

Open Shuhada Street

by Paula Clayton Dempsey

Standing near a checkpoint in Hebron, the second largest city in the West Bank, Palestine, our ecumenical group of travelers with the National Council of Churches watched as a gentleman carrying a couple of bags of groceries was denied passage. Wearily, he turned to walk another way home—a grocery store errand lengthened because of the oppressive 23 checkpoints within one square kilometer that prevent Palestinians from walking on their own streets.

Our group passed through the turnstile checkpoint with few questions and emerged on the other side to discover an astonishingly quiet and scarcely traveled street. Most call it a ghost town when compared to its bustling activity prior to the Israeli occupation. Shuhada Street, which once served as the main marketplace and thoroughfare for the Palestinian people of Hebron, is now almost entirely closed to its 200,000 residents.

The next stop on our tour of Hebron was the Ibrahimi mosque. The sanctuary, believed to be the burial site of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, as well as Jacob and Leah, is the fourth holiest site in Islam and one of the most holy sites in Judaism. History indicates the more than 2,000-year-old structure has served as a Byzantine church, a Jewish pilgrimage and prayer site, a Romanesque church and a mosque.

Almost completely destroyed during the Crusades, the holy site was a home to Muslim prayers until 1994 when a New York City-born Israeli settler opened fire in the mosque and killed 29 Palestinians worshippers. In response, the Israeli occupying government closed and divided the mosque, with part since then being used as a synagogue. Along with dividing and restricting the usage of the Ibrahimi mosque, the occupying government simultaneously restricted movement and life on Shuhada Street by placing checkpoints at each end of the street. In the divided mosque and on Shuhada Street Israelis travel freely, drive cars and carry automatic weapons.

In 2010, a group of young adults began a campaign to end the stranglehold of closures and restrictions in Hebron. Each year on Feb. 25, the anniversary of the Ibrahimi mosque massacre, Youth Against Settlements (<http://www.yashebron.org>) organizes a week of activities and urges others around the world to join them by raising awareness of the situation in Hebron and standing with them in solidarity. The Alliance of Baptists urges our supporters to join the 2018 Open Shuhada Street campaign (http://www.yashebron.org/open_shuhada_street). Become aware of the exceedingly unbearable situation and join the resistance!

The final destination of our pilgrimage to Hebron was to visit Issa el Amro, the founder and director of the Palestinian-led organization Youth Against Settlements, formed in 2008 as a nonviolent direct action group seeking to empower and educate Palestinians to stand firm and mount nonviolent resistance to the occupation. Issa has testified before the United Nations and is currently undergoing trial in Israeli military court. His story, found at

www.mondoweiss.net/2018/01/please-shuhada-campaign/, is inspiring and includes an invitation to join the resistance.

Join the ongoing demand for freedom and equality on Shuhada Street and all of Palestine, and learn more by visiting www.yashebron.org/open-shuhada-street.

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