

# SPIRITUALITY AND SEPARATION

Palestinian-born artist **Larissa Sansour** discusses Bethlehem, the city she grew up in that was once quaint and tourist-driven, but which has since been divided by the Israeli Wall.



Image courtesy the artist.

**F**or many, Bethlehem is nothing but a fictional city, or at best, the biblical city of Christ's birth that no longer exists. But in fact, Bethlehem is a very real place and I should know, I grew up there.

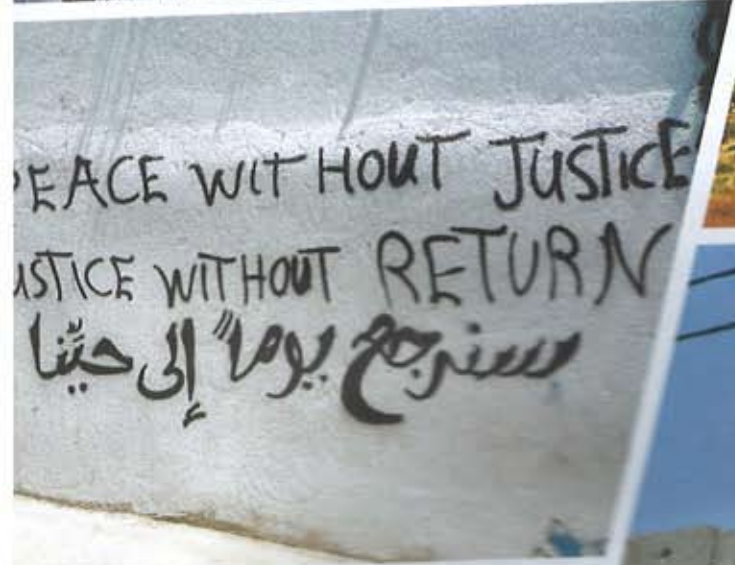
It is impossible to separate Bethlehem from its status as a holy place. For many years, the city lived solely off tourism. It seemed as though all of Bethlehem's inhabitants were in some way involved in promoting the place as a tourist destination. Even taxi drivers assumed you were heading to a holy attraction. Tourists still visit, but not as much as before. The top attraction now is the Israeli Wall: taxi drivers are proud to take you to see the works of Banksy covering parts of the Wall, rather than to Manger Square. With a large part of the population living below the poverty line, for every local to know Banksy seems like an oxymoron, yet Bethlehem seems to be full of conflicting elements like that, ranging from the sad and heartbreaking to the exciting and forward-looking or the downright surreal. What is most striking is that even with Bethlehem's recent isolation, the city has a keen sense of connection to the rest of the world.

When the Israeli Wall was completed, it encircled Bethlehem entirely and permanently severed the ancient route between the city and Jerusalem. Many people were unfortunate enough to find themselves on the wrong side of this wall and lost their jobs in Jerusalem, while others were cut

off from their friends and relatives. I was born in Jerusalem, but I have not been able to enter it for many years. Bethlehem has turned into an open air prison and is experiencing a massive brain drain. Those who were able to leave have left.

But, it was not always like that. The Bethlehem of my childhood was a sleepy and quaint small city with one main attraction, the Church of the Nativity, the spot of Christ's birth. Bethlehem sometimes comes across as a theme park of all that is holy, a sunny city where mosques, temples and churches have stood side by side for hundreds of years. In its centre, there are signs guiding visitors to places such as Shepherds' Fields Herod's Mountain, Solomon's Pools, Rachel's Dome, the Omar Al-Khattab Mosque and other sites. It is a maze of holy paths and squares.

What is fascinating about Bethlehem is that it is a city that keeps reinventing itself, even when times are tough. It is amazing that it still has cultural institutions such as The Peace Centre, which has hosted world-class artists in recent years. The city is full of quirks and contradictions mixed with tradition and Bethlehem always finds a way to be unique and vibrant. Where else would you find hot falafel and *kaak* bread served fresh from the oven at 5am or have the FIFA World Cup games projected on the Wall while dining at a restaurant? For me, this is the magical, surreal world of Bethlehem. ☺



Photography by Rania Habib, unless otherwise specified