

Stories of Hope

Preface

Jerusalem

...Jerusalem, a magical, complicated city, yet one that cannot be forgotten... ...Jerusalem, the city of the three great religions, built upon seven hills like Rome, an ancient city brimming with wonders... ...Jerusalem, the city where so many people could live together, where perhaps one day, finally, peace will reign... ...A city of many names, Al Quds, Yerushalayim, Jerusalem... ...Imagine the white stones, the blue mosque with the golden roof, the intense azure sky, the warm sun,

the green of the olive trees, the bells of the Holy Sepulchre...

This city is sometimes a difficult place, one you perhaps hear about often on television, without always fully understanding what is happening. In Jerusalem live Israelis and Palestinians; Jews, Christians, and Muslims live there. Sometimes we hear of West Jerusalem and East Jerusalem, but it is something strange. Inside the city, there is no dividing wall, though throughout its history it has never been particularly united. In West Jerusalem live many Israelis, and in the eastern part live Palestinians who possess an Israeli identity card or an Israeli passport.

At its heart lies the Old City, *el balad adime* in Arabic and *ieratika* in Hebrew, composed of four quarters, featuring eight gates, and surrounded by high Ottoman walls. Within it are the most important sites for the three monotheistic religions: the Holy Sepulchre, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Wailing Wall.

...Cats strolling peacefully, almost appearing as the masters of the city within the walls, while families of hummingbirds dwell among the trees. Small doors, sometimes brightly colored, scents of spices rising from the market streets, mingling with the incense of the local churches and accompanied by the muezzin who seems to dictate the rhythms of the day.

People walking with strange hats covered in fur and black coats, women dressed in white with babies wrapped in cotton cloths, elderly men wearing the keffiyeh and the

agal, the typical Palestinian headdress, older women in their embroidered red and black dresses, young boys with white cords dangling from beneath their sweatshirts.

Jerusalem is the center of the world, as even Dante maintained, and precisely for this reason, one sees people vastly different from one another yet bound by love and devotion toward this city, for better or for worse.

Children and War

Israel, Palestine, and Gaza are areas where it is difficult to remain peaceful for too long, unfortunately.

However, they are places where there are many, many children. And what do these little ones do when there are conflicts? How do they pass the time? Are they afraid?

These are not easy questions to answer, nor is it easy to imagine what they feel. Even for those watching television from home, seated in a safe place, it is not always instantaneous to shift one's thoughts to what is truly happening beyond the screen.

For almost three years now, the children of these places have had to alter and adapt their lives according to the war.

Ahmad, in Gaza, found himself looking after his little brothers and sisters because he no longer has a mom or a dad. School no longer exists; one plays with whatever can be found on the street among the rubble. He lives in a tent, it is very cold, and when it rains, everything collapses. He must always stand in lines to get a little bread, and finding clean water is difficult.

Rachel, in Tel Aviv, has perhaps spent more hours in a bomb shelter than above ground. She barely sees her school; mostly, she has many online lessons. In moments of calm, she manages to go play on the beach, but not like before. In previous years, every Shabbat (the day of rest for Jews between Friday and Saturday) she would go with her family to relax by the sea; now, it does not happen so often.

Amy, in Jerusalem, inside the Old City, has often found herself walking through a deserted town. Every time the conflict worsens, she and those living within the walls are locked inside, because the houses do not have rocket shelters. Online school is boring, the usual children and

teenagers are not playing in the streets; there is always silence.

Families always suffer in wars, and children even more so. Some lose their parents; others see adults sad because they have lost their jobs. It is not a normal life.

Occasionally, however, there are human beings endowed with goodwill. Clowns who organize shows for the little ones of Gaza, adults who sit down to color and draw in the shelters beneath the buildings, teachers who decide to hold activities and lessons in their homes amidst the narrow streets of the Old City in Jerusalem.

Before, all these children and youths would look up at the sky to see if a kite was flying, if there were storks migrating in flocks to trace patterns in the sky; they admired the landscape from the Mount of Olives looking toward Jerusalem. Now, everyone looks up when the sirens sound to see where the missiles are.

Everyone has their fears; sometimes they talk about them, sometimes they hesitate to say anything about what they feel. Those with younger brothers or sisters try not to let them realize what they truly hold inside; they must stay strong for the others.

Certainly, all children and youths in the world should never have to face any of these scenarios. They should have their parents, go to school, have food and water, and they should be able to live carefree. Unfortunately,

though, there are many wars: Ukraine, Lebanon, Sudan, Iran, Israel, Palestine...

Wars never bring anything good. Even the grandparents used to say it after the Second World War. Weapons solve nothing, and the weakest pay the consequences. Like when friends argue and no longer speak to each other. What is the most beautiful moment? When PEACE is made.

Mustafa and the Cello

10 years old and a fire-red cello. Two green eyes staring fixedly at you. 10 years old and many little brothers and sisters, but no real home. A sort of container covered with a bit of concrete, like many houses in the refugee camps of Bethlehem.

He started studying a few months ago and has a lot of talent; eventually, after much persuasion, his family consented to let him study music. A sacrifice; technically, it is time taken away from helping his family.

He is always punctual, he is so serious that he knows all the orchestra parts by heart.

In Bethlehem, but also in other Palestinian cities such as Ramallah, Jenin, Nablus, and Jerusalem itself, there are refugee camps within them. Refugees? But how, are they not in their own home? No... they lost their home after 1948, 1967, and so on. Perhaps they came from other towns of historical Palestine... Jaffa, Haifa...

Let us return to Mustafa.

He doesn't speak much for a young boy, but he likes to keep busy. When the hot meal is served to all the children, he is always among those helping to distribute the plates, keeping the youngest ones in check.

One day, however, Mustafa does not show up; he cannot be found. The teachers from the music school search for him everywhere, all day long... nothing. Until the evening, nothing.

The next day, a few teachers decide to go around all of Bethlehem searching for him. Where? At all the traffic lights... usually many children from the refugee camps try to sell tissues or lighters to help their families with a little money.

Searching... searching... after a few days, Fadi finally finds him. He takes him with him.

Mustafa enters the cello class, picks up his instrument, and throws it angrily to the ground. He stands motionless and utters not a word. Silence all around; no one can breathe a word. Neither his classmates nor his teachers.

He bursts into tears and cannot stop. One of the teachers tries to hug him, and he curls up in the arms of the young cello teacher. She is a foreigner, she speaks a broken Arabic, but in the silence, she holds him tight and wipes away his tears.

After drinking a glass of water, he begins to speak: "They arrested my dad, I have 5 siblings, and my mom doesn't work. I have to be the man of the house, I am the oldest, and I have to earn some money."

Lapidary, direct words that hurt. "My mom says I can't come here anymore... but I adore my cello."

Following a meeting, the teachers decide to speak to his mother. Thanks to some donations from abroad, they can give Mustafa a small salary to help his family, provided the boy returns to his music lessons.

Mustafa went back to playing and even won the Palestinian competition. Music saved him from the streets, and perhaps, who knows, it might help him when he grows up to stay away from the dangers lurking among the small gray houses of the refugee camps.

Going to school, touching the beauty of art firsthand should not be denied to any child.

The Olive Tree

My roots sank deep into a soft red earth. Every day, some little feathered creature would come to rest upon my branches. Then, around October, came the somewhat more annoying time of the year when the humans, instead of sitting beneath my foliage to seek shelter from the scorching sun, gave me those bothersome beatings to make my olives fall. Yet, despite a few broken branches and all these beings continually jumping upon me to seize my precious green emeralds, I must say it was also an amusing time. The humans arrive with their whole family; the children run circles around me, the males climb as if they had to win over their fair maiden, and the women around me gather everything that falls. Then, at a certain point, because they are all exhausted, they spread out on a large blanket and begin to eat; they prepare a small fire to cook something, and everyone becomes happy when that highly aromatic black liquid is distributed among the people. Meanwhile, I observe them, and usually nearby there is a patient little donkey waiting for the day's end. At

the close of each day, the humans load the sacks full of my olives onto his back and set off toward their village; the little donkey moves step by step under the weight, but perhaps he too is glad to participate in the grand event. One day, my best friend arrived, my beautiful hummingbird. This little bird is a marvel of colors; everyone admires him, and he absolutely loves sitting on my highest branch. He is also quite the chatterbox, I must say.

One day, however, he arrives all flustered with a tiny insect in his beak, which he promptly loses because he is flapping his wings too much. "Olive tree! Olive tree, wake up!" he chirps. "What is the matter, my beautiful friend? Why are you flapping your wings so much?" "The humans! The humans are breaking the trees, there is fire, everything is burning at Ras Karkar!" "My friend, what are you saying? You know that occasionally the humans give us a bit of a beating for the olives, but it is not that time of year now, are you sure of what you say?" The little hummingbird becomes even more agitated: "Olive tree, I am absolutely certain! They have even brought enormous iron monsters that lift the trees, then some—the larger ones—they carry away to I don't know where... Olive tree, I am afraid for you; I can fly and I can escape, but what will you do?" The poor tree begins to smell the scent of smoke wafting from afar. "I have been here with my roots for a hundred years... never have I heard such news. Poor me, I am all wrinkled, an old tree by now, I cannot do anything about it; we trees cannot run away."

In the night, fires can be seen in the distance; the sky is black with gray columns painting an unsettling picture. The following morning, the poor olive tree senses that something horrible is about to happen. A flock of swallows flees swiftly through the air; a crow remains, cawing mournfully upon one of his branches. And there they are, having arrived even at his patch of earth: these horrible humans with the yellow monsters. They begin to dig; some of the humans he knew try to protect the trees but are attacked with stones. At a certain point, the olive tree feels a wrench; the yellow monster is trying to uproot him. He tries by all means to bear down with his roots, not to yield even a sliver of earth, but he cannot hold out for long. He finds himself hoisted in the air; some of his branches have snapped in the attempt to resist. By now he thinks he has met his end, but the men wrap him in a black plastic tarp as if he were a gift parcel and place him upon another iron monster, one that this time moves. Other olive trees are there beside him; others lie torn from the earth, completely destroyed. The wicked men burn the ones that did not survive. The monster sets off again with him and five other trees; the journey is long. The now-desperate olive trees try to save their branches, their little leaves; they will never again see any of their animal friends. The object with wheels stops in front of a large concrete building where a vast hole has been prepared. The men unload the trees and arrange them in the large hole, covering them with black soil taken from bags. There they are, amidst the concrete, far from their red earth, far from the springs that flowed beneath their roots. Instead of streams, they now see plastic pipes;

instead of stones, beneath them lie rocks with shapes that are far too perfect.

The next day, the trees awaken, now acutely aware of having lost their origins; nothing belongs to them anymore. Suddenly, however, the olive tree hears familiar sounds. "No, it cannot be my little friend, it is impossible." Yet, there he is, utterly exhausted, who knows how long he must have flown. "Olive tree, it is me! I am your hummingbird friend! I flew all day to come look for you; you are now in a grand city where there are also towering walls. I am so happy you are still all in one piece!" The poor tree, brimming with sorrow at having lost his land, thus asks one final favor of his little bird: "Little feathered one, could you do something for me? Take a few little twigs if you can and carry them with you. Carry these small pieces of wood, make a nest for your little ones. If you can, build it on a tree that looks out toward my beloved hills, those from which I would occasionally gaze with curiosity at that city the humans call Ramallah."

Days and weeks pass; the olive tree constantly thinks of his feathered friend. The tree gazes at the large building rising behind the small garden where he has ended up. The humans go inside and search for those things with many pages and black lines that they call books. They then come out with large stacks and go into their cars. Occasionally, however, it happens that some of them decide to sit in the garden with one of these squares that open up. They all look identical, but one morning a woman arrives with a book featuring different lines. There are no spaces,

everything seems connected, like a complicated drawing. The olive tree spies on the girl and thinks about where he has seen such a thing before. He thinks and thinks, ah yes! They are the very same lines that were seen written on the mosque. So then, perhaps this human comes from where I come from! Inside the book, there are drawings. The tree tries to discern what is inside and catches a glimpse of something else. One of the pages looks like a photo of his village. The olive tree sighs, and with the swaying of his branches, turns the page for the girl. Everything is now so distant, so painful for him, yet he tries to shift his leaves a little to provide shade for this girl who feels somehow familiar. The tree dreams, dreams once more of his humans with the olives, the tranquil donkey, the friendly hummingbird. His roots stretch out; around them is only the concrete of this vast new city.

Friendship Counts

Yousef and Lior are not old friends. It all happened by chance, as in the most beautiful stories. Stand partners, the only two boys in the older students' orchestra. A piece of black iron, a pencil, and sheet music to share. In an orchestra, one can be more or less fortunate with stand partners; some become friends for life, others make you eager for the inspector to tell you to change seats. Between two seated violinists, there is space, but not too much, otherwise the violists and cellists begin to claim their rights. Scroll to scroll, the necks of the instruments are arranged as if they somehow wished to meet.

For the first few months, there was silence between Yousef and Lior, sparse conversations limited to scribbling down a number for the left-hand fingerings and a few bowings that the orchestra conductor absolutely demanded. Yousef speaks Hebrew well, and Lior speaks English and Hebrew, but not Arabic. The prerequisites for understanding each other, however, are there.

Two teenage boys, timid, who share one fundamental point in common: they love music and their violins. Two gentle, calm, diligent souls. The two of them, in reality,

are very alike: precise, always punctual, they never disrupt rehearsals.

The time comes when the school is to go abroad to perform concerts. The vast majority of the orchestra is female; the only males present are the conductor, the friar who directs the school, and the two of them, who are placed in a room together.

Fate has it that a Palestinian Christian and an Israeli Jew will sleep in the same room, as happens in all other countries when youths travel together. From then on, they become inseparable. They sit together on the bus, visit cities together, and become FRIENDS.

But then, is it possible? Is it a true story? Yes, the answer is an absolute YES. Friendships are born because people recognize one another as human beings, not based on their ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Kindness and gentleness always yield great surprises.

Would this friendship have blossomed even without finding themselves outside their own country? Probably yes, though it would have taken more time. When playing in an orchestra, you must sit close, breathe together, and look into each other's eyes, otherwise, the magic cannot begin.

The Wall

Sofia and Elena are cousins. They used to live in the same village near Bethlehem. One must say "used to live" because now, what divides them is the wall. A great, ugly, gray beast of reinforced concrete. It takes your breath away just looking at it, especially for two young girls trying to gaze toward the sky.

Every Christmas they went together to the midnight mass at the Church of the Nativity, and every Easter they went together to the Holy Sepulchre. Now, it is no longer so.

Sofia manages to go to the village to visit family if the checkpoints are open; for example, after October 7th, they were closed for a long time. For Elena, it is different. She can only see her cousin if her cousin comes to her; to see Jerusalem, she must hope to obtain a permit to exit the checkpoint. Usually, Christians were granted these permits slightly more often than Muslims, but lately, this too has changed. Elena's mother, Mira, is a teacher. The

rules for those teaching within Israeli territory have changed, even when it comes to East Jerusalem. Every month, Mira lives in fear that her permit will not be renewed and that she will lose her job. She is afraid of never seeing her kindergarteners again, and most importantly, of no longer being able to help support her family alongside her husband, who is also a laborer for the Church. Elena has seen her mother cry; for two weeks it truly seemed that she would no longer receive the permit. She cried in secret, at night, next to her husband so as not to be heard.

Elena sometimes dreams of being in Jerusalem, hand in hand with Sofia, while they run through the gates of the old city. She smells the scent of *kaek* (the typical Jerusalem sesame-covered elongated ring bread) and the fresh falafel that Sofia's parents used to buy to eat breakfast together on Sundays after mass.

Memories, images of a freedom that was stripped away from her overnight by blocks of reinforced concrete. Divided families, economic situations that have collapsed, shattered friendships. Walls in history have never worked. Even a block of concrete cannot take away anyone's memories, and above all, it cannot take away the freedom to imagine, to think, and to love people. A wall creates tension, misunderstandings, a lack of knowledge of who is on the other side.

Feeling Free

To simply pick up and leave the country. To arrive at the airport and fly away, out of here. Christians, Muslims, Jews, bearing no marks upon them, without having it written on their foreheads. Traveling together and feeling equal.

It seems like an absurd statement these days, but in reality, it happens! Thanks to special schools, to programs that exist in Jerusalem, sometimes the young people can truly experience this "miracle."

Imagine, for instance, a group of teenagers touring around Rome or Bologna, all together with violins and cellos. They all speak English, because not everyone knows Arabic and not everyone Hebrew.

Everyone at the table. One next to the other, they break bread together, they pour water for one another, they laugh and joke. Do you not believe it? And yet, these moments of sharing and beauty exist.

When the young people leave here, they sometimes feel lighter; they joke and talk, perhaps even forgetting a little about where they come from. And you might think... it's all pretend, you take them around to confuse them. But no. Sometimes stepping out of such a complex place in constant conflict can help; it can provide oxygen.

Rima and Rachel check together to see which eyeshadow is the prettiest; Rami and Lior split a *panzerotto* down the middle.

No one knows who is the Israeli or the Palestinian; even when they are together on stage, one sees a smiling orchestra, one that breathes together, where glances intertwine to create the magic of music in every piece.

Epilogue

Writing these stories is never easy, nor is recounting life in a complex place. The important thing is to offer a

different perspective from the narrative of the news broadcasts.

Unfortunately, all too often there is talk only of numbers, of people who have lost their lives, and of the present tragedies. The situation is undeniably dramatic, but the people inhabiting this land are nonetheless trying to live. The children, thanks to the arts and the kind hearts of peacemakers, still manage to smile despite everything.

To you, young people who live far from here, we ask for a thought, a prayer, an intelligent awareness raised toward this subject. Educating oneself toward hatred and extremism is always dangerous; dreaming of peace and brotherhood starting from one's own home, from one's friends, is the hope that remains for us.

We can assure you that here there are still young and old who dream of a better future and who, day after day, seek to create small oases of peace within a decades-long conflict.