



How I Lead as Relief Society President in Palestine | An Interview With Sahar Qumsiyeh

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Kurt Francom (LS): Today I'm sitting down in downtown Salt Lake at the [00:03:30] Deseret Book headquarters with Sahar Qumsiyeh. How are you Sahar?

Sahar: I'm doing good thank you.

LS: Awesome. Now you are not from Salt Lake. You were from the other side of the globe.

Sahar: Yeah.

LS: When people ask you where you're from what do you tell them?

Sahar: Palestine.

LS: Nice, And is there a specific city?

Sahar: I tell them I'm from Biet Sahour but a lot of people don't know Biet Sahour but it's right next to Bethlehem is about a five minute walk from the Church of Nativity where the Savior was born so it's just down the hill.

LS: I've heard of Bethlehem [00:04:00] this is good. You're born in Jerusalem right? The reason we were together is you recently wrote a book about being a Latter-day saint in Palestine. Obviously there's a story behind this but what led to this book actually coming to reality?

Sahar: Well actually it started out by a very simple Relief Society Project where they encouraged us to write our personal history and I decided I'm going to write my life story. And I did. And I kept adding to it.[00:04:30] As time went by and then one of my friends is like well why don't you publish this. This is interesting because I was sending her my weekly e-mails about sneaking in to get to church and all the difficulties I was

facing. She's like you have an interesting life. You should publish this. People could be interested in my life? So I changed the format a little bit and made it look like something kind of inspirational and kind of topic base. So it's not a biography format.

LS: [00:05:00] Here it is, nice! There is a few things I want to talk about. Obviously it's interesting you've served as early Relief Society president and District Relief Society president in Palestine and obviously there's some interesting stories from that and some unique leadership principles you learned from that experience but maybe back up you converted the church when you attended BYU but before that how would you describe the development of your faith?

Sahar: So I grew up in a place of conflict and it was kind of difficult [00:05:30] to live there and I was depressed a lot. I participated in demonstrations I saw a lot of people get killed and shot and then imprisoned, and tortured, in jail and all that and it was kind of a difficult life and I became very depressed. Then when I went to BYU, and I grew up as a Christian I knew God existed I just didn't know that God actually hears and answers our prayers. I actually thought he hated us because, you know I as a Palestinian [00:06:00] i'm like "why does he cause all these bad things to happen to us." I couldn't understand. So when I got to BYU I asked. Initially it was kind of experimental or you know all I pray and prayer would be answered and the like or maybe it was a coincidence. I'll try again, it was kind of gradual at the beginning and until you know my friend sat me down one day and basically told me about the gospel in one setting and kind of connected the dots for me. [00:06:30] It started to make sense it started to help me understand that God does love me and cares about me and I started to actually have more meaningful prayers and then I started to feel that I found the truth. As I read the Book of Mormon as I went to church I felt that I found, I found the true gospel and I and my faith kind of started to grow but I'm still not sure that I had strong faith [00:07:00] like now. At the time I thought I did but I had no idea how much my faith would grow from that moment on just because of trials and difficulties that I would face in Palestine. My faith just grew tremendously.

LS: So how does a non-mormon Palestinian end up at BYU in Provo Utah ?

Sahar: It was kind of random because I was planning to go to Washington D.C. I received a scholarship which was fifty six thousand dollars a year and it was actually [00:07:30] an impressive scholarship and I was planning to go. There was no doubt in my mind where I was going to get a master's degree. One day was flipping through the old school local paper and I found this ad, that said this university called Brigham Young University was offering scholarships to Palestinians and I'm like to apply now. And honestly when I look back I'm like why did i even apply. Like that doesn't make sense because I applied, when I applied I knew I wasn't going to BYU. I just had no plans [00:08:00] to go there and I got accepted. And actually the director of the center called me with the good news and I'm not going. But I felt bad telling him I'm not going so I said I'll tell him later and I just hung up. I said thank you and hung up. And then I started

having these feelings in my heart that I should go to BYU I'm like What is that and why? You know and I didn't understand what they were and they got stronger and stronger and my family thought I was nuts to even consider BYU. They're like [00:08:30] it's not such a good scholarship it's not as good as the other one. You know the crazy Mormons live in Utah, Utah is a desert. But I just felt impressed to go there and I couldn't deny that feeling. So I went.

LS: So what connotations do you have of the church going to BYU? Did you kind of enter with your guard up a little bit? With all these crazy mormons.

Sahar: Yes I've heard all these crazy stories I don't even know if I should tell you because you think they're nuts.

LS: I'd be interested! [00:09:00]

Sahar: So one of the things that I heard was Mormon women. Well ok so first of all they have multiple wives but they have a lot of children. But the reason they have a lot of children is that Mormons believe that the second coming of the Savior would come being born to a Mormon woman so that's the reason they have a lot of kids is they want Christ to come fast so they try to have more kids. So he would be born faster.

LS: So that was one of the things I heard that's new to me. I've never heard that one. That's great. [00:09:30]

Sahar: I know exactly like where do they come up with these things. But I did not like at the time I didn't know any Mormons so I had to believe it because I didn't know any better. And then they told me you know Mormons don't drink tea or coffee or alcohol or whatever and so I'm like. And then they when when I had my interview they're like well you can't really wear sleeveless things and can't wear shorts and so that's really strange, you know.

LS: So you thought I went for all Mormons.

Sahar: Yeah I know I thought Mormons [00:10:00] were strange. And I was kind of reluctant. The only positive thing I got was from my grandfather who said "Well I met a Mormon couple one day and they were the nicest people I've ever met. So I think Mormons are great." So he kind of maybe reduced that fear that I was having. But when I got there I was surprised though. They're normal you know.

LS: So how long from when you got there to your baptism?

Sahar: I actually got baptized a little bit before I graduated and went home. So [00:10:30] I kind of pushed my baptism. I started investigating the church the second year I was there. I was only there two years. And I started investigating the second year and I just pushed my baptism a little bit towards the end.

LS: And you said there is a friend sort of talked through some of the different principles of our beliefs. I imagine getting there you sort of knew the Mormons you had no interest. But was it gradual over time that interest built?

Sahar: So [00:11:00] It was basically two main things that kind of interested me. First of all how nice people were so just the example people and how much they served

me and how much they loved me even though I wasn't a member of their church. They were really sweet and kind. The other thing was my friend actually invited me to watch General Conference and I sat and watched it on TV with her and one of the speakers. One of the leaders kind of referred to my country as Palestine[00:11:30] instead of Israel. And that interested me because you know I'm I'm passionate about my country and you know I'm Palestinian and my country was occupied by Israel so I wanted that identity and so to hear an American actually call my land Palestine meant something to me and so that's when I asked my friend to tell me about her church and she told me everything, you know. But when she put it all together kind of one big setting it made sense [00:12:00] like she was kind of connecting the dots and and it made everything fall into place because I grew up Christian and I knew of the atonement but it didn't come together until she explained it that way.

LS: And so you get baptized right before you return to your home?

Sahar: I got baptized in February and then I returned home that summer.

LS: So how would you describe that transition from going from Provo Utah, being a being a Mormon in Provo Utah, to suddenly being a Mormon in Palestine? How [00:12:30] you describe it?

Sahar: So being in Provo was so easy like being a Mormon at BYU has, for example in past Sunday the cafeteria isn't open. Nothings open. So you really can't eat anyway even if you wanted to. So you kind of it's easy to fast church was like next door, you just you know you walk to church. Everybody was a member and everybody read their scriptures everybody prayed. So you know doing these things is kind of the norm. And and it was easy [00:13:00] that when I got home it was very different. You know my family drank tea all the time and so they kind of mocked me for not doing it or you think you're going to heaven because you're not drinking tea are we going to hell because we are. And they you know my mother would see me reading my scriptures and she would complain she didn't want me to do that. There weren't any members. Everybody was different. Everybody was a non-member. And then going to church was a challenge. I had to sneak in to get there.

LS: To say the least it was a challenge. [00:13:30]

Sahar: Exactly.

LS: And I want to get to that. Many of the chapters in the book. You know you detail as far as the struggle is just to go to church and in Utah we trip over a church every few blocks but when you got there and so that time you were attending the Jerusalem. Was it the Jerusalem branch at the moment at the Jerusalem Center Right? Would you walk in as someone who just returned from BYU just barely baptized? How did you [00:14:00] find the leadership was helpful in that branch during that time?

Sahar: Yes actually that first year everybody was really nice and supportive. And that first Saturday they meet on Saturday that first Sabbath that I was there. I bore my testimony and I said how difficult it was for me to get to church because it was hard for

me the first time to even find where the center is. No body knew where it is and we just kind of sneaking in and getting there and right that first Sabbath. [00:14:30] One brother approached me and he said “well we live then Geelhoed close to Bethlehem we’d be happy to give you a ride every week.” And so they started just coming to my doorstep and picking me up and taking me to church and that was amazing for the first few weeks because you know it just helped me kind of ease into it.

LS: Were they Palestinian?

Sahar: No they’re actually Israeli.

LS: Yeah but they live close to you and thought it was great. So maybe articulate what the dynamic is of going to church why is it so difficult [00:15:00] from going from just outside of Bethlehem to Jerusalem to church?

Sahar: So I was born in Jerusalem. But the problem is people living in the West Bank right now Israeli law doesn’t allow Palestinians living in the West Bank to enter Jerusalem and other Israeli areas. So even though when I was growing up I was free to travel throughout the country. That stopped after the uprising and all the later years. So as a Palestinian I wasn’t [00:15:30] allowed to be in Jerusalem and to be in other Israeli areas. So we have kind of different ID cards because we’re Palestinian we don’t have Israeli citizenship. We live and in the country that’s called Israel now. But we’re not citizens we don’t have the same rights as Israelis.

LS: So they said they wouldn’t allow any Palestinians in. So why did you even try? I mean did you think you had a chance or sometimes if you caught them on a good day they’d let you in? [00:16:00]

Sahar: Yeah so that’s the idea actually at the beginning so in 1996 it was actually yes you have to catch the soldier on that good day. you have to be convincing enough that they’d let you in. So there were Palestinians you know that were going to the hospital that you know had to go to work and somehow if they’re convincing enough the soldier would let them through. I of course wasn’t convincing an awful lot of times because you know because you know, go to church, are you nuts?! Go to church somewhere else. They didn’t [00:16:30] buy that. so it was hard for me. A lot of times they did turn me back. But at the time it was fairly easy because you know if they turned you back you could climb the hill and just go around the checkpoint. So it was a small hill just right next checkpoint you could just avoid it go there and after a few times of course they discovered that Palestinians were climbing their hill and so they put soldiers on the hill. So then you had to hide from those soldiers and try to somehow get there and then they place [00:17:00] soldiers and so that going around the checkpoint when not even an option. So then you had to take a back road which was an hour and a half and again just reminding everybody it was a five mile trip that I was taking that was going an hour and a half to avoid that checkpoint and to get around to a city called Bethany kind of close to Bethany there and then going around the other way and then they place the sole soldiers and a checkpoint on that back road. And so it just got [00:17:30] more and

more difficult. And then when the wall came up.

LS: That was late 90s?

Sahar: It was yeah it was the year 2000 actually 2001 or so when they started building the wall. Its still not complete but it kind of surrounds Palestinian cities and kind of zigzags especially around Jerusalem. So it's kind of makes it really difficult to get to Jerusalem because of the wall. And you know at some point the only way to enter the city was this little hole in the wall [00:18:00] that I had to take a taxi for an hour and a half to get to the hole and then wait for the soldiers on the other side of the hole to change shifts so I could sneak in and then once I sneak in I had to climb another wall and then I had to hide and then get on a bus and then basically hope that the bus doesn't get stopped by the checkpoints. And there were soldiers about every 20 or 30 feet in Jerusalem. So once you get it's really scary because you're walking by [00:18:30] every group of soldiers hoping they don't stop you.

LS: Just act as casual.

Sahar: Act as cool as possible don't try to look suspicious or anything. And it was a lot of prayers and a lot of miracles that got me to church a lot of times. I mean sometimes I didn't make it. But most of the time you know somehow I get there.

LS: When you say you didn't make it is it. I mean they usually stop you and turn you back. Or would they arrest you. I mean what's the risk there if you stick through that hole and somebody saw

Sahar: So [00:19:00] a lot of times I didn't give up easily. So if they turn me around I found a different way and then tried that if they turn me around from there I tried a different way. So I normally didn't go home until I've tried about every possible route to get me to church and actually for 12 years I sneaked in to get to church and I didn't know what would happen if they caught me because I never got caught and I never even considered the possibility of getting caught. And then one day at church my friend is like well what happens if they catch you I'm like I [00:19:30] don't know. And so then that day when I was going home from church. Normally when you leave Jerusalem they don't even stop you. So they don't care. They want you to leave. But that time when we were going back they stopped our bus and they checked everybody and it was me and another Palestinian man who didn't have the papers to be there. And they made us get off the bus. They wanted us to sign a paper that was two pages in Hebrew and we didn't know what it said. And the man with me said he wouldn't sign it because he didn't know the [00:20:00] contents. And so the soldiers started to beat him and he said I'll make you sign it. And I said I'm going to sign it. I don't honestly care what it says. But then they put us in the police car but they didn't arrest us. They took us back to Bethlehem and left us there. And for me that was it because people told me that that paper was a warning. So your first time you get caught is a warning and then the next time they would actually arrest you and I wasn't I wasn't going to [00:20:30] let that happen. I was scared like I don't want to be arrested and because Israeli jails are horrible you don't

want to be in an Israeli jail. So I decided I'm not going to do it anymore. So after 12 years I was done. And I actually prayed and asked Heavenly Father to help me and I said I just don't want to do this anymore you have to find a different way and somehow I thought you know the walls are going to come down or it's gonna be peace or something. But he provided [00:21:00] me with a job with the U.N. and because of the job I was able to go back and forth to church freely and that was remarkable.

LS: Because your work gave you some type of permit?

Sahar: Yeah exactly.

LS: You just flash it at checkpoint and then you go right? So im just putting myself in the shoes of that branch president and the Jerusalem branch. Did they try and do they say, "Listen, Sahar. This is, it's great that you're showing this faith but really don't put yourself in danger what were they communicating to you?"

Sahar: No they actually never did that. [00:21:30] I honestly don't believe I told them the extent of what I went through every time. Sometimes I would get to church and they're like Well I'm glad you made it today. But they in their mind I think most of them thought. Well the soldiers must have let me in or something they didn't know I was sneaking in trying and getting shot at and you know climbing hills and stuff. I mean sometimes I would share certain things. When I gave talks [00:22:00] and stuff in church but I don't think a lot of them knew the extent of the danger and stuff that was going on.

LS: Were there any other Palestinians in the branch that were facing the same risk?

Sahar: No, there were Palestinian members of the church but they weren't going to church because most of them were men. And for a man to sneak in. It's much more dangerous. So if they catch me they're probably arrest me but if they catch a man. He could be killed.

LS: Wow, and it's not it's like this other story [00:22:30] where the gentleman was beat.

Sahar: I mean yeah or beaten. So it's not good.

LS: All right. Well again we will never complain about going to church ever again because it's higher so this is better. I mean it's such a remarkable here. I mean you share different experiences. Some where you really had to look at some of these soldiers with love and and just realize that you know there are good people somewhere in there and they're children of God. And there's a lot of faithful faith promoting stories in [00:23:00] the book or in that context. So you get a job with the UN, going to church becomes much easier. So it's five miles away. So was it a 30 minute trip?

Sahar: It actually took me an hour or so because I had to cross the checkpoint still you had to wait in line to cross the congestion. You can't take a bus directly to the roads. You have to get to the checkpoint cross the checkpoint then take a different bus to get to.

LS: And during when you got the job in the end that was after you went to Turkey for schooling is [00:23:30] that right?

Sahar: Yes

LS: How would you describe your experience in Turkey. Going to church was much easier. But how would you describe the church there?

Sahar: So when I got there it was kind of interesting because I got there and I found that the church was really small and I don't think I've been in a small branch up to that point because even the Jerusalem branch has kind of with the students it makes a good size. But I got to a church in Turkey and they were meeting at the branch president's home. And there were about I would say less than ten [00:24:00] people there. Two of the people there were Turkish. They didn't speak any English. But the services were all in English and nobody did anything to help those two Turkish members and we're in their country. And so basically once I was able to say a couple words in Turkey, in Turkish. I became the official translator of the branch. So it would be like oh they're talking about Adam. We don't know what they're saying. So I did my [00:24:30] best to kind of interpret it and help the Turkish members and kind of try to communicate between back and forth and then my Turkish got better and it got a little better with communication. But there was a few struggles you know culture differences and people were not welcoming to Mormons so we actually had to move. So the neighbors of my branch presidents are not happy of us being there so we had to rent a place and [00:25:00] move. But you know there were good members there and branch thrived and it's doing well now.

LS: Nice, and during that time in Turkey you they called you as a member of the Relief Society presidency. How would you what were your week to week responsibilities there? How was the dynamic different of being there as opposed to Provo?

Sahar: Yeah. There was a lot of issues with small branches and if you haven't been in a smaller branch you probably wouldn't wouldn't understand them but in a [00:25:30] small branch there's a lot of issues with members. Sometimes like in Turkey we had issues like this person didn't want to go visit this person because they didn't like them or this person didn't want to go visit this person because of distance or this person didn't have a car. And so overall I mean visiting teaching was like this puzzle that's impossible to do because you just had to work around and you know somebody wouldn't speak somebody's language and say they can't visit them. So it was [00:26:00] it was kind of a challenge. And members were strong but when you have a small branch they struggle, they struggle more. I mean there was poverty and there was so just different challenges that you don't find in a big ward.

LS: So were you finding that you were kind of counseling with members or encouraging them to make these visits or were you mainly planning lessons for Sunday or all of the above?

Sahar: All of the above basically because we didn't have a lot of people to serve and we had a small [00:26:30] branch and I was one of the few people, well maybe the only one at that time than me and the branch president at one point but the other branch presidents didn't speak Turkish. So at one point I was the only person who speaks

Turkish and English in the branch. So I was actually the ward clerk because when the branch president became the branch president he didn't understand English so how would he do you know this stuff. And you know he couldn't do it. [00:27:00] So I was you know music coordinator you know Sunday school teacher did everything you would have all these callings at the same time because there's nobody else. You have to do it.

LS: So you get to go back. You were the ward clerk?

Sahar: It wasn't an official calling! No sorry take that out.

LS: No I think it's great.

Sahar: I wasn't in ward council as a member like so.

LS: So you would go to ward council and interpret?

Sahar: Yes. So like the branch [00:27:30] president and his counselor couldn't communicate because one of them was American and one of them was Turkish so I had to be there for every private thing there like you didn't hear this. I was like okay.

LS: Wow, so one spoke English and the other spoke Turkish? And you were just learning Turkish?

Sahar: Yeah, I mean at the point I think my Turkish was pretty good. I was able to translate back and forth but it was interesting and they'd be there'd be a lot of miscommunication because somebody would [00:28:00] think something and I'm like no let me talk to them because you know when you don't speak the language it's kind of easy to have miscommunications on things.

LS: So were you doing this so you're sort of in these meetings but you weren't like counting tithing?

Sahar: No no no no no.

LS: Again I'm not trying to like "Ha we caught you!"

Sahar: No I wasn't I was doing like helping him with like and all uploading receipts online and simple stuff. [00:28:30]

LS: All that technical stuff.

Sahar: Yeah. Filling out forms and yes stuff like that that you know normally he would do. But if he didn't understand and he didn't he couldn't use a computer and it's hard for him so.

LS: And weren't you studying computer science in Turkey?

Sahar: No I was studying statistics.

LS: That's when you went to BYU again. Gotcha! Well this is so I'm going to title this "The First Female Clerk". I'm just kidding of course right. [00:29:00] But it's interesting to hear how the church functions in those really small branches especially in foreign lands where you have a mixture of languages and you know the branch president needs to communicate with his counselor. And he would be surprised how many branch presidents are bishops and their counselors that speak the same language don't communicate well so that they let alone. So you were there and they needed to help that and [00:29:30] so you were probably sitting in many branch presidency meetings in

your branch councils and helping just keep the work moving forward and communication.

Sahar: Then when I came became Relief Society president it was easier because I was in branch council anyway.

LS: So you returned back after your schooling in Turkey turned back to Palestine and you're going back to tending the the Jerusalem branch. You get a job for the UN. It makes life much easier. You're not crawling through holes or acting like James Bond and then running from Israeli guards. Again I can't wait for the movie to come out. This is going to be epic! But then you were soon called, the branch president called you as Relief Society [00:30:00] President of the Jerusalem branch. What do you remember from that story of him extending that call or leading up to it?

Sahar: Now I don't know. So when I met with him I kind of somehow expected it. But president Yokeishe had tears in his eyes and he extended that call. He said the Lord called me as Relief Society president. And I was kind of overwhelmed because our branch has challenges. First of all we have the students who [00:30:30] change every four months so you basically have to do new calling. New everything every four months and then we had members all over. We had Filipino members that are not able to go to church a lot of times because they take care elderly other people are not able to come to church and then we had and our Jerusalem branch at the time also included the Palestinian members which you know couldn't come to church at all and they were [00:31:00] really far from the branch.

LS: So tell us what was the overall as far as the Jerusalem branch is concerned at that time how many people came on a typical Sunday what was the Relief Society meeting like. Did they do the three hour block like like everybody else and obviously the only difference really was this on Saturday that's when the Sabbath is?

Sahar: Exactly. So at the beginning. So this changed kind of dramatically but at the beginning when I first went back in 96 we had one branch for the whole [00:31:30]country and so everybody in the country came to this one branch. We had people that were speaking Russian. We had people that were speaking Spanish so Russian and Spanish were two major languages that we struggled with because you know

LS: And that's all they spoke? They didn't speak anything else?

Sahar: They spoke Hebrew.

LS: But the services were in English?

Sahar: The services were English. So we have to have translators for them and we also had to shuttle them. The branch would send a bus to the Galilee bring the [00:32:00] members from there and from the south. And for about two. So it's a two hour drive or so from North Galilee to Jerusalem and we would meet and it was challenging at the time I was actually a member of the Relief Society Presidency and we so we had to do three lessons in Relief Society we actually came up with the idea because when you

have two translations going on in a really small group and at the time we had about 150 students BYU students and then in addition to that we had the local members which were [00:32:30] about 30. I mean and when I say local I mean I was the only kind of native Yeah. I mean these were immigrants from different countries, Russia, that happen to live there and Americans that were there working with the consulate or other things. But we met separately because the students were a lot of people and so on. So they met separately. We had our own Relief Society and they had their own Relief Society and [00:33:00] Sunday school and in Relief Society we had to split it up because when you have two translations going on we actually had three different Relief Societies one for Spanish one for Russian one for English. But then later on they split up the branches. And so they made a Galilee branch. They made a Tel Aviv branch and they made a Jerusalem branch. And so our Jerusalem branch included the students. So when I became Relief Society president we had about 80 students and we had the locals again [00:33:30] which were very few in Jerusalem. I mean when I say locals like I say Filipino sisters that work there Americans that work there are BYU faculty and stuff like that. So yeah.

LS: So these feel like pretty good size. That seems like a good size branch but that's because students are coming and going from BYU and yet having that experience there. But if you remove all those students it's very small branch.

Sahar: When the students were gone we probably had like the [00:34:00] 10 to 15 people at church so hardly anyone.

LS: Interesting, and that's for a couple of weeks time between semesters.

Sahar: Yeah, exactly. Between semesters.

LS: And then the tidal wave of students come?

Sahar: Yeah or when they go to Egypt or they go to Jordan throughout.

LS: So I would imagine majority of these students single?

Sahar: Yes.

LS: And did it have much more of a young single adult ward type of feel to it?

Sahar: Yeah it did. But the students were amazing. I mean as a Relief Society President you [00:34:30] know it was amazing because you could give a lesson. I mean they they would just take over.

LS: The contrast from the Turkey branch you had all sorts of resources, people to a teach. Nice. And would you often call them as one of your counselors in the Relief Society Presidency.

Sahar: Yes. So we normally had a student counselor or two you know and then one sometimes BYU faculty wife or somebody else like can counseling.

LS: How long helping to serve as Relief Society President.

Sahar: Two or three years here.

LS: OK. And then you [00:35:00] call this the District Relief Society President and then there is no time between that you went directly from Branch Relief Society President to

District.

Sahar: Well no I did both for a while, I did both for a month. I was like "Are you going to release me like. No we don't have anyone to replace you"

LS: And then at that time soon thereafter you were part of the process of creating the Bethlehem branch which was a huge blessing for you because was it during this time that you stopped working at the U.N. or?

Sahar: No, I actually didn't stop working. I was still [00:35:30] working at the U.N. But I did stop and go on a mission. Yeah after I got back from my mission it was a blessing because I couldn't get to Jerusalem.

LS: And so were you when you Relief Society President, that was before your mission?

Sahar: Yeah.

LS: Okay. And then you were District Relief Society President, what was your role in creating that branch in Bethlehem?

Sahar: I mean I don't know if I had a role, like a major role. I just feel that, just kind of being there and bringing it to people's attention. The members [00:36:00] that were there so like I said when I was in branch council there's all these people that you know, the problem with the Jerusalem branch is a lot of people there are transients. They're there for a short time and they leave. And the sad thing is that local members get lost because from from branch president to branch president it seems like somehow it doesn't get followed up and some like when I became Relief Society President I was in branch council. One day I'm like well whatever happened to that [00:36:30] family? And they're like "Oh, there's a family that lives over here." So it's like this family hasn't been contacted by the church for 10 years. They had no idea where they were, and who they are. And so I just know because you know I'm the local person that I know and I know every local, yeah and they you know and they didn't know, like these local members don't don't get enough attention to feel they get lost in the cracks sometimes.

LS: And did you even attempt home and visiting teaching in that sort of set up a bit with the dynamic of the branch. [00:37:00]

Sahar: So I. Yeah we did.

LS: I mean like you assigned routes?

Sahar: I mean I always we did. Yeah we did. But the locals again the locals get lost. Yeah. It's so much easier for someone to visit and home teach somebody who lives with them in the Jerusalem Center right there than to travel to like three hours north to Tulkarm or something or to Bethlehem or you know try to work around somebody who doesn't speak their language. And so it just it's less, it's not as [00:37:30] effective. It just doesn't get done. And it's sad but at branch council just because I was someone who was unable to go to church a lot, I knew what it was like. So that's why I kept stressing it. Like every time I had branch council. What about these people? Can we help them, because the Palestinian members could not come. Like there was no way for them to get to church and these members haven't been to church in ten years. And so I

really wanted them to have the blessings that I got from partaking of the sacrament and being at church. [00:38:00] And so I kept going back to the topic and stressing it until finally it was decided that we would bring the church to them, because initially people were like well how do we get them to church. I'm like No, let's let's do something different. Cause you know why don't we just have sacrament meeting there. I mean so we started having sacrament meetings and a little Sunday school class right after. And one of the members home in Bethlehem and so, the members in that area could go. [00:38:30] And so it was a blessing. I mean these people you know haven't been to church in ten years so it was like you have new members. They didn't know anything, like they lost all the knowledge they used to know.

LS: Yeah.

Sahar: And so it was reteaching in. And then they became hard to meet at the people's home because you're imposing and they get guests that come in the middle the meeting and introduce them selves and its so inconvenient. So we're like let's trend to place. And so we found a little apartment [00:39:00] downstairs. The church wanted the place right by the check point.

LS: So, its like you found a stable in Bethlehem.

Sahar: Yeah I know. It's almost like a stable when I first saw it. I'm like oh really. They didn't want something expensive and they didn't want something far. And by the checkpoint is just an expensive area, because it's convenient and everybody wants to live there. And so we had to do what we had. We got this little tiny place, and it was a mess and we had to you [00:39:30] know put carpet in, clean, and paint it and all that. And then it was too small we started to get families of members that wanted to come to church. And so it became too small for us and so we rented the adjacent apartment tore the wall down made it bigger. Started had a big sacrament room where we could meet and then and then the branch was organized and it's not the you know the membership didn't really grow that much but having [00:40:00] a separate entity was necessary to separate it from the the Jerusalem branch because you know it's different it's a different unit. You know, I mean they speak Arabic it's not you know in the Jerusalem branch it is just it's own dynamics it's just different

LS: Interesting and they still hold the services in English services?

Sahar: Well, it was in both languages. So if the person conducting was Arabic speaking, they speak in Arabic, with English translation whatever

LS: Because [00:40:30] you didn't have these English students coming and going?

Sahar: So yeah but they were done in both languages. I mean if there were no English speakers it would be done completely Arabic. But if there were I mean there's always Arabic speakers there, so there's always Arabic involved, the sacrament prayers are in Arabic. And I was the one who kind of watched for those cause some times I was like he's blessing the water instead of the bread, the Branch President had no idea, he didn't speak the language.

LS: You are the glue to the church in this part of the world.

Sahar: The hard [00:41:00] part is the Branch President doesn't speak Arabic. That's the worst thing.

LS: I see. So you would know maybe say "Hey just so you know Branch President he is not saying the right prayer."

Sahar: I'm not saying that's me. I'm just saying no.

LS: And I understand what I'm not accusing you. No, I think it's just it's so foreign to me that these things happen. We just take it for granted that, yes of course you understand the sacrament prayer of the branch president understands that.

Sahar: But I wish like I wish something would be done because the Branch President I mean as nice as [00:41:30] he is and you know as good as he is. It's hard to understand the culture it's hard to understand the people and BYU doesn't allow him to visit people in their homes. So it's kind of hard

LS: So is the branch president an American or?

Sahar: He is an American, BYU either mostly a humanitarian couple who serve in Bethlehem. So they get a calling to serve in Bethlehem. But at some point I mean at some point we'll get priesthood holders that are ready to take over. [00:42:00] But right now we don't have strong priesthood to be leaders of the, branch because like I said the members are still are learning they're still fresh in the church because they've been away from it for so long. So when I became Relief Society, sorry when I became primary president of the Bethlehem branch I was teaching the children and then I was giving the same lessons as I was giving the children. I was giving them to the parents because their knowledge of the gospel is about the same. So I would [00:42:30] print it out and give it to the parents. Like here.

LS: Everybody got a coloring sheet.

Sahar: Yeah.

LS: So, now you live in Rexburg, teach at BYU Idaho mathematics and you have a PhD. in mathematics?

Sahar: I have a PhD. in statistics.

LS: So let me tell you what I had to take is statistics twice and I never want to hear standard deviation the rest of my life, I'm glad there's people in the world like you that do this. And [00:43:00] what led you from leaving after it was after the Bethlehem branch that you served your mission? Was it about that time?

Sahar: I think it was after that it was organized into a branch. And then you know before it was a group. And actually when I was relief district, Relief Society president because you have a group, it's the district leadership that's in charge of the group. So I was, in addition to my district Relief Society calling I was the Bethlehem group Relief Society President and Primary [00:43:30] president at the same time as well. So that's that's how it works. And so it was the district leadership that was in charge.

LS: So as far as the primary presidency time, how many children would come to the

branch?

Sahar: Let me count them.

LS: There that few that you can actually count them.

Sahar: So there were in our primary. There were about nine children or ten children actually. Some of [00:44:00] them came because you know, there weren't members I mean their family weren't members some of them came because you know their aunt was a member and they were interested and they liked it and they wanted to come and actually they, there were three kids that just kept coming and they would come even though their mom wouldn't come. They just wanna come on their own, so I go pick them up and bring them to church with me. And it was amazing that was my favorite calling. It was challenging [00:44:30] to say the least.

LS: Why was that your favorite?

Sahar: It was my favorite because I could see the change in the kids. When you teach adults you can't see a change a lot of time.

LS: Yeah, it's all happening internal hopefully.

Sahar: Yeah, it's all happening internal, you will you teach them. You try to guide them and you don't know if they're making the right changes then or lives. But with kids you can see it. And so like for example you know when they first got there and I'd ask a child to pray they would recite a prayer to Mary. You [00:45:00] know they just, they had this memorized prayer that they would recite it and then you know later on they developed you know this relationship with God and developed this sweet faith and you know you'd hear them pray for their mom to find a job and then you'd see that she found a job and you'd see their prayer answered. And it's just remarkable to see that, just to see them kind of develop this kindness towards each other and you know we we had a few challenging kids. I mean they weren't discipline to say [00:45:30] the least. And their parents were not doing anything to discipline them. So you'd see them playing ball in sacrament meaning and just running around and it was insane. Took quite an effort to get them to be reverent and I can't remember how many lessons I taught on reverence.

LS: Every other week, yeah.

Sahar: Ten lessons on reverence until they finally you know started to sit and remember to speak softly. But there are amazing kids and [00:46:00] I know they have good potential. So yeah.

LS: Wow. That's fascinating. And then after that you served a mission in the London England mission and it was you worked in the office there. What were your responsibilities there?

Sahar: So I was in the mission office and I did a little bit of everything. I think, we had when I first got there it was when the age changed. And so we started getting all these missionaries and we basically had no notice, so we had to find apartments and furnish apartments and in such a short notice and we had all this work to do with that. But I was mainly over, you know baptisms, missionary I mean baptism records, and supplies

ordering supplies getting them to missionaries and sorting mail.

LS: You were the mission clerk.

Sahar: Just about everything in the office.

LS: And then return from that and now you are in Rexburg and enjoying it there. You think you will [00:47:00] be there awhile?

Sahar: Yeah, I really like my job and it's great place to work. The students and the people I work with are just remarkable. Only thing we think that's bad about it is the weather. But yeah I figure you get used to this at some point.

LS: For sure. And you talked a lot about your parents have family in the book and your mother still living and her health is well?

Sahar: Yeah, so far yeah.

LS: Great. Well that's great. And the story of when you were born is so amazing anybody could survive that let alone lived to [00:47:30] an older age. So that's great. That's great. And again the book is called "Peace for a Palestinian, One Woman's story of Faith amidst war in the Holy Land." And you can find it at all your favorite Desert Book locations. And but so I just want to ask you just closing, imagine you're addressing all the Relief Society Presidents in the church and you want at from, your experience what some leadership principles that you would give them? Or if you were to serve as Relief Society President again what would you draw upon from your former experience in a more traditional [00:48:00] Idaho ward that would still be applicable there as it was in the in the Holy Land?

Sahar: What sticks in my mind is something Elder Porter told me. So I wanted to give up a lot on some people because there are some people sometimes that you try really hard to get them to be obedient and do what is right and they just will not. And one time I was sharing my frustration with him and he said basically the Lord gives up on no one. That kind of stuck with me because [00:48:30] I've learned the importance of people and that they're all children of God and that no matter what's going on in their lives you know sometimes people look at things differently and sometimes people do things differently but they're all children of God. And if you keep trying, I mean all that he asks is that you love them. And I had a sister in my branch in Bethlehem that was struggling. They didn't have food to eat. They didn't [00:49:00] have work. Her husband just refused to work. Her husband was abusing her. She didn't have any food on her table and she was just having a hard time and they couldn't pay rent. So their landlord basically cut off their water and cut off their electricity so they didn't have any water. Didn't have any electricity. And one day as I was driving her back from church I asked her how she was doing. And she said I'm fine. And she smiled and I looked at her I'm like "How can you be fine?" And that's when it clicked. The reason she was fine is she knew I loved her. And she knew [00:49:30] that she had someone who cared about her and a lot of times with people that we serve with as long as they know that we're their friend and that we love them and care about them. It doesn't even matter if we do

anything to help their situation as long as we have that love and charity towards them then it makes them stronger and it makes them able to withstand whatever trials they have.

LS: Awesome well, last question we have, I ask most [00:50:00] of the guests on leading LDS Podcast, as you look back on your experience serving as a leader whether it was through official calling or just sitting that example as you did. How has your time as a leader in the church made you a better disciple or follower of Jesus Christ?

Sahar: I think when you're in the leadership position you're you have a bigger responsibility to be a disciple of the Savior because without him you can't do anything. When I look back at my life I kind of see some things that I've done that [00:50:30] I say, I didn't do this on my own. I felt that sometimes I was holding this piece of a puzzle and that the Lord was kind of telling me where to place it and he needed it placed in a certain place. And it was only through him that I was able to accomplish what I've accomplished. And I think once we realized that once we make him part of our calling then he can help us accomplish miracles because there are certain things you know you could try to convert someone you could try to help someone but if he's [00:51:00] not there, if the Holy Ghost is not being your guide then you're not going to get anywhere. You're just kind of going around in circles and not getting there. So I just love how the Savior has helped me throughout my challenges and the Bethlehem branch and in the Jerusalem branch. And sometimes you know he calls us because we have certain things that he needs, you know. And so for example when I was visiting teaching [00:51:30] one one of the sisters I'm not a good person to talk. Like I I can't comfort someone. I just don't have that skill. I'm a good listener and you know I was called to visit teach this sister who lived in Jerusalem and she didn't go to church she wasn't active. And I had to sneak in to get to her house. It was it was hard, but I went every month and I didn't say anything. I didn't even give her a message like I, cause she was inactive and [00:52:00] I didn't feel comfortable giving her a Gospel message. So, I just sat there and listened every month. That's all, that's all I did. And a few months down the road she came to church and she bore her testimony and said that I helped her get back to church and like I didn't do anything. I just sat there. But the Lord knew that I that she needed someone that could listen. That was a good listener. And so sometimes he kind of does things for us and magnifies our callings.

LS: That concludes my interview [00:52:30] with Sahar Qumsiyeh. I'm never going to complain about going to church again. What a remarkable incredible story. Definitely go check out the book. "Peace for a Palestinian, One Woman's story of Faith amidst war in the Holy Land." And check it out at any desert book location or order online as well.