

Report from the Holy Land
by Rev. Barbara Gadon
April 19, 2009

Reading: "An Afternoon in Hebron" based on notes by Kathi Weiss

Jacob, the character in our ancient reading this morning, is said to be buried in Hebron, along with his grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, his father, Isaac and mother Rebecca, and his wives, Leah and Rachel. The Tomb of the Patriarchs, as it is called, was built in the first century AD by Herod the Great. This makes it a holy site to Christians, Muslims and Jews.

Our tour group of 15 included Catholics, Jews and Unitarian Universalists. That morning, we toured Bethlehem University, led by a stylish young woman who had once been the student of our tour guide, Ibrahim. For many years, Ibrahim had been a high school math teacher in the village where we are staying. He told the young woman we were going to Hebron after lunch, and she said, "Good luck." He said, "Inshallah" - which means "God willing"....

On the road to Hebron, we see vineyards, long walls made of stone, very beautifully done. Someone later explained that these walls mark off property lines. We see a vineyard where the ground is covered with purple wildflowers. We see men on the side of the road herding sheep.

We also see settlements. Ibrahim explains that settlements begin with a military camp installation. Then they move trailers in. (We see an example of this). After that, houses are built.

Ibrahim points out on the vehicles around us that yellow license plates indicate Israeli, and green tags are Palestinian. The tags on our bus are yellow, for Israeli. As our big tour bus pulls into town, we are looked at, long and carefully, by the Palestinians who live there. Small children wave. The adults just stare.

Hebron is a big industrial and business center. It has a big glass industry. We stopped on the way out of town to see a glass blower and purchase glass and tile. On the wall is a photo of Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, visiting the shop. With 180,000 people, Hebron is the 2nd largest city in the West Bank. There is an Israeli settlement in the middle of the town of 600 to 900 people.

Old City Hebron. Ibrahim says it used to be a very pleasant place, but is now a ghost town.

After our bus driver (Johnnie) skillfully backs the bus for a great distance up a street, we park and walk toward a market. We can see that certain side streets off the market are blocked off because of the settlement on the rise above us. Closing off these side streets to the market has affected the vendors' ability to sell. There is a place where we can look directly up and see a house in the settlement. There is a wire across the top of the market at this spot because the settlers were throwing garbage down on the people using the market. While we are standing there, a settler is outside his house and has a hose. He sees us below and turns the hose on, sending water down this big pipe right where we are standing. It is clear that he is purposefully doing this. Sabina, a member of our group, yells up to him that he should be ashamed of himself. We walk on. A couple of young men trying to sell souvenirs glom onto

our group and basically stay with us the entire time we are there. There are very persistent in trying to sell their wares....very clearly desperate for a sale. Maxine, another group member, ends up buying lots of trinkets from them. Many of us take pictures of the guard in the tower.

We go through a guard point to get to the tombs of the Patriarchs. It has been divided and heavily guarded since 1994, when there was a shooting during Friday Muslim prayer services. The guards won't permit us to enter the Muslim section, saying that tourists aren't allowed in during Friday prayers. It is well past noon, but who are we to argue? Ibrahim apparently is not allowed into the Jewish section of the site. (He is Greek Orthodox, but more importantly, Palestinian.) But he leads us to the gate, asking if the rest of our group could attend Friday night shabbat services there. Here we are told that we cannot get in because Christians are not allowed. Clearly a group that has Jews, Catholics and Unitarian Universalists does not fit into a neat category around here.

So we turn back to the market. We see stands with embroidered goods and a big stand with spices and nuts. There is a burlap bag filled with cigarette butts. We are told that it is there for those who cannot afford a cigarette. We also taste a huge flat rolled up item which we are told is grapes. We stop and have tea, coffee, and fruit at a little shop in the market. Some people play cards. Very nice experience. The shop is clearly not very prosperous and it feels good to be sending some business their way.

We leave the town and I must agree with Ibrahim that it does have a ghost city feel to it.

Sermon

The story of Jacob being promised land for a great nation. The story of Jacob wrestling with an angel in the middle of the night. "I will not let you go unless you bless me," he tells the angel. And though he is wounded, he prevails, securing a blessing and a new name, Israel. These stories have given hope to the Jewish people for centuries. The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have sustained them through pogroms and holocausts and ghettos and oppression and exile for centuries. If you visit the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, you will see that the holocaust of World War II is but one of many throughout Jewish history. These are some powerful stories.

And the story of Israel is also a part of a new story, one of pride and incredible cultural and economic development in 60 short years since its new start in 1948. And one of suffering and displacement, poverty, violence and humiliation for the Palestinian people who had lived in this land of Jacob for centuries. Of course, there were others who ran things before that. And people who came before them. If you look at a cutaway model of a 'tel' or a hill in Israel and Palestine, you can see layers of the different civilizations - conquering cultures - one on top of the other. In some way, the Jacob story is part of each of these layers, too - for Christians, Muslims and Jews - as are the stories of Jesus, and the stories of Muhammad. These are holy stories. And this is the holy land that members of our church and others visited a few weeks ago. The trouble with calling a land 'holy' is that it can make a reasonable conversation about the place - who owns it, who controls it - next to impossible. 'Holy', we may well ask, for whom?

The conflict in Israel and Palestine makes the headlines in our newspapers, and the daily round-

up on NPR. Our pulses quicken more when we hear about this conflict than with most any other in the world. And conflict is practically all you hear about Israel and the Palestinian territories. For many people, it sounds like the most unappealing spot in the world. So you don't hear much about breathtaking views in the Golan, atop the mountain and ruins of a Crusader castle. You don't hear about the silly pleasure of floating in salt water in the Dead Sea – without a raft or inner tube, or anything – just crouch down, pick your feet up, tilt back and *voila*, float. You don't hear about barbecue feasts in Arab restaurants or shopping in the souqs, or bazaars. You don't hear about walking along the dusty path in a Roman site and picking up a shard of pottery the size of a nickel, fairly certain that it's two thousand years old. You don't hear about the creamy white limestone that surrounds you in Jerusalem, or the shoes piled up for services outside the magnificent blue and gold mosque on the Temple Mount, or the cats that nuzzle your ankles in outdoor cafes. You don't hear about going into a museum and giving your grandfather's name, as Barry Marrs did, and having them produce a family tree of your people from Lodz. Including your own name and your wife's, charmingly misspelled. You don't hear about pleasant Friday mornings in Tel Aviv, wandering along Allenby Street among the hipsters that could easily pass for New Yorkers. You don't hear about the glorious symmetry of the Bahai gardens in Haifa, and the hushed, rose-scented calm of their shrine. You don't hear about students at Bethlehem University, most of whom are pretty, young Muslim women in high fashion headscarves and western jeans. You don't hear about the ordinary people that live there, Jewish and Palestinian, most of whom are eager for this whole conflict to be over.

Most people when they ask us about our trip, have one question: Is there any hope? That was certainly our question for the people we met there. Our group of 15, half of whom are members or friends of our church, were led on this trip by a Palestinian organization, the Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies, located in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem. Siraj Center arranged for sight-seeing in churches, synagogues, mosques and Roman ruins. Our aim was to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch this fascinating place. But it was also to hear a variety of perspectives, Israeli and Palestinian. Michel Awad, who was assigned to coordinate our trip, said that most people who come to experience history in the holy land, or to make a spiritual pilgrimage, come to visit rocks. Siraj Center wants them to see people. They arranged for us to spend two nights in home stays with families on the West Bank. And they arranged for meetings with people working for peace and offering humanitarian aid.

It sounds like a simple idea. Go in a meeting room or tour a neighborhood, and get somebody's take on the situation. Ask anybody from our trip, even our coolest customers, and they will tell you, it was an emotional experience. We met a family living in a tent in East Jerusalem whose home had been demolished. A gated community was being developed there, with no concern about where the current residents would go, where they would live, or how. We saw the wall separating the West Bank from Israel – a 20-foot high, concrete bruiser covered with graffiti that is killing the economy and the spirit of Bethlehem. Tourism is drying up. We were there during Holy Week, which is normally a big season for religious pilgrims and tourists. I counted three of us in Manger Square one afternoon. It's drying up businesses on the West Bank and barring many people from working in Israel. Unemployment on the West Bank is 19%.

We saw and heard about settlements - Israelis encouraged and armed by the government to take more and more land. We worshiped with a Reform Jewish congregation in Modin, a delightful experience even though it was all in Hebrew. They had the first female rabbi in Israel, Rabbi Kinnaret Shiryon, who founded the first Reform synagogue in Israel that received state funding for a building.

Their joy as a community was infectious, their commitment to social justice very much like our own. And, we were told, Modin is considered by Palestinians to be a settlement.

We heard about checkpoints stalling people for hours or preventing them from getting to work altogether. At one, we watched as our guide, Ibrahim, disappeared for several long minutes to pass through metal detectors and have his name checked on a list of 40 Palestinian guides approved to lead tours in Israel. They asked me to tell them what we had done that day, repeating what he had just told them. I asked him later if he would have been held longer if we had not been with him. "Much longer," he said quietly. We heard about young men put in jail and never told why. We heard about farms being taken from people, won back in lawsuits and then taken again. We visited the unrecognized village of Ein Hod, where we were treated to a feast and then shown a film about a village that had no water, electricity, schools or police because they were not on a map; they didn't exist, according to the Israeli government. To say they existed meant they would have to give those services, and would be less able to come in and take land. We heard about peaceful protesters being gassed or killed. We did not go to Gaza. The West Bank and the Golan Heights were difficult enough to see. It was so much, it was hard for us to take it all in.

Some of the Palestinians gave way to rage as they talked about these things. And for some of us listening, it felt like hatred and blame for the Jews, all Jews, and we felt our own anger kindled in return. Some of us felt smothered and had to get up and leave the room. For still others of us, it was just sad. We listened, looking down at our hands, wondering what to do with ourselves. It was hard to feel much hope sitting there. As Americans, especially white, middle class Americans, we are people who have found hope in our own ability to accomplish whatever we put our minds to. We want everyone to have such hope. When you are as outmatched as the Palestinians, this belief comes hard.

We were in a place where separation allowed people to demonize each other. I was acutely aware of borders during our trip – checkpoints, the border between Israel and Jordan, the wall – and the laws and fears that kept people separate from each other. Borders that protect the Israelis, and further impoverish and humiliate the Palestinians. Fear governs much in Israel. It's understandable. Fear is certainly what we hear about when we hear about Israel and Palestine, fear of suicide bombers, fear of Israel's enemies. Only a few years ago, Israelis lived in daily fear of terrorist attacks. You might time your grocery shopping for the early morning so the market was less crowded, and a less likely target for a bomb. You wouldn't go on a bus, and if you did, and the driver sailed right by a woman in a headscarf, you were glad. I understand this fear. When I first moved to Wilmington a few years ago, I marveled to hear people say that they still didn't feel safe downtown. During the day. They were there during the 1968 riots, and 40 years later, the fear was still fresh. So imagine if it were only a few years ago.

Since the wall was built between Israel and the West Bank, suicide bombers have been reduced to nearly zero. Because of that, I had to remind myself, I was willing to travel there last year with Robert, and was willing to lead a group there this year. The children pour into Ben Yehuda Square in Jerusalem on Saturday night when Shabbat has ended, and their parents chat and shop. No one is afraid. They have emerged from a nightmare. But the people on the other side of the wall are plunged deeper into it.

So by now, those of you who have come to church for a little uplift, for a little spiritual pick-

me-up, may be feeling a little disappointed. What about hope? Well, hope did not come from anyone proposing a solution that looked promising. We heard conflicting opinions. Some thought a two-state solution was the only way, and others were convinced that only a one-state solution could have a chance, given that Arabs and Jews are so marbled together throughout the land in different ways. Some thought that Israel and Palestine had to work out their issues by themselves, and others thought that pressure from abroad was the only way. The Israeli government with Netanyahu and the Palestinian government with Hamas in Gaza and the weak Palestinian Authority on the West Bank, are polarizing further and further apart. So the hope we found was not on a large scale or in a clear solution.

We saw moments of hope. We saw what one woman we met called tiny dots of hope. We saw hope in people who were the exception to the rule of separation and mistrust. We visited a village called Neve Shalom – Wahat al Salaam, a small town between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem where Arabs and Jews lived together intentionally. With its small white cottages for guests, flowering trees and scattered pathways, it reminded me of Arden. It was founded in the late 70s by a dominican monk and worked for dialogue between Jews and Arabs, and taught children, K-12, in both Arabic and Hebrew. People we met later called Neve Shalom with its 55 families and pretty gardens “utopia”. There may only be a handful of people living in Neve Shalom, but it showed what was possible. And they took their influence out into the rest of Israeli society, teaching courses in conflict mediation at Tel Aviv University.

We met with someone from Peace Now, a 30-year-old peace organization that monitors settlements and informs the Israeli public about them. Many Israelis don't like the settlements either. But under Israeli law, people with Israeli passports cannot enter the West Bank, so it's difficult for them to know what's going on. So when Hagit Ofran, a woman who works for Peace Now, came to talk to our group, she did a courageous thing. She crossed the border into the West Bank illegally. We hear all the time about people struggling in Mexico crossing our border illegally, and we understand why. The opportunity for a better life is a big incentive. So why would someone who had that better life, come across in the other direction? I asked Hagit how and why she did it, and she winked and shrugged. The shrug is kind of a transcontinental Jewish gesture, and I'm trying to learn it. (Think of “Tevye” in “Fiddler on the Roof”. Eh?) I think she was trying to create hope for herself and for other people. And to be able to tell more Israelis how things really were on “the other side”. “I am a Zionist,” she said. “I believe in the Jewish state. I want the Jewish people to be a better people.” She echoed what my husband Robert says, “I expect a lot from Israel. I expect them to do the right thing.” Hagit Ofran gives me hope.

We toured East Jerusalem with ICAHD, the Israeli Coalition Against Housing Demolition, and found a pocket of hope there. They monitor what's happening in East Jerusalem with housing demolitions and work to increase public awareness. Not that ICAHD is anywhere near mainstream. Yahov, our witty, if scruffy young presenter, said, “We're so far left that if you stand in the center you can't see us.” They also work with Israeli lawyers who volunteer their time to help Palestinians keep their land. They take all kinds of people – visiting foreigners, Israeli Jews, people working for peace – to see what is going on. And for this reason, ICAHD gives me hope.

In Haifa, we toured the Leo Baeck School, a Jewish school for all ages where Arab and Jewish kids go to school together, Jewish students are asked to learn Arabic, and Jewish and Arab students are required to work together on projects. Sports and music, a teacher at Leo Baeck told us, bring kids

together. “They'd rather play soccer than hate each other,” she said. This didn't sound like much, given the enormity of the problem. But people in Israel and Palestine, like African Americans here, put a lot of their hope in the future generations. They hope that by teaching them not to hate each other, that things will get better.

We met with George Rishmawi, the director for the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement, a group that facilitates meetings between Jews and Palestinians, and trains people in non-violent protest, inspired by Gandhi and by our own civil rights movement. A large part of everything they do, he explained to us, is to bring people close enough to create encounters between real human beings. He teaches his volunteers to see the real human being in the soldier's uniform. They bring Jewish families to come celebrate Shabbat on the West Bank, to teach Palestinians about their religion and to stay overnight in their homes. And the Center for Rapprochement works a lot with the internet media and sponsors lectures at home and abroad, providing a Palestinian perspective that is clear, well-reasoned and compelling. They are a counter to our image of Palestinians as fundamentalists, suicide bombers or just plain victims.

The Siraj Center also gives me hope. They bring people from all over to see what things are like in the West Bank and in Israel. They introduce people who would otherwise never meet, offer perspectives we would never otherwise hear. And they are as patient with our prejudice and skittishness and defensiveness as anyone could be.

In one of the more difficult meetings, I was struck by a comment made by Aya, a woman, who worked with women in rural villages. She said, “Palestinians hope for no reason. When I go into a home,” she said, “that has been attacked by soldiers (because they thought the family had threatened the settlement nearby) and the woman still has plans to make a garden, and wants to know if she can have seeds for flowers, how can I not have hope? I work with her and it gives me hope.”

Is there hope for peace here? It's the question that is always on the world's mind. As Jimmy Carter said, “The different peoples of the Middle East have their own viewpoints, their own grievances, their own goals and aspirations. But it is Israel that remains the key, the tiny vortex around which swirl the winds of hatred, intolerance and bloodshed.” The fate of Israel affects all of us, Jewish and non-Jewish, sympathetic to one side or the other, because the peace of an entire region depends on it, and in turn, the peace of the world. As Americans, we are deeply invested in Israel, emotionally, spiritually and financially. The United States gives them \$10 billion aid every year, the largest recipient of our foreign aid in the world.

Criticism of Israel, or even the demand for a full accounting of Israel's actions is slippery and fraught with political peril. Jimmy Carter paid dearly for the publication of his book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. People withdrew hundreds of thousands of dollars of support for the Carter Center and its many human rights projects around the world. Some of the most liberal rabbis I know are either deaf to the topic of Palestinian rights or afraid to raise the subject in their congregations. And something has to give in our willingness to speak honestly about this situation. Why not put conditions on our aid to Israel – why not say you can't use our weapons for this, you can't use our money for that? Why not put stricter monitoring in place and refuse to look the other way? And personally, I am going to be very careful this Thanksgiving when my Jewish in-laws ask me how was my trip to Israel? I'm planning to shrug. (Eh?) And I'm planning to tell them what we saw and heard. That the Israel they

love - that we both love – someone is paying a terrible price for it. And if nothing changes, there will never be peace.

Is there hope for peace? Right now, I believe we must hope even if we see so little evidence for it. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we must not let go until we receive a blessing, a blessing of hope. We must tell the old stories, and we must tell the new ones, too. Shalom. Salaam. Amen.