

Olive Branches

Olivia's Year in the Holy Land

December/January



Some YAGM and some friends from Mennonite Central Committee in Manger Square on in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve between worship services.

Merry Christmas, everyone! Kull sine u into salmeen! I know you may be thinking, "Christmas is over!" but here in Jerusalem and the West Bank, there are three Christmases to celebrate. The first, on December 25, is celebrated by Catholics and most protestant groups, but there are two more than happen in early January for Orthodox and Armenian Christians who have a big presence in the Holy Land! So the Christmas decorations are still up in Bethlehem and the spirit keeps going as we head into the new semester at school and the second half of the YAGM year! Thanks again for all of your support so far! Here's some of what I've been up to for the last few months.

Families Near and Far

For me, the holiday season began with a Thanksgiving meal with my YAGM family. We gathered at Beit Aelabouni to enjoy some time together before we set off on our first retreat of the year! Our first retreat followed the beatitudes as we considered the theme of blessing and privilege as part of service in the JWB context. For this we headed up to Galilee, where Jesus spent most of his ministry, Gabi grew up, and there is plenty to see and learn about.

While we were there, we visited lots of places with significant biblical history like Nazareth, Capernaum, and Cana. But one of the best places we went to was Ailaboun, the town where Gabi grew up. In Ailaboun, we stayed with Gabi's sister and spent lots of time eating her delicious cooking, meeting the rest of the family, and enjoying the incredible warmth of their hospitality. Ailaboun is a small Palestinian village near the sea of Galilee that is within the green line, meaning it is technically part of the state of Israel. The residents there are Palestinians that hold Israeli citizenship. We spent one day of our retreat learning about the history of the town and what happened there in 1948, when Israel was established. When soldiers came through the village, the residents were forced to walk to Lebanon, where they became refugees. But the priest of the church in Ailaboun had contacts at the Vatican, and eventually the UN stepped in at the request of the Vatican and the residents of Ailaboun were allowed to return. However, we also visited Tiberius, a city that now has no Palestinian residents because they were all forced to leave, and Lubyia, a former village that was destroyed and covered in a forest. It is now an Israeli National Park. These are the stories of the many Palestinian villages that are within the green line. While a few remain, many were emptied of their original residents (who are now refugees throughout the region), and still others were completely destroyed.

As we learned about the ancient and modern history of this land and explored the beautiful places that the Galilee has to offer, we were deeply aware of the privilege we have. Not only to visit the places Christians all over the world know about, but to visit places that many of our Palestinian companions in the West Bank cannot access, even though their faith or family may draw them to it. We were also once again shown the blessing of being welcomed into families wherever we go. With the Aelabounis we celebrated a holiday, a birthday, and we made welcome over and over again. Even though they had just met us, they became a family for us, and once again showed us how the tradition of welcoming the stranger is still strong in this land.



From top left: Our cohort Thanksgiving turkey; Anna and I hugging in the Sea of Galilee... much like Jesus and Peter probably; hanging out with a big tree at the Bahai Temple Garden in Haifa; some of the cohort and Gabi at the Cesarea Aqueduct (last three photos are places we visited on our retreat to Galilee).

Palestinian Christmas Traditions

Tree Lightings: Tree lightings are a pretty big deal around here. Each town has their own tree and tree lighting ceremony. We went to the tree lightings in Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, and went to see the huge Christmas trees in Bethlehem and Nazareth as well. Tree lightings are huge community events with performances from local choirs and dancers, speeches by clergy and politicians, and plenty of food and goods on sale around. The trees are still up now, at the end of January!

Christmas markets: In the Bethlehem area alone, there are plenty of Christmas markets to be found. Lots of churches hold their own Christmas Bazaar, and several international cultural centers do as well. This year, we went to the huge Christmas Market in Manger Square, where the Church of the Nativity is.

Scouts: The scout troops here are a big part of Palestinian culture, especially Palestinian Christian Culture. There are many scout troops around Palestine, and often multiple in each town. For instance, in Beit Jala there is a Catholic Troop, an Orthodox Troop, and a Lutheran Troop. People of all ages can be in the scouts, and girls and boys are in the same scout troops together. The best part is that Scout troops here are also marching bands! Most troops include bagpipes and drums, but some others have brass instruments as well, like the Lutheran Scouts from Beit Sahour. Around Christmas, scouts play at events like tree lightings and put on a huge parade to the Nativity Church on Christmas Eve!

Bingo: I have played more bingo here than I ever have in my life! Bingo is a popular activity at holiday parties (and a good way to learn numbers in Arabic really quickly). On New Year's Eve, I was invited to a party with the family of a teacher from Dar al-Kalima. It was a lot of fun, and I won bingo for the first time ever!

Christmas Visits: One of the most popular Christmas traditions is visiting family members on Christmas Day. After lunch, people start to make the rounds. At each house you chat with family members, see their Christmas decorations, drink wine, and have some chocolate.



The view of the Sea of Galilee from the Mt. of the Beatitudes where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

Family Traditions, Family Meals

It's probably not surprising to say that Christmas in Bethlehem is a family affair. As I shared above, there are a lot of traditions that center around family this time of year. This year I was super lucky to not only have the family of other YAGMs around me, but to have my host family and other families have their eye out for me as I spent Christmas away from my family in the states.

One of the best parts of Christmas was the holiday celebrations with our companions at the ELCJHL schools. The students at Dar al-Kalima put on a great Christmas pageant on the last day of school with singing, speeches, a short skit, and music from Bass for Peace. That night, we went to the ELCJHL Christmas party with all the employees of the Lutheran Church and schools in Palestine. It was a super fun evening to spend time with our friends from the ELCJHL before the holiday break and a great example of how the ELCJHL is another family for us here in this land.

Take a look at the traditions box above for some more info on what I did in the week around Christmas. Here, I'll just share a short story from the night of Christmas Eve. After a busy day of

festivities and church services in Bethlehem, a few YAGM headed to Bethlehem University for Midnight Mass, where our choir was singing. As we walked through the old city of Bethlehem, close to midnight on Christmas Eve, the streets were empty and we were overwhelmed with the spirit of where we were. The cold evening air and the stars surrounded us with the gravity and importance of the little town that was both our temporary home and the birthplace of the savior of the world. And the families who had sent us out after an evening of food and gifts, and the one waiting to receive us at the university reminded us of what keeps this place holy.

On Christmas day, church was followed by a big meal with many members of Scarlet and Salameh's family coming to join. As family members exchanged gifts, milled around the kitchen to finish up the meal, and shouted Christmas greetings over one another, I was filled with the warmth of this wonderful family. As we sat down together for lunch, the crowded table and delicious food were so homey and familiar, and the joy of a shared Christmas was something I will not soon forget.





From top left: The Christmas tree in Beit Jala. Each town has their own tree and tree-lighting ceremony with speeches, performances, and fireworks; Me, Anna, and two teachers from the school where we work, Nabil and Suhail, at the ELCJHL Christmas Party; Me. Nadia, Scarlet, and Salameh at home on Christmas Day; Lutheran Scouts march in the St. Nicholas Day parade in Beit Jala. Scouts in Palestine are also marching bands, and troops are made up of boys and girls of all ages! They often perform at special events or ceremonies.

Journeys now, Journeys then

Movement is something I didn't think about a lot before I lived in the JWB context. Most of us in the U.S. have no more barriers to movement than our schedules or financial ability. But here, our Palestinian communities are very restricted in their movements. If they want to go to Jerusalem, only a few miles from the West Bank, they must receive special permission that can take a lot of time, money, and isn't always granted. If they want to access an airport, they have to go to Jordan. The separation wall, built in the early 2000s, is a huge physical barrier that stops people in the West Bank from reaching Jerusalem and beyond, often separating them from Holy Sites, schools, hospitals, friends, family, and sometimes their own land.

As I'm sure many of you did in your churches, I heard the story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem quite a bit this season. Besides now having a clear idea of just how far the journey is from Nazareth to Bethlehem, I was also struck with the knowledge that if Jesus was born in Bethlehem today, there are many barriers that could stop him from ever seeing Nazareth or Jerusalem. The Holy Family would have had a very hard time navigating their journeys between Nazareth and Bethlehem and their later flight to Egypt may have been impossible as well. This year, as we continue to move around our area of service and to experience more beautiful places here, I am always cognizant of the rights that I take for granted that not all have.

Holy Families

As you can imagine, spending Christmas in Bethlehem was a very holy experience that I feel very privileged to have. The city filled up around the holiday as pilgrims from all over the world came to celebrate in Christ's birthplace. As you have read, I spent my days around Christmas enjoying new traditions, worshipping with local and international communities, and spending as much time as I could in the place where Jesus was born. But at the end of the day, the holiest part about this holiday for me wasn't simply being in the city that everyone was thinking of on Christmas Eve, but being welcomed there by the holy families that I have encountered. From the little family we have formed as YAGM, to being welcomed so fully into the fold by my host parents, to being offered a place at countless tables by people who have known me a relatively short time, I have seen Christ and the spirit of Christmas in the people of Bethlehem this holiday season. Even as I admired how far many people had traveled to be in the Holy Land this Christmas, I felt blessed to not be experiencing this holiday as a tourist or pilgrim, but as a daughter, a sister, a neighbor, and a friend. As I start the second half of this year I am so lucky to have the support of families near and far. Merry Christmas to you and yours.



JWBros mix tape track three: From Galilee to Golan (photo at Nimrod Fortress near the borders of Syria and Lebanon)