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# Waymaker, Miracle Worker

Amy Yoder McGloughlin

On October 7, 2023, the day that Hamas launched its attack on Israel and that Israel began its disproportionate retaliation, I was leading a delegation with Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT)<sup>1</sup> in the West Bank city of Hebron.

Hebron is the most intensely occupied city in the West Bank. Over three hundred illegal Israeli settlers live throughout the old city and are protected by three thousand soldiers. The soldiers often harass shopkeepers and local Palestinian residents of the city. They also harass children who are trying to go to school through checkpoints located all over the city and arrest and detain young men and boys just for walking to their homes in the Old City (in the center of Hebron). It is a tense place to be on a good day.

But on October 7, it was plain scary.

That day, the CPT staff rushed us out of the Old City of Hebron within the hour of learning about what was happening in and around Gaza. We all knew that the checkpoints around the city would be closing soon—because that’s just what happens—and that our best chance to get out of the city was to leave immediately. And we knew that soldiers would be scared about what they saw happening in Gaza and that their fear could impact how they treated us.

When we got to the edge of the Old City, closer to the more modern part of Hebron, soldiers stopped us. They screamed at us to turn back as they pointed automatic weapons our way, their fingers hovering over their gun triggers. But the Palestinian CPT members didn’t flinch. Instead they negotiated. They said, “We have Americans here. They have to get out of the city.” The soldiers screamed at us again—“You can’t go this way.” A tense back and forth ensued until finally the CPT coordinator suggested calmly, “We can’t go down the main street, but can we go through back alleys?”

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1 Started by Mennonites and other Christian communities over thirty-five years ago, CPT places teams at the invitation of local peacemaking communities that are confronting situations of lethal conflict. These teams support and amplify the voices of local peacemakers who risk injury and death by waging nonviolent direct action to confront systems of violence and oppression.

The soldiers relented, and we wove our way through the back streets of the city, heading to the buses that I hoped would take us to Jerusalem, just twenty miles north of Hebron. I was anxious to get my small group there because in Jerusalem we'd be on the other side of the checkpoints, on the other side of the wall that separated the West Bank from Israel. I knew these checkpoints would be closing soon and that if we didn't get through them, we'd be stuck in the West Bank for who knows how long.

Making our way to the center of the city to find a bus, we discovered that none were scheduled for Jerusalem. Fortunately, however, there was a bus to Bethlehem, the next best thing. So we said goodbye to the CPT team and hopped on the bus.

When we arrived at the station in Bethlehem, we immediately began looking for the bus to Jerusalem. But we were too late. The checkpoints between Bethlehem and Jerusalem were closed, and we were stuck in the West Bank.

In moments like this I am grateful for a network of friends in Palestine. After a meal and taking some time to think through next steps with my delegation, we headed over to the House of Peace, a little hostel run by a Palestinian Christian family, the Al Aqlehs.

At their door, I sheepishly asked, "Is there any room in the inn?" Laughing at my little Bible joke, they greeted us warmly.

That night we listened to Israeli fighter jets flying low over Bethlehem on their way to Gaza. It was impossible to sleep. No amount of music piped in through earbuds was going to cover up the terrible sounds.

The first night in Bethlehem was difficult, but it was the second night that really wrecked me and my fellow travelers. We were invited by the Al Aqleh family to watch Al Jazeera English news with them. Sitting in their living room, we watched on the big screen as Israel bombed Gaza—live.

All of a sudden, this story, which already felt terrible, became extremely close and personal, and very scary.

That night we heard the fighter jets fly low again. This time there were more of them. This time it felt louder. This time, I cried as I imagined how terrifying it must be to be in Gaza.

Between the lack of sleep and the unbearable news we were hearing coming out of Gaza, I was not doing well. I needed some time alone. So I headed up to the Milk Grotto the next morning.

The Milk Grotto is a church built in honor of Mary's breast milk. It is also one of the most underappreciated and beautiful churches in Bethlehem. Because there were no tourists at the time, I was the only person in the church that morning, besides a nun who was loyally praying her hour in front of the icon in honor of Mary's breast milk. There I felt free to weep—for myself and for the group I was with, and especially for all the people of Gaza.

On my way out of the church, I noticed the statue of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Mary, with eyes full of intensity and love, sat on a donkey, holding the infant Jesus

in her arms. Joseph walked alongside Mary and Jesus, looking up at them with eyes full of fear and worry. For the first time, I understood what it must've been like for this family as they left Bethlehem for Egypt to escape Herod's slaughter of male children under the age of two.

On my way back to the rest of my group, I met so many shopkeepers in Bethlehem, their shops open for the faint hope of a tourist. When they saw the anguish on my face, they offered me help and encouragement. One gave me his card and told me to call him if I needed food. Another handed me a bottle of water.

In this city where Jesus was born, this city that housed Jesus's family in the first weeks of his life, I too was experiencing powerful hospitality on the exact soil where Jesus and his family walked thousands of years ago.

Arriving back at the hostel that morning, our host family told us, "It's time to get you out of Bethlehem, and we have a plan." Boulos, the son of our host family, is a tour guide, and he knew there was a bus full of tourists getting out of the city that day. So he told us to pack up, and within ten minutes we were saying goodbye to Boulos's mother—who kissed all of our faces and prayed a blessing on us—and we jumped into the family's van and headed to the bus.

But the plan didn't work. The bus driver did not want to risk allowing more passengers on the bus than he had promised the military coordinator who had agreed to let these tourists exit. Boulos, fully committed to getting us out of Bethlehem, put us all back in his van and said, "We're going to the checkpoints. I think I can get you out."

Our first checkpoint—the main one, Checkpoint 300—was locked. I banged on the metal doors, hoping a soldier would come so I could plead with them to let us through. But no one responded.

So we drove to the next checkpoint. As we headed through the streets of Bethlehem, I saw that Boulos had less than a quarter tank of gas. I also noticed the long lines at the gas stations and people rushing around to buy supplies. I worried for Boulos and his family.

About that time, Boulos turned on the music in his car and out came a song I knew from Mennonite Church USA's recent convention—the contemporary Christian song "Waymaker, Miracle Worker, Promise Keeper, Light in the darkness, my God, that is who you are."<sup>2</sup>

As I glanced at my traveling companions, we all started to giggle. This song felt a little on the nose, a little too perfect for the moment. And then I started to cry again, praying as I sang with the rest of the van. *God, please be a waymaker and a miracle worker. Get us home to safety.* By the end of the song, all of us in the van were laughing and crying.

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2 Michael W. Smith, vocalist, "Waymaker," by Osinachi Sinach (2015), featuring Vanessa Campagna and Madelyn Berry, track 4 on *Awaken: The Surrounded Experience*, Rockettown Records/The Fuel Music, 2019.

And then we pulled up to the second checkpoint, known as a flying checkpoint. It was literally a four-foot-tall pile of rubble spread across a residential street. Behind it I glimpsed the tops of guns and the roof of a military jeep.

“Forget it,” Boulos said. “There are soldiers here. I thought this one might be empty. I can check one more checkpoint.” But I told him to pull the car over. By now, I was fully committed to getting through this checkpoint. And I had a bit of encouragement from the song.

I stepped out of the van, grabbed a colleague who could handle the task, and the two of us made our way over to the checkpoint.

“What’s the plan?” she asked me.

“We’re going to hold up our passports and demand to be let out of here.”

She laughed, but the look on my face let her know I was not joking.

We strode ahead with our passports held up, explained who we were, and demanded to be let through the border.

And the soldiers disinterestedly let us out.

On the other side of the checkpoint, Boulos had arranged for a taxi to pick us up and bring us to Jerusalem. Our little group, who had just scrambled over a pile of rubble with all our luggage, climbed in another taxi and quietly reflected on the people who had made a way for us, for all those people who had worked miracles to get us to safety.

It was a bittersweet recognition that our passport had given us the privilege to transgress the boundaries of a military checkpoint and demand to be let out. And that God had sent us waymakers and miracle workers to get us here—the CPT team, who brought us to the bus to Bethlehem; the Al Aqleh family, who hosted us; the shopkeepers, who offered help; and Boulos, who would not give up until we were on our way to Jerusalem. Those waymakers and miracle workers were left behind on the other side of the checkpoint, where there would be no work for them, food would become more limited, soldiers more harsh, fuel and water more difficult to find.

While passport privilege made a way for me and the group I was leading, my Palestinian friend’s situation would not be changing any time soon, though I had no idea the military action against Gaza would drag on for months, and no one could have imagined that the bombing of Gaza would become a genocide.

Four months later, it still feels difficult to be home, when others I love so dearly are not safe. My best friend in Palestine has two brothers who have been arrested and imprisoned for months. Other friends are unable to leave their homes because they live too close to a military checkpoint. The CPT team is having a hard time getting into the Old City of Hebron because security is so tight.

And Gaza is breaking all of our hearts. So many dead, most of them women and children. Nearly 1.7 million displaced in the area.<sup>3</sup>

I've been wondering—where is their waymaker, miracle worker? And every time I start to ask that question, I see the faces of everyone who helped me and I remember that God sent them to help me and that God has sent me to be a waymaker and a miracle worker for someone else.

I was given a room at the inn, a space to stay in the middle of war. Jesus's parents were given that same hospitality in Bethlehem, and Jesus's birth story is full of waymakers and miracle workers.

In my story, my Palestinian friends were some of the waymakers and miracle workers for my team of North Americans in those days following October 7, and now I feel compelled to return that gift to them. All of those beloveds in the West Bank are the reason that I call legislators even though I hate making those calls, that I march for peace even while I wonder if it makes a difference, and that I speak about Palestine even when my voice shakes. Combining my efforts with other Mennonites, other Christians, and other people of faith means that, even though I am not physically with my friends in Palestine, I am still seeking a way for their liberation.

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3 UNRWA, "Situation Report #82 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem," *Reliefweb*, February 25, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/unrwa-situation-report-82-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem-all-information-22-24-february-2024-valid-24-february-2024-2230-enar>.