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Modern Middle East

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The Church of the Holy Sepulcher

Places have identities that are shared, defined and distinguished by the intersectionalities of the people living within. Jerusalem, “القدس / Al Quds” in Arabic, stems from the meaning “holy.” It is a place that carries sacred value to the three Abrahamic Religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, as well as branches of sub-religions and less represented religious peoples in the area. Al Quds has seen thousands of years of claims, mandates, empires, colonization and conflict, yet at its core, it bears an identity of importance, sacredness and pride to native Palestinians, as well as non-native Christians, Jews, and Muslims globally. In the northwestern quarter of Jerusalem, or the Christian Quarter (الربع المسيحي / IrRabi3 IIMasihi), the Church of the Holy Sepulcher stands. It is the holiest Church and location in the Christian world. I grew up thinking it was the center of the world, as my grandma calls it. It is the symbol and embodiment of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is the place where his tomb and cross are thought to be preserved. To Non-Christians, the church has become a tourist attraction, drawing people in with its intricate iconography, silverwork, ornaments, and architecture. To Christians, it is a home of prayer and pilgrimage, and often proof that the beliefs, which we have dedicated our lives to, exist. Walls can hold a lot of memories, and these walls carry the memories and prayers of millions. Crumbling or not, they remain etched in the marble and soot left from candles lit and distinguished throughout the hundreds of years that the church has stood.

My Teyta (grandmother in Arabic) used to play at the center of the world, little braids, a button nose, a gentle dress, and hope for a bright future. Sunlight would spill through the walls and ceiling, light shining onto a tomb, thousands of years old, and empty. In that world, death means life, and life is eternal, undefined by the grave that attempts to trap it. I always wonder what gets lost along the records of history, and if history is meant to include local meanings and perception of place, both visible and invisible. My Teyta is in her 70s now, an American citizen and a diaspora Palestinian, twice refugee, and a Christian Woman. Her history is intricate, and her story is potentially unsuitable for academic “history” books, especially now that her identity is tied to a dwindling community of other Palestinian Christians under an apartheid regime. I think histories that illuminate the intersectionality of fierce hope and faith, as well as suffering and oppression are too complex to prove to a world that sides with the powerful, structural, and scientifically fact-oriented histories. I am convinced that places are significant because people believe in their history, most of which is unrecorded and spoken through heritage and ancestry. The reality is, all history is made and written by humans, a lot of which is skewed and convoluted; it is an obligation to rewrite the rules of documentation, clinging to the inheritance of our histories.

One might assume that the holiest site of Christianity would be better documented, yet still, no one knows exactly where Jesus was crucified or buried, and others do not believe he was significant at all. The Greek Orthodox Church believes he was killed on the Mount of Olives, while others believe it was within the Church boundaries. He is not in the tomb, so I suppose there's no way to prove it. The tomb itself has been studied and questioned, as protestants believe that the real tomb lies in a Garden in East Jerusalem. Al Quds has records of history, but most of the early descriptions of the city stem from holy documents like the Torah and Bible - both

largely disregarded by academics. Disagreements surround the reliability of age and consideration of religion, although I often see religion as cultural context, providing a reflection of history, and vice versa. There is a modern fixation on proof, yet a lack of questioning towards histories written through colonial eyes. Of course, geography, society, and structures shift, causing our histories to destabilize with time. Jerusalem is no longer the place Jesus may have known over 2000 years ago, nor is it what I believe he would have envisioned. I don't think that any burial place was supposed to become a zoo of tourists screaming at each other. I know for certain that the Holy Saturday procession was never intended to become tarnished with blood and semi-automatic weapons. But I guess history can't predict - it only shapes.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built in 335 A.D. under Emperor Constantine. His mother, Helena, mapped the Old City of Jerusalem on foot, determining the location of Golgotha, which means "skull" in Aramaic - the biblical place of Jesus' crucifixion. She identified his tomb, as well as the cross on which he was killed, referred to as the "True Cross." Many times over the past few hundred years, the church has been burned, attacked, crumbled by earthquakes, fought over, stolen, and renovated. In 614 A.D., approximately 300 years after it was built, it fell in flames at the hands of the Persian Sassanid Empire, who abducted the True Cross. Many of the church's relics and structures were completely pummeled. The tomb surprisingly, remained recoverable. Another couple hundred years passed, and Jerusalem was recaptured during Byzantium. The True Cross was then returned and the church rebuilt. My grandmother often tells the story of how she and her mother visited the place inside the Church where the True Cross is kept. Her mother took a splinter of the cross, now hidden in my Teyta's bedside table for safekeeping and sacred prayer. Through belief and prayer, it has cured illness and blessed many. When I visited as a child, she pointed to a door in the hallway of the church

saying: “behind those doors is the True Cross.” The Cross still rests beneath the church, protected and preserved, although to some, it remains a mystery.

In 2013, I prayed within those walls; I kissed the marble slab on which Jesus’ body was prepared for burial, known as the “Stone of Unction.” I expected to experience more, but the memories hidden within the rock were overshadowed by the tears of others and an overwhelming sense of hurry from the eager tourists surrounding me. I felt more looking into the face of the locked doors separating me and the True Cross. I wonder if it was because I believed in what I could not see, and struggled to see what I could touch. It is difficult to reconcile the modern separation of oral, spiritual, and physical history, without conflating them with the mess of humanity. They often coexist, however, feeding into one another and creating what we can experience in the present; the essence of the past rests in the air that we all breathe.

As often as possible, my mother and I attend Antiochian Orthodox Church in Chicago, where we currently live. On important holidays, Abuna (our Father or Priest in Arabic) speaks about how we all miss the Balad (homeland), as most of the people at our Church are Palestinian or Shamseen (Levantine). But he stresses the fact that it doesn’t matter where we are, as our belief is what keeps the history alive. The grave in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is just a relic without the prayers and celebrations that keep the story alive. Whether Archaeology agrees, we don’t know. History records still say that the tomb is where Jesus “is thought to have been buried,” but currently, the world is awaiting the results of new tests and samples that were taken from the tomb during a necessary repair process in 2016, and we won’t know the truth until those results are revealed, if at all. Currently, the Church is mainly shared between three Church Dioceses, and controversy plagues it, along with corrupt governmental structures. Yet still, it is a

place of intersectionality, weaving cultures, peoples, and religions across barriers, whether disputatious or not.

The Church is now split between the Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Churches. For a large part of the Ottoman control of Jerusalem, the Church was owned by the Franciscans and the Nestorian Church, who cared for and restored it during a relatively deteriorated state starting in the mid to late 1500s. After the renovations, the Orthodox and Franciscan churches rivaled for ownership, often through corrupt methods.

Following another brutal fire, the Aedicule (the structure built around the tomb) crumbled. Through the rebuilding of the Aedicule, the Catholic church entered the picture of ownership. Controversy and corruption still lie within the walls, and the different dioceses often bicker over decisions regarding the site. The Franciscan church is no longer in ownership of the church, however, they maintain possession of a great deal of religious shrines, sites, and land throughout the Holy Land, and have remained a presence in Palestine for around 800 years. Although strife exists around holy sites, religious groups share great care over the church's maintenance and safety. Priests and deacons, church goers and pilgrims respect and believe in the church's legacy. Other religious groups also carry immense obligation and responsibility, as the key to the church, previously held by the Franciscans, was given to a Muslim family, who to this day, open and close the church for holidays, visits, tourism, and services. Division is often imposed on places where light and peace are meant to exist.

My grandmother was born on the day before Orthodox Easter - April 15, 1944 - which is a holy holiday in Orthodox Christianity called Sabt In Noor, meaning "Saturday of the Holy Light." She came into the world at the sound of church bells ringing for Sabt In Noor (سبت النور), which always falls on the day before Easter. It is celebrated when a miraculous fire is said to

ignite on its own within the tomb of Jesus Christ. My Teyta was named Norma, after Sabt In Noor; her father chose that name to resemble the meaning “a light from somewhere.” She says that it reminds her to stay strong and always see the light in things, even in dark times. My Teyta and her family used to attend Sabt In Noor in Jerusalem, as often as they were granted access. Early on Saturday morning, they would attend church in the courtyard across from the Holy Sepulcher, in a tiny Palestinian Orthodox church called Saint Jacob, or in Arabic “Mar Ya’aqub.” After the liturgy, the fire would light, and the Priests, the only ones allowed in the tomb while the fire appeared, would bring the light into the courtyard and spread it to thousands of candles. The candles come tied in bunches, so that the flame grows high, as it is believed that the holy fire cannot burn anything. Swarms of Christians would share their fire, passing it over their hands and faces, dancing and chanting “سبت النور وعيدنا وزرنا امر سيدنا سيدنا حمانا بدمه فدانا” (Sabt In Noor w 3eyidna w zurna amar saidna, saidna hamana, bidamo fadana) which roughly translates to “Saturday of the light, our celebration and visitation by the command of our master, our master protected / negated us with his blood.” This holiday has not changed - it hasn’t for hundreds of years.

Every Easter, we attend evening liturgies. At midnight, we all sing: “المسيح قام من بين الأموات ووطئ الموت بالموت ووهب الحياة للذين في القبور” (Al Massih qam amin ben ilamwat wwati’ almawt bil mawt wwahab alhayat liladeen fee ilqubur), which in English translates to: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs, bestowing life.” Candles inside the church begin to light up the dark sanctuary, one flame at a time, and we celebrate the light that Jesus brought into the world when he conquered death, and rose again on the third day. This tradition, that begins in Al Quds on Saturday morning, intends for the fire to be spread as far as possible, and has been granted special permission to

travel. Today, the holy fire crosses borders, and is even taken on aircrafts, in order to light the candles of Orthodox churches around the world.

In 1947, my family was forced out of Jerusalem by the Israeli Military, right before Israel was declared a state. My grandma was three and a half years old. For a long time, they were not allowed into Jerusalem, even though the Jordanian government gained control of many Palestinian Territories in 1948, including a large part of Jerusalem. Through the time of the British Mandate over Palestine, the period following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine underwent a great deal of changes. Infrastructures were undermined, and Palestinian resources were depleted for the sake of British colonial advancement, and under the Zionist agreement that was placed through the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Jewish migrants were settled in Palestine, and due to lack of economic and structural stability, Palestinians were at risk. Jerusalem was attacked earlier than other towns and cities. My Teyta and her family were displaced in 1947, which was soon followed by the Nakba (Catastrophe in Arabic) in 1948. Information about how these changes affected holy sites is left widely undocumented, however, my grandmother's childhood home was burned the day they were removed, and that home shared a street with the Church. For a long time, scaffolding was necessary to support the church structure, which can be seen in photos of the church in the 1950s (page 10). At this time, Jordan was granted rule over sections of Palestine, including the Old City where the Church lies, while Israel controlled the rest of Jerusalem and was declared a state over other areas of the country. In 1967, during the 6 day war, Israel claimed Jerusalem through further annexation of Palestine, although decisions regarding the Church have remained in accordance with Jordanian consultation. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was nearly an endangered site in the 1990s, as Israel deemed its structures hazardous for the public. Although the Israeli Government did not contribute funds to support

new renovations, the Jordanian Royalty, as well as other large global organizations, made generous financial donations to the church.

My great grandfather, Yousif Shamiyeh, a famous Palestinian photographer, photographed Sabt In Noor in the 1950s, each photo illustrating the grandeur of Sabt In Noor celebrations. For hundreds of years, traditions, services, and holidays have had a home within the church, along with all souls who attended. My grandmother was one of them, but since her and my family lost their home in Al Quds in 1947, she did not have access to the church until adulthood. To this day, millions of Palestinians are denied from even entering the city. On Sabt In Noor of this year, 2023, Israel restricted the number of Palestinian Christians to join the Sabt In Noor celebration to 1,800, when in past years it has been 10,000 or more. During the procession, priests and worshippers, including the young and elderly, were beaten and harassed by fully armed Israeli Soldiers - defenseless and carrying candles. Somehow, the overt and horrific violence in places of worship has been neglected; somehow, it failed to make history.

History shifts, transforming place and identity. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher now sits in the capital city of Israel, formerly the capital of Palestine - a country no longer labeled, completely erased from modern maps. The two holiest sites, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity, are separated by a wall, inaccessible to one another without passing through a security checkpoint. I often wonder how it all happened, but history tells all, although narratives pose things differently. Hundreds of years worth of fires, earthquakes, battles, bribery, mandate, and control have stories, but the prayers, beliefs, tears, memories, and souls are the true tales that live within the tattered marble of the church that still stands. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, regardless of the surrounding conflict, remains a light from somewhere, persisting through dark times. The church in its physical form holds strong, but the

true church prevails through the body of believers, as the Bible says. “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”(Romans 12: 4-5, ESV).



Image: Scaffolding supporting the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. 1950s, Jordanian Mandate of Jerusalem. Taken by Yousif Shamiyeh. All rights reserved.



Image: Guards Containing the Sabt In Noor Crowd Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. 1950s, Jordanian Mandate of Jerusalem. Taken by Yousif Shamiyeh. All rights reserved.



Image: Awaiting the Holy Fire inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Sabt In Noor in the 1950s, Jordanian Mandate of Jerusalem. Taken by Yousif Shamiyeh. All rights reserved.



Image: Woman Holding the Holy Fire in the Courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Sabt In Noor Procession in the 1950s, Jordanian Mandate of Jerusalem. Taken by Yousif Shamiyeh. All rights reserved.

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