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Film tells story of loss and hope in Israel, Palestine

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NCR Today

"One day, someone told us, 'This is my house.' Since then, we have been suffering." -- Rifkah El Kurd, Palestinian grandmother in the film "My Neighbourhood"

Julia Bacha believes violent and nonviolent resistance have something in common. Both are theatrical productions, seeking an audience to their cause. Frustrated by the media's overwhelming tendency to focus on the violent actors, Bacha co-founded JustVision, a small, independent film company committed to highlighting nonviolent voices from Israel/Palestine.

JustVision has not been wanting for material. In the last 10 years, it has produced two full-length award-winning films, "Encounter Point" and "Budrus." Its third project is "My Neighbourhood," a short yet profound documentary that tells of the expulsion of the Palestinian El Kurd family from their home of 65 years and of the Israelis who try to help them.

The El Kurds originally hail from the coastal city of Haifa, now in present-day Israel. Displaced by Israel's war for independence in 1948, the family lives as refugees in their own homeland until the United Nations gives them a deed in 1956 to a house in Sheikh Jarrah, a hillside neighborhood in East Jerusalem. In the summer of 2009, zealous Jewish settlers decide to seize the house and the neighborhood because they dream of a unified, biblical Jerusalem, inhabited only by Jews.

The appropriation is painfully intimate. Young men wearing kippahs and accompanied by Israeli soldiers barge into the El Kurds' home and haul out boxes of household goods while Grandmother Rifkah pleads with them and tries to block their path.

"I hate them. I hate them. They are making our lives so hard," says 12-year-old Mohammed El Kurd.

For settler spokesperson Yonatan Yosef, the reclaiming of Sheikh Jarrah is a must-do. "The Bible says this area belongs to the Jewish people," he tells us, later acknowledging this Judaization of the neighborhood, like the establishment of the Israeli state, is being done "at the expense of the Arabs."

Amid the thievery and woe is generosity and solidarity. In West Jerusalem, where one can live oblivious to the turmoil a few miles away, 20-something Zvia Benninga learns that after Shabbat prayers on Friday, the Jewish settlers of Sheikh Jarrah taunt their Palestinian neighbors. Zvia goes to stand with the taunted. Soon, he and his passionately articulate sister are organizing street demonstrations against the expulsions. The parents follow their children's example. Zvia's ever-smiling mother, who by her own account was not a political person, and his father, a cautious man and the son of Holocaust refugees, join the weekly raucous protests in the streets of Sheikh Jarrah to show their solidarity with the expelled Palestinians.

In one of my favorite scenes, Mr. Benninga, who has been anxious about criticizing the state that harbored him, remembers the few survivors of the Holocaust in his family. They stayed alive, he says, because they "were helped by righteous people." He has taught his children to be the same.

The demonstrations, now well-known in Jerusalem, swell from 30 participants to 3,000 Ofra Ben-Ami, sister-in-law to Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli prime minister and settlement advocate, marches and speaks of the need to respect the human rights of Sheikh Jarrah's Palestinian residents.

On one level, the squall in Sheikh Jarrah is not a big deal. Relative to the thousands of people being slaughtered in Syria, the expulsion of eight Palestinian families from their homes is not statistically significant. But the Sheikh Jarrah story is momentous, for it touches on all the core issues of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict -- the seizing of territory; the fate of refugees, including the new ones being created; and the future of Jerusalem. Today, there are 250,000 Jewish-only settlements within and around East Jerusalem, the city Palestinians hoped would be their capital. The El Kurds' plight is an excruciating detail of this incursion.

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The film's perspective on this most territorial of conflicts is personal. Domestic. Here is eviction "at the granular level," as filmmaker Bacha puts it. Watching the documentary, you realize that building in Jerusalem, according to the Bible, often requires throwing families out on the street. It means smashed windows, early morning invasions from soldiers ordering everyone in the house to get out, and a girl standing in the road outside her home, sobbing, "They have broken all the doors. *All* the doors."

Here, too, is transformation at the granular level. Zvia's action of solidarity prompts a shift within himself and his family. The Benningas may have been apolitical, but they are morally alert. Because of their time in Sheikh Jarrah, their unexamined allegiance to the state that has provided them with a good life gives way to a deeper identity, one concerned about just treatment for all their neighbors.

By 2011, little has changed in Sheikh Jarrah. The El Kurds are still trying to reclaim their home. The settler project has not expanded, nor has it been abandoned. Much, however, has changed for Zvia and Mohammed. More critical of Israel, Zvia also feels more connected. Mohammed speaks of the hope received from the Israeli activists and of his plans to study law to help him fight the injustice his family has experienced. In one of the film's final scenes, the two sit together beneath the shade of a tree in Sheikh Jarrah. Mohammed, already fluent in English, tries to decode the Hebrew inscription of a word on Zvia's political button. The word is "solidarity."

"You see," the Palestinian youth says to his Israeli friend. "I speak Hebrew."

For more on the nonviolent voices in Israel/Palestine, go to JustVision.org.

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