from your blog-reading obligations, bless you. Then again, you might not.

It was that hawk who prompted this particular blog entry. Wisely, the hawk doesn't care whether it is Palestinian or Israeli. It's not worried about *apartheid* either – it flies where it wants, needing no official papers. Today it was enjoying itself, or doing a more discreet

surveillance job than those helicopters, or hunting for its dinner, or all of these combined.

While a raptor has far superior weaponry to that of its prey, just like Israeli soldiers, it uses far more strategy, skill and subtlety than Israelis tend to employ. It doesn't demolish its prey's homes or devastate their habitat. Raptors and their prey are symbiotic, and if one side goes down, the other side suffers too. Same with Israelis and Palestinians: if either gets rid of the other or treats it too harshly, they themselves will suffer. I wish everyone would realise how symbiotic Israelis and Palestinians actually are. In relationship conflicts, it *always* takes two to tango. However, what's disturbing for many Israelis is that most Palestinians want to change the music – hence that Israelis are getting het up about Iranians instead.

"*War isn't about who is right, it's about who is left*", said philosopher Bertrand Russell. In the end we're all sentient beings, with an equal right to live on this Earth. Would that we had more equanimity. Equanimity would lead to greater social and global equity, also known as *sharing*.

The helicopters are now four in number. They're busy burning money to keep the world safe, to save us from terrible terrorists in places like Bethlehem. They're fighting for God at all hours of the day and night, protecting democracy and freedom. They're *keeping the peace!* Protecting civilisation from barbarians! Creating much-needed jobs in the arms trade! Just obeying orders!

Nonetheless, something suddenly happened to drive the helicopters away. After a lovely sunny day and a crisp evening, a mighty cloud rolled in over the hill from the west and it started hailing! The hail battered at the windows, wanting to get in. Must've been quite a squall, up there where the helicopters were. They scarpered. God must have had enough noise for one evening. Or, if the helicopters were tracking someone, perhaps it was that person's lucky day.

*Two days later…*
Tuesday 31st January 2012

## Gimme Shekels

A few times I have mentioned two things about Palestine: aid-dependency and the discomfiting habit of some Palestinians (mainly those in tourism in places like Bethlehem) to treat Westerners like walking ATMs. Well, I'm going to risk getting into trouble with some Palestinians and Palestine activists by unpacking this issue – I don't toe the party line on this. I'm concerned about Palestine's future in a changing world, and this is important.

Let me clarify. Some think that, since I work for Palestine, I'm anti-Israeli (or anti-Semitic). That's incorrect. I believe Israel's current policies and behaviour run against the longterm and full interests of the Israeli and wider Jewish people. Meanwhile, on the other side, some might think that, because I'm occasionally critical of Palestinians and their ways, I'm letting the side down. Incorrect: I look further ahead toward the full longterm interests of the Palestinian people. It's the *human condition* that preoccupies me.

I'm also critical of British and Western foreign policy, which doesn't serve anyone's true interests – not even, if we look far ahead, the ultimate interests of the fabled One Percent at the top of the pile. Despite all the gumph we're given about democracy, foreign policy is not decided by anything resembling democratic means – 'national interest' is firmly in the hands of people for whom government is simply an agency for executing their preferences. But, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. As a sixtysomething I am glad that, when young, I didn't pursue the option of working as a career diplomat – my soul would by now probably be deeply tainted with guilt and regret.

Anyway… For at least a century, Palestinians have lived with the idea that the West is rich. Britain had the wealth and power ninety years ago to invade this place and take it over. Europe has been big brother to the

Middle East for 3-4 centuries, playing a ‘great game’ for which Middle Eastern people have paid a huge price. In the last forty years, USA has been the bounteous main foreign funder of the Israeli project and a big funder of the Palestinians too.

So Palestinians and Israelis have got used to foreign money, without having to earn it in the usual way. There have been good reasons: Palestine has had a hard time, and the West, because of its complicity in giving them a hard time and its inability or unwillingness to correct it, has been paying guilt money to appease its conscience. Until the 1970s, Israel too was a country that needed help to stand on its feet – and that was guilt money too, going back to World War Two and the Holocaust.

There has been genuinely-motivated compassion and support from the West but it’s still true that, since the West has pillaged the Earth and exploited its peoples, it has felt a semi-conscious need to pay this off by providing aid to cover the rough edges and cultivate business markets and strategic allies.

USA and Europe subsidise Palestine to keep it quiet and compliant. In the 1990s Yasser Arafat and his gang were financially incentivised to stop fighting and causing trouble for the Israelis, and the aid has continued since then. Peace wasn’t the issue since Israel has never wanted a final peace agreement until its control of all of the area from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River is safely and permanently secured. This money isn’t medicine, it’s morphine to stop the pain. The Palestinians accepted it – they sorely needed help.

In the 1990s most of them hoped peace was coming, following the 1993 Oslo Accords. The deal was that, if the Palestinians made a preliminary agreement in 1993, they’d get a better deal and more land and concessions later on, with independence by 2001. It didn’t happen. During the 1990s, the Israelis accelerated their ‘facts on the ground’ settlement-building strategy and carried on with their control of the Palestinians – not part of the bargain.

There were extra, incendiary events such as the mowing down in 1994 of lots of Palestinians by a settler in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, the assassination by an Israeli nationalist of Israel's peacemaking prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and the later incursion of Ariel Sharon into the main Muslim holy site in Jerusalem, Haram al Sharif, in 2000. These convinced Palestinians that the peace process was a cover for subtle warfare against them.

Nevertheless, during the 1990s, money from abroad poured into building projects, and Palestinians, while needing and welcoming it, were caught in a moral dilemma. Hope Flowers School's current building was built around 1993 and, down in Al Khader, a big, plush conference centre was constructed so that Bethlehem could host international conferences. All that crashed in 2000 with the outbreak of the second *intifada*, starting as a series of spontaneous protests and ending up as a full-scale conflict, with shoot-outs, suicide bombing and all-out suppression of the Palestinians. It lasted four long years.

At times people were really hungry. The economy tanked. Foreigners left. People were carted off or they left the country. Kids saw family members getting killed or maimed. Family homes were bulldozed and dynamited. It was horrific. The final major armed encounter in the West Bank was a long siege of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, the ending of which was finally brokered by foreign negotiators.

Then came the death of Abu Amar (Yasser Arafat) and the arrival of Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), with his promises to negotiate for peace. We had Roadmaps, Quartets, and the money came in again. Palestinians were so devastated and burned out that the world just had to chip in to help them. Palestinians did most of the right things to comply with the terms and make a success of this inflow of aid. They worked hard, got educated, built stuff, organised things and gradually pulled themselves out of the mess. It's not over, but times are better now in 2011 than they were in 2004 when the *intifada* subsided. The World Bank has certified Palestine as nation enabled and ready for sovereignty.

But there's a problem with aid and development money. Like oil income in other Arab countries, it distorts things, artificially flushing an economy and magnetising all activity toward it. It puts large sums in the hands of an elite who become disbursers of money and holders of power. They become client dependents on the donors – agents or compradors for a subtle aid-imperialism that everyone slavishly believes is *good*.

It gives tremendous power to foreign donors who, if they don't like what Palestinians are doing, can withdraw those funds for any reason – Americans like doing this. This happened in 2006 when Palestinians elected by a 60% majority a government that Israel and America didn't want, so the money was withdrawn, Palestine stumbled, some of the money was given to the losing political party, the democratic experiment was scuppered and a fight later broke out between Palestinians, causing the separation of Gaza from the West Bank. Democracy was killed by the Americans and Israelis, with Europe and the Arab states as accomplices.

Hamas, the governing party, accused of terrorism, was blacklisted. Aid was withheld until Hamas left office. It landed up as the government of Gaza. One country that offered Hamas aid was Iran. Hamas wasn't too happy about that – they were being used by Iran as a geostrategic proxy against Israel – but since hardly anyone else was helping them, they needed the money. Others such as Syria, Saudi and Qatar came in later, but times were hard and Gaza was under Israeli and Egyptian siege. Beggars can't be choosers.

Another problem with aid money is that it causes all those who wish to plug into it to orientate their activities in such a way that they maximise their chances of getting it and keeping it coming their way. This leads to project design that isn't best for real Palestinians and real life – but it reads well in project proposals and meets the need for the right statistics.

It builds an educated elite of NGO, government and business professionals who become the agents of foreign organisations, driving

around in SUVs and living Western lifestyles. They then tend to favour their own kind, gradually building an overclass – most of them live in Ramallah. Just like the West, really, with its own professional overclass or *nomenklatura* which, as in the former Soviet Union, has its own language, economy, culture, membership rules, insider dealings and self-preservation interests.

This means that things don't get done just because they need doing. They are done because they attract the money and fulfil the criteria, as laid down in offices and conferences in faraway high places, according to the recommendations of a phalanx of experts, researchers and consultants. Incrementally it sets up an artificial economy geared that way, and the remainder of society lives off the spillage. There are ample jobs for security guards, accountants and administrators, and for teachers, civic and social workers – though the latter are less important and, when there are cuts, they're the first to go, even though they're the ones most needed. The highest-paid jobs go to foreigners, who are amply compensated for the inconvenience of living in a dodgy country.

A psychology of dependency thus infiltrates society through this elite. You have to suck up to people and do the right thing to get the grant, job or contract, fix a university place for your kids, get permits to enter Israel, have trips abroad, feed your family or stay out of trouble. You get used to the lifestyle, status and steady income. You're accountable not to the people around you but to people *above* you, to head office, to trustees, officials, diplomats or foreign businessmen – and to accountants, lawyers and auditors by the dozen. You shake off your wider family and community and become a smart, competitive proxy Westerner, attending all the right restaurants, trainings and meetings.

Then shopkeepers, gas stations and all manner of traders cultivate you as their customers, and they get hooked in too, prioritising some people over others, stocking snazzier stuff and imitating the elite in ladder-climbing. Before long there's a dual economy going on: one dependent on development money, tourism and corporate business, and the other a

more natural economy generated through local production, trade and services for ordinary people.

The gulf between these two economies gradually widens. Ramallah and Bethlehem thus do quite well, as it goes, and Jenin, Hebron, Nablus and Tulkarm get forgotten. But even there, people start projects that manage to draw in some funds, just enough to keep going, mostly 'with little more than good intentions and hard work' – as it said at Hope Flowers on a plaque which has now, symptomatically, fallen down.

So there is a big, big problem. To punish Palestine for its accession to UNESCO in 2011, USA withdrew funding and Israel stopped remitting due tax receipts. The Palestine Authority nearly went bankrupt and teachers, health, civic and social workers went without wages – but the situation was saved at the last minute.

Most payments are made in Dollars or Euros, and these currencies, currently declining, mean a tough-luck funding reduction for Palestinians. Western institutions and trusts have seen their own funding diminish, their requirements have tightened and they've actively sought excuses to cut funding. But there's a bigger issue than this. It's historic.

The West, the rich world, is gradually deflating, subsiding – this is a normal historic change since everything that goes up comes down again later. The finger is in the dyke but the flood is rising. Apart from the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, who have their own agendas, mainly to do with buying off and silencing the Arab Spring, the rest of the non-Western world isn't in the business of giving aid. So this dependency – or, I should say, interdependency, since the West relies on aid as a way of gaining trade and influence – is beginning to look shaky. This will affect Israel too, with its dependence on American military aid and support for the settlement project, and on European money for all sorts of other reasons, not least atavistic guilt from WW2. The period of dependency is slowly coming to an end.

This process happens in my life too. All sorts of people here look to me for loans, gifts and custom, a few of whom I say Yes to. Yet I've reached my limit and the loans must now come back to pay for other things. I'm not the 'rich westerner' people want me to be, here to save them from the latest cash crisis. I come here to offer gifts and abilities, presence and involvement – these are my true wealth and resource.

My role is changing: I must teach people how to adapt to what's coming, though most don't want to hear it. They want the morphine and cocaine of aid money to keep on coming. But money from the West is dwindling, the world is heading into troubled times and Palestinians could well get kicked into thirty-fifth place on the global needs table, much to their horror. Cruelly put, just as Jews want to hog the monopoly on genocidal suffering from the days of the Holocaust, Palestinians want to keep a monopoly on victimhood. On the positive side, the Israel-Palestine conflict could be rendered obsolete and invalid, simply by force of changing world circumstances, *force majeure*. But that still brings new challenges.

Israeli and Palestinian societies have become dependent on conflict, entirely geared to it. The Israelis have a pathological need to maintain a high state of armed threat-preparedness and pump-primed affluence and hubris, and the Palestinians have a pathological need to remain victims who need saving, even though they don't like it. It's that tango-dance again.

Whatever will be the case, things are going to change, and dependency, as a state of inflexibility, inadaptability and self-imposed incapability, will have to end. It will be hard, but in the longterm it will be the best thing. People will be forced to get real, sort themselves out and heave to. Palestinians are hard-working people and not unused to crisis – Israelis might well have a harder time – they are bigger complainers and less good at acceptance in comparison to Palestinians. Twenty percent of the Israeli population, the Ultra-Orthodox *Haredim*, live on benefits and refuse to work; the nation's youth is corralled into unproductive and pretty long military service; many settlers depend on subsidies and

quite a few Israelis live lives of leisure. Things are going to get leaner and meaner.

But in Palestine the new middle class will have a hard time too – the ones with salaries and advantages. Poor people and refugees know how to stay alive and they're used to shit happening – and they still largely have cooperation-based families and communities. For them, what's new? But the folks with degrees and higher aspirations will need to change fast. In the end this will be good. It will make Palestine into a more natural and solid economy and society, and it will stop the rot that aid and development bring. Sad to say, aid is a psychosocial prison as bad as the separation wall. It eats at the soul of the nation, surreptitiously, almost invisibly. But the change will be hard. Cold turkey.

There isn't really any alternative. In future Palestine could survive better than many countries, not because it has valuable assets but because its people are resilient, toughened, innovative, cooperative, and they have a lot of faith. They have the human qualities to survive whatever gets thrown at them – the occupying Israelis, British and Turks gave them that gift, perversely.

On the balance of historic probabilities, in comparison to other countries, they've had so much bad luck that they're due a bit of grace and release, *inshallah*. Who knows? But things will change. As Buddhists would say, *the only thing that lasts is impermanence*.

*Six days later…*
Monday 6th February

## Ras al Shaitan

Suddenly it's all very different. I'm sitting in a beach camp on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. It's a warm pre-fullmoon evening and the waves of the Gulf of Aqaba are lapping up on the shore just ten feet away,

rhythmically washing out my psyche and infiltrating a deep sense of relaxation through its backdoor.

I wasn't aware until now how hyperactive I have been while in Palestine. I haven't been rushing around but there's something about the Holy Land and its situation which is dynamic, both tense and intense, paradoxical, schizoid and emotionally demanding. This is true both for its high-points and low-points. There is also a tranquillity in the Holy Land but it is a pregnant peace at the eye of a swirling storm. Here in Sinai there is the peace of stillness, space, easygoingness and alrightness.

Even so, its Arabic name is Ras al Shaitan, the headland of Satan. This is presumably because of its geologically wrenched and torn landscape, which looks as if there has been an enormous fight between the gods, leaving a topographic devastation in its wake. Unsoftened by rainfall or vegetation, it has a stark, jagged, captivating beauty, and the colours of the rocks – sand colours, milk-whites, basalt blacks, greenstones, reds-to-purples – remind me of tripping out and perceiving the colours of thoughts. Perhaps this is why this land is attributed to Satan who, in the Muslim cosmology, isn't the 'evil one' of the Christians but the 'great deluder', the one who persuades us that matter is divine and worldly situations are the ultimate reality. Whatever, the Sinai is certainly heaven to a geologist.

Ismael came to pick me up at the school at 7.30, dropping me at the bus stop in Babisqaq, down in town, where the 21 bus starts for Jerusalem. Off we went, up through Beit Jala and then down to the main road and the Gilo checkpoint, where most passengers had to get out to have their papers examined. For some reason foreign visitors don't have to get out – though we did have to get out a few years ago. Instead, a soldier comes in, cursorily looking at our passports and nodding hello. Then we started up again and into rush-hour Jerusalem.

It's bizarre though, because the settler road proceeds from the checkpoint into a long tunnel that burrows right under Beit Jala, under the road we took to get to the checkpoint. Not only this, but the

checkpoint is close to the edge of Al Khader – it's literally one mile from the school. To get from the school to Jerusalem I have to do a double-twist to conform to the geography of politics, three times the distance it needs to be.

Out of the bus at the Damascus Gate and over to the light-rail line for a tram into West Jerusalem, the Jewish part of town. The ticket inspector came round. I had bought a ticket on Friday ready for my trip – the automated ticket machines are complex and don't always work, so this made sense, I thought. Sorry, not accepted – tickets are valid only one day, I was told. So I had to get out at City Hall, wrestle with another ticket machine and wait for another tram.

Then to the Central Bus Station – probably the worst bus station I've ever been in. It is incorporated into a shopping mall. Security checks and scanners on the way in, and then, when inside, it's the challenge of finding your way around a shopping mall where the signs are all in Hebrew – Israelis are very assertive over language and, to oblige everyone to learn Hebrew, they force the matter, thoughtlessly making things difficult for foreigners. It's the 'chosen people' syndrome once again.

Then I had to wrestle with another ticket machine for my bus ticket, but this one worked fine. An old Canadian gentleman watched me – "*So that's how you do it?*". He was jetlagged, having arrived from Canada the day before. He was surprised when I said I lived in Bethlehem. "*Isn't it dangerous?*". I assured him it wasn't – it's probably safer than in Israel, and it's certainly less paranoid about security risks.

The bus journey to Eilat took five hours. My reserved seat was right next to a rather large Israeli woman who took up 60% of the space. She decided to manage me, insisting I place my technology bag in the hold: not a chance – it has my computer, camera, passport, money and everything valuable in it. We cannonaded down the 'peace road' toward Jericho past Ma'ale Adumim, through the mountains of the Judaean Desert, then we turned right along the road that follows the length of the Dead Sea past Qumran and Ein Gedi, with rugged, rocky mountains on

the right – the western edge of the rift valley – and the Dead Sea on the left with the mountains of Jordan beyond it, eastwards.

The road went on and on. It became one of those rather gruelling journeys where you hover on the edge of stupor – even the rockily dramatic scenery became a sameness after two hours of it. But we got to Eilat eventually. It was a town I immediately chose not to engage with, filled with casinos, hotels and modern monstrosities that weren't here when I last came twenty years ago. I found a friendly taxi-driver and we headed off down to the Taba border crossing, past a few more casinos, beach resorts and port facilities.

The border crossing was boringly uneventful. Not too many questions asked at the Israeli side – I did my usual retired gentleman traveller act. "*You coming back here afterward?*" "*If I may, yes – it's too cold in Britain to go back there just now*". That story seemed plausible – the snow and subzero of Europe was in the news. It worked – no further questions. "*Have a good time in Egypt. I used to like going to Egypt until it was taken over by terrorists.*" I didn't take her up on that point – all I needed was her stamp in my passport.

On the Egyptian side there was the usual bureaucratic complexity that Egypt excels in. I wonder if they were like this in the time of the pharaohs? The man in customs who searched through my technology bag relished examining everything closely – he was just trying to prove to himself and everyone else that his job was important, as were the three men who each examined my passport and the two men who stamped it, and the five men standing around the scanners, the ten policemen standing around outside and the twenty or so taxi drivers and sundry professional sitters further on after the final passport check. How Egypt functions as an economy, with this kind of unproductivity, I do not know.

Egyptians are very different from Palestinians. Palestinians are energetic, engaging and continually busy, while Egyptians seem relaxed and lackadaisical, busy doing nothing much. But they're friendly, a distinct contrast to the rather surly and self-preoccupied majority of

Israelis, very few of whom seem to value the presence of foreign visitors.

While I was sitting awaiting a ride to Nuweiba, the Egyptians around me loved my new jacket. I had collected it the day before from my Bedouin friend Alaa Din, having ordered it seven weeks ago. It's hand-embroidered all over in dark red and sky blue patterning on a black background, a masterpiece of traditional work-womanship which paid four Bedouin ladies their month's wages and might even have started a new trend in clothes. I have a slight suspicion a number of people will be eyeing me up and asking me where they can get one. The price ended up far higher than I wanted but, in the end, I'm pleased with the result. So were these Egyptians. It earned me a free cup of tea. Or, should I say, some sugar with tea in it – a passport to hell for a diabetic.

A Bedouin from the Rock Sea Camp picked me up from Nuweiba – a nice guy with a flowing Bedouin driving style, driving his Skoda with the love they apply to their camels. He, like the Egyptians I had sat with, responded well to my sketchy Arabic and the fact that I had come from Bethlehem. Mostly they deal with tourists from Europe, who are a different kettle of fish. We streaked along the meandering road through the dramatic scenery of Sinai – high, jaggedy mountains on the right and the sea on the left, with Bedouin encampments here and there and beach resorts and camps dotted along the coast.

Then we arrived and everything slowed down. It slowed *right down*. Suddenly it was fine just to collapse and relax. Rock Sea is a German-run alternative camp with wood-and-straw chalets and a calm, easygoing atmosphere. I wished I had pressured some friends to join me, to escape the cruel white-out in Europe that everyone around here is remarking on. As I write, it is late evening and a pleasant 20 degrees, the sea is singing and the mountains are doing a studiously geological standing-there act, just behind us. I think I'm going to enjoy it here. Time to reflect.

My life in Palestine is going through a change. A month ago I was wondering what good I was bringing. This I now realise was simply

because I had come with intentions that were not being fulfilled, but something else had started instead. "*We shall miss you, Balden*", said Ismael as I said goodbye to him this morning. I shall miss you too, and your lovely family in Deheisheh. I have become a part of these and many people's lives. I've found new reasons for being here, and I'm growing into the place. Perhaps my life is changing.

*Two days later…*
Wednesday 8th February 2012

## Rock Sea Reflections

I was privileged in the 1970s to spend some years with Tibetan Lamas – His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa and the lamas who worked with him, such as Kalu Rinpoche and Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. They taught me things that have taken many years to fully understand and integrate into my life. I took a Bodhisattva Vow, to dedicate my life to the benefit of all sentient beings. I'm not at all perfect in this, and it's a gradual evolutionary process involving many learning experiences, ins and outs, ups and downs. I've been thinking about the Lamas' influence in my being here in the Middle East – particularly their teaching on loving kindness. It changed me.

Why do I have a pathological need to be involved with conflict zones and victims of circumstance? Sure, I am blessed with a relatively open and compassionate heart, as it goes, and an ability to help people, but this isn't the sole reason I seek this kind of experience. There's something that drives me to do it: *it brings me alive*. It's a kind of voluntary self-testing, putting myself on the line, creating problems and issues in my life that are greater than what I'd normally experience, and it hones my soul. But there's more.

It's the *togetherness*. There's something vulnerable about people in conflict zones which makes them more open to life than people living in comfortable, safe circumstances. This connects with something in me

and the hard times I've been through. I used to preoccupy myself with my own problems, earlier in life. When I started getting involved with exile Tibetans, terrorists, Palestinians, the downtrodden and people in crisis with deep psychological issues, it made me aware how insignificant my own problems and questions were.

There was a meditation practice I learned from the Tibetans which, over the years, changed me greatly. This is called *Tong-len* in Tibetan. It's very simple. You take a problem of your own and reflect on it for a while, then you open it up to become aware of other people around the world who are experiencing a similar kind of problem themselves. At any moment this can involve hundreds of millions of people – but tuning in to a few representatives of those millions helps greatly too. We humans, when preoccupied with our problems, tend to believe we are alone, that only we are experiencing that issue and that it proves that we are the most useless, low-down, rotten shits in the universe. We get stuck inside our own bubble. No matter how many affirmations we make or how much therapy or meditation we do, nothing entirely removes this lurking feeling, which strikes us when we're down, lost or in doubt.

But we share this issue with millions of people – it's *ours, together*. It's humanity's, universal. It's just that, when we indulge in our problems, it's we who carry the load of it and do the learning on it. Other people are dealing with other things on our behalf. But the issue here is that, wallowing in our own problems, we feel isolated and it's difficult to see beyond our own little spheres, to connect up with the collective. No matter how unique our own problem seems to be, there are millions who share it.

Not just that, but many other people have it *worse* than we – therefore we are in a position to assist not only because we are better off, but we also have specialist knowledge and personal experience in such issues. That can matter. In some cases, some of these people handle it better than we – they have it harder, but they handle it better, and there's something to learn from that. Or it might be the opposite. Here we come

to the nub of my initial question. What Tibetans, Palestinians, Chechens and others have given me is great encouragement and example: I've seen them give themselves to the betterment of humanity when they are in really difficult circumstances.

There was a Druze man from the Golan Heights whom I met some years ago. (The Druze are a rather unique Arab ethnic minority with their own faith and philosophy, living in southern Syria, Lebanon and northern Israel.) His family were farmers and his little brother worked as a shepherd minding his family's flocks. But there was a problem: the sheep kept getting blown up by Israeli landmines – and little brother wanted to save them. So he taught himself to read Hebrew and English and then he studied landmines and how to defuse them. He defused most of the landmines on his family's land when he was just 12-13-14 years of age. Brilliant, and very brave.

But the Israelis caught him and he was sentenced to 17 years in jail for terrorism – as far as I know he's still there. His big brother, who attended the trial and organised his legal defence, was enraged at the dubious justice meted out in this case. He was mortally upset at his brother's sentence. Here was a boy who had shown promise and ingenuity, now paying an enormous price for it.

The big brother told me that he was walking on their family's land, fuming over what had happened. Then he had a revelation. He realised he could get angry and go and kill an Israeli or two in revenge, landing up dead or jailed, or he could use this experience to motivate himself to work for peace. He chose the latter. When I met him he had been travelling the world working for peace for some years.

This guy left a mark on me. I've met a good number of people like this. I find that I play such a role in other people's lives too, leaving a marker in their psyches, serving as an example. It's a responsibility and a challenge and it's not always pleasant or easy, but it has to be done, and if I don't do it there are few people willing to take over.

Palestinians have taught me so much through their openness, frankness, generosity and integrity. Being amongst them helps me raise my standards, to match them. Yet during this present trip, they've also been showing me their weaknesses and failings – or perhaps I've become ready to see them. Or perhaps it is because it is now wintertime. In one sense Palestinians are open, solid and cooperative with one another, but in another sense they do a lot of back-biting, complaining, divisive thinking and doubting in each other, and they can be self- and mutually-betraying too.

I understand this: they are genuinely affected by their circumstances. Most cannot come with me to Sinai to sit by the sea and reflect on things as I am doing now. At times they fall down and feel oppressed by their situations. One of my roles in their lives is to *be there* for them, to serve as a frame of reference, a human battery to give a jump-start and an occasional bringer of solutions, or a listening ear. I came here with other plans as my priority but I find that, during this trip, this human input has been the main gift I can bring.

Yet it's an *exchange,* an interchange. I am learning and gaining so much as well as giving and sharing, and something new is emerging in me. I'm not sure exactly what that is yet, but I can *feel* it. Something is becoming healed and resolved. Life is reflecting this back to me in the people and situations I meet. The best barometer I have is at border controls, where I am summarily judged on my worth and motivation – and thus far it has worked every time.

Strangely, in conflict zones I generally feel I'm in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing – even during difficult times. I'm where I'm supposed to be. This is a privileged feeling: it is my choice, yet I feel honoured, as if being given a great gift. It's the gift of being able to participate in the lives of people living life at the deep end. These aren't just people who *think* they have a problem – they *do have* a genuine problem, and they know they must solve it, or at least survive, no matter how long it takes.

In their occasional moments of insight and grace, Palestinians know that somehow, sometime, they will solve the problem they have as a nation, as a people. They know they are strangely blessed by their situation. Even the darkness of night has its blessings. Part of them struggles to have a monopoly franchise on human hardship, but another part knows that other people suffer too – even the rich and comfortable – and that they are in a position to help.

I would love to bring my father here. He's 94 [at the time of writing, and he died in 2015], and he was born in World War One. He wouldn't be able to get here – it's too rigorous, too far – but he would love the atmosphere, delighting in the honour people here bestow upon old people, and enjoying the depth of interaction that Palestinians have with each other. I wish I could share this with my son and daughters too, and with many friends. The only danger they would encounter is that of having their lives changed – which, to some, can be daunting, frightening. It's changing my life, for sure, and I am grateful.

But then, I am experiencing this on others' behalf, just as you are experiencing your life on my and others' behalf. For we are not as separate as we are conditioned to feel. We aren't locked into individuality as much as we believe. We are the eyes, ears and hands of a Greater Existence that is playing a much larger chess game than we are aware of.

Conflict and disaster zones are frontlines of human experience where humans get presented with challenges far greater than most of us do – sometimes far greater than they deserve. To me, it is a comfortable arrogance to look on this as other people's karma or even something of their creating. On some level, we all live our lives on behalf of each other, but those at the frontline are doing an extra favour to their fellow humans. We should thank them. This is true international aid. They carry the world's shadows on their shoulders.

There will always be a variety and inequality in human experience, but in modern times we have become dissociated from one another emotionally and psychically. Rich and poor, blessed and oppressed

have lost contact with one another, and the psyche of humanity has thus become sundered. We have lost touch with each other and with nature and the cosmos, isolated in ourselves and our sub-groups.

Through travel, media and the Internet we're going through a reconnection process – our inherent psychic unity is gradually being reconstructed. This is a collective emotional process, yet to emerge fully. It's an opening of hearts to our fellow humans, to justice and fairness for all. It was this impulse that fired up the Arab revolutions in 2011 – justice and fairness for all.

The more I grow my emotional connections with other people, the more my own individuality clarifies and finds its real purpose. It isn't a loss of individuality, it's a flowering of it. I will never become a Palestinian, yet, as I identify and work with them, I rediscover my Britishness and the meaning behind the specific experiences I've gathered throughout life. This way, I redeem and transform my pain and correct my errors.

Here at the Rock Sea camp I'm bathed in the perpetual sound of waves, washing through me and getting into the dark recesses of my psyche, dislodging the fixities and accumulated gunk, revealing new space. It's wonderful. Please make sure you do such things for yourself, however you do it.

Or perhaps it's just that Neptune has recently gone into Pisces for the next 14 years. If your next question is "*What does that mean?*", go to your dreams, reflections and reveries for an answer. For there lie solutions that words hardly convey.

*Two days later…*
Friday 10th February 2012

## Lost in Arabiyya

Sometimes I wonder whether I'm channelling karmic threads from Lawrence of Arabia, Glubb Pasha and their friends – relatively

enlightened British people who spent a lot of time in the Middle East. They were some of the rather courageous, relatively open-minded Brits who, over the centuries of colonialism, *went native*. In colonial days this was unacceptable, a betrayal of civilised Britishness, inviting rejection back in Old Blighty.

I was reflecting on this while sitting with an old Bedouin lady who had wandered along to our camp. The Bedouin come along a path aside the Sinai shoreline, avoiding the road, on foot or on camels, and they sit awhile at the camp to drink tea and *just be*, with us Europeans. Their capacity just to *be*, to sit still with no intent except to be here, is admirable. Of course, to Westerners, they are busy *doing nothing*, but no, they are holding up the world, giving us something we ourselves lack, making sure the waves continue to lap upon the shore and the mountains continue committing their geological acts of wanton existentiality.

Part of me is semi-consciously schmoozing over a cultural divide, losing some of my Britishness, and not unwillingly so. But there's more. Sitting there with the Bedouin lady, she with her fifty words of English and me with my thirty of Arabic, it was as if she were my mother – though she's probably younger than me – and as if I were her father, with my relative power and wealth in my own sphere as a Westerner. Seeing me in my violet *jalabiya* (an ankle-length, cotton, light one-piece robe worn by local Bedouin), she pulled out a darker violet headscarf and arranged it on my head, almost religiously. All I needed now was a camel.

I'm more at home on camels than horses. I love their steady, thoughtful nature and the way they run. Something in me could stay here forever, wandering the craggy mountains of Sinai or the hot wastes of the Hejaz over in Arabia. But I won't, not in this life. Like T E Lawrence, I'm on a mission to support people here in becoming themselves, in discovering their true interests, not as adjuncts to the West but as people with their own rich cultural continuity, in some ways superior to our own. But it's Palestine where this work is to be done.

My respect for the Bedouin grows the more I get to know them. They have an interiority, a knowingness grounded in the earth and the shimmering void of the desert. The Bedouin go back millennia, being desert nomads who have customarily avoided the rule of empires and monarchs, often involved in camel caravans and herding in former days and looked on as 'true Arabs'. Many are interrelated. They are spread from Morocco to Iran and Arabia to Azerbaijan, products of a cultural choice made long ago to live in simplicity, leading an existential life shared with the mountains, the dunes and the almost tideless sea. Today many of them drive taxis, buses and trucks but, if this ends, they'll go back to their tents and camels, tucked away in the folds of the mountains and dunes, needing little, demanding little and taking care of nature and the world. They live a tough life but, the way they see things, it's not as tough as ours.

I'm going partially native, losing layers of my Britishness. This is partially because I'm an independent activist, defining my own rules, able to act as I think best. People back home sometimes ask, *why don't I get a job with an NGO to help pay my way and to do good through them?* It's simple: to earn my pay I would have to comply with an NGO's rules, requirements, regulations and objectives, and it would involve a lot of desk-work, meetings and report-writing, and I would not be able to use many of my special skills, my intuitive, empathic and quirky ways of making decisions, my healing abilities, intelligence work and personality. Many Palestinians trust me because I am *me*, not because of the organisation I represent. I would have to practice a certain professional detachment and to avoid certain kinds of situations. Some of my 'secret' gifts – such as the ability to use astrological methods to diagnose situations, to use a pendulum in researching issues or to do psychic and earth-healing work – would distinctly not be permitted in an NGO.

The NGO sector does worthy work, but working within its norms and constraints is not my style, and in my judgement it sometimes has a negative effect on Palestine and other places, which I do not wish to be part of. I'm not 'professional' in my approach. But then, 'Amateurs

built the Ark and professionals built the Titanic'. The NGO sector generally helps countries according to a Western-shaped development model. The West brings forth wonderful things but it also charges its price – just look at the plastic bags blowing across the desert, and the film of sunscreen floating on the surface of the oceans. It seeks to incorporate the world's population into its market system yet, in so doing, it doesn't think far enough. It wants humans to serve its system, when the system should serve humans.

Here's an example of something I couldn't do in an NGO because it would be deemed partisan. I'm in process of arranging a settler incursion early-warning system in our area, working with Israelis living in nearby settlements who have reservations about Israeli policy and settler behaviour. Settlers are trying to get into Al Khader by laying a biblically-based claim to two locations in our area. Whether or not the claim is true or even important, it's incendiary and it's being done aggressively. To me, this isn't acceptable: it's a form of warfare. My aim here is not to help Palestinians fight back, but to give them a chance to devise non-violent, strategic responses to such threats and incursions and to minimise the damage done. Often, Palestinians panic when aggressive settlers arrive on the scene, and my aim is to get them to think further, so that they can teach settlers a lesson without actually fighting them.

One example arose when two busloads of settlers invaded a place to make their point. We had advance warning and I advised the locals not to protest or fight, but to let the settlers in – let them feel as if they were winning this encounter, since it makes them relax and indulge in their hubris. That can make them unwittingly vulnerable. But… here's the trick. I suggested they spread broken glass in a visible place across the road that the settlers would travel along when leaving. Then the locals need simply to hide and watch. When the settlers boarded their buses to return home, they saw the glass and were forced to get out of their buses, exposed to what they feared was potential danger, in order to clear the road. They knew many eyes were watching. We let them leave. But, guess what, they didn't come back.

This is a game. One mustn't get too serious. As the Russian wisdom teacher Gurdjieff once said, *humans are like mad machines.* We operate according to our conditioning and it's a matter of playing with that psychology and using the weaknesses and fears of the other side to teach them a lesson. The settlers delight in provocation, so it's a matter of depriving them of that strength and exposing their weakness and defencelessness. It can work. That's *strategy*.

T E Lawrence argued against the splitting of the Middle East into small countries by the British and the French around 1920. He rooted for a united Arab nation, knowing it was in everyone's best longterm interests. He had 'gone native', seeing things from the viewpoint of Arabs and empathising with it. In the end he failed: the men in suits back in Westminster had their own way – divide and rule, yet again. But he was right, nevertheless. The Middle East should have been made into one Arab nation, not a series of small countries with borders that often were straight lines drawn across the land in some distant conference.

Today, I tell people that the Palestine conflict will be resolved by uniting the Middle East. *Impossible*, comes the reply. Yet the process will emerge within the coming years or even decades. Peace is coming, sometime, and it's a matter of laying the ground for it. It is likely to come when the region is reunited, when the multi-layered, multicultural aspect of the Middle East is accommodated more properly, as it has been for millennia, in a wider community and market. It's likely to happen when the oil industry and oil wealth decline and the region transforms into a more normal society and economy.

I'm leaving the Sinai and returning to Beit Lahem in three days' time. Over that border into Israel, up on the bus to Jerusalem and back on my favourite bus, the 21 to Bab-al-sqaq in Bethlehem. And a phone call to Ismael to come pick me up. He has become my brother. Then another chapter will unfold.

*Two days later…*
Sunday 12 February 2012

## Inshallah – the Will of God, yet again

Today it has been warm and sunny – my skin is getting brown and my hair blonder. Ah the delights of February! I've been wearing a new light blue Egyptian cotton *jalabiya* I got in Nuweiba for £12 – it's lovely because the airy roominess of it keeps me cool.

Three German guests left the camp today. One was going home to her North Sea island where she works on a nature reserve, and two guys were on their way to Cairo – one of them, an academic, was to deliver a lecture that evening. We cringed: they had a tight timetable and, well, this is unwise in the Middle East. It's fine to have a plan, but inbuilt into it must be plenty of flexibility. Yet flexibility works both ways – sometimes things are more difficult than planned, and sometimes they are easier. You must be flexible enough to allow simplicity and magic solutions to come through. If you have a sense of restless urgency, trying to adhere to timetables, then the magic of this flexibility will be lost.

To get to Cairo you need a special visa. When you enter Sinai from abroad you get an automatic two-week tourist visa for Sinai only. But Cairo? Well, that's another matter. They had been told they would have to go up the coast to Taba, cross into Israel, go to the Egyptian consulate in Eilat, get a visa, cross back, then start their journey. This they hoped to do as quickly as possible so that they could do the 600km trip to Cairo in, they hoped, seven hours. That's why we all cringed. I imagined urgent phone calls from the desert telling us, to our surprise, that they weren't going to get there on time.

They left at seven in the morning and we wished them well. *Erm*, correction, we had wished them well the previous evening – no one except Rock Sea's trusty cook gets up at that unearthly hour. Seven o'clock is the time you throw off your blanket, open the door, hop back

into bed and lie there in the rising sun, dozing, letting the sun and shadows ooze languidly across your body.

There we were at ten in the morning, sitting in the cafe drinking tea and chatting, half *auf Deutsch* and half *auf Englisch*, swatting flies and watching the cats as they mooned around looking for scraps. Yes, this was one of those mornings where the cats getting a scrap of bread or egg was a big event. Even the waves in the sea were being lazy. Saudi Arabiyya, over the water, was mountainously lying there, waiting for nothing to happen.

Then something actually happened. A car drove up. Out tipped our German friends. Had everything gone wrong? They tumbled in, sweating, looking pleased with themselves. Hmm, what's this? Well, they had gone to Taba and discovered something about the Middle East. As you might guess, it's not the same as Germany, and just because someone says that things work in a certain way, it doesn't mean that is actually true. They had reached Taba, asking how fast they could get to Eilat, get a visa and get back. No need to go to Eilat, they were told. For a 150 dollars each, I'll give you a visa.

This is summed up in one simple word: *baksheesh*. In Europe we have taxes, service charges, parking fees and hordes of shareholders to keep alive but here, especially in Egypt, we have *baksheesh*, the local unofficial enablement tax charged by anyone in return for a favour. It's a people's tax. In Eilat, at the consulate, on a good day, a visa costs $20, and it could take a day to get it. By the time you've paid taxi-fares, had some food and incurred sundry other expenses, $150 or more disappears into all sorts of pockets and cash registers.

So they accepted the price and, because they were deemed good guys – just a bit naïve and Western, that's all – the price went down to $100. Not only this, but the man fixed them a flight on a plane from Sharm el Sheikh to Cairo at no extra charge. Apparently two Koreans had been kidnapped on the road along the Sinai north coast and the road was closed to foreigners anyway, so they wouldn't get through. The Koreans will be let out within 24 hours if they behave themselves – probably

well fed and watered too – so it's all rather a farce, just a slight disruption of everyone's plans.

Why the kidnapping? Well, the Sinai Bedouin are not happy about the way the Egyptians rule them, make all the money, get all the good stuff and treat the Bedouin badly. So they're practising a centuries-old tradition – they have long been guardians of camel caravans, groups of *hajjis* bound for Mecca, as well as being saviours of travellers lost in the void, naturally charging their price for the service. After all, foreigners are so scared of hardship that the Bedouin just have to do a few symbolic actions to scare them and they all run away like chickens when a plastic fox is set in their midst.

This hurts the Egyptian economy of course but, since the Bedouin receive few of its benefits, getting all the worst jobs and living off the scraps thrown to them, why should they care? It's their own way of levying a tax. These Koreans can probably afford a few hundred dollars to buy themselves out of trouble, and once they've started talking as equals with the Bedouin, why not? Bedouin are the gentlemen of the desert, with morals far more advanced than many, and they would harm a person only if that person were stupid, aggressive or arrogant – which, unfortunately, quite a few foreigners are.

So our German friends had a cup of coffee and then piled into their taxi, bound for Sharm and their flight. This would get them to Cairo three hours before the lecture starts. Magic happened. Even if they had got their visas quickly – unlikely – they would have missed their appointment, because driving 600km through the desert in seven hours is, well, fantasy – especially with a Bedouin driver, for whom the word 'time' means an elasticised sequence of events which might or might not unfold as expected. It is not a precisely-measured temporal structure that is such a cause of time-slavery in the West.

"*Yes, they have slavery in the West*", said Muhammad yesterday, quite convincingly, from the top of his camel as he stopped by on his way to Nuweiba, and I was obliged to agree. But what really impressed me

most was not this, but the way he managed to avoid spilling his tea as the camel went down on its haunches to rest.

If you have ever ridden a camel, the first time you experience this, it is a big shock. To go down on a camel, first it goes down on its front knees and you are tipped forward until you're almost flying out of your seat. Then the back legs go down all the way, and you're thrown backwards, then finally the front legs go all the way down and you're tipped forwards again. It's great fun once you're used to it. The reverse happens on the way up. But keeping your tea in its glass while going through this quadrupedal ritual is something I suspect only Bedouin can do – I don't think I'll try it anytime soon.

So, the moral of this story is to *take things as they come*. If Allah is with you, all will go well. Not in the way you thought, perhaps, though the right thing will happen – even if you see its rightness only after the event. The universe is efficient – far more efficient than Westerners believe, with our statistical, rational, right-angled approach to life. Just as well we don't apply our control agendas to sex, or the white race would have died out long ago.

Now this is important, because the West is falling apart. It's moving stage by stage into increasing chaos, and reality is becoming more and more disobedient. This is the true deeper meaning of the term 'sustainability': *reality cannot be forced*. The river cannot be pushed. Just because there's crude oil under the ground, it doesn't mean it should all be dug up until it's exhausted – this is counterintuitive, and people like me have harped on about this for at least forty years. We have to go along with Allah's will and work within the constraints of nature.

This is something the people of the Muslim world are teaching us, but we still believe we're above all this. This is what the 'clash of civilisations' is all about: we don't believe it, but Muslims are trying to save us by teaching us a few things about family, community and respecting the will of Allah (or whatever you might call it). We think we're right and everyone else is getting things wrong, or that some

technological fix or banking wheeze will solve the problem. But the moral of this tale is that, actually, if we quit competing with God and nature, things will get easier and they will work better.

This is how the people of Gaza survive the full might of the Israelis – community, tribe and high levels of acceptance. When foreign observers visit the West Bank, frowning over the figures showing high levels of unemployment and low levels of per capita income, they then look at people in the street, who all seem happy enough (as it goes) and well enough fed and housed, and it doesn't equate. But it's simple: much of the Palestinian economy runs without money. People help each other out and support each other. They flow with the will of Allah, and everything works out – well, sort of.

It looks as if our friend's lecture in Cairo will work alright this evening. It wasn't his German organising capacity and *ordentlichkeit* that did it, though he tried. It was a smile and a little *baksheesh*, which landed up saving him money anyway. That's the way it is, *alhamdulillah*, 'Thanks God'. There's something to learn from this. It could save civilisation as we know it, *inshallah* – if God wills it. If he doesn't, something else will happen, and that'll be fine too.

Or, as a German friend I've met here said today, "*Everything is alright in the end. If it's not alright, it's not the end*".

*Two days later…*
Tuesday 14th February 2012

## Cooked, ready to serve

I'm ready to leave now. On Sunday, the day before my planned departure back to Bethlehem, I suddenly had the thought that I might be pushing the river, returning because I felt I ought to, because I'd said I would return then. When I rang Ishmael and texted Ibrahim, they both encouraged me to stay longer. Well, the sun has been wonderful, but

I've now received my medicine. My skin has that slightly toasted feeling you get when you've had enough sun but not too much.

Besides, my clothes need a wash, and there's a meeting I'd like to attend on Monday with a Dutch charitable trust that supports the school. Also, it's best to get back before the crazy multi-faith weekend starts – Muslims on Friday, Jews from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday and Christians on Sunday – when transport gets tricky.

Muhammad the camel-rider came swinging through today, with his mate. They didn't stop. He was pulling another camel behind. The donkey further along the beach brayed plaintively as they passed him and the camel at the back snorted in return. One of the German camera crew, who had come from spending a month in Cairo making a documentary about the Arab revolution, was stung by a spiky critter called in German *ein Griffelseigel* while swimming above the reef – who knows what the English name is for a *heterocentrotus mammilatus*? Well, the Bedouin cook made him a herbal decoction with olive oil and that did the trick. Another German, who had come from Ethiopia, is busy building a new hut at the camp. There's one woman here and eleven guys – Dutch, Belgian, British, Bedouin, Egyptian and, of course, German. I told her she's spoiled for choice. She grunted and carried on reading.

Yesterday my Jerusalem friend Yitzhaq swung by with a friend of his who was returning to Sinai thirtysomething years after he had served here in the Israeli army, after the Yom Kippur War. An architect, we talked about shaping empty space and the editing of books. I asked what they were looking for in their visit. "*God*", they said, streaking off to Santa Katarina Monastery and Mount Sinai after eating a thoroughly un-kosher pizza, washed down with coffee. Well, I'm happy to quote Lao Tzu (and George Harrison) who said, "*Without looking out of your window, you can see the ways of heaven*".

I have felt no need to go streaking after monasteries and Moses' mountain. Answers have seeped into me through the endless washing of the waves, reaching into hidden recesses of my psyche and loosening

the accumulated sediment and crustaceans of life's experiences – deposits I hardly knew were there. But I came to know of their presence: they became visible as they dislodged and floated free. In Palestine I had had a few too many big issues competing for space in my psyche. Now, the open questions are still there but they no longer struggle for attention, and a new acceptance and openness has settled upon me.

Yitzhaq and friend returned today, on their way back to Eilat. With them were their Bedouin driver and an Egyptian government agent – presumably to guard them because they're Israelis. Israelis are rather kidnappable around here, especially since the swap a few months ago of one Israeli soldier for over a thousand Palestinians – this makes them a valuable asset. The Koreans kidnapped a week ago were carefully chosen in order to send a message to Ban Ki Moon, at the time Secretary-General at the United Nations. The Israelis plunged into the sea, had coffee and a sweetmeat, then charged on up the coast. Obviously the agent was getting restless to get home to his dinner.

This place serves as a refuge from the revolution in Egypt proper. Judging by people's stories, it's not as bad there as the media suggest – though it's still intense, fluid and unpredictable. The media report on the worst places and worst moments, focusing on drama, so events get distorted, filtered through the lens of what the media want us to believe.

The German TV team did, however, say that it was difficult to tell who was who, who was on which side, and how to deal with each individual they encountered. They were quite worn out, happy to jump back out of the frying pan and land at the Rock Sea Camp. They've canned their footage and now they shall go to Germany for the editing.

Tomorrow, Israel. Back into my own frying pan, with quite a schedule to fulfil over the next five weeks. I'm not ready to return to Britain yet. I must take things one day at a time. This is 2012 after all, and history is rolling the dice. I feel that one of life's big junction-points is coming, without knowing what it implies or leads to. My first major tasks in Britain will be to reconnect with my family, establish a home-base and

get my book *Pictures of Palestine* published, two years late. Then… blank space, variables, unknowns, in random order. One thing seems clear: normality as I knew it is not returning.

*God bless the Bedouin, the Rocks and the Sea.* Thank you for your nurturance.

*Two days later…*
Thursday 16 February 2012

## Strange Worlds

There was a guy spray-painting three life-size plastic dolphins in the middle of a drained pool. Behind him were artificial rocks with a big waterfall smelling of chlorine. I'd dropped into a very strange world in Eilat at the southernmost tip of Israel, to visit Yitzhaq, who was staying here at a holiday hotel after his lightning whizz around Sinai. Originally he had contacted me in the 1980s while visiting Glastonbury, and that's how we made friends. He was a friend of the late geomancer John Michell, with whom he did a lot of work on the New Jerusalem and the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

But here in Eilat, this was bizarre, sci-fi, a completely different planet from the Rock Sea Camp. I had ridden up with Mohammed, a Bedouin taxi driver – not the previous Muhammad but a different one – to the border crossing. The scenery was spectacular, yet all along the coast we passed deserted ghost-towns of holiday resorts and hotels, deserted because of the collapse of tourism in the Sinai.

It has happened because of a recession in Europe, the Egyptian revolution and the patchy Bedouin revolt. The Mövenpick and Ramada hotels were deserted, some hotels were just half-built, with sand piling up around them and palm trees dying, unwatered. But at least, as I said to the taxi-driver, the Sinai is returning to the Bedouin after the invasion of faceless tourists over the last two decades. He agreed. "*We want Sinai back – this is our home*."

It took three hours to get through the Israeli side of the border. I was stuck behind a coachload of Koreans and a party of Ukrainians, in a long queue that was stuck, going nowhere. The computer system had apparently broken down, and applying human ingenuity to clearing the queue was clearly not on the agenda. Nevertheless, I was interviewed twice by the security people, clearly being some sort of suspect, then once by an immigration official – useless questions which revealed little.

"*Are you carrying a weapon?*". I was asked this twice. Well, if I were, they'd have picked it up in the scanners – if they'd been watching. The other questions were stupid too – I could have told them anything. I wonder if the Israeli security service would take me on as a consultant, to help them actually get their security system to work? I get the feeling they wouldn't.

This reminds me of the Palestinian Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem who, intercepted at a checkpoint, was asked by the soldiers whether he had a weapon. "*Yes, I have*", he said. Guns rose and the soldiers went on full alert. "*Bring it out, slowly.*" He reached down into his bag and pulled out his Bible.

The border official was quite interested in what I had to say, once the queue had shrunk and my turn came. Apart from all the Israeli places I would be visiting – Jerusalem, Kvar Etzion (that impressed them, being a West Bank settlement) and Tel Aviv, with Herzliyya thrown in for good measure – I said I'd be visiting a school in Bethlehem. He was interested when I started rattling on about trauma recovery and removing the causes of violence through psychosocial intervention in the trauma of young children.

"*What kind of trauma?*". "*Well, if you were four years old and you'd watched your home being demolished by a military bulldozer, you'd be cut up about it, my friend.*" "*Hmm, s'pose so.*" I quoted Hussein Issa's saying, that *every act of violence begins with an unhealed wound,* and he rather liked that. We chatted on until the official in the booth next to him said in Hebrew (I guess) "*You're taking too long*", and the official

came to his senses, concluded the conversation and stamped my passport. Paldywan's charm technique worked yet again. Smile, be nice, take control of the interaction and give them something interesting to brighten up their day – that's how to do it. I was now the proud possessor of a three-month visa. Phew.

Then into Eilat town, where I needed a cash machine and a cup of tea. 'No worry, don't hurry', said a sign at the cafe. Indeed, they didn't hurry – it took ages. I people-watched, observing fat, ungainly Israelis strolling around using up their lives in leisure, and soldiers, guns clattering against cafe tables, taking a break from guarding their country, and black Eritrean immigrant workers cleaning the pavement, and an old beggar rifling through the litter bins.

I found Yitzhaq's time-share hotel, a sick fantasyland place with its canned muzak, plastic dolphins and parrots, and spent the rest of the day with him discussing peace plans, the Book of Ezekiel, water shortages in the settlements, ancient geomancy, migrating birds and the weirdness of the two towns sitting next door to each other, Eilat in Israel and Aqaba in Jordan.

Yes, this is a strategic enclave where Egypt meets Israel meets Jordan meets Saudi Arabia, all in the space of five miles of coast at the top end of the Gulf of Aqaba. It's Jordan's only access to the sea and Israel's main port for its Asia trade. The Israelis are currently discussing giving a concession to the Chinese to build a high-speed railway across the Negev Desert from Eilat to Tel Aviv – they want the railway but they don't want the Chinese workers it would bring. The railway would enable the Chinese to have an alternative route to Europe, bypassing the Suez Canal, and it would enable the Israelis to import Toyotas and export arms more easily.

"*Eilat is just like a smaller version of Las Vegas*" my friend Liz had said. She had stayed with me in Bethlehem some weeks before, then to spend a night in Eilat before progressing to Egypt on her search for clues about Byzantine icon-painting. If I were showing an ET around Planet Earth, this kind of place would be most embarrassing to try to

explain on behalf of my fellow earthlings – an utter waste of resources, a moneymaking dreamscape in concrete and glass. Eilat even has an airport runway running through the centre of town.

When I came here twenty years ago it was small, quiet, provincial, a nowhere-in-particular kind of place, but now it's full of casinos and consumer resorts of the tackiest kind. It's out of the sight of the Orthodox Jews who are gradually taking over this country, out of Torah territory. It's a place where secular Israelis may sin to their hearts' delight.

I couldn't get a ticket for the 10am bus to Jerusalem – it was full. So I had to wait for the 14.45, probably to arrive too late in Jerusalem for the 21 bus to Bethlehem. But I cooked up a plan. I decided to try to get the driver to drop me off outside Ma'ale Adumim, the settlement east of Jerusalem, so that I could get Ismael to come and pick me up – that would cut at least an hour from the journey.

Ismael is not permitted to enter Jerusalem, but he can get to the perimeter of Ma'ale Adumim. So I tried that, and it worked. I didn't want to stay a night in Jerusalem. I don't like it: I tend to see its tragedy and not its charms and, frankly, if this is what holy cities are about, I'd prefer to give them a miss.

It was the lapping of the waves down in Sinai that was holy to me. There are light-years of difference between the inspiringly healing quietness at the Rock Sea Camp and the tourist nightmare of Eilat, this inadequate parody of heaven, with its extractor fans and security guards. Certainly, it takes all types to make a world, but does our dear world need *this*?

No matter. I was off back to my Beit Lahem eyrie overlooking the separation wall for a series of meetings, trips and other encounters over the next month. The 444 bus from Eilat charged along the rift valley, past the ruggedly captivating mountains, with the sun playing tricks on them, shining rays of light through the cracks between the clouds. After two hours of desert we descended into the lowest place on Earth, to the

tranquil Dead Sea, 1,200ft below sea level, passing along its western side past salt pans and the occasional resort and historic site. It is indeed dead, this sea – it's so salty that nothing can live in it. The endless Judaean Mountains to our left, jaggedy, ridgy, mysterious and seemingly impenetrable, rolled on.

I sat next to a young Israeli lady with a newborn baby, and I told her about my new grandchild, recently born in faraway Lappland, Sweden. I looked at the little baby, gurgling in its baby-seat, and wondered whether, in eighteen years' time, it will have to do three years' national service fighting ghosts, like most of the other children of this land.

The road to Be'er Sheva, once the Bedouin capital on the edge of the Negev, now a significant Israeli town, peeled off to the left. A flock of birds heading north flew alongside our coach for some miles, following the rift valley, probably to fly over Syria without knowing what's unfolding there, heading for Turkey and possibly the Black Sea. In the infra-red light of the evening, the Dead Sea shone aquamarine. The intricate folds of the mountains were picked out by the sinking sun. This weekend they're promising snow in the mountains of the West Bank, from Russia with love.

That'll be fun. On Monday we're having a visit from members of the War Trauma Foundation in the Netherlands, who are coming to discuss capacity-building at Hope Flowers. Aware that their ability to support us in the longterm could decline, they're visiting their clients in Kosovo, Chechnya, Ossetia and Palestine to help us all strengthen our organisations in preparation for a new time when money from the West could dry up. Sad, but wise.

But there's just one problem – it's one of the syndromes of foreign NGOs. They've allowed just one day for the whole visit. Of course, they'll find out that this is insufficient – it's utterly predictable. They'll come all this way, with no time to do full justice to the meeting or to see Bethlehem or meet any of its people. Classic.

This is one of the fundamental ways NGOs get things wrong. They fly business class and stay in western-style hotels – because operating at that pace, they need to – then they never find out what's really happening in the countries they're dealing with. They could have stayed with me, saved money, met real Palestinians and found out ten times more than they otherwise would. This is why I cannot work for an NGO.

But no, no time. Got to be productive – productively failing to find out what they really need to find out. Failing to meet folks like Ismael and his family in Deheisheh, failing to meet the school cleaner with her sick husband, his life ruined by a spell in an Israeli jail. Failing to get a real-life taste of war trauma and its real effects. But they're good people nonetheless, and I like them. At least they come here in person, rather than sending misplaced recommendations and demanding reports and statistics from afar. And, in the end, they stayed two days because, of course, too much happened, and they really liked Bethlehem.

Well, I got back home. It was cold. I spent the next day at the computer catching up on things and hiding from the rain and wind. Last night a full-scale gale was blowing, howling around the school. Palestinians wisely cower in their houses until it ends. Palestine has had a national tragedy too: a coachload of children killed and injured in a collision with a truck, up at Qalandia, near Ramallah. However, there was remarkable cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian rescue and medical services. It does happen.

Magic happened too. In the morning, an e-mail arrived from a friend on Cornwall. "*Are you still looking for somewhere to live, Palden?*". Yes, I was. "*There's a place at our farm. It might suit you. Are you interested?*". Of course I was, even though I had never been to this farm before. My friend seemed enthusiastic though. Some days later I had talked on Skype to the farmer and his wife, sitting in their kitchen, and we got on well. Unexpectedly, I had a place to return to – a one-room newbuilt cabin, next to a barn. They were still building it, and I would have to stay in a caravan on the farm for a month or so while it was

completed. That was alright with me. At last I had a safe place to return to. That was a surprising relief.

On for the next chapter. Tomorrow, a trip into town to start tying up loose ends with friends and contacts there.

*Three days later…*
Sunday 19th February 2012

## Summary Justice

Let me tell you about Khader Adnan. There's a sub-plot to my story too: I'm going to show you how Palestine is on the edge of exploding. You might have heard of Khader's name in the media, if you read further down on page nine or fourteen of a good newspaper. From the Western media's viewpoint, he's yet another suspected Muslim terrorist who has been imprisoned by the Israelis and, inconveniently for them and everyone else, he's on hunger strike and heading toward death.

He was arrested on 17th December 2011 and he's in Israeli 'administrative detention'. This is shorthand for not being charged or having a fair trial – he's technically in jail until 8th May, but people in administrative detention are frequently re-detained afterwards, indefinitely and without trial, at the mercy of the Israeli authorities. He is 34 years old and he's at Palestine's premier university, Bir Zeit (near Ramallah), a leader in the Palestinian youth movement. He's popular and respected and his arrest has made him a symbol of what is wrong in Palestine.

It's rather akin to Princess Diana's death in Britain in 1997: she was someone that only some people cared about until she died, but her death exposed more truth about the state of the nation than anyone could have foreseen, and it uncovered public feelings and perceptions far beyond expectation – not least because her death was suspect. It's similar with Khader, here.

Khader's detention has activated raw nerves around the country because he represents a solution for West Bank Palestinians. They are tired of their situation, their ongoing helplessness in the face of Israeli and international pressure and the injustice this has brought. The Israelis have a way of using administrative detention and imprisonment as a way of decapitating Palestine of popular leaders. It does this by calling them *terrorists* – and, of course, the rest of the world locks step, implicitly accepting the judgement, shrugging its shoulders or, at best, writing advisory notes, and there the matter ends. Many key Palestinians are rotting in jail – another being Marwan Barghouti, seen by some as 'Palestine's Mandela'.

Currently there are 340 prisoners under administrative detention, including 23 members of the Palestinian parliament, one well-known professor from Hebron and many leaders of political and civil society groups. Their crime is that they have spoken out, giving voice to different bodies of opinion in Palestinian society – and some haven't even spoken out.

Some are members of political parties, some of which are designated terrorist organisations because they have had active militias fighting for Palestine, such as the PFLP, Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Sadly, the PA under Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) has been instrumental in their detention, either arresting them for the Israelis or for their own reasons, and then handing them over. So this means that the PA, on a bad day, is seen by many as being in league with, or the pawn of, the Israelis.

All this goes back to the 1980s and the first *intifada* of 1988-1993. At that time Islamism and a new dynamic in Palestinian society were on the rise. The older forces of resistance against the Israelis, the PLO, were in exile with Yasser Arafat. The Israelis, who earlier in the 1980s had even covertly helped fund Hamas in order to create a counterweight against the PLO and to divide Palestinian society, suddenly decided to change tack, recognising the PLO as the representatives of the Palestinian people in order to block the rise and rise of Hamas – they were getting popular because they were firm and clear in their message.

After the Oslo Accords of 1993 Palestine entered a path of democratic development which culminated in free and fair elections in 2006, which Hamas, to everyone's surprise, won with a thumping majority. But these were the days of the War against Terror, which the Israelis exploited fully to further their cause, posing as a legitimate democratic force fighting violent terrorist groups in the cause of freedom, American-style. Actually, they were state terrorists. It's called *hasbarah* – repeatedly accusing the other side of doing what they were doing, to cover their own tracks.

They accused these terrorists of wantonly killing innocent civilians. Doing this, they successfully obscured the fact that it was *they* who were killing civilians, not least children, far more than the terrorists did. The odds were stacked against the Palestinian resistance, and the whole world went along with it, ritually disapproving of terrorism and supporting the Israelis.

This led to the annulment of the election by Israel and the Americans and to a brief, fatal civil war which made Hamas the government of Gaza and Fateh (the PLO) the government of the West Bank. It was not Israel's intention to bring this about, but it was useful to them when it happened, conveniently dividing the Palestinians. To consolidate power, both sides hounded dissenters in their patch – in the West Bank, members of Hamas, PFLP, Islamic Jihad and other smaller groupings were rounded up and handed over to the Israelis.

This has continued until today. Sadly, the PA, as the sole recognised representative of the Palestinian people, is partially supported by Palestinians because it is all they've got, and it is partially doubted and opposed because the peace deal with the Israelis (which the Israelis adhere to only when they wish) represented a betrayal of the interests of the Palestinian people.

The PA, sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly, is forced to accept the will of the Israelis and the largely Israeli-compliant international community because the price of not doing so can be enormous. Some members of the PA security forces work for the Israelis too, and

sometimes the interests of the Israelis and the PA coincide – after all, the PA is not electorally legitimate, though it was put in place by the wider world as Palestine's government.

Khader Adnan was once a spokesman for Islamic Jihad but, during a previous detention, he changed tack, withdrawing from advocating the use of violence and joining the new, growing non-violent movement for justice, prevalent particularly amongst young people. He had children and a family life which he wanted to protect. He was still a member of the political but not the military wing of Islamic Jihad: it is often forgotten that organisations such as this are mainly political reform parties, though the existence of their militias and their past history have caused them to be seen by the West as terrorists.

Actually they are freedom fighters. One might have views about the use of violence but my own father and many of his generation were freedom fighters against Nazism. Had they lost, they too would have been treated as terrorists and Winston Churchill, if he survived, would have had been in the dock in the Nazi equivalent of the Nuremberg Trials. (Also the Middle East might have been ruled by Nazis and Israel wouldn't exist, but that's another matter.)

Why is Khader Adnan on hunger strike and determined to go through with it? Well, rarely in our day, he's a man of principles, and he's holding to them. This is why he is liked and respected by many Palestinians, who see many of their politicians and leaders acting self-interestedly or toeing the party line to the detriment of the ordinary people. They see the PA as a mixture of an answer and a problem, and many are not happy with Hamas either – though it is not corrupt, and this is one fact that gained them many votes.

Many people support Islamism because it's the biggest idea in town, with an alternative viewpoint to the otherwise overwhelming and rather insidious values of the West and the international community, whom they see to be supporting or acquiescing to Israel. But people are not necessarily religious in their politics, just as most supporters of the Labour Party in Britain aren't raging lefties, saboteurs and militants.

Thirty percent of Palestinians are seculars and the majority are pretty moderate – during normal times at least.

It's the young for whom Khader Adnan acts as a voice. Young people across the Middle East have started a revolution and a wave of historic change. Their weakness has been that they have no clear ideology or platform – they seek positive change, that's all. As one young Arab revolutionary has said of the ruling elites: "*If you won't let us dream, we won't let you sleep*". As a consequence of this lack of political organisation, the more organised Islamist parties are gaining power instead. This is something that should have happened twenty years ago, but it isn't what the young are seeking now – Islamists are slowly becoming a thing of the past themselves, representing a now middle-aged generation who, in the eyes of the young, failed to deal with the onslaught of the West, its arms and its oil money.

Young people in Palestine – literally teenagers – have been responsible for the last two *intifadas*. They want a better life and a decent chance. They aren't radicals, at least, not at first – they want rights, jobs and prospects, a proper environment in which to raise their kids and aspire to improvement. They're also half of the population – half of the Palestinian population is under 23. Khader Adnan is an articulator of their ideals. This is why the Israelis want to stow him away.

They don't really care whether or not he dies. They know that the international community will do nothing and, if young Palestinians rise up, it just proves they're barbaric terrorists who seek to drive Israelis into the sea. But the Israelis are being unwise, suffering from their own *chutzpah* (arrogance), since there is a risk things might turn against them in future and, to cater for that, they need Palestine to have good, legitimate, popular leaders who might restrain the mob, act wisely and give Israel a chance. They need Palestine to have its Mandela. But they don't see this far – especially under the Netanyahu regime.

Khader went on hunger strike because of the way he was treated, and to shine the spotlight on the way Palestinians are treated. He was forcibly arrested and beaten at night at home, in front of his wife and children,

then carted off. Against the Geneva Conventions he was taken to Israel and detained without trial. He was interrogated, threatened and beaten for ten days and refused to speak. He was not allowed a shower or a change of clothes for a long time (this is a common Israeli tactic). He is now in hospital, having been on hunger strike since December.

The Israelis are playing with fire. They assume they can control the Palestinians. This is what various fallen and embattled Arab regimes have assumed too. What they don't realise is that strange subjective forces arise in heated times like this which lead ordinary people to lose their fear. They don't realise how frustrated the Palestinian people are – not just the young.

They don't see how delicate the position is of Abu Mazen and the PA, or how the PA could lose control or even step down, leaving Palestine ungoverned, unrestrained. They do not realise how much Khader Adnan, if he dies, symbolises the plight of the Palestinian people. His death could be a trigger of developments they don't want.

They don't realise how the label of 'terrorism' is exhausting itself as a propaganda ploy. They fail to realise how much the political helplessness of the Palestinian people is building up pressure and could explode, setting in motion a possible avalanche of events across the Middle East. The rest of the world fails to realise how unstable the situation is, and how pious lectures about avoiding violence no longer impress people when they themselves are being violated.

The Israelis are now caught between a rock and a hard place without fully knowing it. They cannot release him because this would set in motion a flurry of further hunger strikes by prisoners who should, by all the normal rules of justice, be free. They're relying on the passivity of the Palestinian people and the acquiescence of the wider world, and neither can be relied on. They face a collapse of the dishonesties that have propped up their occupation of the Palestinians for sixty years.

This is the significance of Khader Adnan's detention and hunger strike. He is likely to die soon, to become another hero-martyr of the

Palestinian people. He's a popular man, a father of young children whose loss could detonate something. In the West, he's just another name, just another Islamist with a beard, but to Palestinians he acts as one who is drawing a red line, who has set alarm bells ringing. His death will raise the heat one further notch. Expect trouble.

Today's headlines on the Ma'an News Agency site sum up the situation: Israeli troops clash with Palestinians at the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem; Israeli warplanes fire on Gaza, injuring four; Israeli settler outposts impinge on Palestinian Territory (yet again); Swedish politician urges Sweden to recognise Palestine (but they won't); Israel refuses to release a mentally-ill detainee; a Gazan father appeals for information on his missing son; Israel raids homes of Palestinian lawmakers... This is what's happening. There's more to come.

*Three days later…*
Wednesday 22nd February 2012

## Trauma and Joy

It was one of those days when it's just wonderful to be in Palestine. It was a friendly, sun-toasted day and people we met have been so welcoming. I'd spent two days with three people from the War Trauma Foundation in Amsterdam, Netherlands, who were visiting Hope Flowers to discuss 'capacity building' – helping the organisation work better in the longterm. Ibrahim and I took them to meet people in the South Hebron area that Hope Flowers works with. They stayed a bit longer, after all.

A bright golden morning, it was a well-deserved change after a long period of wet, cold, grizzly weather. We set off to Al Arus near Hebron to meet the regional director of education and the counselling director of South Hebron governorate. As we drove along our visitors were fascinated to see how green the landscape is – though it is only so at

this time of year, the wet season (roughly December to March), and the rest of the year it's much drier and browner.

Hebron area is more strongly controlled by the Israelis than many other areas of Palestine because its people are independent-minded and resistant to the occupation, so there were a fair few military vehicles and watchtowers for our visitors to espy, and some classic fort-like Israeli settlements too. They're accustomed to visiting post-conflict zones such as Kosovo, Sudan or Chechnya, but only one of them had visited Palestine before, and they were all rather gobsmacked to see the many signs of occupation and conflict all around.

Interestingly, at the end of their trip, one of them, leaving earlier than the other two, rang from Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv after she had been through the lengthy security checks. She was rather in shock. Bizarrely, the process of exiting Israel is more difficult than the process of entering, with far more questioning involved. "*Don't tell them you've been in Hebron*", she said, tipping off her friends. Ooops, she'd been too honest. But she got out nevertheless.

Entering the country on legitimate business, they had been shocked at the questioning they had gone through and the time it took. All for security reasons, of course. When talking about this to Ibrahim he simply said, "*It's because one of you is Italian*". Yes, Italians are regarded by the Israelis as the most dangerous of Europeans, mainly because the biggest and most assertive single group of Palestine activists comes from Italy.

At the directorate of education we met the boss, who was very friendly and a good friend of Ibrahim's. One of our visitors needed to interview him about the provision of trauma counselling in the area, how it is done, what the challenges are, how people respond to it, and further similar questions. The area has 180 schools, plus youth and cultural centres, kindergartens and other facilities, and they have counsellors in 60% of schools – the rest being under-provided because of fund shortages. So the South Hebron district is quite an operation. Remember too that, since half the population of Palestine is under the age of 22,

and since Palestinians value education highly, schools are a big thing here.

When trauma counselling was introduced some years ago there was some scepticism at first, but many parents responded well when offered counselling for their children and family counselling for themselves – not least because they were personally aware of behavioural problems in their kids and of family stress, and they were relieved to find there were ways of dealing with it. The main obstacle was to overcome a sense of shame that families can have over such matters – traditionally, psychological problems have been seen as a family weakness that brings shame if seen in public. They are regarded as an illness and a failure, not a naturally-arising thing in a conflict-ridden country. But counsellors have softened up this sense of shame by being friendly and supportive, employing many of the techniques taught by Hope Flowers, a pioneer in this field of work. Counselling services are nowadays over-subscribed.

The two directors were interested to answer the intelligent and knowledgeable questions that were asked. The War Trauma Foundation works in various war zones, and it knows its stuff in the field of 'psychosocial intervention'. I hold their approach in high regard – they have good hearts and open ears as well as a good stock of technical knowhow and understanding. Interestingly, the foundation was founded by a Dutch Jewish Holocaust survivor.

Rounds of coffee and then tea were brought in, and the directorate's PR person and other specialists became involved too. I hit it off with the PR woman straight away and, before long, hearing that I am an editor by trade, she was collecting my address to request my help in finalising certain important documents in English. Many Palestinian professionals have pretty good English but, unless they have actually lived for some years in an English-speaking country, their English has weaknesses, some of them rather comical.

Plans and Palestine don't mix and, of course, we overshot our allotted time. The director had given us twenty minutes but we were still there

an hour later. He was enjoying himself, appreciating the quality of the questions and the diligence of the WTF representative interviewing him, rattling away on her computer taking notes. The WTF visitors also appreciated the kindness and attention of our hosts, impressed with their answers and the high standards of trauma work here.

South Hebron is regarded by many in Palestine as a backward and conservative area but actually, in this field, it is progressive and advanced, not least because of sheer force of need. It's an embattled area where there is a lot of aggressive settler and military activity. Just imagine what it's like being a child of four, watching outrages going on, wondering why, and sometimes directly suffering from them. Imagine watching your home being demolished or your dad or big brother being taken away by soldiers. Imagine how you would feel watching your mum going through her fear, and what the effect would be on your development.

We landed up in Yatta, south of Hebron, visiting a girls' school. Yatta has a population of 110,000, with 60 schools – it's the main centre of the South Hebron area. Hope Flowers has done war-trauma work and women's empowerment courses here at this school, and the school director, a delightful lady called Nofa, has over 25 years built up a tremendous community atmosphere amongst parents, teachers and the wider community. A true heroine, she's an exemplary human with a radiant smile. Beyond her normal duties she has supported villagers in outlying villages that are under pressure from settlers and the army.

In one such village there were house demolitions and much loss of land to settlers. Younger adults, most of them parents, were leaving for the towns to find jobs and the village was slowly dying. Nofa organised a campaign to persuade parents to leave their children at the village with grandparents and remaining villagers, then she started a school there, at first in a simple shack. Then she organised some agricultural projects and the life of the village started reviving. Parents started returning. Hope Flowers helped fix women's empowerment courses and income-earning projects, mainly with embroidery and food-production. The

village now has a proper school and its life has returned. This is non-violent resistance *par excellence*. This is how a society under duress can survive.

There's a tragic story though. Nofa's husband was the imam of the local mosque and he was found dallying with a young lady. He was hounded out of town. This reflected back on Nofa herself, and great shame was projected on her and her family. She had to fight hard to survive (she has six kids), to keep her job and maintain her role in the community. For her it eventually blew over but, in this traditionally conservative area, she could not divorce her husband – and I think she still cared for him even though he had brought shame upon them all.

Divorced women are on the shit-pile because marriage here is not just a contract between two people but a merging of extended families, property, connections and resources. It's a social bond without which individuals are lost. The family and the clan are Palestine's social security system. In Palestine, if you're cast out, you're done for. Re-marriage is rare – a divorced woman is 'damaged goods'. So Nofa has a tragic and challenging situation to deal with. The good news is that her fortitude and integrity have carried her through, and her standing in the community has risen. But it's difficult.

The WTF folk interviewed Nofa and various teachers and parents, and we were plied with coffee and sweets (cakes). Nofa's office was filled with twelve or more people, coming and going. The atmosphere was lovely. When we emerged, the girls were finishing school and we were mobbed by teenagers wanting to talk, asking if we would be Facebook friends, asking questions, shaking hands and giggling. "*Ever thought you'd get rock-star treatment for the work you do?*", I asked one of the people from the War Trauma Foundation. Her eyes were moist and her lower lip quivering.

Returning to Bethlehem, I wandered around with our three visitors while Ibrahim went back to work. In the sunshine we moseyed along one of the shopping streets in the Old Town and people were overwhelmingly friendly. After a gruelling period of cold, bad weather,

people were out and about, beaming and sociable. My friends were getting accosted by all sorts of people, and they were fascinated too at the way I was having my hand shaken by so many people who knew me. *What yorr name? Where you come from? How long you stay? How many children you have? When you come back to Beit Lahem?* Our guests were overwhelmed. Is this a conflict zone, or what?

Yes it is. These people are friendly because they have too little contact with the outside world. They're stuck behind walls and checkpoints. They just love foreign visitors. They love being photographed. Tell them how many kids you have and they'll be rooting around for gifts for them. "*Please bring your children to us in Falastin!*" They mean it.

Having got some souvenirs, we landed up down in Manger Square. There we were accosted by a Bedouin who started talking in very good English. One of our party, an Englishwoman, managed to establish that he had lived just down the road from her in Manchester (a city with a sizable Palestinian community). He was really excited, seemingly having fond memories of the place. When they went off for a further meeting with Ibrahim, I sat with him and we talked at length, sitting in the warm afternoon sun in the square. He was fascinated at my story of why I was here and what I was doing, thanking me profusely. Well, my friend, it's my honour, it's good for my soul and I wish I could bring some of my friends.

*One week later…*
Wednesday 29 February 2012

## Bugged by Flu

I've been ill with a flu virus – unusual for me. An inconvenience, naturally, but it has given space for rumination, downtime, processing time on a deep level. Dreaming deeply, I've been reorienting to returning to England in a few weeks' time. More has been going on too, emotionally, psychologically and concerning the shape and direction of

my life, my place in the world, my future. I've been wondering who and what I belong to.

I haven't been wondering what I'm here for or who I am – this I'm clear about. Arising from the choices I've made in life, I've made progress on this front and, as a result, I have much to give and a fine stock of skills with which to do it. I've taken a dissident, alternative path through life and, though this has charged its price, I have few regrets. Except that it has given me a good buffeting, at times painful, and at times bringing me loss. Yet I've gained so much and, here I stand, qualified, trained and experienced in aspects of life which, in today's world, are not conventionally valued.

Many people love me yet I'm strangely alone. I have no home or partner, I have money for now but it will not last. In my sixties with no pension, while I have plenty of work to do I have no job or security. I'm open-hearted but women perhaps wisely stand clear – perhaps my commitment to my path daunts them. Sometimes these facts are disheartening but I have deep trust in the benign support and protection of 'providence'. I'm much blessed, yet vulnerable. This is what has come up as I've been lying in bed aching, sweating and swirling with the bug that hit me on Saturday.

I had been down in Yatta, south of Hebron, giving an English class to forty or so girls, fifteen years old, at Nofa's school. Nofa was there too and she wouldn't leave, for here was a guy telling the girls in clear, simple English about his country and his life, being quite risqué and political about it. I told them how, 1,000-2,000 years ago, my own country was subject to ethnic cleansing, land-clearance and destruction (by Romans, Saxons, Vikings and Normans) just as theirs has been in recent times. I showed how these atrocities had turned us into imperialists, who even occupied Palestine (my grandfather was in Allenby's army of occupation too, in WW1). I told them of the attempted revolution I was a part of at the LSE when just a bit older than they were, relating this to the failed *intifada* their parents had been in. The girls were surprised when I told them my age. "*But you are like*

*a young man*", said one. I nearly cried. Without knowing it until that moment, I was wobbling inside, surreptitiously being prised open by the flu bug that was just then taking hold.

I feel close to these people yet the cultural distance between us is vast. Earlier I wrote about Nofa and her recent personal crisis, and part of me would love to scoop her up, take her away to Cornwall and heal her heart and soul, but no, this is not possible – she or I could even be killed for it. So we can but signal each other from a distance, souls greeting each other across the void. This has been the case with so many people during this trip – so near yet so far. *I recognise you, you recognise me, and may our souls bring solace in this brief encounter.* For me, humanitarian work is precisely this, a heart-encounter, a touching of souls to say, *it's alright, somebody sees you, somebody loves you, go forth from here in faith and hope and, whatever happens, live out your life as best you can.*

On the way back home, Ishmael, who had driven me to Yatta, invited me to his house in Deheisheh for tea. I love his family and they have taken me in. Ishmael has looked after me, thought of me, and his family have watched and taken note: *perhaps there is hope if people like this exist.* A while ago he shared his concerns, amongst other things about funding his son Tareq through university, following his time in Israeli jail. He had been imprisoned for standing up for his right to a good life, for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers who were breaking the Oslo Agreements and invading Deheisheh Camp to arrest people who, in the end, were standing up for the rights of their people against a military megamachine.

I rooted around in my bag and gave him some leftover banknotes from countries I've recently visited – Euros, Swedish Kronor, Swiss Francs, Jordanian Dinars, British Pounds – and it probably amounted to £300 once he'd been to the money-changer. With this he could fund his son through catch-up classes to prepare him for Al Quds university. *Well, Ishmael, people have helped me when I needed it, and this is why I help*

*you. Keep the flow going, for all things come from and return to Allah, and we are Allah's eyes, hands and feet.*

Then I went home and sat writing. My back was aching. I did my exercises, then I decided to go down to Beit Sahour for a lecture about the revitalisation of Hebron, a city under attack from Israeli settlers and soldiers. Standing outside in the cold, waiting for Ishmael to pick me up, I suddenly felt shivery and weak. By the time I got there I wondered whether I'd survive the lecture. I took notes to stay focused. When socialising time came afterwards, with the foreigners who gather at AIC on Saturday nights, I couldn't stand any more.

Ishmael goes to bed early so I rang Mohammed (no, not that one, yet another one), an all-night taxi-driver who does it to fund his studies at Al Quds. He couldn't come. "*I need help, Mohammed – I'm unwell.*" "*Just wait, Balden.*" He rang back soon. "*My friend, he meet you at Souk Shahab, three minutes.*" "*Bless you, Mohammed*." I got home and fell into bed for a night of sweating and virulent dreams. Next day I sat it out, doing a bit of writing. A friend from England skyped and started rattling on about this and that and I had to say, look, I can't do it – I'm ill. "*Oh, well, goodbye then*", as if I'd hurt her. I fell back into bed.

Next day I'd burned much of it through but still felt weak. The wind was howling around the school and the sound of the kids downstairs echoed around my psyche as if I was on an acid trip. I felt like an ET dropped on the wrong planet. I steadied myself and worked on completing a website. The results were surprisingly inspirational. I even managed to crack some knotty technical issues.

Last week I was sitting at my desk working and looked up. It was raining, softly and quietly. There's lovely view from my window over the monastery village of Irtas (also known as Artas), with the Judaean Desert behind. A wonderful, clear, bright rainbow was sitting there. It was there for twenty minutes, at times becoming a double rainbow. A rainbow of blessing, it brought a message: *all is well, all is well*. Posting a photo of it on Facebook I added a comment to that effect.

The day before, my friend Alaa Din had scooped me up when I was in town, taking me to a village south of Bethlehem to meet a friend of his. We landed up at a place with big USAID signs and a high fence and security cameras. It was a water pumping station. *That's nice*, I thought. Being in a Palestinian area, I thought this must be an aid project to help Palestinians deal with their water shortages.

We went inside. His friend guards the place overnight and oversees the pumping controls. The station draws water from an underground water source. He had lived in America, and we had a good conversation. But soon a distasteful truth emerged. Eighty percent of the water goes to the Israeli settlements north of Bethlehem – Har Homa, Gilo and Har Gilo. Twenty percent supplies the Palestinians. Hm.

So here we have it, plain as daylight. American aid supporting Israeli settlement-building, with a token 20% for the Palestinians. They pay a higher price for their water to subsidise Israeli settlers' water bills. Israelis are drawn to the settlements by cheap housing, reduced bills, good facilities, tax breaks and other advantages, and the cost is covered by Palestinians and American taxpayers. Yes, this is the way of the world around here.

American aid finances the settlements and also embeds the occupation – what Jeff Halper of ICAHD (the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions) calls the warehousing of Palestinians. European aid comes in to soften the blow of the occupation, keeping people quiet and preventing a humanitarian disaster or an uprising that would compromise the Israeli occupation. Meanwhile people like Ishmael and his family in the refugee camps are provided with cheap and free power, water, rents and facilities by UNRWA, making them dependent on aid. Leaving the camps thus involves a climb out of a poverty trap and losing the solidarity of fellow refugees. Generous aid from America, Europe and the wider world thus legitimises an outrage. We Westerners all partake in a crime against humanity – and this isn't the only one.

That's why Tareq, Ishmael's son, threw stones at Israeli soldiers. He expressed his youthful rage at a situation that he and his people are

locked into. He saw these soldiers, many of them roughly his age, as oppressors – and indeed they are, to him. They are just obeying orders, just doing their national service, yet they have a moral choice too, a choice before their God. Yet they too are victims.

Many former Israeli soldiers end up in India getting out of their brains on drugs after military service – three years of it, a long time at age 18. Others internalise their anger and become right-wing, or they get into domestic violence or become go-getters, shutting down their hearts because they can't stand the pain. These people are fed illusions and lies as they grow up, about being an endangered chosen people persecuted by the rest of humanity, about the rightness of the Israeli mission and how this justifies everything. They're told that, to protect their people, it's legitimate to oppress and kill because Jews suffer more than anyone and thus their security is more important than anyone's. Some young Israelis are taken to Poland on school trips, to Auschwitz, fed with the idea that the world as Jew-hating and the Jewish mission is one of survival at all costs.

These people are oppressed too, though only some see it and only some have what it takes to acknowledge it. But they aren't too different from you and me. We Brits are told that it's okay to bomb Libyans, Afghans and Iraqis for the cause of peace, freedom and democracy. We're told that nuclear power is necessary to keep our TVs pumping crap at us. We're told that pharmaceutical medicines will save us, pensions and insurances will protect us, qualifications will make us good citizens, and supermarkets and corporations care for our every need. We're told that economic growth and development are the only way, and we sign up to the deal or at least yield to the pressure – what else can we do?

I'm one of the many, yet so few, who have shone a light on this, rendering myself into an outsider, an irritant, a subversive, a security risk. I've lost much as a result and thereby, as Ibrahim Issa puts it, I've become an 'honorary Palestinian'. Like many of my colleagues, I could have been a high-flyer – when I was twelve I aspired briefly to become prime minister until I started seeing what was truly going on.

I'm glad I did it, even if the battle ultimately is lost. It won't be lost. But as the Yaqui sorcerer Don Juan once put it, *one must do one's dance as if one will succeed while knowing that all could be lost*. The bit he didn't say was that, with this attitude, a nugget of strength is generated within, a 'cubic centimetre of consciousness' which nothing and no one can take away. In doing so, a mountain can be made to rumble, and the impossible becomes possible.

Open-heartedness and vulnerability aren't there to be protected – they're there to help us step forward and take a risk. I'm by no means perfect at this. When I was with Tibetan Lamas in my twenties, I sought enlightenment in this lifetime yet, here I am, in my sixties, lost and found, weak and strong, thoroughly screwed-up yet rather clear, and the dance of life continues. It doesn't even end at death's door. Joy and sorrow, these are the nutrients of life on Earth, and I'm glad to be here.

For me, life's task is to make good out of a dire situation. Hence I come to Palestine. I've become a pathological server of humanity and it's dreadful and blissful simultaneously. I'm much loved yet a person to hold at a distance. Yet were this not so, I'd have missed that rainbow that gave a message of blessing, that flu virus that gave a gift of truth. I'd be a slave to success and prosperity with a doctorate and six-figure salary, afraid that it all could end.

Influenza is a catalyst of transformation, an attack on our precious immunity. Israeli soldiers are catalysts of awakening, bless them every one. The phantasmagorical terrorists they fight are bringers of peace. Corporate executives are agents of truth. Yes, we're in a battle for the hearts and minds of humanity and, remember, you might sometimes feel you're a pawn in somebody else's chess-game but you're a radiant sun too, it all revolves around you, and together we're a universe created to allow the Unspeakable, the Unborn and Undying, to find out what it truly is. This is the stuff of life.

We're heading for a new world, and what is going on around us is not all that *can* happen here on Earth. There's more, and we know it. It's all going to change: it's just that life is asking us *Are you sure? Are you*

*ready to really exercise your free will, to create it with your hands?* One reason I work in Palestine is that I feel they're closer here to making that choice than many other people are – it's being wrung out of them relentlessly. This is what's strangely holy here. Amidst this tragedy is a deep spirituality, a proximity to truth.

When I return to Britain, catching the train back to Cornwall, people will be busy reading the newspaper and twiddling their smartphones. I'll pity them as much as I pity Palestinians, for all of us are oppressed and only some of us see it. We're self-oppressed and we go along with it. In the end, we do this to learn the value of true freedom, true love, true smartness, to get ourselves to a stage where we've really had enough. We don't need to rise up against the bankers, the Israeli soldiers, the Illuminati, since the uprising, the throwing-off, the *intifada* of justice and peace arises within ourselves. When we've got this clear, the world will change. We're on the edge of something.

There are a lot of Mohammeds around here in Palestine, and this afternoon I'm going to meet one of them. I met him in Manger Square when the people from the War Trauma Foundation were visiting. He's a Bedouin and an anglophile. We're becoming friends. *A lot of people have had the flu*, he said on the phone yesterday – *it comes on the wind*. Well, I hope they get some of the insights I've been getting. *Allahu Akbar*, God is Great, for now I've finished writing this blog, and Allah is about to give me a cup of tea. You can have one too.

*Next day…*
Early Thursday 1st March 2012

## Blow-out in the Holy Land

It's a dreadful day – the third day of gales, rain and occasional hail. Palestine is shut down – people can't handle bad weather like this and they huddle at home, toughing it out, almost as if it's a curfew from the *intifada* ten years ago. They just go quiet. Hope Flowers School

downstairs is closed, silent. The poor heating and insulation of houses – many of them flat-roofed – serve people badly at times like this. Phones and roads go quiet. It becomes an endurance test, accompanied by the music of the wind howling through the gaps between the windows. Being a mountain area, the West Bank shows its vulnerability to bad weather. Well, at least it's not as cold as the bad weather of January.

I look over the valley and the separation wall at the settlement outpost of Givat HaGadan over there. There's another outpost just round the corner, higher up on top of a hill, and it's enveloped in grey, wet cloud. Poor sods. I know some people might think it politically incorrect to sympathise with a bunch of settlers who have stolen and occupied Palestinians land but, right now, I think they're having a hard time. They live in caravans and portacabins, probably being buffeted and hammered by the sleety rain, shaken by the gusty gales.

Isn't it ironic? Rain falls on saints and sinners alike. Well, at least Palestinian houses are mostly made of thick concrete, and at least we're not under heavy shelling. God's having a laugh, reminding his little children what's really what. Or perhaps we have a case of climate change – this weather wasn't part of anyone's plans, I suspect.

So I'm busy getting on with work. I've just been wading through an article by a human rights lawyer about the statistics of the dead in Syria – Deraa, the nearest Syrian town and one of the centres of the trouble, is only about 200km away from Bethlehem. The writer is reviewing the figures and finding faults with it, both with the numbers of dead (they could be fewer) and with the counts of who is dying, and on what sides (yes, there are multiple sides, not just two). For example, she found that Palestinians killed in border protests against the Israelis in Lebanon last May-June have been included in the statistics, and a number of cases have been counted twice, and that propaganda and emotional claims from both sides could be swelling the numbers. There's no clear answer to this, though it's still true that people are dying, and these are *real people*, members of families and loved ones of the living.

I'm also preparing for my return to Britain. There are lots of hassles and complexities to deal with – even down to whether I can find someone to meet me at Gatwick airport when I arrive at 4am, or whether I just need to get on the train and do a six hour journey to Cornwall straight away, and whether there's somewhere to stay when I get there. I'm sure it will all work out, but I'm at that phase where I need to start knocking things into shape so that I know what's happening and have a plan. I won't be in a state to engage with a lot of complexity immediately when I return – I shall need to camp down and decompress from Palestine, gather myself together and prepare to meet the British world. Soon, I'm even going to have to travel up to Ramallah to get a visa to pass through Jordan for a day or two, bureaucratic as the Jordanians can be. What fun.

I'm a bit concerned about Morgan, a friend up in Al Aqaba further north. She was going to come down to visit, but she contacted me to say she's just gone down with the flu and feeling rotten. Half of the nation seems to have caught flu. She's a brave soul, an American who's really dedicated to her work in Al Aqaba. But it's quite an isolated village, high up on the edge of the Jordan Valley, and I hope people there are taking care of her. I suspect she does need a bit of looking after – when you're suffering flu, mixed emotions can come up, one of them being the simple, almost baby-like yearning to go home to Mummy. Especially when the wind is raging around, making us humans feel small and vulnerable. Her phone is switched off.

The electricity is still on. Usually when there's wind and rain we get a power cut. Something is happening *right* – and I'm still online! I'm glad to report that the Japanese-financed rain-collection system at the school, harvesting rain from the school playground, filtering and storing it in an enormous cistern just down the hill near the school's mini-farm, is busy storing up plenty of water for the dry season, which starts in May and lasts through to November. So, to conclude, here's wishing you holy greetings from Palestine. All is just about well in the Holy Land – if you've got the right attitude. We'll live to see another day.

*Later that same day…*
Thursday 1st March 2012

## Moral Boundaries and Whiteness

It was a grizzly, gale-blown, sopping wet day, and I was marooned at home. No point going out and getting soaked – everyone else was at home too. Then the phone rang. It was Ishmael. One of his daughters had told him to ring me to find out if I needed anything from the shops – snow was threatened for the next day or two (unseasonal weather – it should be spring). That was nice. I needed only one item but, if I was going to be snowed in for a while, I'd better get some more supplies. Better raid a bank machine too.

I got out of my *jalabiya* (robe), dressed up and met Ishmael downstairs. The main road at Deheisheh was closed, flooded out. The American and Israeli financial embargo last autumn, punishing Palestine for its application for recognition as a nation by the UN, and its accession to UNESCO, had meant that many services had to be cut. So pre-winter drainage, sewage and other maintenance issues had been cut and this was the result. May God fail to fix the holes in your socks, Mr Obama, and as for dear old Mr Netanyahu, may history completely forget you. Well, what the hell, we weaved around a side-route up through Beit Jala.

But there was a funny interlude. At Deheisheh they were digging a trench across the road, to unblock a pipe. We could cross. Then, suddenly, an ambulance with blue lights flashing comes along and stops. There is intense jabbering going on. The men digging the trench, plus a few bystanders, walked up to the ambulance, coordinated themselves, lifted it up, navigated it over the trench and set it down again. The ambulanceman waved and drove off at speed. Now that's a kind of efficiency you would not see in Britain – health and safety regulations would mean that the ambulance would have to go on a long detour.

Ishmael told me that the main road connecting the southern and northern West Bank was flooded. "*When I was young we used to go through Jerusalem along the road the British built*", he said, "*But now…*". Yes indeed. It was 25km. Now you have to weave over the mountains along the tortuous route around the city, an 80km trip. It might get longer if the Israelis build a planned separation wall around Ma'ale Adumim. But the road is being improved in places, with money from USAID.

But wait, something is wrong. Jeff Halper, director of ICAHD and a fine, dedicated Israeli campaigner for Palestinian rights, wrote about this in a hard-hitting article about the current state of play in Israel and Palestine. As Halper said, this aid and road-improvement helps embed the occupation by easing its hardships to Palestinians, making them less likely to complain and revolt, and lulling the international community into continued inaction.

This raises a sharp dilemma, especially for Palestinians. Halper and some activists and politicians say Palestinians should not go along with this. This is part of the logic behind the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement and also the anti-normalisation campaign. BDS means to have no truck with development aid for Palestine or with industries and businesses connected with Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Anti-normalisation means that Palestinians should not join or go along with joint Israeli-Palestinian projects that have the effect of consolidating or embedding the occupation.

Theoretically I can support this, though in real life the issues aren't quite so simple. By merely being here I am supporting the Israeli economy. I bring UK Pounds and withdraw them from bank machines as Israeli shekels, thus supporting the Israeli currency and balance of payments. Since most items in the shops and the gas in everyone's tanks are imported from abroad through Israel, or they come from Israel itself, they swell Israel profits and strengthen Israel's and Palestine's co-dependency. By operating my computer and talking to you I'm

consuming Israeli electricity – they restrict Palestinian power-generation to maintain control and grow their market.

This trip costs me about £1,000 per month so, by the end of this visit, Israel has benefited by at least £5,000. In other words, the only way I can stop this benefit to Israel is to stop coming – which I shall not do, since Palestinians need and benefit from my company and input. However, I'm careful not to buy products produced in settlements, and I examine Israeli products carefully.

It gets more complex. As a vegetarian I buy Alpro soya milk, oats and other items from Europe, with Israeli labels on. I buy tofu made in Galilee. Thus, even as an ethical consumer and vegetarian I'm helping keep a crime going. So, thanks to the ways of globalisation, if you buy Coke, Persil, Heinz, Lipton tea, Nestle and many other products, even Ecover, even you in your faraway locations are indirectly supporting the Israeli occupation.

If we all boycott these things (it would be difficult) and if Palestinians refuse to make use of humanitarian and development aid, even though they help embed the occupation, it would make life very difficult for Palestinians in real-life terms. If we refused to use the USAID-improved Bethlehem-to-Ramallah road we wouldn't get to Ramallah. I wouldn't even be able to get out of the country to Jordan – I'd have to go through Israel proper and the dreaded Ben Gurion airport, with its antisocial three-hour security-checks.

UNRWA helps embed the occupation by supporting refugees in the camps – providing schools, health facilities and civic services. Theoretically, Israel should be paying for this but, if UNRWA withdrew, it's unlikely Israel would do so properly – it would do the minimum to stop people dying but little more.

It's easier for political thinkers and activists, most of them well fed and relatively free, to advocate stringent measures such as boycotting and banning than it is to be a Palestinian living with the facts of the matter. It affects my Palestinian friends – the characters in this story. The

Israeli government, singularly dogged in its response to such pressures, probably wouldn't change of its own accord, especially since it is directly subsidised and supported by USA and Germany in particular and the rest of Europe more generally, and even by India and China.

Yes, it is wrong that settlements are physically being built by Palestinians (who are good builders). But if Palestinians withdrew, as the PA is currently trying to oblige them to do, they lose a job and an income, and there are few alternatives except grovelling to NGOs, living on the breadline or leaving the country. Israelis want Palestinians to leave the country, so Israel wins either way. Except it loses Palestinian consumers, from whom it profits.

There are some difficult moral choices here. On the one side, if Palestinians refused all foreign aid and boycotted most things Israeli, it would cause a humanitarian crisis, forcing Israel to face its responsibilities and pay the price of the occupation. It would oblige the international community to come to its senses and force Israel to pull back, to give the Palestinians a chance. But this could take many, unresponsive and determined as Israel is and clunky as the international community is. On the other side, if such a thing happened, Palestinians would suffer immensely – and life is hard enough. Hope Flowers School would close – a loss not just to Palestinians but to the wider world because it's a world-leading educational and community project with a lot to teach the world.

So what do we do? Several things.

First, whatever we do, it must be done intelligently, without sweeping acts of judgement, boycott and sanction which can hurt ordinary people hard. This pain is happening right now [2012] in places like Iran, all because of sanctions and international hypocrisies about nuclear bombs. The way to solve the Iran question is simply to put *everyone's* nukes on the table, and to negotiate them *all* away, with no exceptions.

Second, it must be done with moral sensitivity and carefully-targeted actions, on a knowledgeable case-by-case basis. But even this has

complications: if I stop using the new cross-Jerusalem tramway, as some people advocate, it makes getting around much more difficult, which can hamper my input into projects benefiting Palestinians.

Third, the real issue is political, connected our failure to put pressure on our governments to force Israel's hand and stop the supply of arms and subsidies to Israel. If we pressured our governments more strongly, boycotts, divestments and sanctions would be unnecessary since Israel would lose its disproportionate power and realise the occupation is unsustainable. Yes, the settlements, separation wall, military apparatus and other things would be impossible without foreign money and complicity.

Fourth, it all comes down to oil and the Suez Canal, the main sea-route from Asia to Europe. The reason the West wants Israel to exist is to keep control over the fractious Middle East. Neither the oil nor the Suez Canal are in Israel, but Israel's bellicose presence and power restrains the Arabs. So this question boils down to our addiction to consumer capitalism and the crimes it sanctions. This is our own hypocrisy and ultimately our own self-undoing – Western supremacy is dwindling and its chickens are coming home to roost. We are willing to permit crimes against humanity and injustice as long as the oil and the goods keep coming.

Fifth, we must support Palestine in its quest for justice – not only for the sake of Palestinians but also for the sake of world justice. This was exposed by the recent firing from the Lib Dem party in UK of Baroness Jenny Tonge, who had the courage of her convictions to say the following: "*Israel is not going to be there forever in its present form. One day, the United States will get sick of giving £70bn a year to Israel to support what I call America's aircraft carrier in the Middle East – that is Israel. One day, the American people are going to say to the Israel lobby in the USA: enough is enough. Israel will lose support and then they will reap what they have sown*".

Her opinion is not really extreme and it's perfectly realistic – depending of course on what your views are. But our democratic openness is being

undermined by things like the clampdown on her. Baroness Tonge's fate is a minor issue except to her, but this kind of thing represents a lily-livered lack of principle which permits crimes to happen. Perhaps we in the West don't actually live in democracies. Perhaps we need to be honest about that.

In the end, these moral dilemmas are brought to teach us something. We learn by treading the boundaries between Yes and No, right and wrong. We must be brave and stand up for truth and reality. If we don't, the underdogs of the world suffer – and remember, you too can be an underdog, and you too would feel abandoned and let down if your fellow humans defecated all over you like the world empties its bowels on Palestinians.

It snowed. The kids came out, yelling with joy, and parents came out too, smiling and laughing. It was lovely, though cold. I tried to say to parents that they should be careful when warming up their kids' hands afterwards, because doing it too fast can lead to much pain. But my Arabic is insufficient. Palestinians don't have such things as gloves – they rarely need them. The snow was slushy and wet, not really good for snowball-throwing.

I was hit by a hard and wet one. Palestinian youths are very good at throwing stones a long way, and accurately – it's an institution around here, the only weapon available to frustrated young people. So when the snow comes and throwing translates into fun, it can be dodgy standing in the way of a high-speed, long-pitch snowball thrown by a Palestinian teenager. Would that they were as good at politics and verbal communication as they are at this – they would be able to counter the full-frontal mentally-violent attacks of the Zionist lobby internationally, that causes otherwise sane and sensible people and politicians to defend Israel in thoroughly unreasonable ways.

Actually, it's not even Israel they defend – it's a Zionist minority's conception of Israel, which in the end is not good for the Israeli people themselves. Zionist Israel is pitted against the world, promoting a Jewishness that is separative, elitist, insulting, deadly and ultimately

self-destructive. The true Israel is an open, diverse society, friendly with its neighbours and quietly confident in itself, a creative contributor to the global matrix of humanity.

Meanwhile, the cold has been going on too long. It's time for springtime to start. But the snowy interlude, now mostly melted, was pretty. It made us sure that we're glad to say goodbye to winter, just as the people here would also love to say goodbye to the long winter of military occupation.

*One week later…*
Early Thursday 8th March 2012

## Watershed at Fullmoon

The sun came out on Monday and the temperature has been rising daily after a period of gales, rain, snow and cold – the weather systems blasting us moved back up north, where they belong. The weather this week has been benign, forgiving, allowing us to stretch and open out again after a gruelling two months.

Something deep and profound is shifting in me: I'm placing my bets on things working out in future and, personally, while the stakes are high I have faith it will work. I hope to continue my humanitarian work but I don't know how. Acting as a freelance, on-the-ground type with a magic touch is my strong point. I break too many of the professional rules. But the outcome is that magic can happen.

This deep rumbling process has been a background issue underlying the many events of late. One has been a new friendship with Sheikh Mohammed Ibrahim Sobeh, a former engineering entrepreneur, then Nestlé's representative in Palestine in the early 1990s, of Bedouin stock, who is now a sheikh (cleric and social leader) and the chairman of Nur al Barah rehabilitation school for children with learning difficulties and disabilities. His daughter, a charming woman with bright eyes and very good English, runs it.

Mohammed has asked me to find ways of having up to twenty children adopted or temporarily fostered in Britain. Some of them need medical operations. Palestine does not have the medical or educational facilities to handle complex cases such as these. Many of these children are products of the malnourishment, trauma and rigours of the *intifada* ten years ago.

I visited the school, getting down on my knees to talk with some of the kids and photograph them. They are autistic, speech or hearing-impaired, or simply educationally and socially challenged, all of them lovely kids who are being treated well in small classes of five to seven in size. It was moving to meet them. Some responded when I extended my hand and talked to them, while others didn't respond or were wary. I watched one autistic kid doing colouring-in, carving the paper and breaking the pencils one by one but so very intent on what he was doing that he wasn't at all interested in relating to me. One little girl clearly saw my aura and clung to me, and I rubbed her back and ran my fingers through her hair – she loved that.

I explained to Ibrahim and his daughter that I can act only as an ambassador, connector and overseer of whatever relationships evolve between Palestine and Britain. Adoption and fostering aren't my field and I can't manage the bureaucracy and technicalities involved. But I could, at least theoretically, seek out contacts, brief Brits on the conditions and cultural issues in Palestine and get things going, then monitor and assist the interaction between the two countries. If, that is, anything of this project actually works. I explained that, in the first instance, Brits will need to know three major questions. *Who are these people? Can they be relied on? And, will it work?* In my assessment, the answer is Yes to the second two questions.

I've learned something about taking on projects like this. The big decider is not the worthiness of the project. The clincher is whether I like the people and can work with them. When doing voluntary, unsupported work you just can't afford to get into complex situations – there has to be synergy and a feeling of connectedness and personal

commitment with the people involved. They need to have certain key qualities, such as realism, simplicity, reliability, good English, Internet skills (e-mail, attachments, Skype, images and PDFs), and also a grasp of what life is like in the West. Too many Palestinians believe we're rich, free and powerful and that life in the West is easy – so they have unrealistic expectations of what's possible and what's involved. If they have a 'We're suffering Palestinians and you must save us' mentality, it's not going to work.

Mohammed and his daughter have been to the West and they know roughly what it's like, in real terms. They are also competent realists who aren't interested in exporting souls to the West except in those difficult cases where Palestine just can't do anything for them, or where a few years in the West would make a big difference for the children. It can be medically and nutritionally advantageous, educationally helpful and empowering for the children – though of course each child must be assessed individually by qualified people and, for some kids, it might not be the best strategy, since it's a big cultural jump and distance means there's no easy going back – there's no running home to the family.

So I started to put out signals seeking advice and contacts, primarily to find someone in Britain who will take on this project and run with it. It will involve Palestinians visiting Britain and Brits visiting Palestine, serious discussions, funding, negotiations and visas, and no doubt much more.

[However, it turned out that I was unable to fulfil this task. I didn't have the right contacts, and I had too many other things to attend to – by September 2012 I was involved in a project dispensing accurate news from Gaza during one of Israel's deadly attacks on it, and this itself was really demanding. I don't feel good about that. I should not have said Yes to it and regret it. But it was a difficult mission, requiring insider knowledge and the right contacts.]

Jane Ozanne has been over here too. She's the coordinator for Spirit of Peace, the UK support charity for Jerusalem Peacemakers and Hope

Flowers School. She had a busy schedule – she's here for only a fortnight – but we've had some good discussions and moments of friendship. She has a lot of challenges running the charity, including a need for practical help with admin and other issues. Funding issues are getting tighter in UK, the aid and support business is shifting, there are complexities in the Holy Land, and she has a lot to handle. She's been wondering how much it's all worth it, and whether she's beating her head against a brick wall. This happens when the going gets rough. The answer is: *rejoice, rejoice, we have no choice but to carry on*.

I had some strong words for a good friend of mine called Adnan. It's a long story, but he's having financial problems, ultimately to do with the situation here in Palestine, but they are also of his own making. He vainly believes things will get better it he just does this or that, which they won't, and I told him so ages ago. He over-invests, goes too big, and now he has debt-collectors and lawyers on his tail. He tries blagging money from me, projecting the usual 'rich Westerner' image on me, and I'm fed up with it. Without meaning to, he uses emotional blackmail, so caught up in his issues that he loses perspective and his pride blocks him from learning. This is the shadow aspect of *sumud* (steadfastness), which is the way Palestinians have survived adversity for so long. Sometimes it turns into dogged, inflexible resistance – resistance even to wisdom. Adnan is suffers this, then he cries out for help. I had to put my foot down. It's not nice to do but, if I helped him, it would not only drain my resources, cutting my own chances, but also it would be the wrong kind of helping. I'm not happy about this.

Alaa Din, his nephew, has difficulties too, but he takes a different approach. He's in the same trade of tourist souvenirs, yet he keeps his expenditure down, works diligently instead of doing a headless chicken act, tells me about his situation but rarely asks for help, and he doesn't get wound up and frantic. He trusts in Allah and usually makes it through his crises. So there's an interesting difference between the two. Alaa Din knows that, if you're poor, it's best to keep your life and dealings simple, ticking over in basic survival mode without beating yourself up, but Adnan goes into a frenetic whirlwind of increasing

complexity, making promises he cannot keep and digging himself deeper into the mud.

Yesterday I was drinking tea with Alaa Din in his shop. His sister came in and borrowed the last money he had. He simply looked up to heaven and said, "*Allah will look after me*", and we carried on talking. Later, on the way out, I slipped 50 shekels (£10) into his hand to help him get by – and I know he will use it well. When he shares his problems and asks my advice, he thinks about it and often acts on it. He really values my insights and tips. That's why it's worth slipping him 50 shekels. He has integrity. Adnan has integrity, in his way, as do all Bedouin I know, but he gets lost and frantic, wearing himself out. He was even in hospital with heart problems recently, and he's only 41. He won't learn.

I saw his son Adam yesterday. Adam had been ill too, with a stomach problem which causes him to throw up, unable to eat. I did some psychic healing with him when he had a crisis in January, and he got better the very next day. I knew Allah was teaching him something, giving him a spiritual initiation. But he still needed his guardian angels to be brought closer to him, and I did that. Adam is really special: I know he will do something great with his life and, in a previous year, I paid his school fees.

I've become an informal counsellor and mentor to many people here. Mohammed Ibrahim added the honorific *sheikh* to my Bedouin name, Salah abu Sabr (Giving, Father of Fortitude), saying that, though I am no Muslim, I behave like a *sheikh*. He had been muttering on about gays and I stopped him, saying that, in my experience, gay and lesbian people can be people of high integrity because of the struggles they have been through with themselves and society. This struggle is *jihad*, the inner struggle that brings us to truth (often misunderstood as fighting and bombing). *Jihad* is all about putting yourself on the line, and gay people do this when 'coming out'.

I told Mohammed what Sheikh Bukhari of East Jerusalem used to say: *God is too great to fit within one faith* – and its rules. I spoke of how the world is changing and we must make full use of *ijtihad*, or free-

thinking, to free ourselves of dogma and the rigid aspect of tradition and received wisdom. Rigidity is a form of ignorance, resistance to the power of Allah. I said that Westerners need to do this too because our situation is changing – we are no longer the monopoly-holders of modernity and new thinking. I spoke of my own involvement with criminals, dissenters, terrorists and people judged to be 'wrong', and I too have for decades been judged by conventional society as 'wrong' – yet those who search their souls and transform their lives come through with an insight and truth that ordinary, comfortable, line-toeing people miss.

He sat quietly for a while and then said: "*Yes, you are right. I shall think on your words. God bless you. Today I am reminded that Muslims are not the only holders of truth. Sometimes we have heads of stone*". Anyone who stretches beyond their own narrowness is a friend of mine.

Later he took me to a mosque for afternoon prayers. I sat at the back meditating while he led prayers. A man was sitting not far away, chanting from the *Qur'an* – his voice was resonant, lilting. He was channelling holy sounds – it vibrated through my cells. At the end, Sheikh Mohammed brought the twelve men who had been praying with him over to me. "*This man has today taught me a truth I needed to learn. Truth comes to us in strange ways. Remember to listen for truth from any direction – even from Jews. Allahu Akbar*". I can't remember the other invocation he made, but I emerged with him from the mosque feeling blessed and at peace.

We went to a cafe for falafel, hummus and salad. The TV was blaring pop music with writhing Lebanese girls dancing on the screen. I asked Mohammed whether he thought I could switch it off. "*I shall defend you!*", he said. The waiter came over to find out what was going on, saw the sheikh and said "*Shukran jazeelan*" (thanks a lot). "*I wanted to do it myself but I didn't have the courage*", (so Mohammed translated it). I have made a new soul-friend in Mohammed Ibrahim Sobeh – he's a man after my own heart.

Later I was standing waiting for Ishmael with Jane in Manger Square. The full moon was slowly rising above the Church of the Nativity and the square was humming with people, including a large number of Westerners, here for a conference called 'Christ at the Checkpoint'. These are Christians I can relate to – people who truly follow the teachings of their master, people of conscience, people prepared like Jesus to step out of line. *Ijtihad*. All of us need to practise it, for the world is changing, changing more than we can know, and a new time of history is beginning.

We went for tea and sweets with Ishmael's family in Deheisheh camp. His wife is delightful and his family of seven is warm and welcoming. They are upset that I am leaving soon (end of March), but they know that I have family too, and a life in Britain. "*We shall miss you*", said Fatema, the eldest daughter. "*When will you return?*", asked Doha, third daughter.

"*I love you all too much. I don't know how, but I shall return.*" They saw the tear in my eye and knew what I said to be true. *Inshallah*, I shall return. But actually, I never did.

*Later that same day…*
Thursday 8th March 2012

## Ominous Portents

There has been a portentous rumour around. The old Bedouin wise men around here don't like what they see. Though the weather has warmed up and dried out, we had record rainfall this winter. The last time it rained as much as this was in 1967, the year of the Six Day War and the occupation of the West Bank. They take this winter's rain as a sign that something new could be afoot, and they're not happy. They anticipate a new conflict and, the trouble is, there are several potential conflicts around.

It could be Israel's threatened war with Iran. It could be Gaza [in the end it was]. It could be a further flare-up of the Arab revolutions, with complications affecting Palestine. It could be a third *intifada* in Palestine's West Bank. Or it could be something entirely unforeseeable. This region is like a tinderbox, with a lack of progress in many major issues, giving rise to a simmering frustration: anything could happen. Palestinians would prefer it not to be like this – they've had enough of hard times.

In 2006, when the Israelis were bombing hell out of south Lebanon, I had one of my 'downloads' – a burst of insight which sometimes can be prophetic. I saw that there could be five flashpoints before a fundamental change comes to Israel and Palestine, and the 2006 Lebanon war against Hezbollah was the first.

The second was the bombing of Gaza in early 2009. In both cases, the Israelis tried and failed to get rid of their adversaries Hezbollah and Hamas, and in failing to win and, they therefore in effect lost – Israel, to justify its actions, must win decisively since, if it doesn't it loses, while Palestinians and Lebanese Shi'as customarily lose anyway, so loss is no change and anything less than loss is a gain.

The third was the Freedom Flotilla of 2010 – they stopped the Flotilla but lost in terms of global PR and moral victory, far overreacting to the issue. Israel lost its sole local ally, Turkey. The fourth conflict is whatever is coming. Then there will be a fifth, if my 'download' is correct. What happens then?

Recently I was talking about this with Sheikh Mohammed Ibrahim Sobeh, a Bedouin chief. He's an interesting man. He spent four years studying in Britain in the early 1980s and, being pretty fluent in English, he's fascinated with idioms. We were talking about the Israelis and the fact they always impose such a high and violent price on Palestinians. I told him that I don't believe anyone will beat the Israelis – instead the Israelis will shoot themselves in the foot, ruining their own interests and committing a kind of national self-disablement. This idiom fascinated and rang true for him. If Israel goes too far, its credit having

already virtually run out, it risks blowing its feet right off. The world will have had enough and Israel will have rendered itself powerless.

Israel shot its own feet in Lebanon, Gaza and with the Freedom Flotilla. Sure, it seriously hurt the recipients of their wrath but, in each case, it lost friends, weakened its own confidence, discouraged its soldiers, exposed its weaknesses, increased Jewish emigration and scuppered its own case. It undermined the narrative it has incanted for decades, which says that *they* are the suffering ones, everyone is trying to attack them and therefore they are justified in defending themselves no matter what it costs them or others.

This defence is actually massive attack, using collective punishment of civilians in the belief that this will turn them against their leaders. This approach is ultimately counterproductive. Such aggression has had the opposite effect, creating a new generation of potential enemies – children who, when they grow up, will not forget the loss of their homes and family members in an overwhelming Israeli onslaught. The Israeli narrative is turning toxic to itself, exposing the country as an aggressor using disproportionate destruction to achieve questionable ends. It also erodes Israel's internal social cohesion and economic interests.

Israel cannot go it alone. It relies on outside support yet it is ungrateful, failing to respect its remaining friends and accomplices – mainly America, yet also relying heavily on the acquiescence of Europe and the Arab world. It receives billions in aid and military support every year, without which its economy and defence will dwindle. There's something else too.

Israel has for long relied on generating national unity by having threatening foes but, the trouble is, it's gradually losing its foes as well as its friends. National solidarity is thus surreptitiously crumbling. This growing internal dissonance takes the form of what Shimon Peres, Israel's president, recently called a 'battle for the soul of Israel' between two increasingly dissonant elements in Israeli society. The

problem for Israel is that it is dependent on fighting, and if enemies provide no cause for conflict, the conflict turns inward.

The secular, liberal, business-friendly, internationalist Israelis of Tel Aviv and Haifa, Israel's main income-generators, are at odds with the growing group of religious-nationalist orthodox settlers and ultra-orthodox *Haredim*. The *Haredim* are the more extremist observant Jews dressed in the funny 18th Century clothes. The former are larger in number yet less militant, but the latter are growing and building up for a fight, dead certain of their cause, already provoking incidents not only against Palestinians but also against Israeli people, the army and the state. My fear for this region is an armed conflict between these two groupings. This national schism has been ignored and permitted to grow over the years and it is going critical.

Israelis tend not to know when to stop: their strategy is to push until the other side yields, with little restraint or thought for wider consequences. Orthodox settlers are arming themselves, infiltrating the army and increasingly counting it their holy duty to oppose the state of Israel, which they regard as an abomination, prophetically incorrect. Some even envision starting a 'true Israel' in the settlements of the West Bank (what they call Judaea and Samaria).

Then there's the potential war with Iran. Israel has run out of local enemies so it has to find them further afield. Militarily they can achieve only limited results in Iran, but the political and wider implications of a war could be a final straw for Israel – more politically than militarily – and it's a high-risk strategy. It could be a setback or death-knell for the Ayatollahs' regime in Iran but, even more important, it would bring an enormous crisis to the wider world.

It concerns oil: Iran's only major, effective weapon is to obstruct the flow of oil through the Straits of Hormuz – 40% of the world's oil. The outcomes, even if only short-lived, could be nightmarish for the precarious world economy and particularly for the vulnerable West. It could set off an avalanche of complex consequences that the world is not in a position to ride out, regarding energy-supplies, international

trade, money-markets, currencies and geopolitics. But for Israel, blaming Iran yet actually acting as the aggressor, and itself being an illegal nuclear power, this could be a move too far. Even Israel's overseas supporters would strain and balk at this one: Israel could prove too costly for the world, too costly even for the Americans – a liability worth ditching. Israel could blow its own feet right off.

Many people will of course disagree, and disagreement is the default pattern around anything to do with Israel. We shall see. But if this war does happen it won't be an easy ride. As Alaa Din pointed out a few days ago: "*The Israelians always say we Palestinians use human shields, but we will be the human shields for the Israelians this time – we stand in the way and there is nothing we can do*".

Then we come to the Palestinians themselves. The vast majority want no more conflict – they always lose anyway. Over the last sixty years, every time an Israeli dies in conflict, 10-20 Palestinians die – that's the way the odds are stacked. Ishmael told me on Friday that, down in Yatta, south of Hebron, the Israelis had invaded the place, seeking to re-arrest a Palestinian released in the recent Hamas-negotiated prisoner release, and the people of Yatta had mobilised to protect him. One 17 year old Palestinian was shot in the head by the soldiers – and the poor chap was only walking past, uninvolved in the protests. I knew his mother – "*He's the third I have lost*", she said (the had eight children, five surviving). Meanwhile, on Friday morning at 3am, Israeli soldiers invaded Deheisheh camp in Bethlehem (illegally), seeking to re-arrest another released prisoner – he escaped, but the people of Deheisheh were out on the streets, and it nearly came to blows.

Then there is Gaza. The Israelis are bombing Gaza yet again. More deaths, more grief. There's something they just don't get: the militants of Gaza are a small minority who would lose influence if the Israelis just lightened up their blockade on Gaza and allowed its 1.5 million residents to get a better life. While Gazans are throttled, isolated and bombed, naturally there will be a body of opinion there supporting the rocket-firing militants – after all, if you were an embattled people with

almost no support and few ways of returning fire, would you lie down and let your enemies oppress and bomb you? The Israelis themselves certainly wouldn't do that. So the answer is to ramp down the conflict, let ordinary life settle in and, perhaps with a few mistakes and setbacks, the matter would settle down, and the million or so Israelis affected by rocket attacks would live in safety.

This stuff is becoming more and more common. West Bank settlers are attacking Palestinians, waving guns, invading Palestinian territory and desecrating Muslim holy places – often protected by troops. Soldiers are causing trouble. Houses are getting demolished regularly. Palestinians are dying or getting injured. It's almost as if the Israelis are trying to kill off the now-dominant Palestinian non-violent movement by provoking aggression. In Jerusalem all sorts of problems are happening – every few days, something erupts. It is generating frustration amongst some Palestinians and fear amongst others. Young people see a bleak future. The international community does little – it's too busy with other things, and its hands are dirty too.

Whether it's in Jerusalem, connected with the settlements or in Gaza, the event that lights the fire could be close. An Israeli attack on Iran could set off incidents closer to home. New developments in the Arab revolutions could do it. The portents are not good. What's most ominous though is this: while in the short term Palestinians could suffer, in the longterm, Israel is far more at risk. Its future is at stake, and it is Israelis themselves who are undermining their own country's best longterm interests, sowing seeds of future difficulty.

Israel has a dangerous sense of hubris, a confidence which is unwise. I support the continued existence of Israel, but an Israel that is friendly and constructive in its relationships, withdrawn to its own pre-1967 territory to give the Palestinians space, secure and at peace within itself, and aligning with international agreements, resolutions and legal judgements. It is heading in the opposite direction, and a day or reckoning could be with us soon.

*Three days later…*
Sunday 11th March 2012

## Girls and Sheikhs

On Saturday I had an interesting day. First, I went down to Yatta to do an English conversation class for 15 and 16 year old girls at a school there. Though I've done it before, it's not my thing, language-teaching, but I like the headmistress, Nofa, and Hope Flowers has worked with the school, and it felt right to do it. I see it as helping these bright girls broaden their horizons – they live in an isolated part of the already-isolated West Bank.

Their English is good. I spoke slowly and clearly, asking for questions, and we covered all sorts of subjects for two full hours. We talked about an Israeli incursion in Yatta, in which a young man had been shot in the head. One of the girls said, perhaps without thinking, that the Palestinians would fight back. I let her say her bit, then gently confronted this way of thinking, pointing out how the Israelis always reply massively and punitively, the Palestinians always suffer more and it doesn't really help the Palestinian cause.

By all means stand firm and look the Israelis four-square in the eyes, letting them know you're not taking it lying down, but fighting back and revenge achieves little, and the girls' parents and grandparents have plenty of experience of that. The Palestinians' only real choice is to outlast Israeli oppression and incursions, hanging in there until the tide turns. Which it will, one day. I pointed out that, in my observation, Palestinians are marginally happier as a society than Israelis, which surprised them at first, but the teacher and Nofa agreed – so who is the winner, really, and what is victory? Israel has some of the developed world's greatest income disparities – a sign of a society that doesn't even really care about its people.

One of the girls asked me what I thought about the Zionist saying of 50-80 years ago, told to Jews to tempt them to emigrate to Palestine, referring to it as a 'land without people awaiting a people without a

land'. Well, it's the other way round, I said: it's a land with lots of people waiting for a land. While saying this I was aware I was healing a perceptual wound in these girls' minds, for it's easy for them to gain the impression that Westerners are ranged against them. I reminded them that, despite our alleged freedoms and democracy in the West, people and ruling elites do not sing from the same hymnbook.

The girls asked me about Cornwall, where I live. I'm soon moving to an organic farm, and we launched into organics and sustainability. They're aware of the idea, and this is a big issue for Palestine. The country needs Green *Intifada*, a way of resisting by strengthening society, improving food security, re-fertilising the land, reducing dependency on imports, bypassing chemical fertilisers, getting people out of the towns (into which the Israelis are herding them) to work in the country, and making the land more pleasing to the eye and nourishing to the soul. One girl said, "*But they're taking our land from us*". "*Yes they are, but you still have some land left, and this makes it even more important to care for it well.*"

One girl asked me what 'honing the soul' means. She had looked up the verb 'hone' in a dictionary, and she couldn't quite see the connection with sharpening knives. So we talked about adversity and the way it hones the soul, sharpening our perceptions. I mentioned the terms 'treading the edge' and 'sharp perception', and also talked about polishing. We come to Earth to learn, and hardship can be, from this perspective, a gift, as long as we look hard for the gifts it brings.

I advised them to go out into nature when they have problems, and about taking three deep breaths when they feel irritated or lost. I taught them to ask themselves what the gift is, whenever something tough happens, and to see their oppressors and adversaries as givers of gifts. This doesn't mean we should seek trouble, but if we're getting it anyway, this is a way we can take hold of a situation and turn it around. Seeing things this way gives us more power to change things, for our power lies in our responses to life's challenges.

They asked me about my religion. I explained how, when I was their age, there was no flexibility in Christianity and how I dropped it. When I was eleven I asked a minister, *if God is love, why we should fear God?* He told me not to ask so many questions. From that moment I was no longer a Christian. Yet I still felt there was a spiritual reality. I read many teachings from different faiths and sources. I didn't tell them this, but it was LSD that helped me answer the question, in 1967. That's what started me off on my path.

In the 1970s I was with Tibetan Lamas for some years, and they gave me many answers, with the gift of meditation. But then they then dismissed me, saying that in this life I was not to be a Buddhist but to follow my own path. This was what I have done ever since. One girl asked, "*But then you have no moral rules to follow?*" I said we must create our own moral rules. "*What do you mean?*". "*Well, one rule I follow is the 'golden rule', to do to others as you want them to do to you*". Another basic rule is non-harming and non-violence.

We need to live with fewer rules and to review our behaviour and beliefs, always reassessing our feelings about goodness and rightness. For, in the end, our real-life actions count most. Being a Muslim or a Christian means little if your actions are questionable. There was a quiet, thoughtful response to this. Nofa, a woman whose actions I believe are admirable and courageous, piped up to say, "*He's right, and that's why you like this man, even if he is not Muslim*". The girls stared at me, and I looked at them. This was a moment of silent communion and sharing. I could see that many of them were computing something they hadn't quite clarified before.

"*This is how I say to you that I am spiritual but not religious. This is the difference. You can be spiritual* ***and*** *religious, or spiritual* ***or*** *religious. But to be religious and not spiritual… in the end it is dangerous.*"

They took all this in. Their questions were very intelligent. They were attentive and participated well. I hoiked a shy girl out of the corner and got her speaking, and then kidded Nofa in front of them, saying that Nofa was a good student – top of the class. She'll do well when she

grows up. There was a lot of tittering, and Nofa giggled at the irreverence. I wanted to stretch and jiggle them all, to give them plenty to think about and reflect on. They loved it. It was a great honour. At the end, one of the girls gave an impromptu speech thanking me, saying she wished me a long life, and that my family didn't miss me too much. "*When you come back, please visit us again – and our younger sisters. We need you.*"

I went back to Bethlehem with Ishmael, dropped into his place in Deheisheh for coffee and then proceeded into town to meet Sheikh Mohammed. It was a warm, sunny day – I was down to my shirt. He was sitting on a seat in Manger Square talking into his phone, with a young man next to him who turned out to be studying English at Bethlehem university and a religious student of the sheikh's. "*You're punctual*", said Sheikh Mohammed. "*No Mohammed, I'm British.*" "*Yes, I had to learn that when I was in Britain.*" He offered a choice, to go down to his family land near Beit Sahour or to go to Irtas. Hmmm, tricky choice. "*Allah knows best*", said I, tossing a coin. It was Irtas.

We set off. He's an avid walker, Mohammed. It was 4km, but pleasant in the warm sun. The south edge of Bethlehem is historic, hilly, a ragtag of joined-up villages with terraced fields between, with olive and nut trees and vines growing. Mohammed must be a Gemini – he darted here and there saying hello and exchanging words with people, obviously well-known and respected. I just kept on motoring along in my Virgoid way – I guess I got stuck in that habit when I was a mountaineer. "*Ten years older than me*", he said, "*And I can't keep up with you!*". "*No, Mohammed, I just keep on my path*".

I said this several times that afternoon. Mohammed wants me to convert to Islam, but I just say "*God is too great to fit within one faith, Mohammed, and I just keep on my path. It's Allah that matters, not mosques, churches and holy books*". He can't answer that – he's the sheikh, but I keep raising the level of the discussion another notch. He's stretchy, accepting my word. I think he knows instinctively that I'd be like a bull in a china shop if I became a Muslim.

His young friend wanted to talk. He cleared a dumped tomato box from the path. "*Know where tomatoes originated, Daoud?*" "*Er, Greece, Egypt?*" "*The Mayans in Mexico. They did a lot of plant husbandry – genetic manipulation – not in laboratories but by selective plant-breeding. And they prayed, asking the gods to help. The first tomatoes were the size of grapes, and they grew them larger. And, do you know what? When the Israelis developed small tomatoes again, they did it in a laboratory with genetic manipulation and no prayers.*" He was blown away by that. "*Do you know what the Mayans also gave us? Potatoes, maize, tobacco, many beans, cucumbers, squashes – many Palestinian foods come from Mexico.*"

"*It's good to study history, Daoud.*" "*Did you learn it in university?*", he asked. "*No, I studied social sciences. But I've read history books for forty years. That's what you should do, Daoud: when you finish university, keep studying. It gives you something no one can take away. It gives knowledge, understanding.*" "*But you don't get a degree, Mr Balden.*" "*No, you get knowledge, and a man of knowledge walks ahead of people with degrees. Real knowledge you can use in real life.*" Palestinians believe almost religiously in getting qualifications, and I was questioning this somewhat.

We were walking past some apple orchards. "*Bethlehem apples are special, Daoud, with some of the oldest species here. Down in Beit Ummar and Halhul, on the way to Hebron, is where the species are even older. Do you know where apples come from? Afghanistan. Apricots, peaches, melons, cashews, cherries…*". Again, these are common Palestinian fruits. "*Seven thousand years ago, the people of Afghanistan were like the Mayans, breeding new plants. Over half of the foods we eat come from the Mayans and the Afghans.*"

This was relevant to our trip because local tradition has it that Irtas is the second oldest continually inhabited place in the world, after Jericho. I can see why. It's a benign village, nestled in an enclosing valley. Sheikh Mohammed said the name comes from the Arabic for 'protected paradise', though official sources say it comes from the Greek *Hortas*,

meaning ‘plants’. Take your pick. The village has a Catholic monastery and in the valley bottom are a long green string of fertile market gardens.

Eventually we got there – to be honest, I was worn out by now – entering a house to meet Sheikh Hajjani. We were welcomed and a late lunch was served. When I refused the chicken legs, Sheikh Mohammed raised his eyes to heaven, as if to say ‘What’s up this time?’. “*Is it your religion?*”, asked Sheikh Hajjani. “*He has no religion*”, said Mohammed, with a wry smile. “*I think he must talk to the djinns*” – the spirits of the land and of places.

“*Not quite, but that’s true too*”, said I. “*No, it’s simple. When I was young I was involved in the rescue of lots of birds from the sea, which had been affected by oil from a tanker, a big ship. A team of us had to kill thousands of birds.*” I did a neck-twisting action to emphasise my point. “*After that, I decided never to kill anything again. I decided that other people shouldn’t kill them for me either. So I eat no dead animals*”, pointing to the chicken leg. At the end of the meal, I noticed the chicken leg still there.

We sat talking and then went out. I had asked where the site of the oldest settlement of Irtas was. I should have guessed. They took me along to a spring near the mosque. Ishmael had taken me there two months earlier. During the Six Day War, when Ishmael was eleven, his family had fled to Irtas over the hill from Deheisheh to hide from the Israelis, who were rampaging through the refugee camp and driving people out, hoping to force them to leave the West Bank for Jordan. Irtas certainly is a refuge and a blessed little place.

We took off our shoes and dangled them in the flowing water, drinking from the outflow of the spring. It was delightful. We just loitered, sitting silently in the sun. The two sheikhs sat together while a gaggle of village children hung around Daoud and myself, watching the water. Then the calling to prayers rang out from the mosque and we went over to it for prayers.

I sat in the back while the men came in, chattered a while, then started their prayers, led by Sheikh Hajjani. In meditation, I was off with the fairies, listening to the resonant prayer chant and glowing quietly. When they finished, some of them sat discussing the *Qur'an*. I was still 'out of it' but within myself I was very aware of people in Gaza, just 50km away, quaking at the onslaught besetting them as we sat here in peace, here in this protected paradise.

But even here in Irtas they have had their problems. We wandered through the village – some boys booted a football to me and we kicked it back and forth – then we cut down a track by the side of a sluice leading from the spring into the market gardens. Sitting there in a patch of chamomile, Sheikh Hajjani told me that, back in the first *intifada*, the Israeli armed forces flew down this valley spraying defoliants to kill the plants and ruin the crops. Children of a vengeful god, when they're worked up the Israelis seem to know no limits.

Later, in the evening, I stood outside the school, quietly reflecting on things, looking at a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, the planets of love and beneficence, radiant in the clear sky. Even so, there's thunderbolt-throwing going on, not far away in Gaza – I could hear the Israeli jets. Whatever the excuses being used, I prayed that those fomenting this escalation to get a bounce-back, a lesson, and that innocent victims be protected or find true mercy in heaven. War achieves little except, perhaps, eventually, the honing of souls, but there are far better ways to hone the soul. This is human error at its worst.

In the gardens and polytunnels we pottered around in the rows of thyme, chamomile and mint, losing track of time, at peace. Then we climbed up to visit the village museum. In halting English, the keeper explained that the site of this house was 5,000 years old. He showed me pots, sickles and embroidery from centuries past, and I sat on a stool two centuries old. He led me down into a cave where people had hidden from many different wars.

Then Sheikh Mohammed was suddenly in a hurry. Where's my mobile phone? Could I fix a taxi? His daughter was waiting to take him to

Hebron. My phone was back at Sheikh Hajjani's – who needs one on a tranquil day like this? We walked back, I rang Ishmael, and we stood in the road chatting with a few villagers in the sinking golden sun.

Eventually Ishmael arrived. I was looking forward to introducing Ishmael and Mohammed, but suddenly Mohammed, irritated, laid into Ishmael, saying that he had taken half an hour to get here (he'd actually taken fifteen minutes, and it takes five minutes to get out of Deheisheh, so narrow and convoluted are its streets). Ishmael held his ground but he was quietly seething. We dropped off Sheikh Mohammed in Bethlehem and Ishmael asked Daoud, "*Is he usually like this?*" "*Sometimes, yes, but he is the sheikh…*" – as if that explained things.

When Daoud had got out, Ishmael turned to me to say, "*You have never been like this to me. So who in this car is the sheikh this afternoon?*". I held my silence. So rattled was he that Ishmael said, "*Let us go to The Tent*". So we went to The Tent, a cafe down in Beit Sahour, and talked over tea. Ishmael was troubled. "*A sheikh is a man we should respect, but he must also deserve respect. I hope it is only me he treats like this.*"

"*Well, Ishmael, we all have our bad moments. We come to Earth to learn, and I believe Mohammed does learn from his mistakes.*" Or perhaps Sheikh Mohammed was feeling hypoglycaemic without knowing it.

"*You are very understanding, Balden.*"

"*If I weren't, Ishmael, I'd have given up long ago. To survive in a mad world, you have to stretch further than you ever think you could. Otherwise you just shut down to protect yourself and hide away. This is our choice.*"

Ishmael is troubled that I am leaving soon – we have become deep friends, mutual protectors and supporters. I'm pensive about the irony of leaving this country just when things seem to be getting serious, leaving people to fend for themselves. Well, sometimes we just have to go forward in faith, without really knowing why. It's time to go soon. And sometimes, especially when you work with difficult situations

psychically and spiritually, it's necessary to do it from a distance as well as close-in, because you can get even closer in that way. Then you can come back when the time is right. *Inshallah*.

*One week later…*
Sunday 18th March 2012

## Occupational Hazards

I went to a talk about normalisation. It concerned an issue that has troubled me, affecting my own actions, and that's why I went. Yousef Habash, who gave the talk, is a member of the Executive Committee of PNGO, a Palestinian umbrella organization comprising 132 member organizations working in different developmental fields. Here is what he mentioned.

Normalisation concerns establishing relations between Palestinians and Israelis, building connections over the apartheid barrier. This sounds good, and it is commonly the norm in the donor countries to encourage and fund projects that further such relationships.

But there's a problem. We are not talking about Britain and Germany at the end of WW2, or America and the USSR on the Fall of the Wall in 1989 – these were countries of a comparable standing and power who were able to make treaties at the end of their conflicts, with recourse to reserve options if such treaties went wrong. But here we're talking about one nation, Israel, which is economically and militarily superior, an invader of the other nation, Palestine.

We aren't talking about equal partners. Cross-community relationships develop on an unequal basis – Palestinians can't go to restaurants or pull strings like Israelis can, and if official permissions are sought in order for them to meet up, Israelis and not Palestinians have the power to fix it. There's a psychological issue too: people in winner nations have more confidence and clout than people in loser nations, no matter how many self-empowerment workshops one might attend.

But there's more still. In the beginning, in the late 1990s, I started out working with both sides in a reconciliatory manner. Then I discovered that something was wrong with this, causing me to gravitate to the Palestinian side. Not because I had turned anti-Israeli, but because I could see that the Palestinians needed assistance to get to a place where peace could be possible. They had lost too much and the odds were stacked against them. Israelis, on the other hand, just needed to work to maintain what they had gained from the Palestinians, and they had a tendency to use peacemaking measures as a cover for maintaining these gains and perpetuating the 'matrix of control' they nowadays continue to apply.

Many Israelis are not conscious of this. Thus, on international tours with an Israeli and a Palestinian speaker, which originally I was involved with organising in UK, the articulate Israeli tended to star the show with a Palestinian as a guest, generally raising the Israeli's kudos since he was a peacemaker with the good grace to bring a Palestinian along. An enlightened Israeli preaching peace is, in some ways, more of a wow-factor for Westerners than a Palestinian.

Habash talked about what some Israelis say: "*Well, why don't the Palestinians just accept their losses, forget the past and come to a deal with us?*". Well, that sounds logical, but it's shot with holes. It's simple: Palestinians hark back to the *Nakba* for a similar reason that Israelis hark back to the Holocaust. "*But the Holocaust was a far bigger crime.*" That might be so, but the *Nakba* hurts Palestinians in a similar way to the way the Holocaust hurts Jews – whether or not the *Nakba* and the Holocaust are comparable as crimes. The immensity of the Holocaust does not excuse Israelis of what they do to Palestinians – ethnic cleansing, stealing land, demolishing houses, bombing Gaza, arrests and the control they exert over Palestinians.

"*But they want their land back, when it was over sixty years ago they lost it, and this isn't practical. They ought to drop the past.*" The same applies to Jews reclaiming their possessions and properties in Germany, Poland and Switzerland, from before WW2. They are permitted to do it,

and some have won substantial restitution, and the same right applies to Palestinians, whose losses are more recent, in some cases even this year.

Israelis have a sense of entitlement and unquestioning rightness that they hardly notice they have. The West Bank occupation and the siege of Gaza are justified by using an historical rationale going back 2,000 years and more. There's a massive hole in this kind of thinking.

Most Palestinians do accept the loss of '1948 Palestine' (the area that became 'Israel proper' in 1948), but they do not accept the loss of the West Bank in the 1967 invasion and subsequent colonisation by Israel. Accepting the loss of '1948 Palestine' involves accepting the loss of 78% of the Palestinians' original land, nearly four-fifths of it. Understandably, Palestinians wish to go no further – they have swallowed too many hard facts already.

So the anti-normalisation campaign in Palestine seeks to stop relations with those Israelis that fail to acknowledge the *Nakba*, the losses, deaths, evictions and tragedies of 1948, when the state of Israel was forcibly established. This massacre and ethnic cleansing was deliberate policy. There are Israelis who accept this and oppose the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza, but there are far more that do not accept or acknowledge it.

The problem here is that joint projects can look like nice reconciliatory ventures, yet they can cover up the real issues at stake. Israelis continue to make inroads into Palestinian land and rights and to kill Palestinians, and they show no sincere intention of pulling back or bringing any restitution. They want what they've got and more, while denying the Palestinians what they want and need.

Israelis are in a position to give back much or all of what they have taken in the West Bank, while Palestinians are supplicants whose requests are easily refused or skimped over. It is this that makes for an unequal relationship, said Habash. Palestinians who fight for the rights of their people are terrorists and extremists, while Israelis who do

similar are seen to serve the forces of law and order – the relationship is unequal and rigged.

So the question of normalisation is fraught. Subtle distinctions are involved. First, not all cross-border organisations and networks adopt a clear position regarding normalisation. In many of them, the Israelis involved are a mixture of those with well-meaning intent who wish to make friends but do not intend to give anything back. Then there are those who oppose the occupation and want to do something about it. So banning connections when a mixed bag is the case can alienate some Israelis that many Palestinians might want to keep onside and build relationships with.

One person in the audience made a valid point. The projects that might be banned are sometimes a starting-place for many Israelis, many of whom have never had anything to do with Palestinians. The first step here is for Israelis to realise that Palestinians are ordinary people with ordinary wishes, aspirations and concerns – not bogeymen, barbarians or cut-throats. Arising from this, some of those Israelis might go further to accept what Israel has done to Palestinians. So such projects that gloss over the occupation do have a certain value.

This is a fair point. But it is countered with the notion that such reconciliatory ventures can cover over the harder truths. People can build an institution of not looking at awkward truths. Also, most Israelis do nothing to meet up with their own Palestinians in Israel – the ‘Arab Israelis’. These people constitute 20% of the population, yet they are heavily discriminated against. The anti-normalisation campaign says that Israelis should befriend Israeli Palestinians first, correcting inequalities in their own nation before making friends with West Bankers. Another fair point.

I was down in Tel Aviv last week. I attended a meeting at The Hub, a meeting and working place for people involved in new start-ups – a major sector in the Israeli economy centred on Tel Aviv. The idea was to propagate the idea of starting a Hub in Palestine. The Palestinians attending the meeting were either Arab Israelis, or West Bankers who

had had to have permits fixed so that they could visit Tel Aviv – a lengthy procedure where Israelis have to vouch for them (again, making the relationship unequal).

It was a good meeting with potentially positive outcomes. But I realised what was going on here. The Israelis indeed were well-meaning, though there was a potential glitch. Such a move would reactivate an old issue which is more of a problem for Palestinians than for Israelis. So I butted in to offer some help from Britain, from a more objective, detached partner. Such hub-building developments are going on in Britain, and the British foreign office offers grants to help such things. It would also help Palestinians by having expertise and encouragement coming from Britain rather than from Israel – especially if conflict or polarisation flares up.

This was welcomed by the Palestinians and generally welcomed by the Israelis, though I think they might have felt I was stealing the show. But it highlights a point: it's not good enough for an Israeli simply to be well-meaning toward Palestinians. It's important for Israelis to do something to undo the damage done and to recognise that the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza must end.

It's important also for foreigners to recognise our part in it – and I am one who does. It's not good enough to play nicey-nicey peacebuilding games, insisting that everyone stops being nasty to each other. In doing so, we cover Israel's tracks, allowing it to continue in its ways, and we pressurise the Palestinians to shut up, swallow hard, accept their losses and play someone else's peace game. But building peace isn't just about making peace, it's about the *restitution of justice* – and peace will follow when Palestinians feel justice is returning. Westerners need to stop using the peace card as a way of bashing Palestinians.

I agree with the basic principles of the anti-normalisation campaign. Yet I have reservations about the precise instances and issues involved. Sometimes, for example, I allow Israelis to get away with 'not talking about it' in order to soften them up before coming in with some awkward truths – but this would be considered by some to be

normalisation. Sometimes a little benign trickery is involved too, in order to get some information or fix something. But it's also true that, to come here to help Palestinians, I do at times call on the support of Israeli friends to vouch for me, so that I can gain entry to the country.

The way to support peacebuilding is to foster relationships over the separation wall. It's true that the past should be forgotten – but the best way to do this is to perform some genuine restitution of the ills and insecurities that Palestinians still suffer. For Palestinians to forget their past, things need to improve immensely, and Israelis should also consign the Holocaust to the past.

The Holocaust should never be forgotten, neither the *Nakba*. The rigid, unforgiving way that both are remembered doesn't help resolution now. However, nothing can now be done about the Holocaust (except not repeating it), but something can be done about the *Nakba* – that's a big difference. Germany is still paying vast sums to Israel in restitution for the Holocaust, but Israel is avoids restitution to Palestinians, instead letting other countries and agencies perform the necessary social duties an occupying power should carry out. This involves protecting the welfare of its conquered subjects.

Something needs to happen here. This concerns the carrying out of international law and standards, as decided by the international community. Occupation and colonisation of others' land is illegal. Oppression of an occupied people is illegal. An invading power has a responsibility to cater for people under its occupation. This is international law. It should be adhered to, otherwise international law is empty, a pretence.

There's also something that the Palestinians need to learn. They have tended in the past to say No to various ideas and decisions from the international community. Fair enough. But simply blocking something doesn't help, because international forums get fed up, concluding that the Palestinians are just being obstreperous, and they decide in favour of the other side. It's too simple just to block things. It's necessary to make positive statements and do good diplomacy in order to make

one's viewpoint understood. Instead of saying No, it is necessary to state positively what one will go along with, and to make it loud and clear. Even the concept of 'anti-normalisation' is negative: it's a movement for justice and a lasting solution.

So, the Palestinians need to look at their side of the equation and to learn from history. After the Israelis' thumping victory in the 1967 Six Day War, which started the occupation of the West Bank, the Arabs adopted the policy of 'the Three Nos' – no recognition of Israel, no peace and no negotiation. Well, fine. But the consequence was that the Arabs made no progress for twenty years. They lapsed into the same idea Israel falls into, that of trying to punish the other side for its perceived wrongdoings. It gets nowhere. The challenge is to change the concept from 'anti-normalisation' to 'steps to peace'. *If these steps are followed, we will make peace* – that's a positive statement that gives diplomats and the other side something to get to grips with.

So the talk was interesting, and it applies to me personally. I'll have to think about this. Life goes on. Meanwhile, I have nine days left in Palestine.

*Three days later…*
Wednesday 21 March 2012

## The Virtues of Giving

An armoured digger was rumbling slowly up through the military construction site toward a new piece of the separation wall that was being built at Al Walaja. The wall slices through Palestinian land to surround the growing Israeli settlement of Har Gilo, which is taking over much of the hill on which Al Walaja, a farming village, is located. Over a hundred Palestinian houses have been demolished for it. Just round the corner is Cremisan monastery, a well-run estate managed by the Salesians, an ancient Christian sect here in Bethlehem – its land is going to be sliced through by the new wall. It's crazy.

Ishmael was getting nervous. There was an armoured police van cruising around watching us, and he knew it would wait for us further on, watching what we were doing. I obliged, stopped photographing and hopped back in the car. "*If there's a problem, Ishmael, I'll handle it – you're just an innocent taxi-driver, okay?*" But I knew he was concerned because his son Tareq had been released from Israeli jail only a few months ago, and the Israelis are now going around re-arresting some of those who were released. Not because they are doing anything suspicious, but if they are suspected of *possibly* doing something, that is enough.

In the unlikely event that I got arrested, I could talk my way out of it, cite a few names and, at worst, waste 24 hours, but for Ishmael and people like him it's a very different story. He's an inmate of Deheisheh refugee camp, which immediately makes him a suspect, even though he is the least troublesome man you could imagine. He is respectable, cautious and law-abiding.

As part of my finishing-off process in Palestine, I asked Ishmael to take me round some of the landscape atrocities around Bethlehem, to photograph them. It was a hazy day, even up here in the West Bank highlands, but since I'm running out of time I just have to do it anyway.

Of course, everyone wants me to visit them before I go, but time is running out. Why did they not visit me? But they don't think that way. It goes like this: *we are the suffering Palestinians and our lives are so hard and we need help, so people should come and help us*. It's not entirely conscious – just an ingrained attitude of mind. So there's an unconscious tendency to treat foreigners like helping machines.

I've had to lay down the law on a few occasions: *if you expect people like me to be money-providers, it makes our visits more expensive, which means we cannot come back easily.* A psychology of dependency is involved and, unfortunately, we Westerners are as guilty of inveigling such dependency on Palestinians as they are of falling into its trap. It takes two to tango. But only *some* Palestinians are like this: many retain their dignity and wisdom, irrespective of their poverty, appreciating

what comes when it does come, and avoiding sucking up to people to attract more of it. Dependency is, after all, humiliating.

I don't want to sound critical: it's too easy for a well-off person to judge those who are poorer. Richer people have a *duty* to support the poorer people of the world, not only because it helps the poor but also it saves the souls of the relatively rich. The challenge is to do it discerningly, in ways that genuinely help people without creating negative side-effects.

The challenge is to be helpful without binding people into psychological slavery and the capitalist development treadmill. We need to help people strengthen society and solve problems without making them addicted. That's tricky. Foreign money in Palestine has been misused to gain power and even as a way of conducting war. I refer here to the threat used against Palestine that funds will be withdrawn unless Palestinians comply with foreigners' wishes. This happened in 2011 after Palestine's UN membership bid.

The trick is to help people help themselves. Sometimes they have a crucial issue they cannot overcome which, if resolved with a cash download, can unblock a logjam and help them move forward. So, when Ishmael's son Tareq emerged from Israeli jail in January, I gave Ishmael some money to help them buy some catch-up tutoring for him, to make him eligible for university and give him something to get his teeth stuck into after emerging from prison. This made a critical difference. What helped here was that I knew they did not expect help, and the money would be well used. But when Adnan asked me to lend him a substantial sum to keep the lawyers at bay, thanks to his unpaid debts, my answer was no – this is not the same, even though Adnan was clearly in need. I felt sorry for him, but I could not do that.

Being in Palestine isn't just a matter of *giving*. I have received so much from being here. Returning to Britain will involve a degree of self-suppression, which isn't easy. Bizarrely, Palestine and its situation permit a flowering of heart and soul, arising from the tragedies and joys one witnesses and participates in here, as well as the attitude of Palestinians to life. This indeed is a Holy Land, where something is

revealed that is not quite present elsewhere. The emotional intelligence and relative openness of Palestinians opens me up too.

The acts of generosity and sharing one can witness here are salutary. I've watched many Westerners arrive, receiving a positive shock at what happens when they come, experiencing a hospitality and generosity unlike what we experience in the West. Life is not easy here – it is more intense and insecure – yet it is more colourful, human, rich in feeling and experience, and spiritually lively. Some internationals keep coming back as much as they can.

One English chap, Ron from Yorkshire, seems to have grown tired of his life in Britain, and he's back again and again. He participates in non-violent actions against settlers and Israeli incursions – "*I've developed an addiction to tear gas and twisted arms*", he once said. But he loves it, and he loves helping Bedouin shepherds reclaim their land, or making his point at Al Walaja, where the Israelis are busy annexing land, building the wall and giving local Palestinian farmers a hard time.

It's all part of the Israeli 'Greater Jerusalem' project, in which they are encircling Jerusalem with settlements and walls, pushing over the Green Line into Palestinian territory. Yet Jerusalem is geographically the capital and hub of the highland West Bank, from which the city is being separated. Israelis of course do not see it that way – they see it as a return to their historic capital and a legitimate exclusion of dangerous Arabic intruders.

So, despite all this, spending time in Palestine has its rewards. If you want to raise the human-factor stakes in your own life, I recommend it. You might bring benefit to others too while you're at it – probably in ways you never thought possible, often simply through listening and being friendly. But the key issue really is the interchange. It's a fair trade.

*One week later…*
Wednesday 28 March 2012

# Amman again

I'm always rather relieved to get out of Israel. My departure via the King Hussein Bridge border control was uneventful, though you never can tell how it's going to go. So there's an underlying tension as you approach the time of leaving the country. This tension suddenly evaporates as soon as you're on that bus over no-man's-land away from Israel and on your way to the Jordanian border control. But at least, when I pass through the Israeli border control I get a read-out showing whether or not I am registered on their computer as a risky person – thus far, it's okay.

The landscape around the border crossing is barren yet captivating, the old sea bed of a once much larger Dead Sea, carved into valleys and strange mounts by wind and water. I wish I could photograph it for you, but it's a military security zone where photography is forbidden, and my objective when I come to this area is to cross the border intact. The flat floor of the Jordan Valley is a little world of its own, Earth's lowest place.

On the way here we drove through Jerusalem. It's an impressive city, perched on high plateaux, with dual carriageways wheeling around the city through valleys and tunnels. There's a lot of new development, with lots of concrete everywhere. The modern building style here is fortress-like, with blocks of apartment buildings stacked up in defensible positions – impressive to some but, to me, a social nightmare in the making and the symbol of an embattled society. Jerusalem is a strident city, very polarised. I don't really like it.

But as the road curves around the city to join the main Tel Aviv to Jericho road, the landscape widens out, turning into desert mountains – right now comparatively green after the winter rains – and the road soars down, down, down, through the Judaean hills, heading for sea level and then below it, down into the Jordan Valley.

After going through two checkpoints on the approach to the border crossing, you arrive at the terminal building. There's one entrance for Jews and foreigners and one for Palestinians. You hand your bag over and head into the passport control hall, where you pay a rather extortionate departure tax of £35 (a 'passenger fee'), then you head over to passport control where you show your passport. There's some tapping on the computer and, if you're clear, you get stamped. Then you go to another place, where your passport is examined again before you pass through the turnstile. Then you collect your bag and wait for the bus to the Jordanian side. Well, that's what it's like when it's not busy and you have a clear run through – I deliberately choose such times to pass through.

Eventually the bus leaves, heading through a final Israeli checkpoint, then over the rather disappointing Allenby Bridge, which crosses the nowadays almost dried-out Jordan River. So much water is extracted from it upstream that nowadays the river hardly flows. This is one of the world's more famous and sung-about rivers, and it is now a riverine tragedy. Water extraction from the Jordan River means that the Dead Sea is gradually shrinking and drying up. There is a Jordanian plan to siphon water from the Red Sea into the Dead Sea, with desalination plants to create potable water, but this is going slowly owing to difficulties making agreements with the Israelis. Everything here is subsumed to the conflict – a conflict conveniently kept going to justify Israel's obsession with security, emergency rule and military preparedness.

Then we come to two Jordanian checkpoints, followed by the Jordanian terminal further on. They take your passport at the first checkpoint and miraculously it is returned to you at the terminal, after a confusing time seeking out your luggage and then thronging to collect your passport. Eventually you emerge from this process to run the gauntlet of competing taxi-drivers seeking custom. I had rung an old Jordanian taxi-driving friend, Shawki, who couldn't come, but he had sent a friend. I found a Belgian-Hungarian couple who needed a ride, and we shared the taxi into Amman.

After a few miles crossing the flat floor of the Jordan Valley, the road heads up the side of a valley penetrating the escarpment on the edge of the valley, gradually climbing 1,300m or 3,200ft up toward Amman, passing belching, struggling trucks and weaving along the side of the scarp until the road reaches the top, levelling out and approaching the city. Here in Jordan there are no watchtowers, separation walls, checkpoints or controls, no surveillance balloons or cameras – it's always a little strange, emerging into a freer country after being in Israel. I keep looking around, expecting a wall or watchtower, and they just aren't there.

I had been busy saying goodbye to friends and completing all sorts of small details before leaving. To add spice to the occasion, the internet at the school went wrong, preventing further blogs and other interactions far and wide. But perhaps that was good too – a release from the duties of a cyber-junkie and an opportunity to focus on real-life events and situations.

I must confess too, I am tired, rather deeply tired. I need to rest and replenish my batteries. I need to sit by the fire and stare into the embers, and sit for long periods on clifftops, staring at the waves. When I get back home I shall return to a list of things to do, demands to fulfil and responsibilities to observe, some of them questionable, typically British, bureaucratic and expensive. A host of people will invite me to visit, many of whom would be a little more convincing if they offered to visit me.

The last few days have been both sad and a relief. People didn't want to say goodbye, and I have some reluctance in leaving them. Especially at this time, when something could burst out in Palestine, changing everything, probably for the worse. There's a feeling of dread around, though everyone is busy getting on with their lives too, trying to make normality prevail.

I don't want to abandon them. But in another sense I am relieved. I'm looking forward to going back home. I left Britain with mixed feelings about my homeland, wondering where it is going and what part I play in

it. I return feeling a little better, though still mixed, and glad that I live in Cornwall, almost another country, not in Middle Britain. I look forward to stomping the cliffs, meeting old friends, perhaps even to a change of fortunes.

One of my tasks is to get my book *Pictures of Palestine* finally published. It has been a long wait – two years – as it has done the rounds of publishers only to get nowhere. "*Pity it's about Palestine, not Israel*". "*Too biased*" – which means it speaks up for Palestine. "*Interesting approach, but we could sell it more easily if you were more angry with Israel and made them into the badguys*." Well, the book doesn't fit into any of the customary categories, and that's actually its strength. It's honest, not a rant, defusing stereotypes and portraying real life, a bit like a travel book. So I'm self-publishing it.

Now I have 24 hours in Amman to think and adjust. Travelling from Palestine to Britain is quite a long jump, culturally, to a different world. No more will I time my day by the calling to prayers, and no more will I have my morning cup of tea looking over the separation wall at the Israeli settlement over the valley.

Whither life leads next, I do not know. My roots in Britain aren't strong any more. I'm feeling more like an expat – and in Cornwall there are quite a few returned expats, who need to be in Britain but don't really want to. I'm becoming an internationalised Brit who loves the endearing, picturesque, friendly and human aspect of Britain and who dislikes the spiritually deadening materialism, conformism and insularity of the place. People often ask me whether it's dangerous or risky doing what I do in Palestine, to which the answer is, yes, it's slightly risky, but living a safe life in Britain is also risky – the main risk being that of wasting one's life away, avoiding risky situations.

Please permit me to thank you, all my readers, for following this story. While writing the blog during my stay I have appreciated your company, thoughts and comments, and have enjoyed sharing this story with you. Leaving God's holy land and returning to the largely secular, business-dominated world of Britain, where everything is perfectly

normal except when it isn't, I wish you all the following prayer, however you care to read it.

***May Spirit bless you and keep you,***
***and cause its light to shine within you***
***and guide your way home.***

*Ma'assalam* – go in peace.

*Palden Jenkins*
Cornwall, May 2012
**www.palden.co.uk/pop**