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## Study guide

# Tent of Nations

*Lutheran Palestinian brothers welcome all to family farm*

By Robert C. Blezard

Because of our strong relationship that dates back to when Lutherans sent missionaries to the Middle East, we have been intimately involved with the struggle for peace in Israel and the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza strip. Today that is expressed in our close friendship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land and our continued advocacy and education on the issues. As with Christian concerns in other parts of the world, our denomination is working for peace, justice and human rights.

### Exercise 1: The Nassars' plight

Imagine your family has owned and operated a farm for generations, but now government authorities are challenging your right to ownership. They want to destroy your buildings. They want to take the land and give it to strangers to settle. Not only that, they say you can no longer build on it, connect to the electrical grid or develop it as you like. The challenges not only hinder your farm operation, but also cause you to incur thousands of dollars' worth of legal challenges.

If this situation arose in Nebraska or California, legal remedies are available. But this is the occupied West Bank, where Israelis have been encouraged to settle through government policies that displace and disadvantage Palestinian families such as the Nassars.

- What do you think of the Nassars' situation? What issues of justice and fairness does this raise for you? If your family was experiencing this, what would you be feeling and thinking?
- How would you want your church and fellow Christians to think about this? What would you want them to do and say to support you and accompany you through this struggle?

### Exercise 2: Blessed are the peacemakers

- In establishing their farm as the "Tent of Nations" and committing to education, nonviolence and love for their neighbor and adversary alike, how are the Nassars living up to some of the highest Christian ideals? How is this revealed in their motto: "We Refuse to be Enemies"?



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- Faced with the same situation, would you be able to respond as they have? Why or why not? What does it say about the Nassars? How do they and their farm provide a good witness for the Christian faith?
- How can you and your congregation support the Nassars and Palestinian Christians in similar situations?

### Exercise 3: Christians for peace

The struggle in Israel and Palestine has been a concern from the beginning of the ELCA. Its 1989 “Message on the Israeli/Palestine Conflict” calls for an end to oppression of Palestinians and for a continuation of talks toward a peaceful solution. Since then the ELCA has worked tirelessly for peace with justice and affirmed its commitment through numerous statements, including two memorials from the 2016 Churchwide Assembly. According to an ELCA news release, the actions:

- Reaffirmed the commitment of the ELCA to continue its awareness-building, accompaniment and advocacy for a peaceful resolution of the Israel and Palestine conflict, as well as seeking ways to support Palestinians and Israelis in restorative-justice dialogue.
- Reaffirmed the need to protect the human rights of Palestinians and Israelis and oppose all violence and actions that discriminate or deny any people their freedom, dignity or human rights.
- Urged the church’s members, congregations, synods, agencies and presiding bishop to call on their members of Congress and the administration to require that, to continue receiving U.S. financial and military aid, Israel comply with internationally recognized human rights standards as specified in U.S. law, stop settlement building and the expansion of existing settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, end its occupation of Palestinian territory, and enable an independent Palestinian state.
- Directed the ELCA’s corporate social responsibility review team to develop a human rights social criteria investment screen based on the social teachings of the church and on human rights concerns raised in the ELCA Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine, adopted by the ELCA Church Council in 2005.
- Encouraged ELCA members, congregations, synods, agencies and institutions to increase positive investment in Palestine and other under-resourced areas where human rights abuses materially impact the well-being of all people and to engage in shareholder advocacy in support of human rights.

Lutherans are not the only Christians concerned. June 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian communi-



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ties of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza following the Six Day War in 1967. The World Council of Churches (WCC), of which the ELCA is a member, marked the occasion with a “Statement on 50 years of Occupation” (find it at [oikoumene.org/en](http://oikoumene.org/en)). The statement notes that the WCC and other international organizations, including the United Nations, have recognized Israel’s right to exist and defend itself while also calling for peacemaking and negotiations to find nonviolent means to resolve tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. But the statement goes on to say:

- “[H]alf a century after the 1967 war, there is still no peace and no justice among the inhabitants of the land of Christ’s birth, death and resurrection.”
- “The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories continues without any political solution on the horizon. On the contrary, its matrix of control—in particular through the ever growing web of illegal Israeli settlements—is increasing rather than diminishing.”
- “The occupation strangles hopes for a jointly agreed political solution of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, for a sustainable peace for both peoples, for justice and equal human dignity and rights for all, and for the realization of legitimate Palestinian aspirations for self-determination.”

For discussion:

- Why should Christians be concerned with the rights and living conditions of any minority group facing persecution or oppression by a majority population? What biblical principles support the push for human and civil rights for all? How does Jesus’ command for us to love our neighbors as ourselves come into the picture?
- What are some of the common core principles for human rights and dignity that civilized people can agree upon? What principles are informed by the Bible? By Christian doctrine? (For study or suggestions, see the United Nation’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.)
- Why should ELCA members be concerned with the struggle between Palestinians and Israelis?
- Why is it important to raise our voices, continue to educate ourselves and others on the issues, and urge our leaders to work for policies that promote peace and protect the rights and well-being of all?

### For action and further study

- Go to [elca.org](http://elca.org) and study the comprehensive actions, messages and statements of the ELCA toward the Israeli/Palestinian struggle.



### About the study guide author:



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Check out, especially, the ELCA's campaign "Peace Not Walls" and its FAQ and talking points on the 2016 Churchwide Assembly actions.

- Visit the website of our partner the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land ([elcjh.org](http://elcjh.org)) and explore the lives and concerns of Christians there. Read also how its former bishop, Munib Younan, received the 2017 Niwano Peace Award for his work toward interreligious dialogue among Christians, Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem and worldwide.
- Explore the Lutheran World Federation's extensive Jerusalem program ([jerusalem.lutheranworld.org](http://jerusalem.lutheranworld.org)) and the work it is doing.
- As you learn more about this long-standing problem, network with others in your congregation or synod and find ways to continue to educate others about the issues and to advocate for peace and justice.
- Visit the Holy Land, especially the West Bank, and learn for yourself about the situation. There are several good Palestinian travel agencies that can arrange a tour. Good Shepherd Travel ([tourtheholylands.com](http://tourtheholylands.com)) in Bethlehem, on the West Bank, is run by Palestinian Christians and specializes in bringing North Americans to the Holy Land.

# Tent of Nations

Lutheran Palestinian brothers welcome all to family farm

Text and photos by Judith Sudilovsky



Daoud Nassar and his family have fought to keep their farm in Bethlehem for 25 years.

**W**earing a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses to shade himself from the early May sun, Daoud Nassar strolls down the dusty path on his family's 101-year-old hilltop farm. In every direction he looks, he can see the ever-expanding Israeli settlements with their white multistory buildings and neat red-tiled roofs in the distance.

"Once an Israeli couple was hiking around here and found the farm. The first thing the woman said was: 'We are neighbors.' And I said 'Yes, neighbors—but we should be equal,'" said Nassar without a trace of rancor.

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For 25 years the Nassar family has been embroiled in a legal battle to protect their property from confiscation by the Israeli government. Despite the frustration and constant struggles, they have made their farm—the last Palestinian-controlled hilltop in the area—a symbol of peace simply by farming their land and welcoming guests and volunteers of all nationalities and religions.

They are also the only Christian family that remains in the area. The Nassars are members of Christmas Lutheran in Bethlehem (a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land).

“Love your neighbor like you love yourself is a big commandment, but how do you go about doing that?” Nassar asked. “Loving myself means I am committed to love the other. God did not make us to hate each other.”

Still, he acknowledged that they deal with daily frustrations.

Despite the 22 outstanding demolition orders for structures on their farm, which they have appealed, they refuse to give up hope. All their requests to build legally have been refused with no explanation. “Even if we are not allowed to build anything here, not even a shed, it is enough to bring people together,” Nassar said.

# “We Refuse to Be

The farm was renamed in 1992 as Tent of Nations to honor the biblical tent where everyone was welcome, traditionally believed to have been set up not far from this area by Abraham. Today it’s an expression of the tenacity, faith, determination and love—for each other, for all the people of this land and for the land itself—with which this Lutheran Palestinian family keeps fighting to preserve their farm while maintaining the Christian principles of tolerance upon which they were raised.

“We believe in justice and we believe that the sun of justice will rise again giving hope,” Nassar said. “We created the Tent of Nations to invert our frustrations into something constructive. Our motto, ‘We Refuse to Be Enemies,’ is an active way of [practicing] nonviolent resistance. Many people face [the] problem of land confiscation, but our way is trying to find solutions even in a difficult situation.”

## “God did not make us to hate each other”

As settlements expand, Daoud and his brother Daher continue to manage the farm their family has no intention of leaving. Their hilltop southwest of Bethlehem is located in Area C of the West Bank, where Israel has retained full civil land-related matters and security control.

Forbidden to connect to an electrical grid or build new buildings, the Nassars have turned to innovative solutions. The family put up solar panels to provide electricity, depends largely on rainwater for potable water, uses recycled gray water for irrigation and provides large canvas tents to bunk volunteers.

When their land was first threatened with confiscation in 1991, the Nassars were able to oppose the move in court because their grandfather had registered his property in 1916 with the Ottoman rulers of the time. Many farmers didn’t register their land to avoid paying property taxes. So unlike other Palestinian landowners, the Nassar family has documents that prove the land belongs to them, and to this day they have not lost any of it.

However, their legal expenses, which have been paid in part by individual donors and friends, have reached \$200,000. They have been physically attacked by settlers, hundreds of fruit trees have been uprooted and their water tank was destroyed. Once, the Israeli army attempted to pave a road through their property. Each time the Nassar family counteracts with a legal response and takes a constructive action on their farm—like planting more trees or repairing agriculture terraces.

When a Jewish European group helped sponsor the replanting of 250 uprooted trees several years ago, the family saw it as a sign of hope that they weren’t alone in their struggle for justice, Nassar said. “We believe there is another way of nonviolent resistance,” he said.

## “Faith is the base that makes them strong”

His conviction, Nassar said, is based on four pillars: the refusal to become victims; the refusal to hate; the belief that their Christian faith, which has been transferred from generation to generation, is the center of their nonviolent resistance; and their belief in justice.

During the first intifada (uprising) when Palestinian universities were closed, Nassar went to study at a Bible college in Austria. Though he hoped to remain longer due to the political situation back home, he returned earlier than anticipated because he couldn't work to finance further studies. He feels that it may have been God's plan for him to return when he did in August 1991 because the struggle for the farm began a few months later.


But his time abroad provided him with a new perspective, and soon after returning he met his wife Jihan, who had spent time studying computer science abroad, at church. Now the two are a mutual support system for each other. Jihan also runs a women's empowerment project in a nearby village.

# Enemies”

Elisabeth van der Waal, a Dutch volunteer who came to help at the farm, said she ultimately discovered a sense of hope there that she needed in her life. “Faith is the base that makes [the Nassars] strong and helps them face everything they have to face here,” she said. “They espouse the deep belief of not being enemies, but to act like a friend, with love. ... The Tent of Nations has changed me. It has taught me to look at what another human being needs.”

Today Nassar has a new dream as well. He hopes to create an environmental school on the farm to teach Palestinians about ecology, farming and recycling.

The road to the farm may have been blocked by the Israeli government, he said, but the garbage strewn all around was thrown by Palestinians. People always say they are willing to die for the land, but he would rather they live for the land, Nassar said. He wondered: “What kind of respect is shown for the land if garbage is thrown out like that?”

“My idea is that even if it is difficult, I can make a difference,” he said. “You can make a difference. Act differently, positively. Don't sit down and cry and be the victim. You can create something positive from the negative. And so we continue with our faith, love and hope in action.” 

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org)



Tent of Nations volunteer Nikki Minjon (left) consults on logistics for work to be done on the farm with Nassar and his wife, Jihan (right), as family matriarch Meladeh looks on.

The Nassar family renamed their farm the Tent of Nations to honor Abraham's tent, where everyone was welcome.



**Judith Sudilovsky** is a freelance journalist who has covered the intersection of faith, politics, people and hope in Israel and the Palestinian territories for 25 years.