

# **“Still Living”**

## **1. The Quest**

Though I've always considered myself part of Jerusalem, I knew almost nothing about my city. My journey began by asking myself what's the real story of Jerusalem. I became a tourist in my own home. I began exploring and asking people about their stories, the stories they heard when they were young, and the stories they want to pass on to the next generation.

It was hard to get people to tell their real stories. Perhaps they were afraid or they'd gone through such hard experiences that they didn't want others to see their wounds. To get the stories I wanted I had to visit different people from different communities and ethnicities, and most of all I had to dig deep.

The journey was difficult but I enjoyed every bit of it because I found things that I never imagined were there. I heard stories that left me breathless. Stories of sorrow and despair. Stories I'd otherwise have to hear from the news or read about in books. I had never realized the source was next to me.

The walls of the old city of Jerusalem tell a million stories. The space within the four quarters may be small, but the stories it contains are wider than the ocean. And just like the ocean there are high and low tides.

## **2. First Steps**

I woke up in the morning, got dressed, grabbed my notebook, pen and camera, and I was ready to go. I didn't know what was awaiting me, but I knew where I was heading: to the souq. I usually don't go there often hence I found friends from the old city to guide me.

We walked into the souq and passed many shops selling souvenirs, sweets, traditional dresses, and pita bread. While walking I noticed the ancient architecture. The old windows, Roman pillars, cracked walls, and old pipes and wires were part of a thousand untold stories I was certain the souq contained. A man selling sweets has as many stories as a brick in an ancient wall.

We continued, and at one point we were next to the Holy Sepulcher; within minutes, we reached a mosque. I still wasn't sure where my guides were leading me.

During the tour my fellow friends shared their stories about living in these neighborhoods. They liked their lives - they felt safe because it was their home. I don't think I could manage to live here, I found myself thinking. Maybe it is too holy here. Maybe I would spend me entire day just praying. I am too young to be a saint.

Our destination was the Moroccan Quarter. When I heard about a Moroccan community living within the old city I was intrigued and wanted to know more. Who are these people? How long have they lived in Jerusalem? To find answers I had to go and listen to the stories.

Within a few minutes we were arrived at the Wailing Wall, where the Jews pray. To cross it we had to go through a metal detector. Security cameras were everywhere.

### **3. Aisha**

We finally arrived to a house in the Moroccan Quarter, went up stone steps, and at the top stood a woman, and with a joyful smile she welcomed us into her home.

Her house was very small, the size of your average dining room. But she had all the necessary devices and appliances and furniture a house needs: two couches, a TV, a small kitchen with a fridge. There weren't any cupboards and all

their clothes were in suitcases. There were two small, thin, and long windows, one looking out to the Wailing Wall.

I felt sad for her, as it must be hard to live in a small house with all her children – I think she had three.

Her name was Aisha, which means “still living,” an interesting name considering her story. Aisha was wearing a beige hijab, a long blue Moroccan dress, socks and slippers. She was also wearing glasses with a black frames, which showed how her sight had weakened after many years of hard work. Aisha's face was wrinkled from the difficulties of life, just like any women who has fought for her family and kept it strong. But Aisha didn't give up - this I saw from the smile on her face, her strong courageous voice, and her eagerness to share her story and the story of the Moroccan community.

I learned that day that the Moroccan community consists of many buildings, all the people living there work like one family sharing common happiness and sadness. They speak Palestinian Arabic and are Muslims, but they hold on proudly to their Moroccan traditions.

The community used to be an entire Quarter, that is, until the Israeli conquest of Jerusalem in 1967. "They came at 5 a.m. and ordered everyone to leave," she said, recalling what happened after the war. The Israeli soldiers didn't allow them to take anything with them before the bulldozers came to destroy their houses. Some people managed to grab some money, but most left behind their Jewelry and clothes, their pictures and all their papers and all that they owned.

Three bodies were found afterwards because people had been sleeping and hadn't heard the warning.

Aisha, a strong woman, became very emotional. While talking she started crying and I rubbed her shoulder. "Every time I look out of the window I remember my neighborhood, where I used to run and play with my friends, I can even see my parents eating breakfast on the balcony. Now nothing is left ... just

memories and stones of the past. Our lives have turned into a place for the Jews to pray."

Two of Aishas' siblings died when she was young, and her husband was killed in an accident when they were in Morocco in 1978. She stayed in Morocco for five years after he died, but she returned to Jerusalem because she knew it would be hard to raise a family alone there.

When she came back, she started working at the Swedish Center near Jaffa Gate, and remained there for 25 years. She described Swedes as being very organized.

Aisha's life experience made her who she is today. She believes that every woman should be proud and strong no matter what, and no matter what her ethnicity or nationality. Aisha worked hard and supported her family, and she never gave up even at the darkest moments.

She retired from her job with the Swedish Center. Today she takes part in women organizations, and she fights for her rights and those of her small group of Moroccans in what is left of the Quarter. She will do anything to keep the community alive. As a widow and an Arab woman, she is strong. Aisha hopes that my generation will continue her mission and preserve our pride.

For me, the name Aisha – still living - reflects her personality and who she is today. She suffers, she has her weak days, and she has difficulties in life; but still she stands like a house made of stone hit by a storm. She never looks down but instead looks up with hopes for better days to come.