

# Letters from Overseas

## Jan McIntyre Writes from Palestine and Israel

November 2011

### TODAY YOU CAN PLANT

The South Hebron Hills team of “ecumenical accompaniers” (EAs) was out with Mohammed and his family on Thursday, November 17, as they were ploughing their land and planting their barley. The wind had gone down from the day before and it felt pleasant to be outside, especially when the warm sun peeked through the clouds.



Things unfolded much the same as the previous day, with Mohammed starting the ploughing in the morning and one of his sons taking over when the sheep came to graze. This day, it was Fahlil who came to plough; a friendly, smiling young man who is the proud father of three young children.

I was sitting on a hill with Mohammed and the sheep. The hills are starting to green up a little now that fall is here and the sheep were finding a bit to eat. It was peaceful sitting in the sun amongst the sheep, listening to them chew away on whatever they found and watching Fahlil go up and down the field with the donkey. It felt like a perfect pastoral scene, if you forgot for a moment the reason I am here. I started to wonder about the sustainability of this form of agriculture as compared to our mechanized model that is so dependent on fossil fuels. The pros and cons of each were moving through my head when all of a sudden I heard Fahlil anxiously call up to me and then point down the field. Sure enough, an Israeli army jeep had arrived.

My two EA teammates were at the far end of the field. Two soldiers on foot approached them from the hill behind me. Rudely and disrespectfully, they questioned who my teammates were and why they were there. What were they doing with “these people”? My teammates felt the implication was that “these people” were not worthy of our attention, that “these people” were somehow less than human beings. It was an unpleasant conversation that ended with the soldiers rudely telling them not to take photos, that photos were not allowed.

Meanwhile, I motioned to Fahlil to continue ploughing and I hurried toward the army jeep. Two more soldiers got out of the jeep, leaving two inside. Mohammed had arrived ahead of me and was talking to the soldier in charge. Standing a few steps back from the conversation, I held my camera in hand, making it as visible as possible that I was photographing this exchange. The conversation ended and the soldier started to walk away. I approached him and asked, “Why are you here? Is there a problem?” He asked where I was from, and then said that there was no problem, that this man (Mohammed) had the proper papers and could work his land. He seemed reasonable. I asked why then another soldier had approached Mohammed a few days before in this same field, telling him—at gunpoint—to leave his land or else he would be shot? He shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, “We heard that people were taking photographs. That’s not allowed. If it’s you, that’s okay.”

Hmm, I thought to myself. Internationals can take pictures, but not locals. That’s interesting. And today, with internationals present, the locals can work the same land that a soldier had forced them off of three days ago. That, too, is interesting. None of this makes sense.

The soldier walked back toward his jeep. Within moments, a security vehicle from the nearby settlement arrived and the security guard, armed with a machine gun, got out and spoke with the soldier. The security guard then wanted to know who I was and what organization I was with. I gave him my card and he spoke into his two-way radio, saying “EAPPI.” He had a brief conversation with Mohammed, spoke again with the soldier, and then both he and the soldiers left.

I turned around. While all of this was happening, Nasser had come and taken the sheep back to the yard. Too many previous visits from the army or people from the settlement had resulted in harm to the sheep. It was important to get them to safety.

Mohammed sat down on a rock, collecting himself. My teammates and I walked over toward him. He was profuse in his thanks. His wife came and stood by him, also offering thanks.

I carried on back down the field to where Fahlil was still ploughing. He stopped and looked at me. "It's okay," I said. "Everything's fine. Keep ploughing." He understood. With a relieved smile and a huge sigh of relief, he said, "Thank you, thank you." Other family members came to the field, offering their gratitude as well.

I was struck by how relieved the family was and how clearly they felt that things would have been much different if we, as internationals, had not been there. Our very presence, our vests and our cameras, had made a difference.

I know of villages where settlers have come and intentionally grazed their sheep on their Palestinian neighbour's barley field, pushing the Palestinians away at gunpoint when they have protested. I know of villages where the crop has been intentionally destroyed by neighbouring settlers through wanton acts of destruction. In these situations, the army has supported the settlers. Palestinians tell us that having internationals present results in less violence toward them. For three days this week we were able to assist this family with their planting. Will they ever be able to harvest this crop? Time will tell. Like farmers everywhere, they plant, they watch, and they hope.

Peace, Salaam, Shalom,

Jan

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*To learn more, visit Jan's blog at <http://amosaicforpeace.wordpress.com>, or view photos of EAPPI work taken by United Church accompaniers (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/IsraelPalestine>).*

Jan 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) ([www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)). The views contained herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer (The United Church of Canada) or the WCC.

