Day 3 – Hebron and Battir

Tuesday 21 March 2017

We travelled to Hebron (its Arabic name is al-Khalil), where we were briefed at the Hebron Rehabilitation Centre by Pablo Livigni, a young Frenchman who is the Development Coordinator at the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee. Pablo gave a lively and upbeat presentation on the work of the HRC: its mission is to restore the historic architecture of the Old City and protect the human rights of the Palestinians who live there.

Pablo explained that Hebron and Nablus were exceptions, in that Israeli settlements were actually in the middle of a Palestinian town: ‘normally’, settlements are located outside Palestinian towns, in order to sever communications between them. In Hebron, as in Nablus, the presence of a settlement in the centre means that the town centre is under Israeli control.

Hebron, Pablo informed us, is one of the oldest cities in the world. Its Old City has been declared a Palestinian World Heritage site by UNESCO, to the anger of the Israelis. The Ibrahimi Mosque is one of the most sacred sites in Islam, believed to be the place where Abraham, or Ibrahim (his Muslim name), is buried. Hebron is famous also for its grapes and its glassware.
As well as being the largest city in the West Bank, Hebron also holds an important place in the Jewish faith. After Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Cave of the Patriarchs (or Cave of Machpelah) is the second most holy site in Judaism. It is believed to hold the remains of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their respective wives: the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish faith. The Ibrahimi Mosque was built above it at the time of the Muslim conquest in the 7th century.

Throughout the thirteen centuries of Muslim dominance in the Holy Land, there were always small pockets of Jewish population. The population of Hebron by 1929, under the British Mandate for Palestine, amounted to about 21,000, of whom 700 were Jews. In August of that year, the Palestinian Arabs, fearful that a Zionist appropriation of their land was being planned, rose up against their Jewish neighbours, the worst massacre taking place in Hebron. The Jews that were left, Pablo informed us, were sent away from Hebron by the British. Jews only returned to Hebron in 1967, when the Israeli army entered and occupied the city.

In 1968, a group of radical Jewish-American ‘tourists’ visited Hebron and refused to leave. Since Israel doesn’t eject Jews from anywhere in the Holy Land, these people were given protection on a military base which became the settlement of Kiryat Arba. This settlement was constructed in the outskirts of Hebron, but little by little, in the 1980s, settlers began invading the Old City and creating settlements in its heart, establishing yeshivas there. These settlers were violent radicals, the most uncompromising and aggressive in Israel. They are armed with heavy weapons, and are determined to force the Arabs out of the Old City by any means. In the alleyways, where Palestinians have market stalls, the settlers, who live above, throw rocks, faeces, and so forth down onto the protective grillage, and break the windows of Palestinian houses. The Palestinians, said Pablo, are reduced to living in ‘chicken cages’. The Israeli soldiers, who are there to ‘protect’ the settlers, do not intervene on the Palestinians’ behalf.

In February 1994, a Jewish-American settler named Baruch Goldstein, entered the Ibrahimi Mosque at prayer time and murdered 29 Palestinian worshippers, injuring another 120. In consequence of this, in 1997, Hebron was divided into two zones, H1
and H2, according to the Hebron Protocol, signed by Yasser Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu as part of the Oslo Accords. H1 was ostensibly under Palestinian control, and H2 was under Israeli control, since it was the area where the settlers had established themselves, in the midst of a Palestinian community. The Hebron Protocol also allowed for a Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH).

![Palestinians in the Old City have constructed overhead grillage to ward off ordure thrown at them by settlers](image1)

So Baruch Goldstein, even though he was killed by those worshippers in the mosque whom he hadn’t managed to slaughter, seemed to have won the victory. After the Hebron Protocol, there were more than 160 closures in the Old City, and the eighteen points of access to it were reduced to three. Palestinian life in the Old City was destroyed absolutely. To protect the 500 settlers there, 1,500 soldiers were deployed. The soldiers take orders from the settlers, allowing the latter to get away with the harassment of schoolchildren, whom they assail with threats and stones.

![The Ibrahimi Mosque, where Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 worshippers in 1994](image2)
Under this military shield, the settlers have fortified their positions with permanent structures, destroying 2,000-year-old buildings in the process. This archaeological vandalism is of special concern to Pablo and the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee. There are roads in the centre of the Old Town where Palestinians are forbidden to walk or drive. Al-Shuhada Street, which used to be the site of the regional wholesale market and contained 500 shops, was closed by military order after the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre. The Palestinians refused to sign the Oslo Accords unless al-Shuhada Street was reopened. It was partially reopened, then closed permanently after the Second Intifada (2000-2005). Those still living there are forbidden to enter their houses by the street door, so they enter via the roof or through a window. From 10,000 shops before the Occupation, the number dwindled to 450, but in 2016 this number increased significantly under a renovation project from the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee.

In 2015, there were thirty-six extrajudicial killings in the Old City. Soldiers have been given a ‘shoot to kill’ order. Palestinian ambulances are forbidden to come to the aid of people who’ve been shot, and soldiers, even those with medical training, won’t treat wounded Palestinians. Hadeel al-Hashlamon was fatally shot because she didn’t understand the Hebrew that was being shouted at her by a soldier (https://972mag.com/the-idf-must-come-clean-about-the-hebron-shooting/112113/). Since 2015, the death toll from these summary executions, which always go unpunished, amounts to 215. Palestinians from all levels of society have been the victims.

Pablo then outlined the history of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee. It had been established in 1996 to preserve the archaeology of Hebron by taking over old buildings and persuading Palestinians to return to them by methods such as installing utilities and offering free rent. The Committee also gives vocational training in
capacity building, health care and education, and provides legal aid. The HRC has renovated old buildings, using traditional methods, but splitting some into apartments. It is also trying to develop tourism in this unpropitious environment. To further this aim, the HRC has renovated Sufi shrines as well as an old olive press. Because of Israeli hostility to these initiatives, ‘Every stone used in these projects was moved with difficulty’, said Pablo. ‘Even “animal carriage” was forbidden.’ Thanks to funding from Norway, among others, the Committee also organises social activities. Where conflict with the IDF or the settlers arises, the Israeli Supreme Court often rules in the Committee’s favour, but the government refuses to implement its ruling.

We were then taken by Pablo on a tour of the Old City, an excursion that had to be curtailed because rumours spread that roads were about to be closed. We did have time, though, to explore the Ibrahimi Mosque and imbibe some of its ambience of tranquillity mixed with anxiety. We were able to see at close quarters the tombs of the Patriarchs, notably that of Abraham, which, since the Goldstein massacre, has benefited from an arrangement that allows both Jews and Muslims to pay homage to different parts of the sepulchre, the Jews doing so by means of a grill in an adjoining synagogue. In fact, cenotaph might be a more appropriate appellation than ‘sepulchre’, since few believe that the tombs in the Cave of the Patriarchs contain the actual remains of those they commemorate.

Pablo then took us to the depressingly empty al-Shuhada Street and its neighbouring thoroughfares and alleyways of shuttered shops. Practically the only human beings we saw were a couple of bored-looking soldiers at a makeshift checkpoint, and a pair of hostile settlers who buzzed us a couple of times in a 4x4. It was interesting to read the signs put up by the settlers of Hebron, laying claim to a completely different narrative from that of the Palestinians they were hoping to displace, a narrative that seems to ignore thirteen or more centuries of Arab residency in the region.
Wall panels in the Old City broadcast the settlers’ ideology, while . . .

. . . Israeli flags claim hegemony . . .

. . . in a once-animated business quarter
We then made a rapid progress through the Stygian market, made gloomier by the protective overhead grillage and the various refuse that had accumulated there. Unfortunately, rumours of the impending curfew meant that we had to disappoint the various traders behind their stalls of merchandise, for they must have been hoping for some business from this troop of rare visitors.

We then proceeded to the home of Atta and Rudina Jaber, who had kindly invited the group for lunch. Their small house lies on the edge of Hebron, in the Baqa’a Valley.
While Rudina was preparing the food, Atta briefed us on his personal history. He explained that his family had been prominent in the Palestinian business community for centuries. Before the creation of Israel, the family exported oranges and other farm products through the port of Jaffa to Europe, as well as trading in the other direction to India and further afield. In those days Palestine was a commercial hub, open to the world. Some Palestinians even married women from Greece, Italy and elsewhere.

Then in 1917 came the Balfour Declaration, followed by the Holocaust, which led to the Nakba, all ‘under the eyes of the British government’. The year of 1967, said Atta, brought another Nakba, ‘a second holocaust’. Now there are six million Palestinians languishing in refugee camps: a ‘horrible’ situation.

Palestinians, said Atta, suffer punishment ‘even without reason’. They are treated like alien intruders, ‘even though history shows that we’ve been here for 7,000 years’. Since 1967, settlements have proliferated across the West Bank, even though ‘this is [Palestinian] state land’. To cement their hegemony, the Israelis use a panoply of laws, including the Emergency laws promulgated by the British when they held the Mandate for Palestine (these are called upon to justify house demolitions, for instance).

In the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, Israel wanted to bring the PLO from its exile in Tunis to the West Bank, where it could enclose and contain it, and stymie its further growth. Much of Atta’s large landholding of 400 dunams (100 acres) has been taken from him, leaving him with just a small orchard, which he nevertheless maintains meticulously, coaxing the sweetest of grapes from his remaining 60 dunams.

On his dwindling acreage, Atta still manages to produce bumper crops, despite frequent maraudings from his settler neighbours

The house and grounds of Atta and Rudina is a tiny fraction of what they previously owned, the rest having been stolen for the settlement. Their first house was bulldozed in 1998, under the pretext that they didn’t have a building permit (which are almost never given to Palestinians). The cramped quarters in which they are now sequestered reflects the overall status of Palestinians: cabined, cribbed, confined to a terrain that continues to fade towards nothingness. As Atta explained, Israel takes 85 per cent of the West Bank’s water resource, leaving the Palestinians a mere 15 per cent.
‘The whole world is punishing us’, said Atta. ‘I get old from the horrible situation. We can’t go to the sea. We just have to live a dry life! Tens of thousands of shekels’ worth of Palestinian goods are produced each year, but they’re unable to reach their markets. There is 45 per cent unemployment in the West Bank. Because of Israeli obstructionism, no one can plan for the future. Hope and patience alone enable us to continue our life. Children learn at school the names of the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and so on; but they’re not allowed to go there (though they haven’t abandoned hope of doing so one day). The occasional school trip to Jericho is permitted, but the children can’t continue to the Dead Sea just beyond.’

Atta recalled the Second Intifada of 2000, and the increased attacks on his property by settlers. In 2008, the Kiryat Arba settlement was expanded, and the Jabers’ house was targeted day and night by stone-throwing settlers. Atta’s elderly father fell down and hurt his leg, trying to defend the children. He spent 75 days in hospital with a broken leg. The settlers injured the eye of Atta’s niece, when her glasses were smashed. She had to be taken to hospital in Jerusalem, where the glass was removed from her eye. Settlers occupied the Jabers’ house for two days.

Eventually, Atta obtained permission to tend his orchard for a limited time, not enough to do what was needed. Sometimes the settlers prevent him from working; at the last grape harvest, they set fire to his car. Every moment there is a ‘new situation’; but ‘this is our land; we have no other place to go.’ Atta’s final message to the UK: ‘Stop this horrible Palestine life. Apologise to us. Come and see for yourselves!’

*This gnarled old olive tree in Atta’s orchard sprouts spring blossom, symbolic of the Palestinians’ steadfastness and resilience (sumoud)*
On the way back to Bethlehem we stopped at the ancient village of Battir, just down the Valley from Deir Yassin, scene of Israel’s most infamous massacre of Palestinians in 1948. After that act of barbarism, most of Battir’s inhabitants fled, but a few stayed on, under the leadership of Hassan Mustafa. They kept lights burning in the empty houses, to persuade the Israelis that they were inhabited and deter them from attacking. We were told all this by Yusuf, a local guide from the nascent tourist industry, who said that the far-sighted Hassan Mustafa had seen the tourist potential of Battir, with its ancient irrigation system pre-dating Roman times. When Israel built the Wall, he said, they’d wanted to put it through the village. To ward off this threat, the local people managed to persuade UNESCO (not Israel’s favourite international body) to declare Battir a World Heritage site, because of its ancient terraced agriculture.

_Battir’s ancient terraced agriculture, a World Heritage site still in use today_

The _sumoud_ of the villagers has borne fruit: they are on the threshold of tapping their town’s tourist potential. An ecomuseum helps to maintain the irrigation system and chart its history. Another feature of Battir is the Roman spring and bath, still used as a water source for villagers and a place for children to cool off in the summer.

_Battir’s Roman bath is fed from the irrigation channel on the right_
The village of Battir is built on a slope, at the foot of which is an unexpected object: a double-track railway line, with frequent passing trains. Yusuf explained that the railway was built by the Ottomans, to connect Jerusalem to Jaffa. Before the Nakba, farmers from Battir would send their produce by rail to Jerusalem and to the port of Jaffa, from where it could be exported. At the same time, the railway brought oranges to the village from Jaffa. The steam locomotives stopped to take on water from the stream at Battir, requiring a 25-minute wait – long enough for the people of Battir to sell their produce to the passengers. The possibility of travel to other places ‘opened people’s minds’, said Yusuf.

The Turks built a beautiful ornate railway station at Battir, but when the Israelis came they bulldozed it into the ground. The trains no longer stopped; the villagers could no longer make excursions to Jerusalem or Jaffa. When he was a child, Yusuf used to ask his father, ‘I want to go on that train’, not understanding why the trains didn’t stop and that Battir no longer had a station. Yusuf’s son now asks him the same question. Neither of them has ever been on the train.

Returning to Bethlehem, we had time to walk down to the house and shop of Claire Anastas. Claire sells Palestinian hand-crafted goods, many of them carved from olive wood. Her shop used to be on the main route between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, a perfect spot to attract tourists. Then the Wall came, and Claire found herself and her shop surrounded by it on three sides. Her children came home from school to find their home darkened and dwarfed by this architectural monstrosity. The wall snakes around here like the serpent of Eden in order to allow Israelis wishing to visit the adjacent tomb of Rachel (one of the Matriarchs) without meeting any Palestinians. In 2010 UNESCO had affirmed that Rachel’s tomb was ‘an integral part of Palestine’,
and reaffirmed this judgement in 2015. But, as usual, Israel chose to ignore this UN decision, and effectively annexed Rachel’s tomb as part of Jerusalem.

Claire Anastas’s house and shop, encompassed on three sides by the Wall

I had visited the shop on my previous visit, and was brought up to date on the latest developments, none of them hopeful. All six Christian car repair shops in Bethlehem, said Claire, including that of her husband, had been designated by Israel as ‘weapons-making centres’ (although they obviously weren’t), and were trashed by the IDF before being closed down permanently.

The 8-metre-high Wall near Claire Anastas’s shop – a sight to make Donald Trump salivate
Later on, Israel apologised, attributing their ‘mistake’ to a bureaucratic error. However, in order to claim compensation, the victims would have to sue Israel: an impossibly expensive step, for which the potential claimants had no money. The Palestinian Authority had refused any assistance. In addition, Claire had been letting out her upstairs rooms under the name of ‘Banksy’s Guest House’, believing that she had authorisation from Banksy himself to do so. Now an Israeli lawyer from the nearby Banksy’s Walled Off Hotel was threatening to sue. It had cost Claire 5,300 shekels to install the name, and would cost the same amount to change it. There was not enough money to do so; the ubiquitous Wall had choked off her business.

In the evening, we were given a briefing by Judith, a monitor for EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel) in Bethlehem. EAPPI, she told us, was set up by the World Council of Churches, and is a Quaker-organised Peace and Social Witness programme. It follows a code of strict neutrality while monitoring human rights abuses and supporting peace activists, both Palestinian and Israeli. There are seven teams operating in the West Bank. The Hebron team has the most difficult task. The Bethlehem team consists of five people, from various countries: they have to monitor Checkpoint 300, between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, four times a week at 4 a.m., when the men are going to work. To get a work permit, these men must be 25 and married with children (to make sure they’ll return to the West Bank).

The road to Jerusalem: checkpoint 300, Bethlehem, at 6 a.m.

The EAPPI monitors stand at the checkpoint on both the Bethlehem and Jerusalem sides, and can only observe or give counselling to those who are turned away. On the eve of Purim recently, Israel closed all the checkpoint gates without warning. Between 7,000 and 8,000 men pass through the checkpoint every morning. Sometimes the soldiers shut the turnstiles, trapping people inside. The men are fingerprinted before being allowed entry, and sometimes, because they are working men and have rough fingers, the fingerprinting doesn’t work: they are rejected and must lose a day’s pay.
EAPPI monitors also accompany schoolchildren. Sometimes soldiers throw tear gas canisters into the playground. Standing near the school gates, these soldiers tower above the 6-year-olds and intimidate them, sometimes searching their bags. Although EAPPI rejects violence, it understands how the frustration of adolescent young men sometimes boils over.

EAPPI also visits communities, and listens to the residents’ problems over water and the confiscation of land, despite proof of ownership. Loss of land leads to loss of livelihood. Palestinians are hit by obstacles and unmerited punishment from every direction. Judith gave us the example of a man with a young wife and a child who was issued with a demolition order on his house because he’d added two rooms to it for his growing family. Palestinians, of course, cannot make any alterations to their buildings without government permission, which is almost invariably refused.

Judith concluded by expressing her admiration for this despised and downtrodden people. The majority of Palestinians, she said, show remarkable resilience; their patience will surely one day be rewarded.