

christmas in bethlehem, 1995

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Two months after yitzchaq rabin's funeral, the never-ending procession of world leaders going to israel to say their peace had ended, and the black-bordered pictures in every bus stop had been papered over. Life though went on, as, more surprisingly did the peace process. With shimon peres taking charge, the pullouts from the more-heavily populated palestinian west bank areas actually accelerated. Given that the right's hectoring was widely seen as root cause of the assassination, the opposition was less vocal, and so the back end of the oslo II agreement was implemented more smoothly than could have been imagined. Given that the lifeblood of israeli society for a generation had been those for returning the territories virulently set against those who opposed it, those withdrawals were revolutionary change. It was almost unimaginable that there would be just silent acquiescence to what we all thought then was a pretty much once and for all determination of the question. In a matter of months, after decades of occupation, all the palestinians' political centres were no longer occupied by israel, something that anywhere else would have likely taken a war. It was an interesting time. On December 24th, after being an integral part of israel for 28 years (a majority of israel's history), the army (the israeli defence force) pulled out of bethlehem. I'd never been, so where else could I spend christmas day ?

I was living and working in tel aviv at the time, at its finest museum, and my colleagues all thought my taking the day off somewhere between eccentric and inappropriate. They thought my trip to bethlehem positively insane. I stayed at a friend's in jerusalem the night before, as by then, nearly a decade into the intifada, the wonderful (or terrible) ease with which you could simply travel over an entirely non-existent border that I longingly remembered was long gone, and every road had roadblocks and document checks. In the morning, I went out the damascus gate of the old city to get an arab bus, a first I'm ashamed to admit. The bus station was neglected and just plain dirty, and I waited a while with a growing gang of pilgrims. I held out my twenty-shekel note as I got on, and the driver held up three fingers. Must be thirty was my first thought, but even as I plunged my hand back into my pocket, I was given seventeen shekels change. I realised why the arab buses were so old and ramshackle. It was a pleasant and interesting journey: from the magazine-seller opening the wooden flaps of his stall as we left the central bus station, through the religious hilly jerusalem suburbs, where I think I'd been once long before to a ritual jewish baths (mikva), past a final fortified synagogue and its idf post with which, and without stopping, we were on the "other side", the almost-country obliquely called the palestinian authority. We skirted the hill and valley that bethlehem overlooks and fills. The first sign I was entering the city, was the palestinian flag bunting that hung across almost every street and house, with the palestinian colours on one side and yasser arafat's face on the other, the hero of the moment. Throughout the whole city, he was absolutely everywhere, from the huge banner draped down one side of manger square to small posters and plastic masks hanging over almost every door and window.

I got off, as everyone else did and followed the crowd up a rather steep hill, past the open shops and cafés, all rather small and squalid, that lined the route; none at all with any seats. Parked cars and vans were also all over the place, to such an extent that even though it was a wide road, the single line of traffic was having great difficulty making its slow way without knocking over the line of pedestrians that were also competing for space as there was no pavement. Past ruined buildings, better-kept private flats, construction work and to the corner at the top which

headed straight into the central manger square, now a gigantic car and coach park. Everywhere in the city, the traffic was slow and absolutely chaotic.

Organising the endless traffic seemed to be the main job of the palestinian policemen, of whom there were very many, of two types: in green army style uniforms, and in better blue ones, almost all armed with machine-guns. Many were in jeeps riding around, others in cars, and a few in swanky new turquoise blue police cars with sirens which if my memory serves me, were donated by our very own john major on a visit. I didn't find them intimidating at all: on the contrary, I asked them for help and directions a few times and very helpful they were too, as in fact, in the glare of omnipresent tv crews, was everyone. It was, after all, day one of the rest of your life for bethlehem, and incidentally the very busiest day of the year. Everyone I came into contact with, from market-stall owner to old woman in the street, was pretty cheerful and quick to wish me merry christmas. Everything, on this day at least, seemed to have been organised (insomuch as there was any organisation) for the swarms of visitors that had descended on the city and hence a great many of the streets were closed off to the hundreds of mainly arab cars with their 'beth' plates, which only worsened the chaos. The only time I saw the police get angry, and this was often, was shouting and swearing at drivers, as, with their new lack of regulation, they tried hopelessly to keep the traffic moving.

There were a great deal of foreigners there: mainly americans, but also quite a few japanese and other asians, germans and, a bit to my surprise, some israelis. I sat in front of the hotel near the church, with a massive union jack hanging from the railings, and in front of it four scummy-looking twentysomething glastonbury types. As I passed, an american tv crew was going over to interview them; another in front of me was just starting on the back of a group of american tourists, pilgrim middleast tours, and as soon as they realised, the front of their queue broke ranks to join in. I took in the spectacular view over the deep valley, and walked around for a good while, beyond the souvenir shops, past a fountain and many falafel places, into a market. It was obvious from the things sold that few tourists had yet made it so far from the epicentre. The streets were narrow, the buildings dilapidated, with many closed; there were hawkers and a few beggars. Still though, I felt completely secure, stopping at a stall to buy three pairs of black socks "from italy, from italy". The end of my ramble was the 'milk grotto'. Apparently famous in christian mythology, this is the place (I learned from information provided in 8 languages) where mary hid to breastfeed the young saviour, and the walls of the chapel were decorated all around with tacky reproductions of mary and her breast feeding away. In one alcove was a piano and two covered fans; in another, past the nuns, was a big recreation of the manger, with jesus in mary's arms, surrounded by flowers. As I looked on the nuns led by a priest broke loudly into *oh come all ye faithful* in some strange language; and as I headed out a big and loud group of americans were joining in.

The highlight of the visit was the church of the nativity, which is just off the square through a stone passageway that even I had to duck my head to go through, emerging in a big nave, not big by european standards, but huge around there. All the action was at the far end, and there were people milling around in the space in between, which was broken by some open boards looking exactly like the doors to a pub cellar, though beneath them was a pleasant mural that I gathered goes way back. At the end, on the raised section, was a scrum of people going both left and right; I bore right, past the main crowd at an altar and up some wooden steps which led outside to a courtyard filled by a big korean group stood in a circle in prayer. I skirted them to a door at the back, but a palestinian policeman there was turning people away as there was obviously something going on inside. With some effort, as he obviously hadn't done it before, he closed the big wooden door. I went back down the steps and right up to the altar, or as near

as I could get in the big scrum of people waiting to light candles, which a priest over on the other side was doing a roaring trade in. The place for the candles was so full that there was just one big flame, and rather than lighting their candles, all the pilgrims could do was to toss it into the mêlée and watch it melt. I walked back to the main nave and then left into an open antechamber, on the right of which were stone stairs going down. I didn't know quite what it was, but I knew I was approaching *the* spot.

Alongside me was some sort of palestinian official, being shown around by a priest, which was handy, as he was clearing the way in front of us, shooing people along, frowning at the complete chaos before him and shouting to another monk to hurry people along: "please go out, please go out, merry christmas" he was saying over and over again in the strongest voice he could muster. Down into a small crypt crushed full of believers, all bearing to the left, where a line of people was coming up from the stairs opposite, and, as crowds that can't see ahead of them often do, rather impatiently pushing forward. A wave of sweaty heat hit me as I got close. Struck, I diverted right to compose myself before getting to the main attraction. In the corner was a stone arch, a detour. I went through it and was standing alongside a priest's dais where, facing a seated audience, a priest was finishing off prayers, "peace be unto you brothers" he concluded, "and unto you" they replied - "and peace be unto *you*" said a large woman next to me grabbing my hand. "Errr, thank you" I said, rather caught off balance.

Back in the packed main cavern, I dived headlong into the scrum to see what I could see, which was not a lot. Being small though does sometimes have its advantages, and squeezing to the front of crowds is one. So soon I could actually see: a rather tacky crib with wire in front and a mock up of the nativity behind. Just as I glanced it, someone shouted back to the crowd still pushing to get in "crib to the left, star to the right" and everyone passed it back, like a sort of gregorian chant, "crib to the left, star to the right, crib to the left, star to the right..." The star it was then, and so I slowly crossed the stream and saw what I realised was (supposedly) the exact spot of jesus's birth, marked by a curly celtic-type sun star, metal, embedded in the stone floor, with many curvaceous talons emanating from a circular centre. Not easy to see as it was on the floor and set back beneath a portrait, with a thick stone ledge above it, so most people that wanted to touch it or take pictures had to go down on their knees, which of course was what was taking so long. The priest was almost pulling people away and urging them to leave all the time, "please go out, please go out, merry christmas".

As I made my own way out, I was stopped in my tracks by an extremely loud siren, which after a second I saw was the out of control megaphone of an israeli tour guide. Every head around turned, but there was surprisingly little panic. Surprising, as 99% of the people can't have seen what it actually was and such a sound just a few days earlier can't have been a good sign. The guide was clueless and couldn't stop it, and I too failed, but into the breach jumped a policeman who held it against himself to minimise the noise, and rushed outside where a minute later it stopped. I continued into yet another nave, that I gathered from the well-arranged seats and flyers of the service (in arabic) was prayer central, where the service must just have taken place. Outside, unlike in the other sections, the people seemed not to be tourists or foreigners, but rather well-dressed, western clothed, arabs, and the atmosphere struck me nothing so much as after synagogue on new year. After this, I headed back down the large hill, vaguely towards the buses, where the police seemed more frantic than ever. I was passed by a long line of cars, and then the reason became obvious, as up slowly came the motorcade, sirens blaring, and in the middle a black limousine, and in the back of it, clearly visible, two solid looking men flanking the green army-style slacks of yasser himself, on the way to his big speech. A fitting end to an auspicious and historic day.