

Crocodile Tears

Christmas Letter from the Bantustan of Bethlehem - 1997

"I will tell you something about stories [Leslie Marmon Silko once said]. They are not just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have stories. Their evil is mighty but it can't stand up to our stories. So they try to destroy the stories. Let the stories be confused or forgotten. They would like that. They would be happy. Because we would be defenseless then."

For the Christian Palestinians, our story starts with this prophetic statement; "but you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people." King Herod's sense of security was threatened and this disturbed him profoundly. So, he called upon his chief priests and teachers of Law to organize an urgent workshop, resulting in a resolution that declared a state of emergency. The Magi were ordered to "Go and make a careful search for the child. [And] as soon as you find him, report to me..."

The story continues, "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under..." The angel intervened and told Joseph, "Get up! Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

Fight or flight were Joseph's two options! It seems that 2,000 years later these two options still exist for the Christians of Bethlehem. The Arab Palestinian Christian continued presence is in danger! It is Bibi, who is now deploying his military intelligence to acquire information and then he oppressively and illegally restricts the movements of thousands of people and confiscates their homelands. Big portions of the Christian population left their homeland whether through the intervention of the angels or by the Israelis repressive measures deteriorating the political and socio-economic livelihoods of the two-percent remnant of the Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land. Today exists three types of flight among the Christian Palestinians; intellectual, capital, and youth.

What frustrates me, is the crocodile tears spilled on the Internet in the form of a 'special report' from the office of the Israeli Prime Minister. The report is entitled "The Palestinian Authority's Treatment of Christians in the Autonomous Areas." This report is a bunch of fabricated lies. It is an attempt by Israel to once again reinforce the stereotypical images accusing and demonizing the Moslems and the Palestinian Authority as the catalysts for Christian emigration from Palestine.

Yes, Christians are becoming an endangered species in Palestine. But it is not because of the alleged persecution and oppression from our fellow Moslem brothers and sisters and Palestinian Authority. More accurately, it is the oppressive measures issued by the state of Israel that has become the catalysts for Christian emigration from Palestine.

Since 1967, in the aftermath of the Israeli occupation, the number of Christians has been dwindling enormously. Even though there is enough room in the inn for all peoples, the Christian Palestinians are involuntarily leaving as a result of the Israeli military siege, the continual confiscation of their homeland, and the lack of progress in the 'peace process'.

Bethlehem is now referred to as the Bantustan of Bethlehem. It is isolated from Jerusalem and is cut off from the ghetto club of other West Bank cities whenever Israel feels it is in the "interest of national security." Yet, prophet Isaiah reminds us that "the effect of justice is peace and the result of justice is security and quietness forever."

The little town of Bethlehem has become tinier. Since 1967, at least 60% of Bethlehem land has been confiscated by the State of Israel. Jewish settlements surround Bethlehem, choking it from every side. According to a report issued by B'Tselem in 1995, Har Homa and Givat Arba are examples of new settlements to be built in the Bethlehem area with 8,500 housing units.

"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Luke 6:41). So, please allow me to remind the world of the gross violations of the Israeli government, the LOGs that go unnoticed by the eyes of the world: Sixty percent of the Palestinian Christians were kicked out in 1948 from their respected towns of historic Palestine; some of the 440 Palestinian villages which were leveled since 1948 were Christian; West Jerusalem was ethnically cleansed in 1984 of which 23,000 of the 45,000 Palestinians evicted were Christians; although the Israeli authorities have not differentiated between Moslem or Christian, thousands of Christians have been imprisoned by the Israeli Authorities; and many Christians have been since killed by Israeli troops, for example Jimmy Canawati killed in November of this year at the Bethlehem Checkpoint.

According to Horace Walpole, "Life is a comedy for those who think and a tragedy for those who feel." As a Palestinian I feel we are living in the Via Dolorosa stations. I am not sure of what station we are presently at now! Is it the fourth station or the fourteenth? With closure, siege, deportation, arrest, demolition, and denial of basic rights, we no longer know if it is important to continue to try to understand which station we are at. Hopefully, the Via Dolorosa will lead us all out of these stations and direct us toward the tomb, to the Holy Sepulcher, where we as an unrecognized people will pose numerous questions. Who will roll away the stone? Are we going to overcome all the political, economical, social, and religious challenges?

Thankfully, the Tomb is empty! Christ is resurrected! Christians, Muslims, Jews, Arabs, and Israelis are all invited to the feast of His resurrection. Sooner or later a just peace will prevail. Then, as a result of his renewed hope, love, and everlasting peace, all Palestinians will one day return to the Inn to establish their continuous coexistence in the land of our Lord and Savior.

Santa is not coming to Bethlehem this December 24th, because the scrooge is stealing Christmas by not giving Santa the required identity card to get his sleigh in and out of Bethlehem. But, there is hope for it has been promised by Christ that He will always be there to serve, protect, and love His faithful children. Thankfully, Christ's eventual message is one of liberty, justice and peace: *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD."* (Luke 4:18)

Zoughbi Zoughbi