

**I received the following from Cy and Lois Swartz in Philadelphia. They and others in the US are standing in solidarity with the many in Palestine and Israel who are protesting the closing of Shuhada Street in Hebron and demanding that it be opened again. Below is some background to the situation in Hebron.**

### **Build Bridges Not Walls . . .**

#### **Grandparents for Peace in the Middle East**

**(Cy and Lois Swartz started this group in Philadelphia after the second Intifada and have stood outside the Israeli Consulate in Philadelphia every week since then, with the exception of weather conditions.**

There may be too much SNOW this week - but if Philadelphia Public Schools are open - we will be at 19th & JFK - to help raise consciousness about the injustices of the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank! In over twenty cities around the world there will be demonstrations focusing on the closing of Shuhada Street - the main shopping street in Hebron. The presence of illegal Israeli settlers in that city has strangled the commercial life of a place that was once a bustling center of business for the Arab world.

(The link below connects with a video describing this situation. Hope you take time to open it and to watch the video!)

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[A Tale of Three Cities: Hebron in 1967, 1998, 2007 by Iris Keltz](#)  
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I have been to Hebron three times, but each visit was like entering a different city. In May of 1967, the entire West Bank, including Hebron was governed by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. A Palestinian family living in Jerusalem had invited me to visit their village south of Hebron, where they owned acres of land with olive trees they'd planted themselves. Al-Samu's main connection to the world was a bus running, twice a day to Hebron, 23 miles south of Jerusalem. It was an easy trip that took about an hour.

Donkeys and camels shared the road with cars and buses. Unlike Jerusalem, few tourists wandered the streets in search of holy shrines and trinkets. People dressed as if the prophets were still alive, although I was not the only one in western clothes. The father of the family, Ibrahim, wore cotton trousers, a shirt and shaded his head with a traditional kaffiyeh, like most men. His wife was in an ankle length cotton dress with a scarf covering her silver hair. A blend of traditional and modern was most common.

There were no soldiers to protect or threaten us, but we felt perfectly safe as we walked past the mosque where Abraham, the prophet for both Jews and Muslims, lay buried with his wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah. A fortress like structure that started out as a synagogue built during the time of King Herod and became a mosque during the Islamic period, 700 A.D. protected their resting place. On this lovely summer's day, the family was far more interested in catching the bus to Al-Samu than in entering the mosque— even Ibrahim's wife, who prayed five times a day in the privacy of home.

Ibrahim bought camel kabob sandwiches for everyone from a roadside stand. Although the unique taste of this delicacy was disguised by exotic spices, I knew it was not pork, a meat forbidden to Moslems and as well as to Jews. While eating, Ibrahim hinted at Hebron's violent history, of which I knew almost nothing. "Once there was a community of religious Jews living here when the British ruled Palestine. Now the people are suspicious of outsiders." But I was not worried. They knew I was a Jewish American and welcomed me like long-lost family. We had no idea that in a few weeks, a war would break out that would change everyone's life forever.

Israelis started moving to Hebron after their conquest of the West Bank in 1967. At first, Muslims and Jews prayed together in the Holy Shrine for the first time in nineteen years. All this changed on February 25, 1994 during Ramadan, when a Jewish settler entered the Ibrahim Mosque and killed 29 Muslims. After this tragedy, the Israeli government imposed a curfew and closed Shehada Street—Hebron's main commercial and cultural thoroughfare— to Palestinians. The settlers, however, were allowed to travel freely— an unwise and unfair decision that bred anger and resentment in the Palestinian community. Two suicide bombings in retaliation for the massacre fed the cycle of violence. The Jews and Muslims of Hebron have never prayed together since.

When I returned in '98, barbed wire walls and concrete barricades sliced Hebron into areas of control— A=full Israeli control, B=minimal control, C=Palestinian control. The holy shrine was as divided as was the city. Each side of the Ibrahim Mosque/Avraham Avinu Synagogue had separate entrances and security checks. We were frisked and searched by Israeli soldiers before being allowed to enter each side. Our local guide was part of the Christian Peacemakers Team (CPT), an international group invited here by the mayor of Hebron after the massacre. They wear recognizable uniforms but were unarmed. We walked through run-down neighborhoods where local Palestinians complain of army outposts built on rooftops. Godlike, the soldiers watched the inhabitants below who are forced to string netting across courtyards to protect themselves from falling debris, but there is no protection from urine. A former Israeli soldier who served in Hebron once shamefully admitted, "The army made us stand on rooftops for twelve hour stretches— without bathroom breaks. Sometimes I sang at the top of my lungs just to stay awake." He helped me understand the dilemma faced by young inexperienced soldiers who found themselves in positions of authority over a civilian population that has been enduring occupation for more years than they have been alive.

In spite of this, Hebron pulses with life. I walk past the carpenters, leather workers and saddle maker shops and stop to watch a blacksmith laboring in front of a fiery forge, transforming iron rods into window grills, architectural ornamentation and utensils. Further down the street, flying feathers and clucking chickens announced a stall where eggs were sold still warm. Racks of clothing with American logos hung alongside bedouin dresses, piles of scarves, kaffiyas, shawls, shoes, cases of jewelry, hand blown glassware, olive wood carvings and more. Shoppers walked amidst well-armed soldiers while old men play

backgammon in front of a cafe that kept them supplied with Turkish coffee, tea and smoking tobacco for the nargileh.

Disappointed, I never made it to Al-Samu. Armed soldiers, checkpoints and roadblocks, made the simple trip an ordeal. I was told by the Palestinian family that the village was now beset with pollution, traffic jams and overcrowding. But I had wanted to see this change for myself.

Of all the places I visited in '07, Hebron was the most changed. The Christian Peacemakers Team was still here. What started as a temporary project became permanent as the occupation worsened. A local CPT guide escorted us along Shehada Street— open to settlers, soldiers and internationals, but still forbidden to Palestinians. Once a thriving hub for surrounding villages, the main commercial thoroughfare is eerily quiet. A Jewish settlement in the heart of Hebron transformed the city into a ghost town. Six hundred Jewish settlers guarded by 500 Israeli soldiers restrict the movement of 160,000 Palestinians. Shops were boarded. The front doors of Palestinian homes—padlocked and welded shut by the Israeli government were covered with hateful graffiti— “Arabs to the Gas Chambers,” “Transfer Arabs” and more. Gone were the old men who sat around tables in front of cafes playing backgammon in the sun while drinking Turkish coffee.

There was a tense moment when we passed a Palestinian home recently occupied by Israeli settlers. “I will speak to the soldiers if we are stopped,” warned our CPT guide, a fair complected woman from the Netherlands. “The army wants to make Shehada Street safe for Jews going between their settlement and the synagogue. The Israeli government has ordered the settlers to evacuate, but they are fixing the house, determined to remain.” There is a serious rift between Israeli law and the implementation of the law. Subsidized by the government, the settlers in Hebron are ideological extremists, convinced that what they are doing has been ordained by God.

International law affords all children the right to attend school, including Palestinian children who are frequently spit upon by stone throwing settler children, even when accompanied by a CPT guide. Soldiers watch but do nothing. Members of the Israeli Knesset have visited Hebron but nothing changed. Because of this, Palestinian children walk to school along rooftops and re-enter the street through a house near the school— “the ladder lady’s house” they call it. Our guide told us that the children’s favorite game was to play soldier. They understood that whoever had the big guns had the power.

On Friday afternoons, the Muslim Sabbath, the CPT watched people coming and going for noon prayers. Israeli soldiers guard the entrance to the mosque. Young Arab men were especially targeted and sometimes held for hours. I could not understand why our trusted Palestinian guide told the soldiers I was Jewish and following orders, forbid me from entering the mosque. For the first time in my life, I was denied access to a place based on religion. With a sense of entitlement, I waved my American passport at the soldiers— to no avail. Forced to accept their edict, I waited in the shade of nearby building on the

Moslem side of a concrete barrier that blocked the road leading to the Mosque. A few friends stood in solidarity with me.

When our group re-gathered, we headed towards a checkpoint leading to Area C— Palestinian Authority controlled Hebron. Single file, we walked through a turn-style inside a cage surrounded by barbed wire. An American passport got us through the checkpoint with ease but our Palestinian bus driver and guide were forbidden. However, they knew how to sneak around the barricade, which is what they did. I could not understand why Palestinians were forbidden to enter Palestinian-controlled areas. Upon reflection, I think our guide just offered me a personal lesson about the humiliation and arbitrary nature of occupation.

On the other side of the checkpoint there was life, movement, shops, an open market, Palestinian soldiers and people begging us to buy something. "Please help us to survive. We are merchants. Please buy something." The crippled owner of the Resistance Cafe welcomed us with the dignity of an unspoken leader. He limped around serving falafel and cold bottled water. When his work was done, he sat down at one of the tables and told us about himself. "This cafe is a symbol of the struggle to maintain Palestinian life in Hebron. Most Palestinians have made a commitment to stay, no matter what. We would rather die in our homes than walk away like many did in 1948. My greatest act of resistance is to keep this cafe open." That commitment comes with a high price. He has been held and tortured in an Israeli prison. Knowing all this, eating the falafel made me feel part of the resistance.

February 25, 2010 marks 16 years since the massacre in the Ibrahimi mosque. Shuhada Street has become a symbol for the Israeli settlements on the West Bank and the occupation at large. It is crucial that American activists support internationals on the ground who are planning to open this street to Palestinian commerce and life once again. The promise of thirty billion dollars in aid from the U.S. government makes the occupation possible.

*Iris Keltz is an activist and author of "Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie," a social history of the counterculture in northern New Mexico in the early seventies. This article is excerpted from a manuscript about her experience of living with a Palestinian family in East Jerusalem during the '67 War and subsequent visits.*

[Call for International Day of Action to Re-open Shuhada Street to Palestinians](#)



History," wrote James Baldwin "does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us and are unconsciously controlled by it."

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