

## The Ethics of Being Unwashed

by Lesley Dawson

Water was always a problem in Bethlehem, except nobody else seemed to worry about how much we used but me. Allocation of water, as well as electricity, was under the controls of the Israelis. They could cut us off any time they wanted. I was always surprised that it didn't happen more often.

The Municipality found their own way round the problem by only allocating water to individual sectors of the town. If your district had water, you could wash your vegetables under a running tap to your heart's content. I was told that this was the correct way to wash fruit and veg. It was not enough to fill the washing up bowl and dunk the items in there to be swished about. This was simply not good enough. No proper housewife would accept this.

Each house and apartment had several water tanks on the roof and when they were empty you had to either go about your daily business unwashed or scuttle round to a friend's house where they did have water. If this wasn't on offer, you called up a water truck to fill up your roof tanks. Of course, this truck came from West Jerusalem, driven by an Israeli driver and costing a fortune. We tried very hard not to get into this position, not only because of the cost, but because when the truck arrived our landlord, Abu Ahmed, looked at us suspiciously as though we were collaborators. It was obviously a sign of patriotism to smell unpleasant.

Because of the water problem, having visitors could be an issue. Each Christmas I had a house full of guests who were warned that a shower was ok but there was no chance of a bath. One year my friends came from England and brought their seven-year-old son. Davd had a great time playing with all the local kids and language seemed to be no barrier. Coming in for tea, he greeted his mother with a big grin and a very dirty face. When she examined him in more detail, she discovered that he was filthy all over.

"What I would love to do is put him in the bath and scrub him clean." She realized that this was not possible, but this was her default position in the UK. David, of course, was delighted not to have to get in the bath. A quick wash of the face and hands before eating had to suffice. As I winked at David, I remembered a time when my own mother would do the same to me.

When my dad came to visit, we usually had enough water to keep us both clean, by coping with the trickle of water that came out of the shower. One evening disaster fell upon us, when the whole of Bethlehem was bereft of water. It was no good asking friends: we were all in the same boat.

Walking up to the university for dinner with the Brothers House we felt uncomfortable and weren't really looking forward to smelling bad in front of visitors from Jerusalem. My father always managed to get into deep conversations with the other men present, especially when he was plied with the rough red wine that was made by the Silesian Brothers up the hill at Bet Jala and tonight was no exception.

I had no idea what he had been talking about until we were about to leave. "Think about it Bert. Get Lesley to take you to Tantur for a shower. Because we are in Jerusalem, we have no problem with water"

"What was all that about?" I asked as we walked down the hill to my flat.

"That nice Irish fella, I think his name is Mike, offered to let us shower at his place"

That "nice fella" was a respected theologian doing research in the ecumenical religious centre at this place called Tantur. His offer was a generous one, but I wasn't sure he really meant it. As far as my dad was concerned it was a done deal. We decided to mull it over before we took him up on his offer.

As he kissed me goodnight he yawned, "It sounds plausible enough tonight but wait until tomorrow. Let's wait for the common sense of the morning."

In the morning, we still had no water, so overcame our so-called common sense and set off for Tantur with our towels and shower gel tucked in a duffle bag.

When sitting in the common room at Tantur, with a big mug of coffee in hand, we decided it was the best shower we had ever had. We wouldn't tell Abu Ahmed and hoped he couldn't smell the shower gel on us and label us collaborators.