

May 19, 2008

Update from Janet Lahr Lewis

Dear Friends,

Israel has finally completed a two week stint of celebrations for Independence Day (better known as Creation Day since they didn't have anyone to declare their independence *from!*). As I sat having lunch in Jerusalem yesterday afternoon many different, unrelated thoughts ran through my head that I would like to share with you as in informal form of keeping you updated.

I was invited to attend a meeting of the Department of Services for Palestinian Refugees followed by a Middle East Council of Churches meeting that took place in Fuheis, Jordan (near Amman) from May 9-11. As Israel continues to crack down on and deny Christians from working or volunteering in Israel, for the past year many of my colleagues wishing to re-enter Israel after a trip "out" have been given visas for only 2 weeks to one month, or been denied re-entry all together. If "denied entry" is stamped in their passport, they must then return to their home country (or the closest embassy) and reapply for a new passport requiring much maneuvering of official government representatives and Ministry offices. In fact, I have recently spent many hours trying to acquire a student visa for our UM mission intern, David Hosey, who was only given a one month visa upon his return from Turkey. Since I, too, am here (and have always been here) on a three month tourist visa I am listed on their computer as doing consulting work for Mar Elias branch campus of the University of Indianapolis in the Galilee, the answer I have always given when asked, "What is the purpose of your trip?". (This is not entirely untrue although it requires a very minimal amount of my time and energy.) So as to verify their information and not risk being denied re-entry I decided to cross over to Jordan on the northern bridge closest to the campus, about a two hour drive from Jerusalem, rather than the one closest to my home near Jerusalem.

On May 8, the day Israel had set aside for the celebration of its Independence Day, according to the Jewish calendar, I turned off the fridge, emptied the trash, left a list of contacts on the counter, and dropped off the key with a neighbor on the chance that I would not be given a re-entry visa and consequently be unable to get home (keeping in mind I have had to do this every three months for over 14 years!) I drove north to the village of Ibillin in the Galilee where the campus is located and spent the night there. I had chosen to leave my car at the campus and pay the extra \$80 to take a taxi to the bridge the next morning rather than risk parking my car at the bridge in case I was not permitted back into the country. From the northern bridge it is another two hour taxi ride back south to get to Amman, and another 30 Jordanian Dinar or roughly \$55. On the return trip I would need to do it all over again in reverse. A lot of money and about six hours of wasted time each way just to have a better chance of being let back in the country.

On the drive north, all the way west from Jerusalem then along the coast road, almost every car I passed was flying Israeli flags on both sides of the car in a show of solidarity and support of Israel. Although I fully recognize Israel on everything but the illegally occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza (and the Golan Heights), I also fully recognize that the population of that "state" is about 30% Palestinian. And so, in solidarity with the portion of the population who Israel refers to as "Arab Israelis" I pulled out from under my seat a keffieh (black and white Palestinian headscarf) and draped it over the back of the passenger's seat then closed the smaller Palestinian flag into my window so that it flapped in the wind as well. Needless to say, I got many angry stares until I got farther north. Then people just pointed and laughed. One

Jewish couple behind me at a stoplight even smiled and gave me a “thumbs up”. Sometimes the most effective messages don’t have anything to do with words.

After the meetings in Jordan concluded I had to do the trip all over in reverse. For years, as soon as the crossing comes into view, I can feel my blood pressure rise, wondering if I will get back across, trying not to get angry at rude Israeli soldiers who enjoy making peoples’ crossing, especially Palestinians, as unpleasant as possible. Unless you are with a group of other tourists the experience can be most unpleasant. I was grateful, at least, that the old crossing that required standing for hours in the scorching sun (while soldiers sat in air-conditioned booths) has been replaced by an air conditioned terminal. Now the atmosphere and my disposition are tempered by the cooler air. After a not horribly long time, nushkar Allah, (Thanks be to God) I was given a three month visa and sent on my way. (Sometimes the extra effort pays off!)

I returned to the campus in Ibillin around 1:00 and set about tracking down the head of the university as we had arranged to pick up documents for David Hosey to take to the Ministry of Interior with his visa application. As fate would have it, the head of the college had been called to Jerusalem for a meeting with the Ministry of Education. They are trying to get full accreditation for the campus to finally become the first Arab University in Israel after five long years of struggling as an “American” branch campus. As fate would also have it (fate just loves keeping me on my toes!) the secretaries were also off that day, not sure why, so I was forced to spend another night in Ibillin (my home away from home) so that I could get the papers from the secretaries the next morning, return to Jerusalem, and drop them off with David so he could take them to his appointment the next day.

By this time it was Wednesday, May 14. On my drive back south I got a call from a Palestinian friend asking if I was at the airport. In a sudden panic I replied, “No, why? Am I supposed to be?” I thought I had forgotten to meet a group arriving or some other “senior moment”. He replied, “Aren’t you there meeting President Bush’s jet?” Oh, right! I’m not exactly Condi Rice! Unfortunately I knew that Bush’s arrival would mean another “tightening of security” and that my getting back into Bethlehem would be much more difficult if not altogether impossible.

Thursday, May 15<sup>th</sup> marked Independence Day for the Israelis (although I have always wondered, “independence from whom?”) and al Nakba Day or the Day of the Catastrophe for the Palestinian people. I did get into Bethlehem that day by taking the longer route from the south. Most of the shops and businesses were closed that day in remembrance. The few people I did see on the streets were wearing black as I had also done. At noon thousands of black balloons were released from locations all over the West Bank hoping that they would travel to other parts of the region so that others would also remember the day 60 long years ago when the Palestinians lost their homeland.

In the afternoon I received a phone call from Gaza. A Palestinian friend who is head of the Near East Council of Churches in Gaza was calling. He had been able to get a permit to leave Gaza to attend the meetings in Jordan, but his wife was denied, so the vacation they had planned outside the hell that is now the Gaza strip was forced to be cancelled. As soon as I heard his voice I asked about his trip back into Gaza. He told me that while in Jordan all Gazans are now required to report to the Jordanian Ministry of Interior to make sure they are there for legitimate reasons. This confirmed his absence during one full day of the meetings. He said it wastes an entire day to go and sit in a waiting room for a ten minute meeting. They just confirm that you are who you say you are and that you are actually in Jordan, then they let you go. He also mentioned that he had received a call on his way back to Gaza with a request to bring bread back with him. He emptied his suitcase and filled it with bread for the starving people in prison

that is now Gaza. He has other clothes, but there is now no way to bake bread! There is no gas and only enough electricity to power emergency and medical facilities. Gaza has become the worst “avoidable” humanitarian disaster in modern history. All in all, it was not a good day.

One of the things I tend to do to keep my sanity and my temper in check is to observe my surroundings for anything that will make me smile. Here are some things I noticed on my way home from work on the day of Al Nakba:

-Strollers: it has only been about 5 years since I spotted the first baby stroller here and it has taken that long for the trend to catch on. Before that women struggled with one arm carrying a baby and her bags of groceries and household supplies while the other toted more packages and held the hands of two other small children.

-Bicycles: This new trend can cause severe “traffic” delay when some young boy decides to take his big mountain bike through the crowded alleys of the Old City of Jerusalem where it is already difficult to maneuver past tourist groups and shopkeepers’ wares. I did happen to see a couple of industriously helpful boys use their bikes to block vehicular traffic on Manger Street in Bethlehem so that a shepherd could get his flock across the street.

-Car Seats: These are required but very rarely used, much to my agitation. It is not unusual to see a small car with the back seat jam-packed with children wiggling for space and a baby sitting on the mother’s lap in the front seat. Only people who seem to be educated in the West understand that car seats, like seatbelts, are for safety not inconvenience.

-More tourists: I take this as a mixed blessing. While I personally would love to be able to continue to enjoy being able to walk into Nativity Church or some other holy site and be the only one there I also am very aware that my Palestinian friends have no business when that happens. Now there is usually a 2 hour wait to get into the grotto to see the birthplace of Jesus. For the local hotels and shop keepers this is excellent. For the street vendors and children forced by their parents to beg on the streets (since we all know children get more sympathy than adults) it means that tour groups are easy targets for their pushy, rude and disrespectful behavior. Over sixty street vendors were given permits by the former Ministry of Interior, despite any past record of grievances filed against them. (I have personally filed three complaints against two vendors and a shopkeeper for cheating and/or rude and lascivious behavior. They give the other reputable vendors a bad name!) The new Minister of Interior will hopefully put an end to this so that the reputable vendors and shopkeepers can receive people into their shops without tourists fearing being abused.

-Illegal Russian Tourists: Many of the tourists coming by the busload are Russians or Poles. This is not just a phenomenon to celebrate Orthodox Easter. They were coming before and continue to come. It is wonderful to see them, but they come in through the crossing with Egypt at Taba in the south, make a mad three hour dash in the bus up to Jerusalem, run around the Old City, load up the bus, dash into Bethlehem, visit Nativity Church then make the three hour dash back to Taba in the same day in hopes of not getting stopped. They do not have visas to be here. On a personal level this makes me smile! I’m not a big fan of red tape.

-First Communion Sunday: All over the world little children dress in white to take their first communion. What better place to do that than the Holy Land. After the church rites are over and photos are taken the children are dressed in traditional Palestinian outfits, long embroidered dresses and scarves for the girls and keffiehs and elaborate vests and the loose, black riding pants of the Bedouin horsemen. Every so often you see a miniature nun or Franciscan brother

as families stick to a two thousand year old tradition of offering one of their children to the church to enter the ministry. Cameras are everywhere for this wonderful day.

As we hear news of other catastrophes in China, Iraq, and even the devastating tornadoes in the U.S. we push on "running as fast as we can just to stay in the same place." And so, my friends, that's it for now. I will continue to work with visitors and VIM teams coordinating their stays, answer the many questions I receive by email, liaise with my ecumenical counterparts, write funding proposals for small ventures in the villages where tourists rarely venture, and continue to find things to smile about as the situation here goes from bad to worse. After all, as my father once told me, "Never lose your sense of humor. Someday it may be the only thing you have left."

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