
“Is This Your First War?”

On-the-Ground Learnings from Israel/Palestine

Dorothy Jean Weaver

It’s risky business, embarking on a cross-cultural venture, leaving community and comfort behind, and spending a year in someone else’s world. It’s a course without a syllabus or even a designated professor. You can never guess who your teachers will be or where they will appear. You never know in advance what the lessons will be or how they will affect you.¹

It’s especially risky business setting off for a cross-cultural learning venture in Israel/Palestine, a land of enormous conflict and violence over the past century and onward to the present moment. I’m not at all sure I was prepared for what I would encounter on my first journey to the Middle East back in 1995–96.

What I knew was that I was a New Testament professor, that I had been teaching New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, Virginia) since 1984, and that I had never seen the places associated with all those stories I taught about in the classroom. It was my first full sabbatical, and I knew exactly what I needed to do with it. I needed to travel to Israel/Palestine to see all those biblical sites that were merely words on the pages and pictures in the books. I even knew where I needed to take up residence for this venture—Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies in Jerusalem. I had known about this place ever since my own seminary days in the mid-70s, when one or another of my own seminary professors had gone off to Tantur for study leaves.

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1 Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Beyond the Comfort Zone: Unsettling Revelations from a Cross-Cultural Education,” *The Seminarian: Newsletter of Eastern Mennonite Seminary* 27, no. 2 (April 1997): 1.

I also knew I would be doing some writing while I was there—an essay on “Mission and Peace in the Gospel of Matthew.”² What I didn’t know was what else I would be doing and learning while I was at Tantur, and even before I arrived, for that matter.

I had originally intended to head off to Tantur in the spring of 1991 on a single-semester sabbatical. But those plans had been scuttled, very dramatically, in fact, by the buildup toward the first Gulf War; in place of my Middle East plans, I had gone to Cambridge, England. That should have been a wake-up call for me, especially as I sat in Cambridge and listened to the news with horror, night after night. I even read a poignant letter from friends of mine then serving under Mennonite Mission Network in Nazareth, Israel, about the challenges of sealing off rooms at the Nazareth Hospital EMMS against the possibility of chemical warfare. And I felt deep pangs of survivor’s guilt because I was sitting, safely and sweetly, in Cambridge, England, rather than in Israel/Palestine in a hermetically sealed room and wearing a gas mask.

It was months before I had the courage and the heart to write to my friends. What could I have said? “Greetings, Bob and Nancy! Here I am, safe and secure in Cambridge, England. Let me tell you how much I am enjoying myself here.” No. I couldn’t send that letter. So I worked full speed ahead on an essay about Matthew 5:38–42, Jesus’s words about “not resisting the one who is evil.”³ This was, I told myself, my own and my best response to the hot war going on in the Middle East.

Well, that was 1991. And I could and should have taken my cues from that event alone.

“Middle East Politics 101”

But this was now 1995–96. And I had not yet encountered the Middle East face to face. So I set out innocently enough, still imagining that my own self-established learning goals were firmly in place. I’m guessing I also imagined I could come home to my real world at the end of this academic year having had a nice sabbatical. I had no idea that this sabbatical was about to capture my heart, reshape my personal perspectives, transform my sense of calling, and bring deep changes into my real world for as far as the eye could see into the future.

2 Dorothy Jean Weaver, “As Sheep in the Midst of Wolves: Mission and Peace in the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Beautiful Upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God*, eds. Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies; and Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2003), 123–43.

3 Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Transforming Nonresistance: From Lex Talionis to ‘Do Not Resist the Evil One,’” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 32–71.

The lessons started early. One of the first came during the fall semester of 1995 while I was teaching a New Testament course at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon. I had to pay for my sabbatical at Tantur somehow, and how better than to teach for a semester at a Presbyterian seminary in Beirut, where I would receive room and board for my efforts? But here I also gained major perspectives on the world I was about to enter and learned lessons I had no idea were there to be learned.

Take the magic marker lesson, for example. Thursday, October 26, 10 am, another ordinary school day at the Near East School of Theology. Typically at this time I headed down the stairs from my efficiency apartment to the faculty-staff lounge on first floor for coffee and casual conversation with my colleagues. Others were ahead of me at the [coffee] table, so while waiting I turned to look at a wall map of the Middle East, one that I had seen many times before without paying much attention.

Then I saw it, for the very first time: The black magic marker line, dead center in the map. It had always been there, no doubt, but I had never noticed it. Now, this morning, it practically jumped off the page at me. There was no questioning the meaning of the line. The Mediterranean Sea was to the west, Lebanon to the north, Jordan to the east, and Egypt to the south. I knew what name, and what nation, it obliterated. The sudden awareness almost took my breath away; the irony jolted me.

At this time I was making travel plans for my upcoming journey to the Tantur Ecumenical [Institute] just outside Jerusalem, not many miles down the road from Beirut. It would be complicated to get there. I already knew that I would have to leave Lebanon “by another way” [cf. Mt 2:12]—Syria, Jordan, or Cyprus—to end up at Tantur. The country across the border was Lebanon’s next-door neighbor, but one simply couldn’t get [there] from [here].

The bombshell exploded in my mind. And then there was space at the [coffee] table. I got some coffee and sat down to visit with my colleagues, externally composed but internally shaken. There had been no books to read, no papers to write, no tests to take, but I had just received a powerful education in Middle East realities, a lesson indelibly etched into my consciousness with the ink of a black magic marker.⁴

Had I gotten credit for it, the name of this course would have been “Middle East Politics 101.” This was a major geopolitical lesson about the State of Israel and its neighbors and their relations (or not) with each other.

⁴ Weaver, “Beyond the Comfort Zone,” 1.

“Israeli Occupation 101”

Then in January 1996, as I arrived in Jerusalem, I found myself enrolling, up close and very personal, in a related course—“Israeli Occupation 101.” And this was the course that took me by storm and set my world on end for the coming months and well beyond.

The setting for my daily lessons in this new course was, above all, Tantur Ecumenical Institute. And the location and the immediate circumstances of Tantur made the site itself into a profound learning experience. Located on a hilltop on the very southern edge of Jerusalem and just across the valley from Bethlehem, Tantur was, at that time, also directly up the hill from the Bethlehem checkpoint. This was the site where Israeli soldiers monitored the entrance to Jerusalem and allowed admission to Palestinians coming from Bethlehem, if they had valid permits. Countless Palestinians, however, did not have such permits.

And here was where Tantur came into play. The institute had a back gate that opened onto the West Bank, no more than a hundred yards from the Bethlehem checkpoint, and a front gate that opened on the Jerusalem side, well past the Bethlehem checkpoint. And now the picture becomes clear. In the winter/spring of 1996, there were, no doubt, hundreds of Palestinians from Bethlehem and farther south who streamed through the back gate of Tantur day by day, crossed the Tantur property, and headed out the front gate on their way to Jerusalem to find work, to get to the doctor, to sell their produce. That is, they streamed through the back gate unless the Israeli soldiers from the checkpoint were there patrolling, which they often were. And this was the daily drama that caught my eye and grabbed my attention irretrievably from the very beginning.

And here is where I received an early lesson on curfew. One day I learned that the Israeli military had started to close off the back lane leading to the back gate of Tantur. So the next morning I headed out to see for myself. Things were very tense at this time, following a spate of suicide bombings. But I was none the wiser. The story I sent home to my family and friends unfolds in this way:

Well, I left the gate and headed out the lane to where I could see the mound of dirt and rocks blocking the road. When I got there, I looked down toward Bethlehem, and there I saw a white army van with several soldiers standing by it. And just as I noticed them, they also noticed me. They started yelling at me, in Hebrew, of course, which I didn’t understand. So I turned around and started walking back where I came from, very slowly and deliberately. From the introductory manual to Tantur I had picked up the wisdom that if one ever encounters the beginnings of an incident of any kind one should *walk* away from the scene, *never run!* So I *walked* away. But this clearly did not satisfy the three (very young!) soldiers (they couldn’t have been more than twenty years old) who were out on their morning’s shift, protecting Israel from suicide bombers! They came running down the lane to the mound at the fork in the road and continued their yelling.

By this time, I knew I was in trouble and realized I would have to talk to them. So I turned around and faced them, pointed back up the hill to Tantur, and repeated several times, "I live there."

One of them could speak English. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm just out on a walk."

"Don't you know there is a curfew on? You're not supposed to be walking here!"

"Until what hour?"

"There's a *curfew* on!"

"Until what hour?" (I obviously knew nothing about 24-hour-a-day military curfews.)

"Until the army decides it doesn't need it anymore and they tell you so on the radio."

"Oh, I didn't know that there was a curfew on."

"Are you Jewish?"

"No, I'm Christian."

"Where's your passport?"

"I don't have it with me. It's up there" [pointing up toward Tantur]. (This was my most glaring bit of folly that morning, to have left the gate and the grounds without my passport or my ID on me.)

"Well, you can't walk out here. There's a curfew on."

"I guess I didn't know that."

All the while this dialogue was going on, I was understandably quite concerned. I had no idea what they would do. I didn't know whether they might proceed to accompany me back to Tantur and come right into the building to make me get my passport. But worse than that was the fear that they might in their skittish, danger-zone mentality think to arrest me and to take me off someplace (minus my papers), thus creating a big problem for Tantur and a huge embarrassment for me.

It could well be that the three young men who were facing me were just as frightened as I was. They seemed very tense and very focused on their task. But at some almost imperceptible moment in the midst of our dialogue I sensed the soldiers beginning to relax as they figured out that while I might well have been stupid, I was equally harmless. So eventually they went their way and allowed me to go mine.

I headed back the lane and in the gate and went on in for breakfast, where I proceeded to tell my story. Issa at the front desk said to me, "You should have

known better! You have been in Beirut!” I assured him that the Beirut I had experienced in past months was nothing at all like this!⁵

That was one of the first of countless lessons in my ongoing course on “Israeli Occupation 101.” The lessons happened on any day, at any place, and under any kind of circumstance. I recorded them in my letters and emails to friends and family. I prayed them into my prayer journal. Later I gathered them into story collections for public presentation in North America. And in 2003, on another sabbatical at Tantur, I wrote an essay entitled “Of Fear and Fear,” which pulled together prominent threads from my learnings:

I’ve been wanting to write this essay for a long time. It’s the essay that begs to be written. It is, in fact, the subtext underneath virtually everything happening on the surface here in this land. It is the question of fear and fear. It doesn’t take much time on the ground here as an outsider to observe a curious reciprocity of fear that profoundly shapes the lives of the Palestinians and the Israelis, each in their own communities.

To start with the people “on the bottom” might be appropriate. Clearly the Palestinians are afraid of the Israelis, or, at the very least, of the military face of the State of Israel, the face that Palestinians encounter day by day at checkpoints, on any and every street of their towns, in the drivers’ seats of house-and-olive-grove-eating bulldozers, in the skies over their cities in helicopter gunships and F-16s, and, most fearsome of all perhaps, in midnight raids into private homes, where belongings are trashed, people are terrorized, and, on occasion, wanted persons are summarily executed in front of their own families.

This last atrocity actually happened here in Bethlehem not too many weeks ago. And just last week a beautiful young 10-year-old girl from Bethlehem was killed by accident when her family’s car got caught in the way of an undercover Israeli police operation against some (evidently wanted) men in a car nearby. Clearly there are cogent reasons for Palestinians to fear the Israeli military and its weapons of destruction (whether mass, medium, or any other size). And the fear that they do have is entirely understandable.

But . . . and this is why this essay begs to be written, the fear of the Palestinians is clearly matched, and perhaps even overtaken, by the fear of the Israelis. Strange as it may seem, the Israeli military—in spite of all the heavy weapons and all the overwhelming military power on their side—are virtually overcome with fear of the civilian population, whose personal lives they are busy harassing, whose houses they are busy destroying, whose lands they are busy confiscating, and whose right to justice they are busy denying.

5 Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Stories from the Back Gate: Crisis and Conversion on the Road to Bethlehem,” unpublished paper (revised), 1996.

As I have noted before, the standard response I receive at the checkpoint if they don't want to let me into Bethlehem on a given day is that “it's very dangerous down there!” This is not a bluff on their part. *They actually believe this.* I have heard this statement too many times by too many different Israeli soldiers both here and elsewhere to imagine for an instant that they don't actually believe it. And for them it might actually be true. In the most perverse sort of human logic, *these Israeli soldiers with their machine guns and tanks and bulldozers are, in fact, turning their own worst fears into self-fulfilling prophecies by making themselves into the objects of Palestinian hatred.*

So for those of us who look on from the outside there is indeed a curious reciprocity of fear that shapes both communities in profoundly negative fashion. On the one side, this fear is palpable in the anxious loitering of Palestinians on the Tantur grounds on days when the soldiers are at the front gate in the morning or the back gate in the afternoon. It is audible in the anxious questions (“Soldiers?”) directed at me as I walk the back lane or pass Palestinians on the Tantur grounds. And it is visible in the instinctive reactions of those faced with the fearsome prospect of encountering soldiers.

One evening Sami at the front desk asked me to accompany a young Palestinian couple down to the back gate because the soldiers were there. So we went out together. And when we got to the path leading down to the back gate, there was a soldier inside the property. Instinctively, the young woman drew back physically, obviously very frightened, and was ready to turn around and head back to the building. But her husband encouraged her to go on; and I did as well. The soldier had already seen us, in all events, so nothing could have been resolved by turning back at that point. And, in fact, we could not have turned back at that moment even if we had wanted to, since we could literally have been held at gunpoint by the soldier who had seen us. But it was the young woman's instinctive physical response that told me everything I needed to know. *Here was fear of the first order, perhaps even terror.*⁶

On the other side, the opposite fear manifests itself in equally vivid fashion. One day I had gone out to catch a bit of sun just after lunch and discovered that a group of Tantur staff was heading down to the back gate on their way home to Bethlehem. Just above the back path they had learned that soldiers were out in the back lane. But they decided to go ahead anyway. Tantur staff are supposed to be let through. But since I knew that soldiers were out back, I decided to go with them through the gate and watch to see that they were ok.

So we went on out, they in front and I in the rear. The soldiers were indeed out there, only well down the back lane. And as I stood on the mound and watched, I witnessed a little ritual, not uncommon at checkpoints, that man-

⁶ In the end, the couple were allowed to leave and head on back into Bethlehem while I stood and watched until they turned the corner, to make sure they were safe.

ifested the genuine fear of these Israeli soldiers out on an ordinary everyday patrol in the West Bank. As the Tantur staff approached, they were instructed to stop at a significant distance from the soldiers. And then, one by one, each of the men was forced to lift his shirt and turn around, to demonstrate to the soldiers that he was not wearing an explosives belt. Only then did one of the soldiers approach the Palestinians, look at their papers, and allow them to pass. *Here was also fear—palpable, tangible, visible fear.*

And so life proceeds in the dysfunctional world of Israel/Palestine, where the Occupied fear the Occupiers and the Occupiers fear the Occupied.⁷

“Intifida 101”

Then there was “Intifida 101,” the major and terrifying course in which I was forced to enroll shortly after arriving in Bethlehem in the fall of 2000 to teach a “Life of Jesus” course to Palestinian tour-guiding students. I had been on the ground in Bethlehem not quite two full weeks when a massive and violent confrontation erupted on the Haram al Sharif (the Temple Mount area) between Israeli soldiers brought there by Ariel Sharon in a massive show of force and Palestinian men gathered for prayers at the Al Aqsa Mosque. This deadly confrontation lit the fuse that then precipitated the Second (aka “Al Aqsa”) Intifada. In the beginning, however, I had no idea how to classify the violence. It was a conversation with Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb that put the word “intifada” into my head. And it was an incident that happened before class one day that brought the word “war” into focus for me. My e-mail essay reads as follows:

Friday, October 20, 2000, Bethlehem. The incident was a simple one, and very small. But it struck me in a profound way. And I know that it will stay with me. It happened one day in the moments just before class started. I was at the front of the room, and people were visiting with each other before I called the class to order. And there it was, out of the blue, from Sahar, one of the women in the class, who was sitting right up front near me: “Is this your first war?”

Well! What a question! And what a world in which such a question even needed to be asked! I assured Sahar that if this was indeed a war, it was my first. Her response? “Congratulations!”

Hm . . . Congratulations for what? Because I had thus far in my fifty years of sheltered existence completely bypassed all the ugly, brutal, horrific wars that have turned the world into a cosmic killing field? Because, to the contrary, I was now gaining a significant new life experience to add to all those I had lived up to this present moment? Or, perhaps, because I had now joined the

⁷ Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Of Fear and Fear,” prepublication version (revised) of a subsequently abbreviated essay published in the *Daily News-Record*, Harrisonburg, VA, July 31, 2003.

ranks of the initiated, the survivors who know what war is all about and are still around to tell the story? Pick your own answer, or add another one to the list. I didn't ask Sahar what she meant. But I do know that Sahar's question and her own response set me to thinking about life in a very new way. I won't soon, or ever, forget her words.⁸

At no time during that fall was I ever, to my awareness, in serious danger. Downtown Bethlehem, where I lived and worked, was neither the scene of gun battles nor the recipient of Israeli shelling. But what I did not experience personally I could nevertheless hear very well and at close range. I spent many evenings listening with horror to gun battles at Rachel's Tomb or between Israeli soldiers in Gilo and Palestinian gunmen in Beit Jala. A pair of journal entries from Wednesday evening, October 25, reflect my personal distress:

I'm indoors and warm and cozy this evening and enjoying the deep silence of the quiet house and the absence of artillery fire. I simply can't put into words how profoundly beautiful and nurturing *silence* is. I don't know that I've ever before heard the beauty of silence as I have in this last day after the terrifying experiences earlier this week.

O God, no! No! No! There was just a big boom of some kind. What could it have been? Please, God, no more Israeli bombs and artillery! Not now, just when the silence is beginning to heal the shock and trauma of past days! O Lord, please let this be a quiet night! Please, Lord!⁹

Late that fall, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb invited me to write an Advent meditation for the online newsletter of the International Center of Bethlehem (now the Diyar Consortium). I knew almost immediately exactly what I had to write. And it was this tiny “Advent Meditation on Matthew 2:13–23” that then gave me ongoing courage as I lived through the rest of that fall in the midst of “[my] first war”:

It was not an especially pretty world, the world into which Jesus was born. The Palestine of Jesus's day was a world of grinding poverty for the masses, hard labor for a daily pittance, wealthy tax collectors who made their fortunes by extorting money from the impoverished, and brutal military occupiers whose preferred method of crowd control was crucifixion for all those who dared to rise up and resist the occupation. Nor was the town of Jesus's birth an especially peaceful place, and hardly the idyllic Bethlehem of our beloved Christmas carol, lying “still” under the “silent stars” in “deep and dreamless sleep.” The Bethlehem into which Jesus was born was one that was soon to know the terrifying clank of military steel, the blood-curdling shrieks of terrified children ruthlessly slashed to death by Roman soldiers “just doing

⁸ Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Dona Nobis Pacem: A War Journal from Bethlehem,” unpublished paper (revised), 2001.

⁹ Weaver, “Dona Nobis Pacem.”

their job,” and the heartrending cries of anguished mothers inconsolable over the brutal massacre of their innocent infants.

Two thousand years later the picture looks strangely similar. The Palestine of Christmas 2000 is a world of massive unemployment and growing poverty. And the Bethlehem of Christmas 2000, with its sister cities Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, knows only too well the terrifying sounds and scenes of war: the menacing drone of helicopter gunships, operated by soldiers “just doing their duty” and raining down death and destruction from the skies; the rapid-fire report of machine guns aiming live ammunition at live human beings in deadly confrontations on the ground; the heavy and horrifying boom of tanks that send shells smashing through the stone walls of ordinary houses, fill children’s beds with glass shards, and turn defenseless civilians into refugees without a home; the screaming of Palestinian children, too frightened to go to bed; and the voiced and unvoiced anguish of Palestinian parents, incapable of protecting their little ones from the ongoing terror and the ever-growing destruction all around them.

This is the world and this is the hometown of Jesus Emmanuel, “God with us.” When God comes to be with God’s people, it is not to an idyllic, fairy-tale world of beauty and peace and “dreamless sleep.” There would in fact be no need for “God with us” in that “never never” world. The world that Jesus Emmanuel comes to is rather the real world that all of us know somewhere, somehow, at some time: the world of poverty, extortion, callous cruelty, unrelenting terror, and inconsolable grief. It is this world, and none other, into which God comes to be with us in the person of Jesus, the defenseless child and the crucified Messiah. The God who comes to be “with us” in Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is a God who walks our streets, experiences our daily struggles, shares our pain, weeps our tears, suffers our humiliations, and dies the most agonizing of human deaths at the hands of his enemies. This is our God, the one who “comforts those who mourn,” claims “peacemakers” as “children of God,” and grants inheritance in the kingdom of heaven to those who “hunger and thirst for justice.” This is Jesus Emmanuel, God with us. And this is the “good news of the kingdom.” Thanks be to God!¹⁰

A Broken-Open Heart and an Expanded World

My “on the ground learnings from Israel/Palestine” over the past quarter century-plus have transformed my life in unmistakable and irreversible fashion. I have never recovered from my 1996 sojourn in Jerusalem. Instead, the risky business of engagement in Israel/Palestine has broken my heart open and expanded my real world in ways I could never have imagined. I can only thank God.

¹⁰ Dorothy Jean Weaver, “The Massacre of the Innocents,” in *Christ for All People: Celebrating a World of Christian Art*, ed. Ron O’Grady (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 54.