

Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear.

These are the words that we sang at the base of the apartheid wall in the West Bank, Palestine. As I reached out and touched the cold concrete, I looked up 8 metres to the top of the wall and could not help but weep. The wall was heavy on my heart. In that moment, in that place, I personally had nothing to be afraid of. I was a North American tourist crying by a wall. No reason for the Israeli Defense Force to take notice. Yet even as we sang those words of Jesus' promise to be always near, it was difficult to not be afraid. Afraid for the future and afraid that I am more complicit in this conflict than I realize. And still we sang that song as a prayer for strength and for hope, for us and more importantly for the Palestinian people.

This past May I travelled for three weeks with a group of 26 through the State of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. This trip was jointly organized by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, and given the name "Yella!" which means "Let's go!" in both Arabic and Hebrew. The trip is run every few years, and is open to young adults ages 18 and older. Our group was made up of 23 young adults, including nine from Conrad Grebel University College and four from Eastern Mennonite University, and three "faith partners": Derek Suderman, professor of Old Testament at Grebel, Pieter Niemeyer, pastor at Rouge Valley Mennonite Church, and Jessica Reesor-Rempel, Grebel alumni and co-founder of the organization Pastors In Exile which is based in Waterloo. The group was very diverse, as was expected with that many people, and yet we got along well and bonded over the three weeks. Some were more interested in the Biblical history and setting, others were more interested in the ongoing political situation and military occupation, and I think it's safe to say that we were all interested in the travelling and sight-seeing aspects. The three weeks were packed with all three of these things and much more. While I unfortunately won't have time to tell you about all of it, I'd like to share with you some of the most significant things I experienced and learned from the trip.

This past May I travelled for three weeks with a group of 26 through the State of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. This trip was jointly organized by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, and given the name "Yella!" which means "Let's go!" in both Arabic and Hebrew. The trip is run every few years, and is open to young adults ages 18 and older. Our group was made up of 23 young adults, including nine from Conrad Grebel University College and four from Eastern Mennonite University, and three "faith partners": Derek Suderman, professor of Old Testament at Grebel, Pieter Niemeyer, pastor at Rouge Valley Mennonite Church, and Jessica Reesor-Rempel, Grebel alumni and co-founder of the organization Pastors In Exile which is based in Waterloo. The group was very diverse, as was expected with that many people, and yet we got along well and bonded over the three weeks. Some were more interested in the Biblical history and setting, others were more interested in the ongoing political situation and military occupation, and I think it's safe to say that we were all interested in the travelling and sight-seeing aspects. The three weeks were packed with all three of these things and much more. While I unfortunately won't have time to tell you about all of it, I'd like to share with you some of the most significant things I experienced and learned from the trip.

This past May I travelled for three weeks with a group of 26 through the State of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. This trip was jointly organized by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, and given the name “Yella!” which means “Let’s go!” in both Arabic and Hebrew. The trip is run every few years, and is open to young adults ages 18 and older. Our group was made up of 23 young adults, including nine from Conrad Grebel University College and four from Eastern Mennonite University, and three “faith partners”: Derek Suderman, professor of Old Testament at Grebel, Pieter Niemeyer, pastor at Rouge Valley Mennonite Church, and Jessica Reesor-Rempel, Grebel alumni and co-founder of the organization Pastors In Exile which is based in Waterloo. The group was very diverse, as was expected with that many people, and yet we got along well and bonded over the three weeks. Some were more interested in the Biblical history and setting, others were more interested in the ongoing political situation and military occupation, and I think it’s safe to say that we were all interested in the travelling and sight-seeing aspects. The three weeks were packed with all three of these things and much more. While I unfortunately won’t have time to tell you about all of it, I’d like to share with you some of the most significant things I experienced and learned from the trip.

This past May I travelled for three weeks with a group of 26 through the State of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. This trip was jointly organized by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, and given the name “Yella!” which means “Let’s go!” in both Arabic and Hebrew. The trip is run every few years, and is open to young adults ages 18 and older. Our group was made up of 23 young adults, including nine from Conrad Grebel University College and four from Eastern Mennonite University, and three “faith partners”: Derek Suderman, professor of Old Testament at Grebel, Pieter Niemeyer, pastor at Rouge Valley Mennonite Church, and Jessica Reesor-Rempel, Grebel alumni and co-founder of the organization Pastors In Exile which is based in Waterloo. The group was very diverse, as was expected with that many people, and yet we got along well and bonded over the three weeks. Some were more interested in the Biblical history and setting, others were more interested in the ongoing political situation and military occupation, and I think it’s safe to say that we were all interested in the travelling and sight-seeing aspects. The three weeks were packed with all three of these things and much more. While I unfortunately won’t have time to tell you about all of it, I’d like to share with you some of the most significant things I experienced and learned from the trip.

This past May I travelled for three weeks with a group of 26 through the State of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. This trip was jointly organized by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, and given the name “Yella!” which means “Let’s go!” in both Arabic and Hebrew. The trip is run every few years, and is open to young adults ages 18 and older. Our group was made up of 23 young adults, including nine from Conrad Grebel University College and four from Eastern Mennonite University, and three “faith partners”: Derek Suderman, professor of Old Testament at Grebel, Pieter Niemeyer, pastor at Rouge Valley Mennonite Church, and Jessica Reesor-Rempel, Grebel alumni and co-founder of the organization Pastors In Exile which is based in Waterloo. The group was very diverse, as was expected with that many people, and yet we got along well and bonded over the three weeks.

Some were more interested in the Biblical history and setting, others were more interested in the ongoing political situation and military occupation, and I think it's safe to say that we were all interested in the travelling and sight-seeing aspects. The three weeks were packed with all three of these things and much more. While I unfortunately won't have time to tell you about all of it, I'd like to share with you some of the most significant things I experienced and learned from the trip.

The apartheid wall, also known as the separation wall or security fence depending on who you ask and which part of the wall you're talking about, is a barrier that runs around the West Bank. Parts of the barrier in heavier populated areas are 8 metre high concrete walls, and other parts consist of multiple layers of fences with barbed wire, trenches and patrol roads. The proposed barrier is over 700km long and in the 12 years since construction began, it is just over 60% complete. The barrier is about 60 metres wide on average, which over the entire length of the wall would amount to 42 million square metres, or 4,200 hectares, of unusable land. That's huge! Most of the wall is built inside the West Bank, sometimes cutting deep into the heart of the territory, and as a result cuts off almost 10% of the Palestinian land. Most controversially, it annexes East Jerusalem, which is supposed to be the Palestinian part of the important city and is still home to many Palestinians. To try and put it in context a bit, the West Bank is smaller than the GTA. The completed wall would stretch halfway from here to Winnipeg and render unusable as much land as is south of St. Clair Ave from the DVP to High Park.

The wall was ostensibly built for security, to protect Israeli citizens from Palestinian terrorists, and sure, it is likely easier for Israel to ensure terrorists cannot move freely in and out of Israel. But that means it restricts the movement of all Palestinians. And not just between Israel and the West Bank, but also within the West Bank itself. Since the wall meanders around within the West Bank, people's travel is often obstructed or entirely cut off. Some people cannot even regularly access their farm land because it is now on the other side of the wall.

This is a map of the area around Jerusalem, which is the largest city in Israel/Palestine. The grey part is Israel, but as you can see the red line of the wall annexes the rest of Jerusalem and obstructs the movement of people between Bethlehem in the south and Ramallah in the North. And that's "just" the wall. There are also checkpoints set up along most major roads in the West Bank, and Palestinians are required to apply for and carry travel documentation which might be rejected at any given checkpoint for seemingly arbitrary reasons.

A particular example of these checkpoints is entering Jerusalem, where Palestinians are not allowed to drive and are often given a hassle for even entering on foot. As an international tour group with Israeli license plates on our bus, we generally did not even get stopped, and only once, when entering Jerusalem, had to show our passports to soldiers who boarded the bus.

The remaining 90% of the West Bank which isn't cut off by the wall is then split into three different areas: A, B and C. Area A is technically under full Palestinian control, but the reality is that there is often some form of Israeli military presence there too. Area B is shared land, and contains a lot of the road network in the West Bank, as well as the checkpoints. As you can see

from the table here, approximately 96% of the Palestinian people live on 39% of the land. And remember, that's 39% of 90% of 5,640km<sup>2</sup> which amounts to less than 2,000km<sup>2</sup> and includes a significant amount of farmland and wilderness area. Area C is composed of Israeli settlements, Israeli-only roads connecting those settlements to Israel proper, and nature reserves (which sounds lovely, but is essentially just an easy way to take over huge areas of land). As you can see from the map here, Area C covers most of the West Bank, and more importantly it cuts up the remaining Palestinian land into islands, making movement throughout the West Bank even more difficult for Palestinians.

I just mentioned that Area C contains Israeli settlements. What are these settlements, you may ask?

Well, you might be picturing them as small camps or villages, as I originally did, but it turns out that most of them have existed for so long that they are now large cities, with all the public services you would expect in a Western country. They even have cookie-cutter homes like we find in suburbs here in Canada, just a slightly different style which often includes a signature red tile roof. In urban centres such as the Old City of Jerusalem and Hebron, settlements exist right next door to Palestinian homes and businesses, easily distinguishable by Israeli flags or other Jewish symbols. Here we are on the roof of a Palestinian home, and if you look closely the much newer building next door has a menorah and three other symbols along the top.

I took this photo looking out the back of my host family's house. Just across the valley is a settlement, the buildings arranged around the outside looking out at the Palestinian villages around. My host father told my friend Reid and I that they were actually shot at from that settlement during the first intifada. All of these settlements are illegal under international law, and while some exist through Israeli government mandate, there are others that technically aren't even recognized by the State of Israel. And yet because all the settlers are Israeli citizens, it is the responsibility of the military to protect the settlements, which effectively gives recognition to the officially unrecognized settlements.

The most obvious problem with these settlements is that they claim land that is rightfully Palestinian. These settlements are often built on the highest hills with the best vantage points and are continually expanding. It's all about presence and intimidation. Yet as if their presence isn't enough, there are constantly reports of settlers going and vandalizing Palestinian property or harassing Palestinians. Whether that's in the form of destroying hundred-year-old olive trees or throwing bottles at Palestinian children, it has the same message: **this is our land and we don't want you here so leave before it gets worse**. Here shopkeepers have put up a mesh structure about the market street to prevent garbage from being thrown down from above.

It's not just the settlers that intimidate and harass the Palestinian population. It's also the Israeli government, mainly through the military and border police force. Being an occupied territory, the West Bank is under the jurisdiction of the military, meaning that most legal cases are dealt with in military court. It also means that there is a constant military presence, especially in heavily populated and conflict-prone areas like Hebron and Jerusalem where they wander the

streets and staff the checkpoints. Here they intimidate Palestinian people going about their daily lives, including children on their way to school. Because of this, one of the mandates of Christian Peacemaker Teams in Hebron is to accompany kindergarten children to school. Night raids are all too common, and often the teenagers are the ones arrested, usually for allegedly throwing stones at Israeli settlers or military. They are held in poor conditions awaiting trial, all the while missing school and being separated from their families, not to mention the rumors that spread through the community. When given the chance, most choose to plead guilty and accept the few months in jail, simply because it is shorter than the time it would take to appeal their case. This means that they will forever have criminal records and be under increased suspicion from the military and often their own community as well. This is just one of the strategies used to intimidate Palestinian communities and tear them apart from the inside.

Water is another significant problem in the West Bank, which has an arid climate. The primary source of fresh water is the Jordan River which is being severely over-drawn for irrigating Israeli plantations. While referred to in the Bible as a mighty rushing river, it is now little more than a creek that flows into the Dead Sea. Since the West Bank is occupied by Israel, its water supply is also controlled by Israel. Palestinian villages and cities are often subject to water limitations, and that sounds like a sensible thing given the circumstances. Even we here in Canada will have the occasional limitation on watering our lawns, right? The thing is, on the next hill over in the Israeli settlement there are no such limitations. Quite the contrary, people have swimming pools and lush gardens. I even saw a few green lawns. For me this was such a simple example of the inequity, and was representative of the nature of the complex conflict as a whole.

Whether due to direct loss of property from the wall or settlements, intimidation and harassment, lack of resources like water, lack of space and the inability to obtain building permits, or lack of opportunities, many Palestinians are being displaced. Generally, this means moving from rural farming villages to urban centres like Ramallah. This has resulted in both overcrowding and over-stressed services in Ramallah, and an increase in dependency on Israeli food and products. During the trip we heard a lot about the Holocaust, and I can't help but see parallels between this indirectly forced migration and overcrowding, and the Jewish ghettos in Europe. Please let me be clear that I am by no means trying to equate the two. It is but an interesting connection that came to me in that context.

Next to our time at the apartheid wall, the most intense part of the trip for me was the day we spent visiting Efrat, a settlement with a population of close to 10,000 people. It was a lesson in pushing aside prejudice and listening with an open mind, something that proved to be extremely difficult, especially given all we had witnessed in the West Bank during the week leading up to our visit. We had the opportunity to hear from a number of people, all of whom lived on the settlement. A few taught us a bit about Judaism, and for that I was grateful since my knowledge thereof is minimal. Others who were speaking more about the political situation were much more difficult to listen to. Ardie, our host for the day, was particularly difficult. He was very gracious to host us and he acknowledged that our perspective was likely different from his, thanking us for coming to learn in spite of that. He encouraged us to ask any questions that we might have and promised to be open and honest in answering them. However, I didn't feel

like it was a safe space to ask questions, mainly because even while he expressed openness, he came across as very defensive of the idea that Jews are entitled to the land, and that seems like a very closed position.

Later in the evening, we were hosted for supper by various families on the settlement, which was a fascinating experience partially because it was not in any way extraordinary. This couple with their 10 year old daughter moved from New York City two years ago and were settling into new jobs, school and community just fine. Life is great! We had a lovely visit over a delicious and familiar meal of baked chicken and fries. If I hadn't just spent a day listening to talks and the past week in the West Bank, it would have probably felt like any other dinner with new acquaintances. Perhaps inviting someone new over for lunch after church, say. But in the context, it was very jarring. Here is this family, recently immigrated to Israel from the US, which by the way is a very common theme in Israeli settlements, enjoying a new life in a lovely community, yet seemingly oblivious to what's going on outside of the walls of the settlement in the neighbouring village. Now, we were only there for a very short visit, so I don't want to assume that they actually were as oblivious as they appeared, but the fact that Palestinians only came up once in conversation, and only in passing, was concerning.

One thing our host, Ardie, mentioned was that he himself was born in Efrat and seeing as the settlement has been around for close to 70 years that would mean that there are probably second and third generation "settlers" living there. I mentioned this at the end of the day when Ardie asked us to share some things we had learned. His response of "Well, duh..." hurt a bit. I realised that living in Efrat is all he's ever known; that he along with so many others are just living their lives; that it's probably a small minority that are militant and aggressive toward Palestinians. And through all that, it hit me. I am a settler too. I am a fourth-generation immigrant to Canada. Life in Canada is all I've ever known. I'm just trying to live my life here, and I am not aggressive toward the indigenous population. This realisation allowed me to identify at least a little bit with the Israeli settlers, to step into their shoes for a moment. It's not exactly the same situation, but it similar enough to help.

From there, the parallels between occupied Palestine and occupied Canada began to unfold before me. Obviously each has its own context and is at a different point in its history, but I personally find it astonishing how many close parallels there are. Here are some of the ones I thought of while writing this:

- A foreign group comes in and establishes an independent state.
  - These are the names of the Palestinian villages that were evicted when the State of Israel was established in 1948. As a result, 700,000 people were displaced and became refugees, many of them moving to refugee camps in the West Bank. This memorial is located in the Aida Refugee Camp near Bethlehem.
- The indigenous people are left with only small, shrinking parcels of land, cut off from each other by land claimed by settlers.
- Both states would like to get rid of the indigenous people...
  - Israel is working on it, but it's proving to be very difficult.
  - Canada gave up on that idea a long time ago and moved to plan B: assimilation.

- Palestinian communities are terrorized by night raids where their youth are arrested. Canadian indigenous communities are terrorized when their children are taken away to Residential Schools.
- The government establishes a system under which the indigenous people are dependent on it...
- ...and then the government proceeds to neglect these people
- Palestinians have restrictions placed on water usage. Canadian indigenous people generally don't have safe drinking water.
- Casualties are ever increasing. Recently there has been increased violence between Israelis and Palestinians in major centres. And in Canada, more and more indigenous women go missing or are murdered, and too many indigenous youth commit suicide.
- Division, distrust and fear fuel the conflict.
- Israeli and Palestinian children too often learn that the other is the enemy. In Canada, settler children barely learn about Indigenous people in school.
- So much healing is needed.

I'm sure you could add some more to this list.

My realisation of these parallels does not mean that I am going to stop objecting to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and stop working for peace there. I will continue that. What it does mean, however, is that I must at the same time acknowledge the conflict zone that I live in and work for peace here as well.

And that starts with breaking down the barriers that prevent relationship, even though that's exactly the opposite of the government's original plan. Bringing people who have been separated into a safe space together creates a place where healing can begin. Getting to know the "other" and re-humanizing them is fundamental. And teaching the young ones the honest history and how to right those wrongs is the only recipe for long-term social change.

Throughout our trip, amidst the tragedy of separation and distrust, there were scattered signs of hope, just as there are here in Canada. Many sections of the wall are covered as high as one can reach in graffiti, and from what I saw, the majority of it, though often full of frustration or anger, is hopeful and positive. There are organization like Christian Peacemaker Teams, Jewish Rabbis for Peace, Mennonite Central Committee and many others that are working on the ground to bring light to the injustices and speak out against them while building relationships. Here in our own country, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been a significant cause for hope, and now we desperately need a government that is courageous enough to address the 94 recommendations set out in the final report and engage us as citizens to join in that work.

Finally, on the section of the wall that we visited, there is a poster exhibit of stories told by Palestinian women of their experience, and I'd like to finish by reading two of those that I found especially moving:

---

*The Wall next to my house divides people. Music brings people together. I am a music teacher, and I know that music is a language which all people can enjoy. Music gives my pupils joy and life. Among my pupils have been my niece and nephew. My nephew has become an excellent pianist.*

*Once I made music for a national song when I taught at a school in Beit Sahour. The occupation forbade the song... Imagine!*

---

---

*Israeli soldiers were beating up a man in a crowded street. From all sides people rushed to the scene. Suddenly a woman with a baby came forward to the man and shouted: "Why is it always you who makes problems and goes to demonstrations! I am fed up! Take this baby of yours! I don't want to see you ever again." She laid the baby in the hands of the man, and ran away. The soldiers left the scene in confusion. When quiet came, the man returned the baby to the woman. They had never seen each other before.*

---