

# Letters from Overseas

## Dianne Baker Writes from Palestine and Israel

July 2011

### *"Water is life"*

I am writing this letter from the town of Yatta in the South Hebron Hills in the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. I've been appointed by The United Church of Canada to serve as an Ecumenical Accompanier with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Three fellow team members and I are living among Palestinian villagers here in the South Hebron Hills, providing a protective presence and witnessing to the occupation that permeates every aspect of the lives of Palestinians.



One of our tasks is to share with the people back home stories of the Palestinians and the Israeli peace groups whom we accompany, and to tell of our own experiences as witnesses to the occupation. I got a little dehydrated today, in this desert land, a cloudless sky and a light breeze blowing. Daily we each carry about a litre of water with us, and everywhere we go, regardless of how difficult the circumstances of the people we visit, we are served tea.

How did I get dehydrated? We travelled this morning to four communities with lack of water. There is little water for agriculture, for sheep or goats, and for the people. In the village of Wadi J'Hesh, the family of Ibrahim and Aliya Nawajar have to truck in water from Yatta... a good 30 minutes away, on pretty dodgy roads. It costs 100 New Israeli Sheckels (about CAD \$28) for 1,000 cubic litres of water. Since this is a drought year, there is very little feed for the animals, and the wild grasses from which they might get a dose of water in the leaves have long since been nibbled up or died, until the rains come again. This money is hard to come by, since it is difficult for the men to travel out to work. If they are granted permits to seek work in Israel, they need to leave their families and go, for maybe one or two months at a time and then make that money stretch for food, fuel, fodder, and now... water.

Aliya Nawajar spoke of the frequent intimidation by Israeli settlers from nearby settlements of Suseya and Ma'in. The Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are illegal, under international law. One man rides an all-terrain vehicle, and sometimes he comes in the night to yell and swear at the villagers. Aliya said, "The settlers come and make trouble. They tell us that 'This is our land. You should go.' But I have lived here a long time. There has been a lot of damage made by them, but I am firm. I will suffer for my land. I will make my grave here." Aliya's son Hamed showed us a video of settlers scouting the community. They opened the lid of the cistern, but this time, thank goodness, didn't do anything to the water! (In other parts of the West Bank, we are told that settlers are known to swim in the village cisterns in order to contaminate the water source.) When we ask how the EAPPI can offer any help, Aliya replied, "If they see that there are internationals present, maybe they will be shy to come. They may stay away."

Our next visit was to the Bedouin Community of Um Al Kher. Internally displaced from the Negev desert following the war in 1948, the Bedouin resettled in this part of Palestine, having purchased land from the nearby Palestinian town of Yatta. In the

1980s, Israel began to send settlers to this area. Under international law and the Geneva Conventions that govern the obligations of an occupying power, transfer of citizens of the occupying force onto land owned by the people is illegal. However, the settlers came and set up large housing, farming, and agricultural operations nearby. Israeli law had until this time also allowed the Bedouin to receive water through a pipeline. This is an obligation an occupying power must meet. Recently, though, this water has become more limited and is occasionally turned off altogether by the settlers.

Nearby, cattle owned by an Israeli company have water 20 hours per day. Eid Suleiman, son of one of the village elders, says, "They treat us worse than animals! I am sorry about the settlers, because who is destroying Israel? They are eating themselves from the inside! They are making the hate and they are afraid. It is these people who are destroying Israel!" With the help of some international organizations, and from friends in Israel, the village of Um Al Kher has solar panels and wind turbines that allow it to have electricity. Even so, Hajja Suleiman cooked over a fire to boil the precious water for our tea.

Next, in Am Nyar, we followed up on an incident from Tuesday, July 5. That day, the Israeli Army destroyed nine water tanks provided by Islamic Relief. They had previously damaged mature olive trees in order to bring in heavy equipment carrying gravel and giant rocks to destroy the well. Mohamed Aj'bour sat in his tiny tent on a rocky outcropping telling us of how he managed to rescue a tarpaulin to create a small shaded place for him to sit and to sleep in. He remains close to the one remaining tank of water that he uses sparingly to water his tender new olive plantings. He offered us water and tea, and we declined, ever so gently. The water is so precious! We asked Mohamed, "What will you do now, that you have nowhere to live and no permission to build another home?" He replied, "I have life from my olive trees. I cannot leave them. If I go, I will lose my land." There is no despair in his face; just the worn truth that things happen *InInsha'Allah*; as God wills.

It is nearly 10:00 pm and I am still thirsty. As I sleep with my glass of water by my bed, and having had a refreshing shower, I will remember Mohamed, and Aliya and Eid, and give thanks for what keeps them stalwart in their struggle to bring water and its gifts to a land that thirsts for peace, and justice and *maaya*... water is life.

Dianne

*To learn more, visit Dianne's blog at [shalom pax salaam](#), or view [photos](#) of EAPPI work taken by United Church accompaniers.*

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Dianne works for The United Church of Canada as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the [World Council of Churches/Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel \(EAPPI\)](#). The views contained herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer (The United Church of Canada) or the WCC. If you would like to publish the information contained here or disseminate it further, please first contact the EAPPI Communications and Advocacy Officer (eappi-co@jrol.com) for permission.

