A Century of Grace

by Amy Hamar

Amy Hamar (DUO II, Abu Dis) teaches English Composition in Doha, Qatar. She is interested in how holding on to cultural identity can help people remain sane throughout, as well as recover after, conflict situations.

When I was asked to write a small segment of the newsletter, I had no idea what I could, or would, write about. I could write about so many different topics related to dialogue, conflict, language, communication, education, and so forth. In the end, I’ve decided to tell the story of my husband’s grandmother in Palestine who is somewhere between 105-107 years old. She has seen more than most people alive, and has endured more emotional pain than most, especially when her son was accidentally killed by a neighbor at the age of 14. Amazingly, she bears it without the bitterness that usually accompanies catastrophic realities.

She has lived through the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, World Wars I and II, the creation of Israel, the displacement of her and her family before and after this time, known to Palestinians as al-nakba (the Catastrophe), as well as the ensuing effects of the occupation on her life. Just looking at her, one can feel history living in the room. She wears traditional Palestinian dress, and bears tribal tattoos on her hands and face. We don’t know the origins of these tattoos, but it seems they are from a time when Bedouins would travel through the villages of Palestine, giving the women these tattoos to signify beauty. She is a wealthy woman in terms of land, and she was a shrewd businesswoman, looking out for herself and those around her. Prior to meeting her, I knew she had suffered a stroke in 1996, losing mobility of her legs and going blind in one eye.

I knew she wasn’t mobile, but didn’t realize there was no furniture. Therefore, I didn’t expect my meeting her to go quite as it had (traditional Palestinian homes do not have furniture apart from stuffed cushions on the ground). We walked into her room, watching her, wondering what she thinks of this American wife, coming into her room. My mind was flooded with thoughts about measuring up to what they all thought I should be, especially as many were not for our marriage, labeling it a mistake, telling him to just come home and marry a good Palestinian wife. Once our eyes met, however, there was a moment of unspoken kinship between us. I knelt down to kiss her hands and the top of her head, and she started crying, pulling me to her, saying “habibi, ya habibi” (my beloved, oh my beloved). All of the thoughts I had about being inadequate, or not enough for them to accept melted away with the touch of her hand and the sight of her tears.

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Palestine’s Scrambled Eggs

Jamal Dajani (DUO I, Chicago and DUO II, Abu Dis) is a Palestinian-American political analyst and an award-winning journalist. He produces documentaries and other programming for Link TV and contributes to numerous other media enterprises, including the Huffington Post and Al Jazeera English.

“Palestine’s Scrambled Eggs” is a term used by Jamal Dajani to describe the Israeli policy of “creating facts on the ground” in the Palestinian territories by erecting a highly contentious separation barrier and by encouraging the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Dajani has written and produced hundreds of media programming about the Middle East conflict, and has delivered talks on the subject to many thousands of people all over the world. He has just returned from a trip to Israel/Palestine, where he spent two weeks researching the most recent political developments in the region, including the ongoing expansion of the settlements and the blockade of Gaza. In other words, he went to assess for himself precisely how scrambled those eggs are.

When I look back on sitting with her that first time, I think of her reaction not only to me, but to that of my husband’s absence at the time. Unfortunately, the Israelis had stopped my husband at the border, so my step-daughter and I had arrived alone for our first visit. I know she was deeply saddened by this, but she welcomed us with no irritation to her voice. No cursing out of anyone. No complaining of any kind. It was as if she was content to finally meet me, and see her granddaughter after 8 long years. It was as if she had pushed the sadness and anger to the side, and focused on the joy and happiness that were equally present. I wish. I hope. I pray that one day I can be like her. That if I had to suffer and endure all that she has been through in life, I could still focus on the slice of happiness being offered. Our lives could not be any different, her and I, but it is as if there is a tiny string connecting us. Every time I leave her, I don’t know if she’ll see me, but we always say goodbye the same way we say hello. Our faces become streaked with tears, but we’re smiling the whole time through.
Decoupling Archeology from Politics

by Razvan Sibii

Chaim Noy (DUO II, Abu Dis) is an “interdisciplinary scholar,” currently teaching Communication and Sociology courses at Sapir College (in the Negev). One of those courses is “Intro to Israeli Society.” “The first part of it is functional and the second part is critical. The students don’t find it very easy to combine the two,” says Noy.

Chaim Noy has recently been asked to serve on the board of Emek Shaveh, an Israeli organization that brings together archeologists, human rights activists and Jerusalem residents. The organization strives to disengage archeology from politics — a most difficult endeavor in East Jerusalem. At the present, Emek Shaveh is focusing its efforts on a particularly rich archeological site in the village of Silwan, near East Jerusalem’s Old City. The site, also known as the “City of David,” is being excavated by an Israeli right-wing organization. Noy and his colleagues argue that this organization is using archeology to prove the historical precedence of Jews in the area — and hence justify Israel’s political dominance of Arab East Jerusalem. Enter Emek Shaveh, which offers alternative tours of the site (in collaboration with the Wadi Hilweh Information Center, a local Palestinian organization) and publicizes what it perceives to be an outrageous situation. “What is nice about Emek Shaveh is that it combines a discourse of archeology with a humanist discourse,” says Noy. “All branches of anthropology have historically had an imperialistic bias. But cultural anthropology, for example, has really done a lot to look into itself. That introspection has been much delayed in archeology. Maybe this is because of those heroic images of Indiana Jones-like archeologists — who, of course, went to Northern Africa and the Far East and the Levant during the age of imperialism and excavated and stole property. What Emek Shaveh is saying is archeology should not look for the ‘City of David’ itself [which would legitimize the Jewish nationalist claims to the area], but rather for all the different cultures that existed in the past on this site, leading up to the current one: the Palestinian culture.”

Palestine’s Scrambled Eggs

From Gaza, he left for East Jerusalem and the West Bank, where he documented the story of Palestinian families evicted out of their houses by Israeli authorities. “We talked to these two families who had just been kicked out of their house,” Dajani recounts. “The Jerusalem authorities said that the house had belonged to a Jewish trust so that it was illegal for the families to live there. We can’t verify that, but, even if it’s true, those families had moved into that house decades ago after being driven out of their old West Jerusalem houses. Israel is operating with a double-standard here.” Mindful of America’s weighty involvement in the political games of the region, Dajani is writing for a predominantly American audience. For the time being, however, he is not particularly optimistic about the Obama administration’s willingness and ability to alleviate the conflicts wreaking the Middle East. “They talk the talk but don’t walk the walk,” he says. “Obama’s Cairo speech [delivered on June 4, 2009] resonated with many people in the Middle East. He said he wanted to bridge the gap between the U.S. and the Muslim world. But then he sends more troops in Afghanistan! He is losing popularity in America because of the health care and economy issues, but he’s losing popularity in the Arab world because he isn’t doing anything concrete to solve the conflicts.”