



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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*A Mideast view for North American Mennonites by church representative in Israel,
Glenn Edward Witmer. For more information see last paragraph of this letter.*

“The aim now is to increase the losses on the other side...so that it is clear to them that they will achieve nothing through terror...It’s them or us. We have our backs to the wall. This is war.” — *Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, to journalists.*

Responding to reports that a massacre had been carried out in the camps, and statements by Israeli army officers that ‘the soldiers are almost not advancing on foot; the bulldozers are simply *shaving* the homes and causing terrible destruction,’ Israeli Foreign Minister **Shimon Peres** said, “When the world sees the pictures of what we have done there, it will do us immense damage. However many wanted men we kill in the refugee camp, and however much of the terror infrastructure we destroy there, there is still no justification for causing such great destruction.” — *Ha’aretz, April 9*

*As MCC staff accompanies the relief convoys, one refrain is repeated over and over:
“This relief aid is good and appreciated, but what we want is our freedom.”*

MY VOICE:

Getting on the Fence

Elijah is at the door. Again. Almost every day now he appears about breakfast time, mostly grey, looking quite elegant with a sleek black hood around his head and shoulders. As soon as he arrives at my patio, the chattering finches and more peaceful doves scatter to give him room—these grey ravens have that reputation anyway: big, bullying, belligerent. They move in, take what they want, then leave. Elijah is no exception, but I keep feeding him anyway. I know the gentler doves will stay close by, and soon fly down again to peck their way along the trail of crumbs to my doorstep...

War and absence-of-war have followed each other like roundabouts throughout this Middle East region for millennia, especially during these 54 years since the war that led to the formation of the Jewish state in 1948. The oppressors and the victims, with different imperatives and urgency, say it will happen again. Now there is war; we await the time when there is not war. Each time hoping that things will change. “Perhaps this time we Israelis will feel secure again in our land, free from guerrilla attacks.” “Perhaps this time we Palestinians

will be able to free ourselves from the ever-present occupiers of our land and homes.” Perhaps soon the messiah will come.

There is no shortage of opinions on how to resolve the problems—doves and hawks abound, and talk is cheap, from the Knesset to Ramallah, from the US Capitol to Brussels. The problem for Christians is to know how to respond to the opposing voices, and where to take stand. We dare not seem to be on the fence—everyone expects us to take sides, and the refrains make it clear: “If you are not with us, you are against us” ...or similar thematic variations. Indeed, Christians *have* taken sides—and they are on *every* side. Christians debate among themselves which view to support, which is ‘clearly the right position’ to hold, and which side is ‘clearly supported’ scripturally. Someone who seems to be neutral is suspect—suspect of holding a view we wouldn’t approve of.

But I wonder if we should be ‘taking sides’ in the Israeli/Palestinian conflicts...at least if doing so means being *for* Israel and *against* the Palestinian Authority, or *for* the ‘terrorists’ and *against* ‘the oppressors.’ Even the terms have taken on politicized meanings that render them difficult to use in conversation. I can hear the opposition already to this very suggestion. “The land was given to Israel for ever—read your Bible.” “Israel cannot expect Palestinians to talk peace while they are occupying land illegally and subjugating an entire people.” “How can you not take sides?”

Dr. Nurit Peled, a Jew living in Jerusalem, has more than enough reason to hate Palestinians. Her 9-year-old daughter was killed by a suicide bomber while waiting for a bus to take her to ballet class. Israeli politicians came to her door to offer condolences [and have their picture taken by the press] denouncing the terror that surrounds all Jews... But she turned them away, and refused to be caught up in the side-choosing. No one forgets the murderous horror of the act that ended her innocent daughter’s life, and the incredible suffering and loss their family has endured since. But the temptation or pressure to join a side, and sweep all people of one nationality, or religion, together in a general accusation, is also clearly wrong in her mind.

Nurit Peled refuses to hate Palestinians. “One cannot denounce Arabs for evil any more than denouncing Israelis for the same. There is hatred, injustice, and cruelty on both sides.” But there are also good and peace-loving people on both sides, she explains—Israelis who work for peace, Palestinians who speak out against blind violence, Israelis who help replant olive groves and rebuild Arab homes destroyed by the Israeli military, Palestinians who join other Christians and Jews and Muslims in marches for peace... Taking sides all right—right in the middle! “The line of demarcation,” says Peled, “is not *Israeli vs. Palestinian*. It is rather *those who work for peace vs. those who work for hate*. There are Israelis and Palestinians on both sides in that.”

Jesus wouldn’t have said it better! Political leaders of his day often tried to pin him down, label him, determine whose side he was really on. [“*Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?*” That will find out whose side he is on!] Jesus refused to be categorized by the political definitions of his day, choosing instead to search for peace and justice wherever it could be found, and to press for it where it couldn’t. A tough position to choose, of course—he was often suspect as a result. [As I write, Elijah has just flown off to a nearby cypress, and several doves have taken up positions at the feeder.]

It is easier for us take sides—in the company of others who give cover from attack—than to be suspected by both sides. The middle ground is not *neutrality*—it is a daring Christian *reality*. It's where we belong. We must oppose wrongdoing and injustice on every side, and determinedly search out and support peace and justice moves within each camp. Others will label us, to be sure. It's a label I'll take: *One who works for peace, against those who work for hate.*

A QUIET, SAD-LOOKING young man called Kamal Anis led us across the wasteland, littered now with detritus of what were once households, foam rubber, torn clothes, shoes, tin cans, children's toys. He suddenly stopped. This was a mass grave, he said, pointing. We stared at a mound of debris. Here, he said, he saw the Israeli soldiers pile 30 bodies beneath a half-wrecked house. When the pile was complete, they bulldozed the building, bringing its ruins down on the corpses. Then they flattened the area with a tank. We could not see the bodies. But we could smell them.

Those who did not flee the camp, or were not detained by the army, have spent the bombardment in basements, enduring day after day of terror. Some were forced into rooms by the soldiers who smashed their way through the walls into the houses. The UN says half of the camp's 15,000 residents are under 18. As the evening hush fell over these killing fields, we could hear the children chattering. The mosques, once so noisy at prayer time, were silent. — *MCC Palestine Update #45*

The Hart al-Hawashin neighborhood—the heart of the Jenin refugee camp—was a silent wasteland, permeated with the stench of rotting corpses and cordite. The evidence of lives interrupted was everywhere. Plates of food sat in refrigerators in houses sheared in half by Israeli bulldozers. Pages from children's exercise books fluttered in the breeze. In a ruined house, the charred corpse of a gunman wearing the green bandana of Hamas lay where it fell, beside his ammunition belt.

Alleys leading off the square deepened the image of wanton destruction: entire sides of buildings gouged out, stripped out to the kitchen tiles like discarded dolls' houses. The scale is almost beyond imagination: a vast expanse of rubble and mangled iron rods, surrounded by the gaping carcasses of shattered homes. Ms. Salah's home was occupied by Israeli soldiers who entered her livingroom by punching a hole through the neighbor's wall. Before they withdrew, one of the soldiers wrote a message on the wall in neat blue ink: "I don't have another land."

"The thing we did not count on was the bulldozer. It was a catastrophe." After the 13 soldiers were killed, Israel appeared to have abandoned foot patrols. Instead, the army began knocking houses down indiscriminately, creating a vast plaza of rubble in the center of the camp, a crossroads for the Israeli tanks. "They just started demolishing with the people inside," said Hania al-Kabia, a mother of six whose flat is on the edge of the new lunar landscape. "I used to hear them on the loudspeaker saying, 'Come out, come out!' Then they stopped [giving us warnings], but they went on bulldozing."

— Suzanne Goldenberg in Jenin, for *The Guardian*

When 70-year-old **Issa Mhamery** heard the F-16s flying over her home in Yatta at the beginning of the Israeli Army invasion, she went to an upstairs bedroom and prayed. As she was praying her son gently led her to an opposite room where other family members were gathered. Minutes later the bedroom where she had been praying was hit with tank shells. — *Dianne Roe, CPT Hebron*

MOSQUES AND CHURCHES HAVE BEEN SHELLED. The computer system and all of the equipment of the Palestinian Ministry of Education have been destroyed in the repeated assaults in Ramallah. Palestinian children are being denied education. Soldiers are even destroying private computers and electronic equipment in their house-to-house searches. If this is destruction of the infrastructure of terrorism, then Sharon views all Palestinians, without distinction, as terrorists.

Soldiers have looted food supplies. Families have been forced to watch the decomposing bodies of their relatives, because they are not allowed out of their homes to bury them. Orphaned children in Jenin have searched for the bodies of their parents in bulldozed homes. Survivors of the 15,000 people in the Jenin refugee camp are now homeless; tanks and F-16s have flattened the camp. This is not the destruction of a terrorist infrastructure; this is organized terrorism destroying civilian life. The actions of the suicide bombers were unconscionable, but the current acts of the Israeli army are equally unconscionable. Sharon's war of revenge on a civilian population...will only produce a breeding ground for more suicide bombers. Such a war cannot bring peace. — *Jeanne Clark, Hebron*

“Daily, Palestinian officials bewail Israeli ‘massacres’ and ‘bombings’ of Palestinian civilians, when in fact...[the] only civilians deliberately targeted and killed, massacred, are Israeli— by Palestinian suicide bombers... The Palestinian leadership, and with them most Palestinians, deny Israel’s right to exist... They want all of Palestine and as few Jews in it as possible.” — *Ben-Gurion University professor, Benny Morris, author of controversial studies concerning Israel’s role in the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, once jailed for refusing to serve with the military in the West Bank.*

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, by isolating Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, has brought upon us worldwide isolation the likes of which we have never known before. The way things look at the moment, Israel is in a military and political rut. The stars of the show are two stubborn, bullheaded leaders with 30 years of bad blood between them who are prepared to scratch at each other until the bitter end, like a pair of fighting roosters... But Israelis have this manic-depressive tendency. When things are good, their euphoria soars sky-high and they think they can do anything they want—like building settlements in the territories. When the inevitable explosion comes, they are masters at letting off steam, and crying as if it’s the end of the world. — *Yoel Marcus, Ha’aretz*

FOR THE SECOND TIME in Israel’s history, Ariel Sharon is leading the country into a war of choice—as pernicious as any war of choice—and nearly the entire public is following him more than willingly. When history judges this war, only a few will be able to say that they opposed it from the outset. In the last analysis, it will also be difficult to blame Sharon for the

consequences of the war, in the light of the sweeping support he has been given by the majority of Israelis.

With a huge leap in the percentage of citizens who “rely on him”—from 45 percent in March to 62 percent in April, according to a recent poll—it seems that no one can express the aspirations of most Israelis like the prime minister. This is not a war that was waged by Sharon, the “warmonger,” this is the war of all of us. The call that was sounded at the right wing’s demonstration almost a month ago—“We want war,” the kind of call that is not heard in any enlightened country—has become the general sentiment.

Israel has set out on a bewildering operation whose goal no one understands and whose end no one can guess. Nearly 30,000 men were mobilized and they reported for duty as one man, making the refusal movement, with 21 *refuseniks* currently in jail, irrelevant. “We didn’t ask why, we just came,” the reservists told the prime minister, expressing the “together” syndrome that characterizes Israel at such times as these.

—Gideon Levy, *Ha’aretz*; excerpted from *MCC Palestine Update # 44*

OTHER VOICES:

This space includes opinions that may differ from our own—often widely held by sincere people—to help the reader understand other positions. Your comments are invited.

The Real War of Independence, by Hirsh Goodman

SEDER NIGHT 2002 will be remembered as Israel’s *Kristallnacht**—the night the Palestinians went too far, sending a suicide bomber into a Seder meal at the Park Hotel in Netanyah, killing 30 and injuring dozens more. It was a blatant act of anti-Semitism, not anti-Zionism; it was directed against our Jewish soul, not the Jewish state. [* a pre-Second World War night of devastating attacks by pro-Nazi sympathizers against hundreds of Jewish synagogues, businesses, and homes in Germany.]

The Palestinians are going to remember March 27, Seder [Passover] night, as well. It is going to go down in their history books as the night they lost everything: their quest for independence, their institutions, their leadership, their hopes and their dreams. They are going to remember it as the night Israel, for the first time, went to war against the Palestinian people and especially their undisputed leader, **Yasser Arafat**.

The 1948 War of Independence was fought against the Arab world trying to nip embryonic Israel in the bud. The Sinai Campaign in 1956 was an ill-conceived adventure with the British and the French against the Egyptians over the Suez Canal. The 1967 Six-Day War was precipitated by the decision of Egypt’s [then-president] **Nasser** to shut off access to Israel’s southern port of Eilat. Jordan and Syria, fatefully, later decided to join in, which resulted in Jordan losing the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and Syria forfeiting the Golan Heights. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt and Syria, trying to regain territories they lost in 1967, attacked Israel. The 1982 War in Lebanon was a war against Palestinian terrorists, based in Lebanon, and their Syrian protectors.

THIS IS DIFFERENT. This is the first war since the War of Independence that Israel is fighting for its survival; this is the first time Israel is facing its real enemy. Not the Arabs fighting on the Palestinians' behalf, but our core enemy, the Palestinians themselves, under the leadership of Arafat. It is not a war in the distant sands of Sinai, but a war on our block, on our doorstep, over our homes. It is Israel's true war of independence. If we lose this one, we lose our country.

There is much argument about [former Prime Minister] **Ehud Barak's** legacy. But there is no denying what he offered the Palestinians: 94 per cent of the West Bank, a division of Jerusalem, a land swap, an equitable solution to the refugee problem and imaginative thinking over the Temple Mount—as a basis for negotiation. Arafat refused.

Even if there was much tactically wrong about the way [former US president Bill] **Clinton** and Barak tried to pressure Arafat into a deal he thought he could improve on, had he genuinely sought reconciliation he could have agreed to keep talking. Instead, he opted for killing Jews on Seder night and a year and a half of disgusting, cowardly and sick suicide-bomb attacks on babies, families, grandmothers. That is barbaric.

But the atrocity has served a cause. We, in Israel, now know with whom we are dealing. And we can see the issues with *Kristallnacht* clarity. Oslo, for Arafat, was a Trojan horse. No question about it. He proved that by turning Allenby Street in Tel Aviv and King George Street in Jerusalem into the battleground, by making targets of babies and old people. He is a threat to every household in this country, left or right, secular or religious, rich or poor, thief or righteous man.

ISRAEL ENTERS THIS WAR WELL PREPARED. It can take care of threats from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinians and whoever else decides to enter the fray simultaneously. Yes, we have our problems. The settlements are a nightmare, a huge historical mistake, a waste of billions of dollars and a bone in the throat of peace. And there are officers who are refusing to serve in the territories. Sharon is yesterday's man, devoid of vision, and his cabinet is impotent. The economy is hurting and so are we, the people, those who never know where death will next show its face.

But it is not the settlements Arafat has chosen to attack. He has not even chosen to attack the army of occupation. There are no suicide bombers protecting their leader from tanks and special forces by throwing themselves against the Israeli troops in Arafat's Ramallah backyard. No, it is far easier to kill Jews celebrating Passover eve in Netanyahu or kids eating pizza on Jaffa Road.

Of all the enemies Israel has had to fight, of all the wars the country has been through, this is the most critical. It is also the most amorphous. The enemy is a coward who hides behind confused 18-year-old girls prepared to kill themselves together with shoppers in a supermarket. We, on the other hand, are a regional superpower with tanks, and planes, and helicopters with missiles that can penetrate the window of a house from 20 kilometers away.

THIS WILL PROBABLY BE ISRAEL'S LAST WAR. It will end within a year—or two or three or four —after Arafat and Sharon have left the stage and new leadership brings the conflict to its logical end, with Israel out of the territories and the Palestinians genuinely happy with a two-state solution. But until then, this is a war. And thank God we have the helicopters and the missiles and the technology and the strength. Their hate knows no limits. Our answer is our

military prowess. This needs to be used with prudence. But the Palestinians have to know we have faced annihilation.

Never again. — *Mr. Goodman is a columnist for The Jerusalem Report*

IN CLOSING. Few people need yet another newsletter to read, especially unsolicited —so why are you getting this one? With my appointment last month to this representative position in Jerusalem by church agencies in Canada and the United States [MC Canada WITNESS in Winnipeg, MMN in Elkhart, and EMM in Salunga] one aspect of the assignment is to provide another view—an Anabaptist eye—on the issues confronting the people and churches in the Middle East: Jews and Muslims, Arabs and Israelis, the ancient churches and current church activity—plus matters of Jewish-Christian dialogue. A tall order to say the least. Our intention is to provide a window on political/cultural/religious issues that is separate from the reporting in the secular press, focusing in particular on the questions that may interest Mennonites most.

“As I listened to you speak,” someone hearing my sermon told me recently, “I became more confused!” He noticed my bemused grimace, then hurriedly added, “And you can take that as a compliment!” He explained how he had thought the conflict was simple—he had the solutions for the two sides all worked out in his mind—“And if the leaders would just...” Now he had begun to realize how much more involved is the reasoning than the often one-sided media had presented it. It is perhaps less a question of *Who* is right and who is wrong, but *Where* is right and where is wrong!

In this issue of the *MennoLetter* we are giving you some of the varying opinions that serious people on both sides hold dear. We want to respect your wishes and not fill your Inbox with material you do not wish to receive. *We ask you to tell us if you wish to continue receiving it*, by writing to the e-mail address given below. But to start off, and to let you discover what it’s all about, we will send you several unsolicited issues for your evaluation. We hope it will assist you to understand some of the complexities that abound in this part of the world. Perhaps it will help you make your prayers more focused, or better inform your study group discussions, or challenge your thinking on issues relating to your Christian outlook and worldview. That is the mark we set for ourselves—your feedback and suggestions will help us aim and reach it.

We want to encourage and challenge you, involve you in the world around. *Write with your comments, ideas, questions.* Let us know what is important to you and your congregation. This undertaking will only be valuable if it responds to your needs and interests. Please pray for this new ministry assignment. With God’s shalom and salaam, from Jerusalem. — GEW

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