



From Dheisheh to Jerusalem

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Muna Hamzeh-Muhaisen

Sheikha finds a spot in the shade and sits down to catch her breath. The relatively short trip from Jerusalem to Dheisheh under the scorching July sun has sapped her aging, sick body. Without speaking, she motions her longtime friend Halimeh to sit next to her. Halimeh slumps down on the dusty rock. "We're almost home," she gasps.

Sheikha doesn't answer. Her large bosom heaves and she winces from the pain. She closes her eyes and fantasizes about an ice-cold glass of water cooling her throat and her insides. She opens her eyes and licks her dry lips with her parched tongue. "Oh

God Almighty! Have mercy on us from this awful heat," she whispers and grabs the edge of her white head cover to wipe her sweaty face.

The two women sit there, afraid to get up and face the sun that has been glaring at them all day. It wasn't so bad in the early hours of the morning when they started off for al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to attend the Friday prayer. But now, at 3 p.m., the heat was too much to bear and the thought of having to walk up the hill before reaching home was hellish.

Nearly ten minutes pass before Sheikha shifts her weary body. She reaches down for the plastic shopping bag resting by her swollen feet. Four loaves of sesame bread stick out of the bag, looking dried and twisted. "Let's go," she tells Halimeh as she gets to her feet. The two women plod into the camp, as if pilgrims back from hard travels. "I'll see you next Friday," murmurs Halimeh as she and Sheikha part ways. "God willing! If we are alive," answers Sheikha as she bids her friend farewell.

Sheikha can hardly remember when the Israelis started imposing a siege on Jerusalem, making it impossible for West Bank Palestinians to get to the city without having to carry Israeli-issued permits and go through military checkpoints. But she vividly recalls when Jerusalem was simply there, accessible, reachable, and open to all Palestinians. "Even at the height of the Intifada, we didn't need permits," she says. "Can you imagine that? We used to come and go to Jerusalem as we pleased. Things were different then. Starkly different."

Between 1977-1989, Sheikha worked as a cleaning woman at Hebrew University. She and nearly ten other women from

Dheisheh camp worked on the Mount Scopus campus, making the trip to Jerusalem six days a week for twelve straight years. "There were no check points at the entrance to Jerusalem and no one ever stopped us to ask for permits," she recalls.

While no figures are available as to the number of Dheisheh refugees who used to work in Jerusalem in the 1970s, the number is believed to be much higher than it is today. Many Dheisheh nurses, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) employees, journalists, construction and restaurant workers, and fruit pickers used to work in the city.

Dheisheh refugees employed by UNRWA used to either work at UNRWA headquarters in Jerusalem or drive into Jerusalem to attend staff meetings. "Now we hold our meetings in Ramallah because the majority of UNRWA employees don't have permits to enter the city," says Hussein Shaheen, UNRWA's Camp Director in Dheisheh.

Shaheen worked at UNRWA headquarters between 1973-1992 and used to drive his own car to work. Since 1992, Shaheen has been issued a three-month entry to Jerusalem only three times, but never a permit for his car. "It is very difficult to get an entry permit for a human being, so imagine what it's like getting a car permit," he says. Like most Dheisheh refugees, Shaheen hasn't been to Jerusalem in four or five years. "Jerusalem wasn't simply a place of employment, but a place where we went to attend conferences, workshops, book fairs, theater plays, and much more."

Rab'aa Manna', who worked with

Sheikha at Hebrew University, also remembers. "Jerusalem to us was the city next door. It was where we worked, where we went to pray on Fridays, and where we occasionally went shopping in the market of the Old City. Now, it feels like a far away place, and America appears to be more accessible to us than Jerusalem is."

For several years now, Rab'aa has been going to Jerusalem only during the

Month of Ramadan, and even then, she only goes on Fridays. "I go to pray at al-Aqsa. I stay all day and attend three prayers." Rab'aa doesn't like making the trip. "Sometimes the Israeli soldiers at the Bethlehem checkpoint send us back, and we have to make a long detour on foot. I'm too old for this nonsense. I remember one time that we had to go down a valley and walk up a treacherous hill just to escape the soldiers who were in pursuit. I was sick for three days after that."

Rab'aa hates the whole idea of permits and refuses to apply for one. "I'm in my late 40's and a grandmother to 14 children. How can I possibly be a security threat to the Israelis if I go pray in Jerusalem?" she asks defiantly. "I always take my chances. If they let me through, then so be it, if not, then I sneak in." She laughs at the idea. "A woman like me has to sneak in! It sounds criminal, doesn't it?"

If sneaking in to pray at al-Aqsa is a crime, then the majority of the older women in Dheisheh are criminals. All the Palestinian grandmothers and great grandmothers in Dheisheh and elsewhere in Palestine are, in the eyes of the Israeli authorities, a threat to Israel's national security. If they were to take Israeli regulations seriously, they would all have

to endure the nuisance of submitting applications for entry permits to Jerusalem and then be at the mercy of some Israeli officer who may, or may not, grant them a one-day entry permit into the city. There are no known cases where a Palestinian was issued a permit for the specific purpose of going to pray in Jerusalem.

In Dheisheh, and throughout the West Bank, the increasing closure of Jerusalem since the Madrid talks in 1991 has had a profound impact on the Palestinian psyche and the way of life. Even at the height of the Intifada, Palestinians could get on the bus and ride into Jerusalem. "There would be severe clashes inside the camp, and we would go to Jerusalem without anyone asking us where we were going," recalls Sheikha. "Now, Jerusalem seems like a far away city in some foreign land."

It is obvious to all Palestinians now that since the peace talks were initially launched, Israel has been pursuing a policy of isolating Jerusalem from the hearts and minds of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. At first it was not entirely clear that it would be a sustained and systematic policy. At the start, when the Israelis began requiring permits from Palestinians to get into the city, many thought the closures were temporary. Soon, however, the systematic nature of the policy emerged. The Israelis made it next to impossible for students to obtain entry permits that would allow them to study at Jerusalem schools, colleges and universities. They also made it difficult for Palestinian buses and taxis to get permits, thus creating a situation where transportation into Jerusalem wasn't as easy as it used to be.

In addition, the Israelis made it

increasingly difficult for medical patients to get permits to enter Jerusalem for medical treatment at al-Maqassed Hospital or any other Palestinian hospital in East Jerusalem. Palestinian refugees, for instance, used to get free referrals from UNRWA-operated clinics in the various camps for treatment at the Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives. But now, that too has changed.

Because repeated closures have made it difficult for Palestinians to enter Jerusalem, UNRWA has started referring refugee patients to other hospitals in the West Bank. Bethlehem area refugees, for instance, are now referred to al-Ahli Hospital in Hebron and, in delivery cases, to the French Hospital in Bethlehem. Only when a particular treatment is not available in the West Bank are patients still referred to the Augusta Victoria, which has since been privatized.

Furthermore, young women from the Bethlehem area, a twenty-minute drive to downtown East Jerusalem, used to go shopping in Jerusalem, but now they go shopping in Bethlehem. Students at universities in Jerusalem have to sneak in to attend classes. In manifold and accumulating ways, the Israelis are obstructing and suffocating the everyday ways of life that have historically tied Palestinians to the city.

When you ask Dheisheh camp residents how long it has been since they've been to Jerusalem, the answers vary. Some say it has been four years, others say it has been five. "We can pack a bag and cross the Allenby Bridge into Jordan right now without even thinking about it, but we cannot even dream of hopping into a taxi

and driving into Jerusalem," says Hiyam, a Dheisheh woman in her thirties who used to go into Jerusalem at least once a week to buy clothes at bargain prices from the Old City.

"What is even more ridiculous is when relatives from Jordan or the Gulf States come to visit us. They have tourist visas and go to Jerusalem any time they like, but we cannot go with them," complains Hiyam. "They end up going site seeing on their own, and we sit at home and wait for them to come back and tell us what it felt like to spend a day in Jerusalem. It is the most absurd and insane situation I can think of."

Hiyam's sister, Amal, works as a nurse at al-Makassed Hospital. "I rely on Amal to buy me anything I need from Jerusalem," explains Hiyam. "Sometimes she finds clothes at bargain prices. I try them on and if they don't fit, she takes them back and exchanges them. You'd think she's off to someplace in Europe and I'm asking her to buy me something that I can't get here."

Only a small number of construction workers and nurses, like Amal, work in Jerusalem and are issued permits. Others sneak past the military checkpoints in order to work inside the city. Each day they take a chance and risk getting caught. Sometimes they're lucky, other times they aren't. Sometimes the punishment is a night in prison, or a fine, or a good beating, or a few hours of punishment spent standing under the hot sun without a drink of water. It all depends on the mood of the Israeli soldier who catches the unlucky man.

Meanwhile, it is Friday again. Dheisheh sleeps in on this relaxed one-day weekend and the alleys and streets rest from the

snarl of traffic and the screams of children. The only people out and about this early in the morning are the grandmothers and great grandmothers. They walk down the hill in pairs or in groups of three or four. Their pace is slow but determined. Small, overstuffed shopping bags swing in their hands: a small pot of coffee, a bottle of ice water, home baked bread, a few tomatoes, olives, and perhaps a piece of goat cheese, the nourishment they will have when they sit under the shade of the olive trees in the spacious courtyard of al-Aqsa. First they'll attend the Friday sermon, pray, and then have their little picnic.

"My grandchildren asked for sesame bread, remind me to get some," Sheikha tells Halimeh as they emerge from Damascus Gate.

"My grandchildren want some too," Halimeh replies. "I don't know why their father can't get it for them from Bethlehem? They can eat it before its dry."

"What a silly thing to say! They know they can get it from Bethlehem, but it won't be the same. The sesame bread we're bringing has the taste and aroma of Jerusalem. Don't you get it? That's what they want...."

Muna Hamzeh-Muhaisen is a journalist who has been covering Palestinian affairs since 1984. Her articles currently appear in Middle East International, Palestine Report and Pour la Palestine, among others.

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