

PIN Bulletin For Local Organizers

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Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?



**Christmas Blessings
from EPF PIN
with Prayers for
Grace, Peace and
Justice in
2021**

A Christmas Memory by Philip Farah, member of PIN's Advisory Council and a founder of the Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace -- reprinted with permission from [Mondoweiss](#).

MY BETHLEHEM CHRISTMAS

For 51 years my father, Gregory Farah, took a six-mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem every Christmas, as in this photo from 1973.

Today, that walk would be impossible.



Last weekend I participated, virtually, in a Simulcast that joined Palestinian Christians in the beautiful Christmas church in Bethlehem, Palestine; several congregations in Philadelphia, USA; and over 500 online participants from several countries. The interdenominational service went back and forth in Arabic and English between both cities.

The reading in Arabic of the story of Jesus' birth, from Luke, Chapter 2, brought tears to my eyes. I am a Palestinian-American born and raised in Jerusalem and consider myself an "interfaith" person. My father, Gregory Farah, was a devout Christian; he read to us the same Luke Ch. 2 verses when my family gathered around our decorated tree every Christmas Eve in Jerusalem. Earlier that day, for many years, my siblings and I would accompany him on a six-mile walk from the southern outskirts of Jerusalem to Manger Square in Bethlehem. Those of us who were still around would sometimes bring our friends along for the walk.

On the way, we would stop at the Bethlehem home of my brother's godmother, Mrs. Halaby, with gifts for her children, and enjoy the Christmas cookies she always had for the occasion. Dad had made a vow to make this walk back in 1929. Upon reaching Manger Square, still the center of Bethlehem, we'd see groups of clergy and pilgrims headed to the Church of Nativity, some of them caroling in different languages along the way. Dad kept his vow until 1980, when he and my mother immigrated to Canada to join us, their children, who were already settled in North America.



Mother, Mary Qamar Farah, pictured here with my father in 1944, is now 100 and lives in a nursing home in Toronto. Because of Covid-19, I am unable to visit her. So the caregivers occasionally connect me with her for virtual visits on FaceTime. Her memory sometimes fails her; for example, she sometimes mentions one or more of her siblings as if they are her children. However, her recollection of songs is amazing. She even remembers a school anthem from the Swedish School of Jerusalem that she attended as a small child. So we spend most of our virtual visits singing Arabic songs together on

FaceTime. One of her favorite pieces is a New Year carol, Ya Rabbu 'Amun Qad Mada (Another Year Has Passed, Oh Lord.) This was also part of our family tradition in Jerusalem: On New Year's Eve, we would gather another time around the Christmas tree and sing this lovely carol of praise.

It is sad that, today, we could not do the walk that my father did for 51 years from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. At best, we would have to go through the Israeli checkpoint with its long, humiliating lines. Palestinian friends from outside Jerusalem might not be able to join us because Israeli authorities often withhold permits for Palestinians from other occupied territories to enter East Jerusalem. Bethlehem is a very sad place today. The military occupation that has lasted since 1967 and the Israeli "Separation" Wall—much taller than the Berlin Wall—have greatly restricted all aspects of life there. Today with Covid-19, tourism—the mainstay of the already dismal Bethlehem economy--has come to a near stand-still.

Not long after the Israeli occupation in 1967, my brother George Farah reluctantly accompanied my Dad on a visit to his Jewish friends in West Jerusalem; Dad had not seen them for nearly 20 years. At Jaffa Gate, leading out of the Old City, Dad reached out and touched a tiny object on the wall and kissed his hand. George asked him what he was doing; he explained it was a Jewish mezuzah, a decorative case containing holy text from the Torah. George asked him how he could do such a thing when they (Israeli Jews) had done what they did to us. His response was simple: "Do Jews, Muslims, and Christians have separate gods? We're all God's children."

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