

“If the War Goes On”

Four-part Lament for the Anniversary of the Massacre and Genocide precipitated by Events of October 7, 2023

As the tragic anniversary of October 7th, 2023, approaches, the Mennonite Church Canada Palestine-Israel Network offers this flexible liturgical resource to be used in congregations. Its components are designed to be used in worship on the four Sundays leading up to, or surrounding October 7, 2024. Through song, prayer, and story, they help us to keep holding in our hearts the people and the churches of Palestine —and others living in zones of war and oppression.

The liturgical helps that follow have been shaped, with permission, by rabbis and others two groups: “Halachic Left” and “All That’s Left.” [<https://www.halachicleft.org/>; <https://allthatsleftcollective.com/>] In the introduction to their guided readings for Tisha b’av, a Jewish holy day commemorating the destruction of the two temples, they ask:

“How do we internalize that our grief for Israeli victims of October 7th is not counter to, but inextricable from, mourning the loss of tens of thousands of Gazans? What does mourning look like when we are not in the aftermath of the devastation but still in its midst? Can we confront trauma in a way that portends redemption instead of using our pain as a justification for further destruction?”

None of these questions have simple answers, but, for now, we exist in a place of brokenness and rupture... [a place of] of inarticulable horror. “

The contents below are grouped as follows:

1. How to use this resource
2. Introducing the service of lament
3. Liturgies for September 15, 22, 29, and October 6
4. Background and Stories

Acknowledgements: “If the War Goes On” grew out of a liturgy of lament developed by Jewish peace activists from “Halachic Left” and “All That’s Left.” [<https://www.halachicleft.org/>; <https://allthatsleftcollective.com/>]. It was discovered by Mennonite Church Alberta Palestine-Israel chair Suzanne Gross, pastor at Holyrood Mennonite Church, Edmonton. Inspired, Suzanne drafted a liturgy for church settings based on that liturgy and offered it to her colleagues on the national MC Canada PIN (Esther Epp-Tiessen, Jo Hiebert Bergen, Jeanette Hanson, and Byron Rempel-Burkholder) for further refining and promotion. Thanks, too, to Independent Jewish Voices, Mennonite Central Committee, and We Are Not Numbers for their stories and resources.

1. How to use this resource

The materials that follow here are for periods of lament and prayer that can be integrated within four regular Sunday morning services, marking the October 7 anniversary. They are labelled to coincide with the Sunday services from September 15 to October 6, but they can also be used in other ways: They can be used on different dates, or they can be combined for a single service of lament and prayer. Or they can be adapted for smaller gatherings or for individual reflection.

Each of the four parts is built around one verse of the song “If the War Goes On” by John Bell and Graham Maule (*Voices Together* hymnal #794; or *Sing the Journey* #66). Each part takes about five minutes – longer if you incorporate one or more of the stories appended at the end of the resource.

We recommend that the worship leader introduce the time of lament (see “Introduction to the Service of Lament” below). The congregation or gathered group should then be invited to sing the assigned verse, with an instrumental accompaniment continuing to play through the song again after that verse. The leader then speaks the prayers, and other individuals read the scripture passages¹. Alternately, the words may be printed in a bulletin or projected on a screen for the gathered group to speak together. Finally, the concluding words for October 6 may be adapted for the earlier Sundays as appropriate.

Each of the lament segments may be supplemented with stories and other background, which are also provided below.

2. Introducing the Service of Lament

The following words can be adapted to introduce the prayers and readings that follow.

On October 7, 2023, and in the months following, more than 42,000 children, women, men, and elders have been killed in violent attacks in the land many call “holy.” Three percent of this number are Israelis, and ninety-seven percent are Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. As well, more than 151,000 buildings and homes have been bombed or demolished in Gaza and the West Bank, displacing at least 1,700,000 Gazans and rendering 2,250 Palestinians homeless in the West Bank and in the Negev desert in Israel. Ninety thousand Israelis have also been internally displaced since October 7th.

Two hundred fifty-one hostages were taken from Israel to the Gaza Strip on October 7, including children, women, and elderly people. In Israel, 3,660 Palestinians are being held in administrative detention without charge, including 170 children.

All of these people have names and relatives and friends. Those who live are traumatized, grieving and lamenting this incomprehensible loss. From our news sources and personal contacts, we in North America have gotten to know some of these names and the stories of their families. Tragically, most of these brothers and sisters in our human family remain nameless, their histories erased.

¹ These are drawn from a variety of translations, including American Standard Version, English Standard Version and King James , along with English translations used by the Jewish liturgical community.].

We are approaching the one-year anniversary of the beginning of this historic tragedy—an event that seemed unimaginable on October 6 of last year. The words that follow arise amid the pleas from Palestinian Christians calling churches around the world to speak up, pray, give, and advocate for a just peace. Many of these calls have come from the faculty of Mennonite Church Canada's partner Bethlehem Bible College in the West Bank. They invite us to challenge the false narrative that Israel's military actions align with God's will, and that opposing Israel's conduct vis-a-vis the Palestinians is somehow antisemitic. They invite us to recognize the equal humanity of the Palestinian people and to pray for and encourage our Palestinian brothers and sisters. The college, along with Mennonite Central Committee, has been directly involved in supporting the congregants of the churches in Gaza, who continue to meet for worship even in these days of terror.

Let us join those grieving and pleading for a just peace in this time of remembrance and lament. We begin with words from the hymn "If the War Goes On" and then move into prayers from the book of Lamentations and from the Psalms to guide our lament.

1. For September 15

Verse 2, "If the War Goes on" (Voices Together 794; Sing the Journey 66)

If the war goes on and the truth is taken hostage

and new terrors lead to the need to euphemize:

When the calls for peace are declared unpatriotic,

who'll expose the lies?²

God of love and justice, today we confess our human limitations in holding the histories and traumas of the people of Palestine-Israel with the mercy and wisdom required for your peace to prevail for all your children. We pray for patience and wisdom as we seek out the voices that will help us free the truth for the sake of your Kingdom. Help us pray for all of those traumatized by this current, yet decades-old situation of false security of one people through the occupation of another. We join the Psalmist and the writer of Lamentations:

From the Psalms:

All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes. My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away. (Psalm 38:9-11)

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From the book of Lamentations (taken from various translations):

How does the city sit solitary? She weeps sore in the night. She has none to comfort her. Her infants are gone into captivity before the enemy. (1:1-2)

Fear and the pit have come upon us, desolation and destruction. (3:47)

He has destroyed his place of assembly. (2:6)

In our watching, we have watched for a nation that could not save (4:17)

My soul is far removed from peace. (3:17)

Now their visage is blacker than coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin is shrivelled upon their bones; it is withered; it has become like a stick (4:8)

The faces of elders are not honoured; the young men have [ceased] from their music (5:14)

The kings of the earth and all the inhabitants of the world would not have believed that the adversary and the enemy would enter the gates of Jerusalem, [churches, or mosques] (4:12)

You heard my plea, "Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!" 3:56

[Silent reflection and prayer]

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

2. For September 22

Verse 3, "If the War Goes on" (Voices Together 794; Sing the Journey 66)

If the war goes on and the daily bread is terror

and the voiceless poor take the road as refugees;

When a nation's pride destines millions to be homeless,

who will heed their pleas?³

O Holy One, today we confess our silence at the news and images of terror, and our inability to be a strong and unified voice for the voiceless. We are numb at the suffering of those on the road yet again, seeking what seems to be an elusive safety. We remember our Lord who died for our sins – sins rooted in the false security of retribution – a safety that is never sustainable. We recommit to our Prince of Peace as we pray and act for the violence and killing to cease in the Holy Land, for the sake of your Kingdom. We join the Psalmist and the writer of Lamentations:

From the Psalms:

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How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? (Psalm 13:2)

From the book of Lamentations :

He has hedged me about so that I cannot get out (3:7)

He has made my flesh and skin to waste; he has broken my bones (3:4)

In the tent of the daughter of Zion he has poured out his fury like fire (2:4)

They hunt our steps; we cannot walk in our broad spaces (4:18)

We get our bread with the peril of our lives (5:9)

You heard my plea, "Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!" (3:56)

[Silent reflection and prayer]

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

3. September 29

Verse 1, "If the War Goes on" (Voices Together 794; Sing the Journey 66)

**If the war goes on and the children die of hunger,
and the old men weep, for the young men are no more,
And the women learn how to dance without a partner,
who will keep the score?⁴**

God of Shalom, today we cry out for the woe and waste of warfare in our world. We pray especially for the children of Gaza who are dying of hunger, and their caretakers – men and women and siblings – in anguish at their helplessness. We join the Psalmist and the writer of Lamentations:

From the Psalms:

God, listen! Listen to my prayer, listen to the pain in my cries. Don't turn your back on me just when I need you so desperately. Pay attention! This is a cry for help. And hurry—this can't wait!
(Psalm 102:1-2 The Message)

From the book of Lamentations:

The tongue of the sucking child cleaves to the roof of its mouth for thirst: the young children ask for bread and no one gives it to them (4:4)

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They say to their mothers, where is corn and wine? (2:12)
Those slain with the sword are better than those slain with hunger (4:9)
My children are desolate, because the enemy has prevailed (1:16)
We are become orphans and fatherless (5:3)
Young and old lie on the ground in the streets (2:21)
You heard my plea, "Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!" (3:56)

[Silent reflection and prayer]

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

4. October 6

Verses 4 and 5, "If the War Goes on" (Voices Together 794; Sing the Journey 66)

***If the war goes on and the rich increase their fortunes
and the arms sales soar as new weapons are displayed;
When a fertile field turns to no-man's land tomorrow,
who'll approve such trade?***

***If the war goes on, will we close the doors to heaven?
If the war goes on, will we breach the gates of hell?***

***If the war goes on, will we ever be forgiven?
If the war goes on . . .⁵***

God of mercy, words fail us as we consider the violation of your creation when we build arms to kill and destroy each other and desecrate the land. We shudder at the invisibility of the arms trade in our current world. You taught us that violence and revenge are not part of the Kingdom of God: they violate the sustainable safety God longs for all of God's children. We join those impacted by the evil wrought by such arms and cry out for humanity to turn from this destruction. We join the prophet Jeremiah, the Psalmist and the writer of the book of Lamentations:

From Jeremiah:

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I weep for the pastureland in the hill country. It's so barren and scorched that no one travels there. No cattle can be found there, and birds and wild animals have all disappeared. (Jeremiah 9:10)

From the Psalms:

Have compassion on me, Lord, for I am weak. Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. I am sick at heart. How long, O Lord, until you restore me? Return, O Lord, and rescue me. Save me because of your unfailing love. For the dead do not remember you. Who can praise you from the grave? I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears. (Psalm 6:2-6)

From the book of Lamentations:

Our inheritance is turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. (5:2)
The adversary has spread out his hand upon all her pleasant things, invade her sanctuary (1:10)
Like a flaming fire, which devours round about. (2:3)
You heard my plea, "Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!" (3:56)

[Silent reflection and prayer]

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

Concluding words

Our hope is in Christ our Lord and Saviour: Romans 8:26 assures us that lament without words reaches God's ear. "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Lamentations 3:22-23 assures us of the steadfast love of God, whatever the circumstances of our world: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

There are many stories from Jewish-Israeli, Muslim Palestinian and Christian Palestinian brothers and sisters that echo these wise words. Their persistent struggle for a new day is their hope—hope for a day when all can drink from the justice, mercy, and love of God.

Background and Stories

The following can be adapted and used as time allows and worship leaders see fit.

The Christians of Gaza

Of the 2.3 million Palestinians living (and dying) in Gaza, less than 1,000 are Christians; the rest are Muslim. Christians worship at St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church, Holy Family Catholic Church and sporadically at Gaza Baptist church. St. Porphyrius is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world.

All three churches have been attacked during Israel's current war on Gaza. An Israeli airstrike hit St. Porphyrius on October 19, 2023, killing 18 people, wounding others, and severely damaging the church building. The church was struck again in July 2024. Holy Family Church was seriously damaged, and a church-run school was destroyed by airstrikes in late 2023. Israeli snipers killed a mother and her daughter as they walked through the church compound on December 16. The Baptist church was severely damaged by an Israeli tank shell just after Christmas. It has been estimated that more than three percent of Gaza's Christians have been killed.

With the spectre of death hanging over them, the churches continue to witness to the way of Jesus. They continue to gather for worship, to offer the sacraments, and to baptize, confirm and marry their congregants. Amidst great danger and dire shortages, they shelter and feed hundreds, Christians and Muslims alike. Despite the ruin and the tremendous suffering around them, they hold to their faith, demonstrating love, offering compassion, and practicing Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness). In doing so, they embody the defiant hope that God's reign breaks into Gaza's devastation.

*Drawn from Alain Epp Weaver, "The Church's Worship in Gaza," **Macrina Magazine**, 15 March 2024.*
<https://www.macrinamagazine.com/posts/the-churchs-worship-in-gaza>

Amgad, friend and partner of Mennonite Central Committee

Amgad Al-Mahalawi is 36 years old. He and his wife Qamar (26) have two young sons, Majd (4) and Ibrahim (3). Amgad is an employee with Al-Najd Development Corporation, a partner organization of Mennonite Central Committee in Gaza. He is a friend to current and former MCC workers and is in continuous contact with many of them.

Since Israel invaded Gaza in response to the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, Amgad and his family have been forced to move repeatedly in search of safety from Israeli bombs, mortar shells and bullets. In November, a tank shell exploded in the school where he and his extended family were staying. Qamar and the two boys were wounded, while Amgad's father, sister, brother and 27 others were killed.

Subsequently, the family moved south to Rafah where they could access food and other supplies from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees. When Israeli forces attacked Rafah in May 2024, the family fled back north to Khan Younis where there was more safety but very little food. They

used their limited financial resources to purchase food, cooking pots, and mattresses, while Amgad rebuilt a tent they had used in Rafah.

On August 17, 2024, with almost no warning and with only the clothes on their backs, they fled again, as tank shells and bombs hammered their temporary home. He wrote, “We left because of the bombing, heavy bombing. We were running under the bullets. The children did not sleep, from fear they wet themselves.” Amgad returned a few days later to retrieve some of their items and the wood from their tent. Everything had been destroyed, and he was shot at.

“We hope and pray for the war to end,” he writes.

*Drawn from Doug Hostetter, “Amgad’s Journey Amidst Displacement in Gaza,” **Pax Christi International**, 21 August 2024. <https://paxchristi.net/2024/08/21/amgads-journey-amidst-displacement-in-gaza/>*

Stories from We Are Not Numbers

The following stories are drawn from [We Are Not Numbers](#) (WANN), a youth-led Palestinian nonprofit project in the Gaza Strip. It tells the stories behind the numbers of Palestinians in the news and advocates for their human rights.

1. My favourite student

As I lay in bed, I heard gunfire, getting nearer. It was now only a few hundred meters away. I turned on my side and tucked my hands behind my head, staring at the stars. “When is it going to cease? When will life be normal again? When will I return to my English teaching job? Are my students still alive?”

As I brooded, my eyes fixed on the night sky, I was jolted by the terrifying roar of two consecutive missiles, accompanied by a blinding orange blaze. Night became a hellish day.

Next, I heard shouting from a nearby house. I hurriedly grabbed my phone, turned on its flashlight and dashed to the street. The black fog of the bombardment made the night darker and blurred my vision; I could barely see my hands in front of my face.

A search for survivors

Pleading voices guided me to where the airstrikes hit. I realized that it was another house leveled to the ground. As my feet drew me toward my stricken neighbors, the cries became louder and the fog thicker.

Once I reached the site, a survivor whose head was covered in blood emerged from under the rubble and he pleaded with me to rescue his family members still in the house. “Please, there are dozens of my family members under the rubble, *please!* They are alive!”

Unfortunately, I was the only person there. The other neighbors had evacuated the area days earlier; the Israeli army had not warned residents to move, but the hovering warplanes scared most into leaving.

A miracle of God

Inside, the darkness seemed impenetrable, and the smell of death almost suffocating. The beam of my flashlight was useless. I shouted, “Is there anyone here? Can you hear me?”

After a while, a few other people showed up and joined me, lifting up stones. “There's someone here,” shouted one, pulling at the rubble with his bare hands.

Together, we began to throw aside the charred stones and blocks. To our shock, we saw the hand of a child buried half a meter under the mound of rubble. We redoubled our efforts. It seemed impossible that the child could be alive, but thanks to God she was gasping for breath. I felt a tinge of relief.

As I searched for other survivors, I thought about the dusty face of the little girl. It was familiar to me. Yes, we lived in the same neighborhood, but I didn't remember someone like her in the area. “Is she one of my students?” I wondered. “But I teach boys, not girls.”

No pulse, no breath

I worked harder now to find her siblings and parents. Suddenly, my body froze: I spotted the corpse of a boy, lying face down, with blotches of blood encircling him.

With shaking legs and reluctant eyes, I approached him. I rolled him onto his back so I could check his health status, as I was trained in first aid.

I turned away in shock. The dead boy was my favorite student, 8-year-old Mohammed Almedfa.

He considered me more like a father. My eyes brimmed with tears. At that moment, I realized that the girl was Mohammed's sister who used to come with him when I was teaching him English in the nearby mosque.

I placed the back of my hand on his nose to feel for any faint breathing. No pulse, no breath. His soul had departed his body.

Mohammed died in his childhood, stripped of his innocence, due to no fault of his own. He will never call me “my teacher” anymore. Yet his laughter still rings in my ears.

Are his parents also dead? What about his rescued sister? Will she be alone to face life's hardships?

But I say, Mohammed is *alive* in the most important sense. Through this story, he will become immortal. This earth is full of cruelty and injustice, and that must change.

This is an abbreviated version of a longer story written by Said Alsaloul and published by WANN on August 12, 2024. <https://wearenotnumbers.org/my-favorite-student-dead/>

2. Outrunning an invasion

Early morning on Thursday, June 27, 2024. We were all asleep — 14 of us — at my sister's house in Al-Shuja'iyya, east of Gaza City. We'd been taking shelter here since January 2024, after [our home and](#)

[farm had been destroyed](#) by Israel’s offensive forces in its [first assault on Al-Shuja’iyya](#) in December 2023.

We were awakened by the heaviest, most intensive bombardments that I had experienced since October 7. When the hateful shelling ended, I didn’t care what was coming next. All I could do was go back to sleep.

I managed to get up about 7:30 a.m., wash my face, and have breakfast. I felt weary and bedraggled.

An escape from the chaos

My brother Mohammed and I headed to our family’s destroyed home and torn-apart farm, not far from my sister’s. We wanted to see if anything more had happened there overnight.

For me, our property was the best place to escape from the chaos and noise of the ugly night I had just lived through. It was a place of comfort, where I could recall the happiest moments of my life and dwell on favorite memories. I thought about my family, my friends, and relatives while wandering on what had until recently been our breathtakingly beautiful farm.

Return to terror

Going back to my sister’s neighborhood, my youngest brother, Zakarya, said he had a bad feeling about what was going to happen, that he felt something terrible was about to unfold.

Not long after that, without any prior warning, Israeli occupation fighter jets unleashed a devastating assault on my neighborhood — my relatives’ homes and our farm — with a massive amount of artillery shells. I realized that this was the beginning of a horrific onslaught, and I was terrified. I didn’t know what to do or where to flee. There was no place to take cover, so I just started running under a rain of bullets.

Checking on family

Getting to my sister’s place, I ran up the stairs to see what might be happening there.

Leaning out a window to take in the whole targeted area, I witnessed the killing of one of our neighbors: An artillery shell hit him in the face where he was standing at the entrance to his building. His brother, filling water tanks on the roof of the building, reacted in fear by leaping off the three-story building, breaking his legs but avoiding his own death.

Worse and worse

I could tell that the bombardment was now coming closer to our place. The overhead Israeli forces were destroying everything in advance of the ground forces. Where could we go to get away? to be safe?

After the better part of an hour of ongoing, devastating, and terrifying bombardment, the ground invasion was launched, leaving many innocent people bleeding and dying in the streets. For some time, I and many others were trying to be of use, jumping over bodies, screaming for help, but getting none. The ambulance crews were prevented from reaching our location because of the ongoing danger, so these martyrs were left without medical care. It was heartbreaking.

Temporary safety

[On that endless day](#), all I could do was run. Thankfully, we managed to find temporary safety of a sort in the next neighborhood. We settled in to wait impatiently and uncomfortably until we would be able to return to our own place, or somewhere safe. What we’d been through — bombing, helicopter gunships, drones, tanks; people wounded, bleeding, dying before our eyes — was more than enough terror for one day — for a lifetime.

This is an abbreviated version of a longer story written by Yusef El-Mobayed and published by WANN on August 13, 2024. <https://wearenotnumbers.org/outrunning-the-second-invasion-of-shujaiyya/>

3. Making music and rediscovering joy: Samih’s story

Seventeen-year-old Samih Al-Madhoun sits at the entrance to his tent, adorned in his Palestinian keffiyeh, and plays the oud (a Middle Eastern lute-like instrument). A gifted student from Gaza City, he now shares hope, positivity, and creativity through his music. His fresh musical voice contrasts with the bleakness of the tent-filled camp and the hardships faced by those displaced since the war’s onset.

Conservatory student

I met Samih for the first time two years earlier, at the literature department at Al-Azhar University while I was studying there. He was singing with other choir students, including my little sister Malak. They put on a fantastic show that day.

In that same Palestinian keffiyeh that he always wore in performance, his innocent features shone through as he played his oud and sang in various settings and at national celebrations and events.

At the conservatory, we always talked about the charm of music, the beauty of life, and the allure of extraordinary moments. “Music is my life,” he said. After years of studying, he honed his singing and playing skills and discovered his ability to compose new melodies. He dreamt of performing on the grandest stages.

Student turned internal refugee

Samih’s life dramatically changed on that fateful autumn day when his family moved from a warm home in Gaza City, filled with music, peace, and beauty to harsh tent life amidst explosions, tanks, hail, flooding rainwater, and bone-chilling cold.

But the suffering and disappointment didn’t end there. In November, Khan Younis turned into a war zone due to the Israeli military’s sudden decision to occupy it. Samih’s family sought refuge in a Palestinian Red Crescent building, only to face danger when the army ordered them to evacuate preceding an explosion in part of the building.

Thankfully they escaped unharmed. Samih described this day as the toughest ever, a moment on the brink of death. They evacuated to Rafah and there they set up their tent, continuing the cycle of hardship. But Rafah was occupied in May, leading Samih’s family to evacuate to the Deir Al-Balah refugee camp.

Samih felt overwhelmed by these sudden turns of events, finding no solace, security, or comfort anywhere. He lived in constant fear for his family as they faced the perils of death, starvation, and homelessness once more.

Inspired back to music

In the Deir Al-Balah camp, Samih sat at the entrance of his tent under a scorching heat that darkened his skin tone, mourning the loss of his past, present, and future.

In a sudden moment of inspiration, he envisioned himself picking up an oud, strumming its strings, and singing. Maybe through music, he could rediscover hope amidst the suffering and break free from the harsh realities of war.

He bought an oud and began playing and singing at his tent's entrance. His songs resonated with the people, bringing joy and a sense of belonging to their Palestinian homeland. Through music, both children and adults could momentarily escape the traumas of war and embrace the beauty of life.

In his own words, he declares, "Samih was once the bearer of hope and joy before the war, but now he carries the burden of pain. Nevertheless, he will continue to play and spread optimism and happiness around him."

This is an abbreviated version of a longer story written by Aya Al-Hattab and published by We Are Not Numbers on August 13, 2024. <https://wearenotnumbers.org/making-music-and-rediscovering-joy/>