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Peace in the Holy Land

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PEACE IN THE HOLY LAND

Shirley S. Ricks

Abstract: *Living in the Holy Land as a Palestinian Latter-day Saint has created unique challenges and perspective for Sahar Qumsiyeh. In order to attend church meetings in Jerusalem from her home near Bethlehem, Sahar was required to travel under unsafe and stressful circumstances for hours through military checkpoints to cover the few miles' distance (as the crow flies). Sahar's story, Peace for a Palestinian, varies dramatically from our own and reminds us that true discipleship requires sacrifice, which in turn brings blessings.*

Personal response to Sahar Qumsiyeh, *Peace for a Palestinian: One Woman's Story of Faith amidst War in the Holy Land* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018). 176 pp. \$15.99.

How do I relate to an individual whose life seems so different from my own? Perhaps first I can note some similarities between Sahar Qumsiyeh and me. We both grew up in loving families with brothers and sisters and enjoyed associating with extended family members. Both of us lived in homes with fruit trees and a swing. Both of us rode bikes and explored our hometowns with friends. We were both raised in Christian families and were taught to have faith and to pray. Our families valued education and teaching, and both of us earned graduate degrees from Brigham Young University.

But there most of the similarities end, and the differences become stark. While I was raised in a peaceful country and claimed US citizenship with its associated freedoms and blessings, Sahar experienced danger: bullets, tear gas, travel restrictions, curfews, and the death of a fellow university student that began a two-year closure of Bethlehem University, which she had been attending.

Our little family spent two years in Jerusalem (1978–80) while my husband studied at the Hebrew University. We lived in East Jerusalem among many Arab neighbors and enjoyed easy access to all parts of the city and country. In fact, our second son was born the night before Christmas under the care of an Arab doctor in an Arab maternity hospital on the road to Ramallah. Eight years later when we spent another year in Jerusalem, this time in association with the Jerusalem Center, our son was baptized on his birthday in the Jordan River. During that year we again lived in a home in East Jerusalem. We always felt safe, even when the First Intifada, or Arab uprising, began in December 1987.

In January 1988, my visiting teaching companion and I made an unforgettable visit to a member sister living with her Arab in-laws in Ramallah.

We rode an Arab bus into the city, which was rather quiet. We saw some Israeli army trucks in the middle of town. As we approached the bus station, the bus had to maneuver around a burning tire and rocks strewn all over the road. We walked through the mess to get to the home of our sister, whose family encouraged us to stay longer until the Israelis were through cleaning up the mess and rounding up people. They reported a news blackout and that they are not receiving any newspapers (although they can hear the slanted Israeli view on the television or radio). They said that frequent beatings are taking place, even for no apparent reason. They just grab someone and start beating them. Those who work in Israeli industries are supporting the strike and not going into work. Everyone feels that things are different this time, and they are not going to stop striking until some sort of a solution is reached. Obviously it hurts them economically, but for them that is not the issue right now. The Israeli soldiers will force the shops to open, but the shopkeepers do not feel obligated to sell things. The blacksmiths in town seem to be donating their time to repairing doors and locks that the soldiers have broken. Schools are closed. It was interesting to hear an Arab viewpoint from this family. By the time we had hot chocolate and stuffed cabbage leaves, we finally excused ourselves and got back to the bus station with no incident. The road was then free of debris, which had been tossed onto the sidewalk.¹

1. Shirley S. Ricks, journal, 27 January 1988.

I mention this experience to show that for a few hours one afternoon I was inconvenienced by some of the policies and politics in this land of conflict. But in contrast, Sahar experienced hours of taxi rides (often through fields or orchards), delays, humiliation, and fear every time she tried to go to Jerusalem to attend her church meetings.

Five years ago I first heard Sahar speak at the home of Jim and Joan Stevens, our neighbors. I recorded in my journal what I learned that evening.

I had never heard such a stark retelling of the Palestinian situation in Israel — they have no state. Before 1948, the entire Holy Land was Palestine. With the wars in 1948 and 1967, the Palestinians are left with no rights, no homeland, no homes, etc. The Oslo Agreement in 1995 allowed them to handle some affairs internally — vital statistics, travel permits, etc. But even areas designated as the Palestinian Authority are not a country — and Israel has been careful to keep those areas unconnected and difficult to get to. Sahar came to BYU on one of the ten annual scholarships it grants to Palestinians, and she joined the Church here in 1996. She is currently the district Relief Society president. I had not known about the 25-foot concrete walls the Israelis are building around Palestinian areas. If the Palestinians have to go outside their area to work, it may take three to four hours to get through the checkpoint. My heart is sickened for this great tragedy against some of God’s children.²

Recently Jim and Joan invited us into their home to hear Sahar speak again. This time this remarkable woman related her journey from fear and hate to peace. She felt compelled by the Savior’s admonition to “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44), but it took her a year of prayer and relying on the Savior’s healing before she could view the Israeli soldiers as children of God, beloved of Him.

Sahar came to realize that God loves all his children. “I came to understand that life was a test and that the trials and difficulties we face are allowed by a loving Heavenly Father to help us grow and learn to become like Him. It became clear to me that Heavenly Father loves us all, and He loves us perfectly. He didn’t hate the Palestinians, like I used

2. *Ibid.*, 9 April 2012.

to think! Everything started to make sense — especially the reason and power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ” (57).

Years after praying and expecting to die at the age of 17 because of all the tragedy and turmoil around her, Sahar joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Her obedience to the principles of the gospel enabled her to understand her true identity: “My contentment and joy in life are not dependent on chains, walls, fences, or checkpoints. As long as I know that I have a Father in Heaven that loves me and cares about me, all is well. In His sight, I am precious. There is no reason to care about what others think of me. As long as I know that I am walking in His paths and obeying His commandments, I know that my Heavenly Father will be there to lift me and help me” (29).

Ultimately, Sahar teaches us that peace in the Holy Land can come only through Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice. She has gained personal peace in her own life and, in my mind, joins significant figures, such as Corrie ten Boom, Viktor Frankl, and Otto Frank, who learned to love and forgive and depend on God. That long-sought-after peace in the Holy Land will come only as individuals accept Christ and his teachings and perhaps will be fully implemented only when He comes again in his glory.

Shirley S. Ricks earned three degrees from Brigham Young University — her PhD was in family studies. She put that education to work in raising three daughters and three sons. She received on-the-job training at the BYU Press working as a proofreader during her undergraduate years. She has worked since 1988 as an editor at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute, and now the Religious Studies Center and has helped produce many books and periodicals. She and her husband, Stephen D. Ricks, enjoy traveling and have attended all the temples in the United States and Canada.