



Christmas Spirit in Bethlehem

By Muna Nassar



Come All Ye Faithful
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.

Growing up in Bethlehem, December was the month that I, along with many relatives and friends of mine would passionately await in awe and anticipation. December has and will always be the Sunday of the months, la crème de la crème, Switzerland in the late twentieth century as the definition for laxity and lavishness. December is the touch of velvet, December is the weekend, and December is the star on top of the Christmas tree.

People from all around the globe tend to visit Bethlehem in December, the place where it all started. As a child living in Bethlehem, the rich, centuries-old traditions of Christmas were and are everywhere around us. There was the decoration all around the city, or the one-month-long holiday from school that we used to have because in Bethlehem Christmas comes around not only once, nor twice, but thrice since we get to celebrate Catholic Christmas on December 25, Orthodox Christmas on January 7, and Armenian Christmas on January 19. Many years have passed and as a working adult I don't get to take a month off work, but I still look back on those days with dear fondness and a tenderness that leaves me with profound feelings of gratitude and joy. I clearly remember Christmas as I was growing up. It was the month of pure joy: the joy of eating the scrumptious, mouthwatering Christmas cookies that my mom would make, the joy of buying new clothes to wear on Christmas day, the joy of awaiting the gifts from Santa - although after age seven, clever and sassy Muna knew

that Santa is not real, that he is one of my elder cousins dressed in a red Santa suit and putting on some white, fake-looking beard just to fool us kids. Maybe I knew that the Santa who visited us each year was not real, or perhaps I was hoping that the real Santa could not make it into the troubled, occupied part of the world called Palestine.

The pre-Christmas period is the busiest time of the year, in Bethlehem and worldwide. Many shops extend their opening hours, thousands of calories are burned in preparation for the Christmas festivities - but might I say that they are regained during the Christmas celebrations - especially in Bethlehem, as Christmas is celebrated in the truest Palestinian way, through food. Families, friends, and loved ones tend to visit each other on Christmas

and on the following days; and what other, better, or more satisfying way is there to have a great time than to pair a great Christmas ambiance with great Christmas goodies. The Christmas greeting visits are accompanied by the famous, centuries-old Palestinian hospitality and generosity.

What is unique about Bethlehem, and what distinguishes Bethlehem from other places around the world, is not only the fact Jesus was born into this little town, but also the authenticity and originality that Bethlehem tends to have during Christmas. As Christmas in Bethlehem is not only a religious holiday,

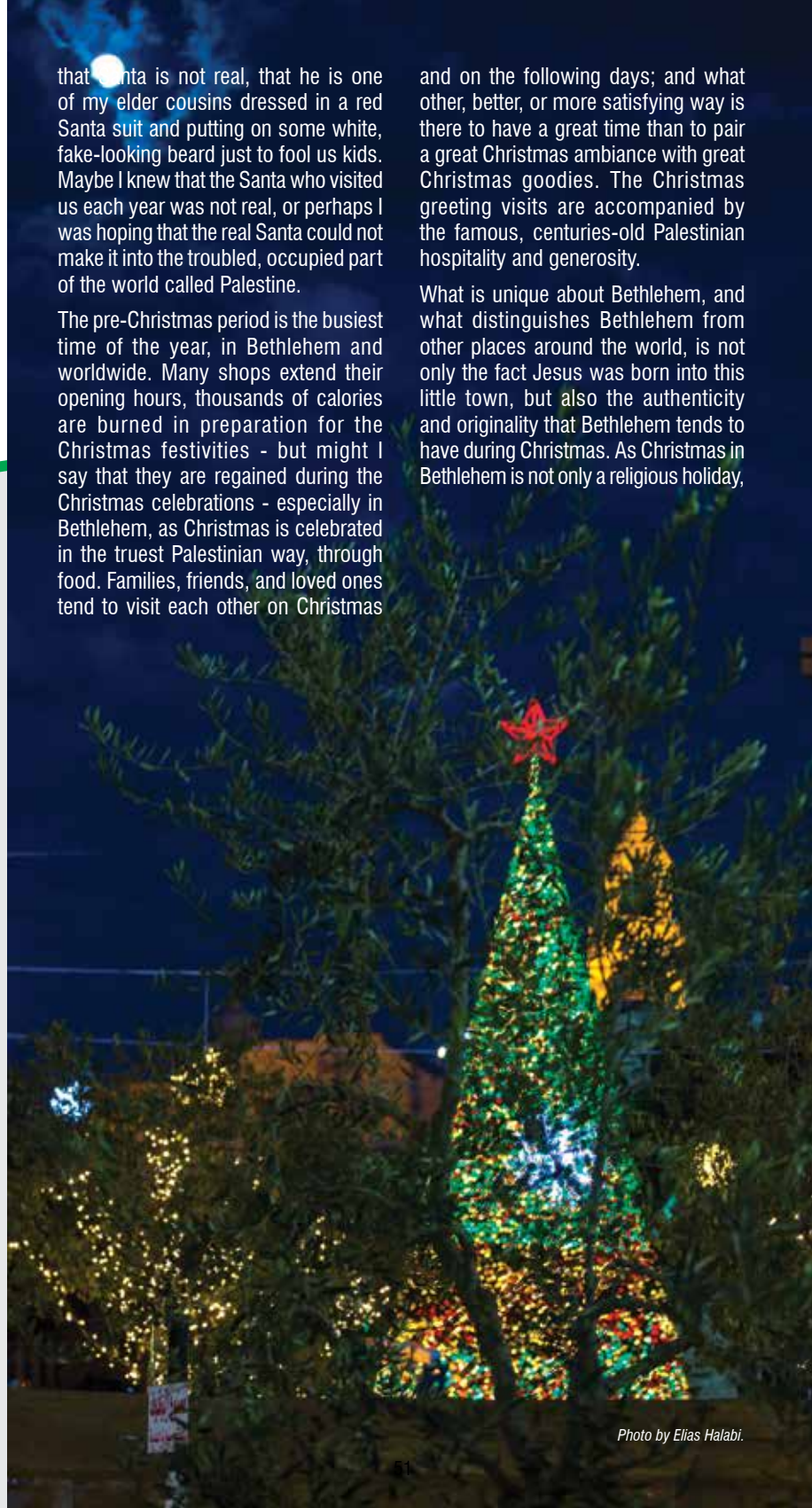


Photo by Elias Halabi.

it is also a social holiday. Bethlehemites tend to celebrate it together, whether by marching to Star Street to watch the festivities that welcome the patriarch, with the scouts playing in the street as they welcome him; by watching little kids holding balloons; or by attending the midnight mass that takes place on Christmas Eve, all people dressed in their Sunday-best in celebration of the festive occasion. Thus, come and enjoy the authenticity and the originality of Bethlehem.


Bethlehem in December is the muse to an artist who has been waiting for some time to be inspired. Bethlehem in December is your favorite homemade meal - made by your mom. It is a dervish dancing and whirling around, entertaining everyone around him and delighting the eye. Bethlehem is both an eye candy and food for an aching soul that has been longing to be freed. Bethlehem is the orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake in total harmony and utter perfection. The lights in Bethlehem will inspire you; Bethlehem will make you feel warm like the aftermath of drinking *Gluhwein*. The city is a gala of colorful lights shining with love, hope, and spirituality.

Christmas would not be complete without a tree. The Bethlehem Christmas tree is placed in the Manger Square. Hundreds of Palestinians and pilgrims gather in the square to celebrate the beginning of the Christmas celebrations and festivities. The tree-lighting event hosts a number of Palestinian representatives and distinguished guests and is broadcasted widely, as it is the kickoff of the Christmas season. The tree lighting is like the coronation day of Bethlehem, as everybody gathers in Manger Square to watch Bethlehem wear its colorful, bright crown. Once the Christmas tree is lighted, Bethlehem becomes the queen that has just worn its bright, colorful crown that shines from miles away. The ambiance of sheer joy and happiness is quickly spread amongst the gatherers. If

you are dissatisfied because for many people in the world the Christmas tree seems to characterize and dominate Christmas - lavish, expansive Christmas trees decorated with the latest most extravagant ornaments - you will be happy to come to Bethlehem. To us Palestinians, Christmas is represented by the humble small grotto into which Jesus was born. If Christmas around the world is the lights, the decorations, the gifts - in Bethlehem, Christmas is unpretentious, Christmas is modest, and Christmas is authentic.

The unique setting of the Christmas activities in Bethlehem is a further element that is both historically and culturally rich. Located in the historic part of Bethlehem, just across the Nativity Church, Manger Square is

the main plaza for all of the Christmas celebrations. Starting in early December, Manger Square hosts the Christmas Market that is held every Christmas season and a great place to find beautiful and unique gifts. The market offers a wide array of art and craft products: Palestinian handmade embroidery and jewelry, olive wood and mother-of-pearl crafts - ancient professions of Bethlehemites - as well as a wide variety of traditional Christmas treats: local specialties and special gastronomic delights for the Christmas dinner table. The event draws hundreds of visitors who come to wander through the narrow old streets of Bethlehem. As Manger Square is located only minutes away from Star Street, strolling down this unique world



I don't believe in light at the end of the tunnel; I believe we carry the light within us and that it shall guide us through the darkness of the alleys.

heritage site and observing the beautiful architectural style of its buildings can be quite entertaining and is certainly a unique experience that is strictly Palestinian.

A traditional Christmas procession with bagpipers playing to welcome a patriarch.





Decorating Bethlehem's Christmas tree. Photo by Elias Halabi.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
Let your heart be light!

From now on,
our troubles will be out of sight.

A prominent and ancient Christmas carol points to the hope that we should obtain in our hearts and minds, no matter what our religion or background. Christmas is the time for our hearts to be light and trouble-free. Therefore, we shall have hope within us to guide us through the darkness of the alleys, hope that shall inspire us to have love and compassion in our hearts even though we live in harsh circumstances that easily could generate nothing but hatred and despire for the other. But we shall



"I have no fear that the candle lighted in Palestine years ago will ever be put out." Dean William Inge, 1860-1954.

have faith in our hearts and minds; we shall have love and compassion. For us Palestinians, hope is crucial to our lives. It may seem hard, even impossible to have hope in our hearts as we suffer from injustice and inhumane practices day by day. However, there are things that cannot be seen but from a crying eye and an aching soul. Hope, love, and faith are most crucial and most needed for people who were born without it, people who have to suffer day by day to survive a harsh, unfair world where nothing can be taken for granted but rather has to be earned by sweat, innocent blood, and great sacrifices. Although life nowadays does not seem to be humane, we Palestinians strive for a just and humane world. We are living in the dark ages now, but we will soon reach the light at the end of the tunnel, and we shall have our own renaissance. Each day is a proof that light has won over darkness; each sunrise is proof of hope and new beginnings. It is true that each dawn is a story of the struggle between dark and light. But without darkness, we wouldn't have been able to witness, or even know the meaning of light and of new beginnings.

December is the well-lighted month, both literally and metaphorically,

waltzing its way throughout the year. December is the light of the months and the month that we light our feelings and wishes, hoping for a better year ahead. This is a wonderful time of the year! It may not always be perfect, but if Christmas can point our hearts toward love and hope for a better future, then we shall always have hope and never live without it.

Muna Nassar is a freelancer translator, writer, and enthusiastic bookworm. She spends her free time reading, enjoying classical music, and dreaming of a better future. She is involved in the cultural domain in Bethlehem, has worked in the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP), and is currently working with Kairos Palestine.



Star Street, Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of IMEU.