

Seeing in Palestine

Carole Rein (North Shore)



Photo: Jonathan Vogel-Borne

Mount of Olives as seen from the Temple Mount, Jerusalem

ONE HOUR RESULTED IN A CHANGE of direction for my life. During the spring of 2018 at NEYM's *Living Faith Gathering* in Portland, ME, I chose to attend a panel discussion about Israel and Palestine. Little did I know how that hour would change my life. One of the Jewish panelists, Steve Low, mentioned that he occasionally leads small groups for nontraditional tours of Israel and Palestine. I left my name with him, saying I might be interested.

Fast forward to November of 2018. I'd received other communications from Steve, but this email's timing was right for me. I read his message and turned to my husband. "Would you like to travel to Israel?" "No, I have no interest. But, if you want, go."

So I did. On December 30, 2018 I flew to

Tel Aviv, joining my five traveling companions on arrival. They were Steve, his wife, Barbara, their daughter, Shaina, and two other women, Linda and Betsy. We would spend two weeks together, jam-packed with non-governmental organization meetings, including the United Nations Humanitarian Council, plus exploration of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Nazareth, and other West Bank areas. Then, I spent a weekend solo in Jericho, and at the Dead Sea and Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were found.

Tourist guides and videos can relay the nature of the trip with colorful accuracy and artistry, but would not describe its effect on me. I'd traveled fairly extensively previously (Thailand, Turkey, Panama, and more), but no other travel changed my life so powerfully.

I'd had a very limited understanding of Israel's creation, not knowing that before it was Israel, this land was Palestine. Until I was there, I'd had no awareness of the Palestinian homes that had been demolished, the families that had been turned into refugees in their own country.

Each time we passed from Israel into Palestine, there were four significant markers. First, a huge red sign announced in Hebrew, Arabic, and English: "This road leads to a Palestinian village. The entrance for Israeli citizens is dangerous." The message conveyed to everyone who reads this sign is that Palestinians are not to be trusted.

Next was the checkpoint, where young Israeli soldiers 'greeted' us with machine guns, and the tall watchtower, where other young soldiers watched us, with their machine guns aimed. The fourth marker was the wall that surrounds every Palestinian village, with one gate. The purpose of the single gate is to make it easy for the Israelis to close it, enclosing the village, either to keep people in or shut people out.

Once, after a brief abrasive conversation between Steve and the soldier, the gate was closed abruptly, and we were not allowed entry. Our plan had been to meet with Palestinians at their grammar school for lunch. We turned around and drove away.

Because we were tourists, in general we were allowed to drive on the Israeli roads, which are inaccessible to Palestinians, plus on the Palestinian roads, which are poorly maintained and seldom have direct connections. Palestinians aren't allowed to use the Israeli roads; therefore, their daily commutes to work or to school are greatly lengthened. Additionally, at the checkpoints, they are often searched, causing traffic backups.

Other significant impositions on the Palestinians include limitations on availability of electricity and water for cooking, drinking, bathing, and toilets. Differences exist between their banking, phones, and mail



Photo: Courtesy Carole Rein

From left to right: Steve, Betsy, Barbara, Carole, Linda, and Shaina, in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. We are wearing our issued ID's, which required the most careful surveillance I have ever encountered.

systems, as well. Palestinians are considered to be immigrants in the country they have lived for generations. Perhaps even worse, they now are given only 96 hours notice when Israel decides to demolish more of their homes.

When I traveled there, I had been actively working on issues of racial justice at home. After a couple of days in Palestine, I began to realize how the U.S. situation paled in comparison to Palestine. I was also torn, wondering why or how I could give any attention to the Middle East, when there was plenty to do at home. By the time I returned home after 18 days, I felt a calling, a pulling in my gut to share my experiences.

I had no desire to be a speaker, but I HAD to share my experiences. Within the past five months, I have spoken to groups in Florida, Maine, and five locations in Massachusetts. We can learn about horrific deeds in the news, but seeing it firsthand requires a different response. Racial injustice takes many forms, and changing it also takes many forms. All of them begin by seeing, really seeing how people treat other people.