

## A Jew in Ramallah

As I write this, it is exactly one week since Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, when Hamas executed their orchestrated surprise attack killing 1200 festival celebrants, soldiers, and kibbutz inhabitants, besides capturing over 150 hostages.

Every succeeding day has brought more violence on both sides. Many neighborhoods in Gaza City have been pulverized into rubble by Israeli airstrikes. It appears inevitable that more unspeakable suffering lies ahead for Palestinians and Israelis. The Israeli Defense Force say they are determined to eliminate Hamas, the terrorist group that is estimated to be ten percent of the Gazan population of 2.3 million people. The other ninety percent of Palestinians have nowhere to go because there is no exit out of Gaza. The blockaded borders surrounding the 140 square mile Gaza Strip are Israel on the East and North, and Egypt on the Southwest. I have never heard mention of the Mediterranean Sea border on the West as an escape option, so I assume blockades or other deterrents are in place there also.

At present more than 24 hours have passed since the Israeli government warned Palestinians living anywhere from the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun to evacuate their homes and move twenty miles south to the town of Khan Yunis. My daughter Tennessee Reed calls it “the 2023 Trail of Tears.” Israelis claim they do not want to harm the other ninety percent of Gazans, Americans, and other nationals including UN and other humanitarian workers, who live and serve in the Gaza Strip. Thankfully, it appears this 24-hour deadline was extended after international pressure by the UN and other governments and diplomats who convinced the Israelis it would be a war crime to start bombing at the original deadline, as 24 hours is not enough time for more than one million Palestinians, including children, disabled, hospitalized and the aged to arrive in the South. And although the Israelis just bowed to US pressure and agreed to allow water to be distributed to Gazans in the South, since the Israelis have cut off essential sources of electricity, fuel, food, water and medicine throughout the Gaza Strip, —which has the misfortune of bearing the oft repeated description of being the world’s largest open-air prison— the situation is dire, whether people chose to flee their homes or stay in place.

Today, one week later, mass demonstrations are happening worldwide, supporting either the Israeli or Palestinian causes. Even in Israel thousands of demonstrators are demonstrating in support of the Palestinians, asking whether the fight to stop Hamas necessitates collective punishment and demanding the government negotiate a cease fire.

I was raised in a Reform Jewish family but have been non-practicing throughout my adult life. My father was a Zionist at heart; my mother was definitely the opposite. Their opposing views personified the fifty-six-year-old controversial history that has brought us to this epic tragedy, rooted in a colonial past brokered into law in 1948 by the British. Israel has practiced a decades long denial of freedom of movement for Palestinians, not just in Gaza, but in the occupied West Bank and even for those who live within the current borders of Israel. Meanwhile the government supports extremist settlers who continue to chip away ever more bits of land within the occupied West Bank and Gaza, claiming exclusive ancestral rights, an argument whose basis I have never understood.

I have never lived in or visited the Gaza Strip. But I have visited Israel four times, the first time at the beginning of the 2000 Intifada and the most recent in 2013, when I lived in the West Bank city of Ramallah, for a ten-week residency. I was there to co-direct an Arabic translation/adaptation of American playwright Philip Barry's 1928 romantic comedy, *Holiday*, at Al Kasaba Theatre & Cinematheque.

This Al Kasaba project was funded by the American Consulate General in Jerusalem. As stated in *Holiday*'s program, the ambition was to exemplify how our cultures worked together, "by building bridges in English and Arabic, and finding mutually agreeable paths to understand and present ways American and Palestinian culture and history could meet." Following the May 30th premiere at the Ramallah theater, the company of Palestinian and Syrian actors toured five other West Bank cities including Nablus, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Tulkarem, closing at the Palestinian National Theater in Jerusalem.

Compared to Gaza, Ramallah is a safe place to live. It is home to many international organizations. Importantly, it is the seat of the Palestinian Authority, which rejects Hamas. Before these recent events, according to some, of the two, Netanyahu has been accused of favoring Hamas—in what is probably a classic divide to conquer strategy. But even so, the Palestinians who live in Ramallah

experience daily indignities and hardships that Palestinians throughout the occupied territories routinely endure.

Here follow some of the restrictions—ranging from the merely irritating and time consuming to harassment and fear invoking that I observed or was told had occurred to people in this production during those weeks I was in Ramallah, and also during a short visit to East Jerusalem six months prior to the residency, when I presented theater workshops in schools in East Jerusalem under the sponsorship of the American Consulate General in Jerusalem:

Like everyone else, my drivers and I had to show our ID papers every time we travelled from anywhere in Israel to or from the West Bank. I learned to recognize we were close to the Qalandia checkpoint, the one most frequented between the border of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, when we began to pass along a long corridor of eight- or ten-foot high graffiti decorated cement barriers topped with barbed wire. Surveillance cameras positioned on watchtowers were evident as we reached the checkpoint's gateway, guarded by visibly heavily armed, very young-looking Israeli soldiers.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs things have only gotten worse since then:

- In early 2023, OCHA documented 565 movement obstacles in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and excluding H2. These include 49 checkpoints constantly staffed by Israeli forces or private security companies, 139 occasionally staffed checkpoints, 304 roadblocks, earth-mounds and road gates, and 73 earth walls, road barriers and trenches.
- Additionally, 80 obstacles, including 28 constantly staffed checkpoints, segregate part of the Israeli-controlled area of Hebron (H2) from the remainder of the city; many checkpoints are fortified with metal detectors, surveillance cameras and face recognition technology, and with facilities for detention and interrogation.
- Combined, there are 645 physical obstacles, an increase of about 8% compared with the 593 obstacles recorded in the previous OCHA closure survey in January-February 2020.
- Specifically, the number of occasionally staffed checkpoints has increased by 35% and that of road gates by 8%. While these remain open most of the time, they can be closed at any moment. In 2022 there

were 1,032 instances (or 293 days) where nonpermanent checkpoints were staffed across the West Bank.

- Over half of the obstacles (339 out of 645) have been assessed by OCHA to have a severe impact on Palestinians by preventing or restricting access and movement to main roads, urban centres, services, and agricultural areas.
- In 2022, Israeli forces also deployed an average of four ad hoc 'flying' checkpoints each week along West Bank roads.
- In addition, the 712 kilometre-long Israeli Barrier (65% of which is built) runs mostly inside the West Bank. Most Palestinian farmers with land isolated by the Barrier can access their groves through 69 gates; however, most of the time, the Israeli authorities keep these gates shut.
- Palestinians holding West Bank IDs require permits from the Israeli authorities to enter East Jerusalem through three designated checkpoints, except for men over 55 and women over 50.
- In 2022, 15% of permit applications by West Bank patients seeking care in East Jerusalem or Israeli health facilities and 20% of permit applications for their companions were not approved by the time of the scheduled appointment. Also in 2022, 93% of ambulance transfers to East Jerusalem were delayed due to the 'back-to-back' procedure, where patients are transferred from a Palestinian to an Israeli-licensed ambulance at checkpoints due to restrictions imposed by Israeli authorities.<sup>1</sup>

These boundaries make Palestine, and especially the Gaza strip, one of the most densely populated areas in the world. I understood how people have learned to adapt their lives within these limitations one Sunday afternoon when I joined George Ibrahim and his family on their stroll after enjoying a sweet treat at a local ice cream parlor in Ramallah. We walked a few blocks along one side of the street, and then crossed the street to return to where our walk began. George's daughter, wheeling her baby in a stroller, laughed as she told me that this was how they have learned to create a feeling of variety in their daily recreation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/fact-sheet-movement-and-access-west-bank-august-2023#:~:text=These%20include%2049%20checkpoints%20constantly,walls%2C%20road%20barriers%20and%20trnches.>

While driving around Jerusalem, it was clear to me that in West Jerusalem, the Jewish section of the city, citizens received far more of what we in the United States consider basic government services than those living in East Jerusalem, where Palestinian Israelis are concentrated. The streets were clean in West Jerusalem, with no garbage littering the sidewalks waiting to be picked up, as was the case in many of the Eastern streets of the city. And the roads were wider and better maintained in the West than in the Eastern sector, where many neighborhoods were without cement sidewalks—just dirt separating the street from the buildings. I heard stories of incessant demands on property owners to file for permits to do even the most minor of upkeep jobs, like a plumbing repair, let alone for major improvements to property as we are required to report in the U.S. One day George Ibrahim spent the better part of one day at a government office in order to pay some theater property related fees on time. He said the due date had slipped up on him; I understood that the fines for being late would be considerable.

Generally this conflict is presented in a bifurcated religious framework between Muslims and Jews, but actually this part of the world is far more complex in its makeup, with many denominations of Christians and other religions with long ties to the land also present in significant numbers. As I recall, George Ibrahim, the owner/producer/director of Al Kasaba Theatre, belongs to the Greek Orthodox Christian Church. We had a day off the weekend of their Easter holiday celebration. The cast and crew included a mixture of Christians, Druze, and Muslims. None of the women wore hijabs, and there were no other overt signs of religion-based strictures inside the theater. Outside the theater, the dress ranged from very contemporary international styles to traditional Palestinian as people traveled around the streets full of markets and shops.

I never felt that anyone at the theater was put off when they learned of my Jewish heritage. During the time I was in Ramallah, hostilities between Syria and Israel were beginning to seriously heat up. The consensus among the actors was that it would be better to leave Bashar al-Assad in control of Syria, even though he was running a police-controlled dictatorship. I think they felt the devil you know is better than the chaos to come, as they cited the example of what happened in Iraq, after Saddam Hussein was toppled.

George Ibrahim had gathered a distinguish pick-up acting company prior to my arrival. I think three of the supporting actors –Rita Hourani, Firas Abu Sabah, Muayed Abdel Samad—were based in Ramallah. Maisa Abd Elhadi had just wrapped a film project in Israel when she joined the cast as a last-minute replacement for an actor who became ill. Two of the actors, Yussef Abu Warda and Shaden Kanboura, had travelled to Ramallah from their homes in Haifa, where they both were active in theater and film. Warda at that time had participated in over 130 TV series, films, and theater productions. One of the actors, Ezat Abu Jabal, had recently relocated from the Syrian Golan and had just graduated from the High Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus the previous year. Out of the blue he had to miss rehearsal for a few days when he was ordered to undergo a required interrogation by Israeli authorities. He said they kept asking him why he had come to Ramallah. Another actor, Adeeb Safadi, was born in the Golan’s Majdal Shams and before taking up residence in Ramallah, where he was teaching at The Drama Academy, had been a teacher at the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts and the School of Art in Syria. Sami Metwasi, a winner of the 2001 UNESCO Ashburg Artist’s scholarship placed in India, who played the leading male character (Cary Grant in the 1938 movie), had been living in Jordan where he was directing a musical. Amira Habash, who played the leading female character (Katherine Hepburn in the 1938 movie version), lived in Jerusalem. One day, she matter-of-factly related how, while driving to rehearsal through a checkpoint with her then about 18-month-old son, a bullet grazed her car.

Almost everyone in the pick-up acting company, the production crew, and the theater’s administration were at least bilingual, if not trilingual. Sami Metwasi and the actor who left the cast due to illness, had performed together in Shakespeare’s *King Richard II* at London’s Globe Theatre.<sup>2</sup> The script the company was using was an Egyptian scholar’s Arabic translation of Barry’s original text. This became a source of much discussion as I was working from the original English version and assumed the actors’ Arabic version was a close translation, only to find out their version did not include some of the text I was referring to when discussing their motivations, or reasons for actions. Although I learned a few Arabic words and phrases by the end of my stay, I was not able to understand

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sammy-mitwasi-b0270918/?originalSubdomain=ca>

spoken Arabic, so when rehearsal discussions were conducted in Arabic, actors often took it upon themselves to translate for me.

The theater arranged for me to stay at the Royal Court Hotel on Jaffa Street. Their ever-gracious staff served a generous buffet style breakfast which kept me well prepared to last through the daily 8-hour rehearsals. From there it was just a ten-minute walk up the hill to the theater. I would also walk about the city by myself in both day and evening hours, and never felt in danger.

One weekend I took a bus to the West Bank city of Bethlehem. I had been to Bethlehem briefly, on one of my previous trips to Israel, but did not remember how it is situated in the midst of vast and stark mountainous spaces, in a landscape of scattered stones and dust. It is just amazing to me how humans can have wandered the earth across such expanses and then decided where they wanted to create a settlement in the middle of lands that otherwise still look mostly uninhabited. But of course, as we crisscrossed our way through the mountains there were many villages tucked along the roadside, and goats, donkeys, horses, and sheep were nibbling away at the grasses that the recent rains must have encouraged, besides industrial zones whose purpose I could not figure out.

The scenic and costume designer, Fairouze Fawzy Nastas, had invited me to visit her in her family home, which was in the nearby town of Beit Jala<sup>3</sup>. Fairouze's father, Fawzy Jiries Nastas, is a master stone sculptor<sup>4</sup>. Fairouze showed me around her family's gracious home, built by her father in the 1980s, I think. Palestinian marble of varying hues from sites in the area were used throughout the house, for floors, stairways, railings and even tables and shelves, augmenting an abundance of regional treasures of fine embroidered fabrics and pottery. Fairouze and her mother showed me the difference between even what is considered good embroidery, done for tourist sales, and what is respected by the locals, and you have to have a good eye to notice how things can be not finished just so. (Actually Fairouze and I had just purchased some pieces to use to cover

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beit\\_Jala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beit_Jala) Beit Jala is "a [Palestinian Christian](#) town in the [Bethlehem Governorate](#) of [Palestine](#), in the [West Bank](#). Beit Jala is located 10 km (6.2 mi) 10 km south of [Jerusalem](#),"

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pef.org.uk/the-stonemasons-of-beit-jala-making-the-stones-speak/>  
<https://www.all4palestine.org/ModelDetails.aspx?gid=7&mid=1971&lang=en>

chairs in one act of “Holiday,” knowing they would not be perfect but fine for our purposes with long distance viewing from the stage.)

Fairouze’s father had just shipped off two huge full body stone sculptures of saints for a church in New York City—he could not recall the church’s name that day. Most of his commissioned work is within the traditions of classical Christian church art, including beautiful carved stone pedestals for the statues, often in elaborate Corinthian style although also the simpler Ionic and Doric styles too. His studio was lined with his secular and sacred statuary, including his carvings of angels and St. George, the patron saint of Palestine. There was a spread-eagle bas relief that Fairouze said was the model for a series of eagles her father carved for either the American embassy or consulate buildings, I don’t remember which. In their front yard, Fairouze called my attention to a life-sized tall statue of a Palestinian hero, Abd al-Qadr Al-Husseini, standing guard by the front door. It had been commissioned by a West Bank university, but its original head and left arm had to be replaced, Fairouze told me, because Hamas followers had destroyed them when the statue was placed in one of Bethlehem’s town squares. Fairouze pointed out bullet holes in their home’s outside walls and at least one window, which she said were from various intifada battles since the 80s, because, as I recall her saying, their home is located near a settlement that became the focus of much fighting, and was on a known “escape” route through people’s gardens.

Shortly after this visit, Fairouze had to leave rehearsals in order to travel to Jordan to get a visa because she wanted to join a puppetry workshop in the Czech Republic. She was very familiar with all the hoops required to travel outside the occupied territory because she had previously participated in workshops in playwriting, scenography and puppet theater in Tunisia, Egypt, Britain, France, and Portugal. She was going to Jordan because she could not obtain a visa in Jerusalem—let alone in Ramallah- as she is a Palestinian.

Now we wait for the likely extermination of Gaza by airstrikes and ground assault, with many lives lost or changed forever. Will Israeli’s decapitation by air be considered more elegant than decapitation on the ground, as Hamas is rumored to have done? Because communication, dependent upon internet and phone connections, will be intermittent at best, we may not know what is happening except to know that Gaza will be unfit for human habitation for many years to come.



This is a slightly revised version of the essay, "A Jew in Ramallah," that was published in CounterPunch on October 16, 2023

Carla Blank directed Ishmael Reed's most recent play, THE CONDUCTOR, a "Living Newspaper," which closed at Off-Off Broadway's Theater for the New City on September 10, 2023. Her article, "The Resurrection of Sister Aimee," published in ALTA magazine, was a finalist for a Los Angeles Press Club 2021 National Arts & Entertainment Award.