



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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*A Middle East View for North American Mennonites
by Church Representative, Glenn Edward Witmer*



“Not only don’t I see a light at the end of the tunnel, I don’t see a tunnel!
There’s no way out, no solution.”

—a Palestinian Christian



Kum bah yah, my Lord, Come by here;
We are praying, my Lord, Come by here;
We are suffering, Lord, Come by here;
O Lord, Come by here. —*adapted*

~MY VOICE ...

An Israeli psychologist on television used the newly-coined terms “*hypervigilance*” or “*ambivigilance*” to describe the heightened state of wariness and caution that most Israelis practice just now. Dr. Irwin Mansdorf, analyzing the mental and emotional effects of the current cycle of violence and uncertainty for Israeli citizens, refers to the development as a *crisis by observation*. He is not very optimistic. “Calls to our offices by all types of people suffering shock and despair about their life have increased by 1300% since 1998,” he said. “It’s a frightening statistic, and we know that we are hearing from only a percentage of those affected by the bombings and incursions.” Many families are traveling abroad, some to stay if they can. Others just need to have a time to breathe more easily and not need to keep watching every movement on the streets, of constantly security checks before entering stores, banks, malls, and even the synagogue.

The recent wave of devastating attacks by Israelis on public and private property in Ramallah, Hebron, Jenin, and throughout the West Bank is counter-weighted by frustrated Palestinian youth who willingly volunteer *to wear the belt*—to tie a band of explosives around their waists, then head out to find a vulnerable and innocent group of Israelis to perish with as the explosives rip them apart. “We hugged her when she left this morning,” her father said of a teenage beauty who boarded her usual bus number 32 for school, only to die a block later as the vehicle was lifted off the ground and blown apart along with almost 20 passengers. “How could we have known we would never see her again. The coroner refused to let us see her in that condition. ‘You should remember her with the pretty face you always used to see,’ he told us.”

He wept uncontrollably... Benny Friedman also knows the pain from real close. He was sitting in the *Sbarro* pizza restaurant on Jaffa Street last year when a similar scenario was acted out. The noisy chatter in the place made him choose a back corner behind a pillar for lunch—the pillar that would save him from flying appliances and glass that killed or severely wounded tens of others minutes later. “It’s horrible for us all,” Friedman told an interviewer, “but we really don’t know what the long-term effect is going to be on our children.” That also touches him up close; he has a 7-year-old son who has become rather introspective and moody. “We hugged as we always do when I put him to bed,” the father said, “but one night he wouldn’t let go. He just kept clinging to me, and finally said softly, ‘Daddy, promise me you won’t die.’”

It seemed like a good idea on the editorial theme sheets: during the past month of preparation for this release I was planning to use articles and analysis that would decrease some of the previous concentration of news stories on the political situation and violence in Israel. It seemed the right time to begin moving on to coverage of many other aspects of life in this region, *and other aspects of my assignment here as the local representative for the churches overseas*. For example: a Muslim understanding of the current conflicts, international study groups which continue to come to Jerusalem in spite of the news reports, a look at many of the biblical and theological themes shared by that Christians and Jews... Yet here I am using much of this space for coverage of these terrible events—and the impact—of Middle East political maneuverings, especially as these are fueled by North American government policies. With the escalation of military activity and violence between Israelis and Jews—and with an explosive escalation of shrill voices on both sides—there seems no getting away from it. It keeps pushing back into our consciousness and onto the agenda of our thinking.

An underlying theme of last month's MennoLetter was that of the increasingly vigorous and desperate battle by the spin-masters and politicians for the minds of the international community. If the fight on the streets and in the communities is vicious, the war of words often seems as uncontrolled and pointless. Lies don't matter if the truth doesn't make your point well enough. And as we said then, What is truth anyway, and who determines it? Which part of the story should be left out to make my side more convincing? Last month's story about the Israeli government's change of language in descriptions of its incursions into Palestinian territory brought a number of comments from readers who had their own examples of 'incomplete' versions of episodes reported.

News programs have come under attack even more strongly than before—CNN has been a punching bag for both sides. *Guardian Newspapers* report a widespread perception of bias among some Israelis and US supporters of Israel which has prompted several boycotts by pressure groups, urging viewers to switch to Rupert Murdoch's Fox News channel. But three months ago, in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, it was Arafat who slammed down the phone after accusing her of anti-Palestinian bias. "You are covering with these questions the terrorist activities of the Israeli occupation and the Israeli crimes," he said. "Be quiet. Be fair. Thank you, bye-bye."

CNN now seems to have buckled somewhat after earlier taking stances that sounded too supportive of the Palestinian cause for a very angry group of Israeli listeners. Some of their correspondents may yet be labeled *personae non grata* with the Israeli government—effectively expelling them from the country—for reporting news that Israel doesn't like to hear. A news programming chief has just announced an altered treatment of regional coverage, more to the liking of Israelis.

As well, putting pressure on George W. Bush seems to have become the parlor game of choice. If louder voices can convince him that a majority of voters believe a certain way, they decide to organize and make themselves and their side heard in Washington! As we wrote in May, we have to know who we are listening to, and be more careful of how we interpret the message we hear. '*Some of the truth*' is often an *untruth*. We must learn to be vigilant—in fact, *hypervigilant*.

—GEW

The Christian Right Mobilizes

A new campaign called "Stand for Israel" aims to mobilize 100,000 American churches and one million Christians to express solidarity with Israel. The campaign will be run by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, and Ralph Reed, former executive director of the *Christian Coalition*. Rabbi Eckstein, whose Fellowship last year presented a \$1 million cheque to the Jewish Agency for use in immigrant absorption, says, "Jews are only now beginning to understand the depth of support they have among conservative Christians. Once the potential of this immense reservoir of good will is fully comprehended by the Jewish people..., you will see support for Israel in the USA swell dramatically." Reed added, "America has always cherished its friendship with Israel, and religious conservatives and evangelical Christians are among its strongest supporters."

—reported by *For Your Glory*

American Jews Against Israeli Government: New Jewish Coalition to Take on Powerful AIPAC Lobby

*The Brit Tzedek v'Shalom—Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace—
believe they can mobilize the majority of U.S. Jews—and plan to
“saturate the media with a message of peace, justice and security!”*

The powerful AIPAC, American Israeli Political Action Committee, claims 60,000 members. Leaders of their new opposition, *Brit Tzedek v'Shalom*, are certain that many more Jews than that support their peace and justice views. “We believe that of the six million Jews in the United States, only a minority truly agree with the organized Jewish community’s Likkud-dominated message, which is following the Israeli government’s line almost in lockstep,” wrote founding member Donna Spiegleman. “We believe that the majority of us are at the very least uncomfortable with the actions of the current Israeli government and the Israel Defense Forces and that there are many—very many—who question whether these policies and actions serve the long-term best interests of Israel.”

Their founding conference recently outlined its goals: It is a pro-Israel, anti-Occupation group of people who hope to create an alternative voice within the American Jewish community that is at once concerned for the security and long-term well-being of the state of Israel, and in disagreement, both moral and political, with the policies and actions of its current government. It is their hope to create a large, national membership organization numbering in the tens of thousands with chapters and affiliates throughout the United States in order to lobby, and saturate the media with a message of peace, justice, and security.

Their list of founding principles includes action to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an equitable and nonviolent way, with a demand to the Israeli military occupation of the territories occupied since 1967 in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders alongside Israel, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states. Unrestricted access to all religious sites in Israel and in the future Palestine would be assured to all Jews, Muslims, and Christians, regardless of nationality or sovereignty of the sites. —Thanks to Dorothy Jean Weaver for passing this on to me.

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“I feel hatred toward the Israelis, toward George Bush,
and toward all the Americans, because they keep giving weapons to the
Israelis.”

—11-year-old Palestinian girl, victim of house destruction and post-traumatic stress disorder, with a psychologist

Blame is a popular god, but a false one.
False gods drive the world crazy and drive us to make war with ourselves.
By portraying war as an adventure and not portraying peace as an adventure,
we promise murder to our children.
The call to adventure is what brings our souls to manifest in the first place.
The instinct to adventure is what calls the human spirit forward to take form and tell us who we are.
The question is not, *What are we willing to give for peace?*
but rather, *What are we not willing to give?*
For what we withhold from peace becomes the curse
that turns the wings of our souls to stone.

What we give beyond what we would give,
breaks the curse and returns our souls to their holy flight.

—Michael Bridge

Who Should Select a Country's Leader?

US President George W. Bush tried to persuade his allies at the G-8 summit in Canada last week that they should urge the Palestinians to rid themselves of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat and elect new leadership, US officials said. While European leaders said publicly they would not advocate Arafat's ouster, a senior administration official said nevertheless there was "no doubt" Bush would try to persuade his European allies to do so. US officials said the decision to call for new Palestinian leadership emanated from recent suicide bombings. The Syrian press called it the "worst speech in the history of U.S.-Arab relations," and the Egyptian press said, "No one in the Arab world will sleep tonight."

"I think the Bush speech was a big gift to the people of Israel after two years of terror," said former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, praising the American policy speech, "because Bush called to remove the Arafat regime and institute an alternative leadership. Bush has a vision of the World to Come," Netanyahu said. "I've been saying to get rid of Arafat for a year and a half, and it seems that now even the president of the United States has caught the idea from me," Netanyahu said. One of Israel's leading newspapers hailed the Bush speech as "the political assassination of Arafat."

"The timing for new elections is 'not optimal,' said United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He rejected the President's call, saying the Palestinians must elect their own leaders. "They elected Chairman Arafat, they are planning new elections, let them elect their own leaders," Annan told reporters at UN headquarters. He admitted, though, that a major drawback is the popularity of extremist groups opposed to peace with Israel. "You could find yourself in a situation where the radicals are the ones who get elected—and the result of a democratic process that we have to accept," he said. The European Union and Russia also came out in support of Arafat.

'Samaritan' Settlements to Return to Palestinian Control?

Israel Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said that the new peace plan being proposed by the United States includes a requirement that Israel evacuate all West Bank settlements in exchange for the Palestinians dropping their request for the right of return of 'refugees'. In effect this means that several large and well developed cities (not so-called *settlements*) would be vacated. Prime Minister Sharon has repeatedly said he would never agree to the giving up of the biblical land of Samaria (now called the West Bank by the media and others). Ezekiel prophesied that in the last days, the children of Israel would return to that specific area—in the Bible, 'the mountains of Israel'—and never leave it again. The thousands of Israelis who make their homes there now will not readily walk away. If you built a home in a new development 15 or 20 years ago, would you want to just walk away and leave it for some political agenda? —*For Your Glory* release

The Price of Speaking the Truth

How can Christians act and respond amidst such violence and despair? Jonathan Kuttab, a Palestinian Christian and former Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteer, spoke to a visiting delegation of Quakers on this topic. Kuttab pointedly noted that the peace and justice community (he included himself in this group) had failed during the Oslo process, failed by not insisting that final settlements be grounded in international law and be non-discriminatory, by making Palestinian statehood an end in itself rather than a means to landed security for all, and by not observing that direct negotiations in a situation of dramatic power imbalance would inevitably favor the stronger party.

Whatever Christians should do now, Kuttab suggested, they should not retreat from vigorous critiques of any "peace" moves—say, the recent talk of a "provisional" Palestinian state—which are once more ripped out of the context of international law and resolutions; rather than worrying about being "effective" (since, as he noted, peace and justice groups have been notably ineffective at securing a just peace in Palestine/Israel), Christians should be willing to be marginalized if that is the price for speaking the truth. —*MCC Palestine Update*

~ OTHER VOICES...

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Build Moral Pressure to End Israeli Occupation of Palestinian Lands

An International Campaign.

WASHINGTON: The end of apartheid stands as one of the crowning accomplishments of the last century, but we would not have succeeded without the help of international pressure. There is no greater testament to the basic dignity of ordinary people everywhere than the divestment movement of the 1980s.

A similar movement has taken shape recently, this time aiming at an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. We should hope that average citizens again rise to the occasion, since the obstacles to a renewed movement are surpassed only by its moral urgency.

Divestment from apartheid South Africa was fought at the grass roots. Religious leaders informed their followers, union members pressured their stockholders and consumers questioned their store-owners. Students played an especially important role by compelling universities to change their portfolios. Eventually, institutions pulled the financial plug, and the South African government thought twice about its policies.

Moral and financial pressure is again being mustered one person at a time. In the United States, students at more than 40 campuses are demanding a review of university investments. Europe faces efforts ranging from consumer boycotts to arms embargos.

These tactics are not the only parallels to the struggle against apartheid South Africa. Yesterday's township dwellers can tell you about today's life in the occupied Palestinian territories. To travel only a few blocks in his own homeland, an elderly grandfather waits to beg for the whim of a teenage soldier. More than an emergency is required to get to a hospital; less than a crime earns a trip to jail.

The lucky ones have a permit to leave their squalor to work in the cities, but luck runs out when security closes all checkpoints, paralyzing an entire people. The indignities, dependence and anger are all too familiar.

I am not the first South African to recognize the chilly reminder of what we just left. Ronnie Kasrils and Max Ozinsky, two Jewish heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle, recently published a letter titled "Not in My Name." Signed by several hundred other prominent Jewish South Africans, the letter drew an explicit analogy between apartheid and current Israeli policies. The writer Mark Mathabane and former President Nelson Mandela have also pointed out the relevance of the South African experience to the current conflict.

To criticize the occupation is not to overlook Israel's unique strengths, just as protesting the Vietnam

War did not imply ignoring the distinct freedoms and humanitarian accomplishments of the United States. In a region where repressive governments and unjust policies are the norm, Israel is certainly more democratic than most of its neighbors. This does not make dismantling the settlements any less of a priority.

Divestment from apartheid-era South Africa was certainly no less justified even though there was repression elsewhere on the African continent. Aggression is no more palatable at the hands of a democratic power. Territorial ambition is equally illegal whether it occurs in slow motion, as with the Israeli settlers in the occupied territories, or in blitz-krieg fashion, as with the Iraqi tanks in Kuwait.

Almost instinctively, the Jewish people have always been on the side of the voiceless. In their history, there is painful memory of massive round-ups, house demolitions and collective punishment. In their scripture, there is acute empathy for the disenfranchised. The occupation represents a dangerous and selective amnesia of the persecution from which these traditions were born.

Not everyone has forgotten, including some within the military. The growing Israeli *refusenik* movement evokes the small anti-conscription drive which helped turn the tide in apartheid South Africa. Several hundred decorated Israeli officers have refused to perform military service in the occupied territories. Those individuals not already in prison have taken their message on the road to U.S. synagogues and campuses, rightly arguing that Israel needs security, but it will never have it as an occupying power.

More than 35 new settlements have been constructed this year. Each one is a step away from the safety deserved by the Israelis, and two steps away from the justice owed to the Palestinians. If apartheid ended, so can the occupation, but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his work against apartheid. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune

Rabbi Arthur Waskow

Honest News is Needed for Wise Counsel

“An Authentically Jewish Voice”

In the Philadelphia *Inquirer* recently, three letters to the editor denounced the *Inquirer* for running a story on the pain of some Palestinian families at the failure of the Israeli government to return the bodies of some suicide bombers. The letters may have resulted from the front-page editorial in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent* denouncing the *Inquirer* for running this article.

What would a Jewish position on this matter be? Torah teaches (Deut 21: 22), “Now when a man has sin-guilt, resulting in a death sentence, and is put to death, and you hang him up on a wooden stake, you are not to

leave his carcass overnight on the stake; rather you are to bury, yes, bury him on that very day, for a hanging-person is an insult to God—that you not render your soil taboo that YHWH your God is giving you as an inheritance.” How could the Torah speak more strongly to affirm that we must accord respect to every human corpse—even the corpse of someone who has been so full of “sin-guilt” that he has been hanged in punishment? To me it seems obvious that the spirit of this teaching applies today when the body of a murderous suicide bomber sent by some Palestinian terrorist organization is in the possession of the Jewish state. The spirit of the teaching is that the body be returned as soon as possible to the family, for burial.

If the Exponent were speaking in an authentically Jewish voice, it would be calling for the Jewish state to act in accordance with this ancient teaching of the respect due even to the corpse of a killer. Instead, the Exponent has denounced the Philadelphia *Inquirer* for publishing an article about the suffering of Palestinian families who have been denied access to the bodies of their dead. Honest news is needed for wise counsel.

—from The Shalom Center <www.shalomctr.com>

a North American network committed to draw on Jewish wisdom, old and new, in order to pursue peace, justice, and the healing of the earth.

Submitted by Marian Hostetler.

Bat Kol Begins Israel 2002 Study Program

Wars, and rumors of wars, were not enough to keep away a group of

20 Christian scholarship winners from arriving in Israel from five continents last week to study the Hebrew Scriptures. As it does every July and November, Bat Kol Institute of Jerusalem has again just welcomed a new international group of ministers, priests, and Bible teachers for an intensive month of study. Entitled, *Excavating the Word of God in the Book of Exodus*, the study session emphasizes hands on methodology of digging for text treasures, to deeper levels of understanding of the ancient texts, with the help of both Christian and Jewish professors. An important part of the four-week session is the program of on-site lectures around the country, relating to the geography and archeology of the land, and to the biblical record.

Two Mennonite pastors were among the 2001 *Excavating Genesis* alumni. One of them, Rev. Steve Drudge, pastor of Rouge Valley Mennonite Church in Ontario, has also registered for the second-level course this November. “The evening of dialogue between the Jewish and Palestinian women was tops,” he wrote after last year’s course. “It was one of the most powerful moments that far exceeded my expectations.” Only five seats remain for the November program, and the 2003 program has now been announced: “*Wilderness and Holiness Themes in the Books of Leviticus and Numbers.*”

[*The reader is informed that this writer is one of the session lecturers, tour guide, and Director of Program Development and Publishing for Bat Kol Institute. A key part of my Israel assignment is the encouragement of more Christian leaders and teachers to study in the Holy Land. See also www.batkol.info —GEW*]

ANTI-SEMITISM ON THE RISE—A poll released by the ADL (Anti-Defamation League) found that 17% of American citizens can be classified as “hardcore” anti-Semites. One thousand people participated in the survey. ADL President Abraham Foxman says that the poll proves that, “an undercurrent of Jewish hatred persists in America.” The poll suggests concern that American Jews have too much influence over US Mid-East policy, with 42% of those described as the “most anti-Semitic” Americans were four times as likely to believe that American Jewish leaders have too much influence over US foreign policy, while 73% of them felt the US has been tilting too much towards Israel.

Mideast Christians Torn over Israeli Tactics at Churches

Christians in the West Bank are caught up in the daily bloodshed between Palestinian gunmen and the Israeli defense Forces (IDF), reports Stan Guthrie in *Christianity Today*. At Bethlehem's historic Church of the Nativity, IDF tanks and soldiers surrounded the church complex, where 200 Palestinians took refuge with 60 priests, monks, and nuns. Palestinian Christian leaders faulted Israel for punishing innocent civilians for the deadly assaults which followed. "We regret the suicide attacks, but these are done by individuals who are a small minority and are not an act of the Palestinian Authority or Yasser Arafat," said Bishara Awad, president of Bethlehem Bible College. "Why are all the Palestinians being punished?"

Samia Khoury of the Palestinian Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem told an interviewer, "Everyone seems to be a target. The brutality and the devastation [are] beyond imagination." He sarcastically refers to the military as the "Israeli Occupation Forces." Efraim Goldstein of the *Jews for Jesus* ministry in Israel has a son in the Israeli army. Goldstein sees the military operation as a legitimate response to terrorism. "My heart is torn in different directions as I pray for the peace of Israel and the safety of my son," he said. "Yet I am fully aware that among the Palestinians who are suffering there are brothers and sisters in the Messiah Yeshuah. My heart and prayers go out to them." Goldstein sees despair among the Jews who had hoped for peace. "People are searching for answers," he said, "and we are finding new opportunities for the gospel to be proclaimed in Israel."

Christians make up about 1.5% of the West Bank population. Alex Awad, dean of students at Bethlehem Bible College fears there will be even fewer now. "Christian families who never thought of leaving the country will now seek a way out, thus endangering the very presence of Christianity in the city that witnessed the birth of Christ," he said.

~ YOUR VOICE...

"MennoLetter is quickly becoming an important source of up-to-date information for discussion in some of my [university] classes."

Because this newsletter is only on its third issue, it was a pleasant and reassuring development to receive 54 notes of response within 48 hours of the June issue being sent out. Overwhelmingly the comments supported our intention of trying to listen to a range of voices on the issues—understandings of TRUTH as others may interpret it. Before we attempt too much comment or analysis, it is important first to hear the other sides. Here is some of the feedback, mainly from Ontario and Manitoba, and also from Pennsylvania. PLEASE WRITE, so we know what you want too. —GEW

"Given the complexity of relationships and issues pertaining to Israel and the Palestinians, I am inspired by your recent newsletter... , a refreshing alternative to the adversarial and simplistic approach we are often subjected to in the media, in political and in religious circles." -- **"I want to encourage you to continue your excellent work in helping, particularly the church, to engage in hard, God-centered thinking, and informed praying about the situation in the Middle East."** -- "Please keep it coming. We need trusted information to guide our prayers."

"A refreshingly balanced range of views on the Middle East situation that isn't available through the public media."
"Caution about our information sources is indeed worthy of note. As you suggest, the picture can so subtly be colored by reports that don't 'tell the whole truth'." -- **"I deeply value receiving input that is not filtered through North American newscasts. I also appreciate the intent to keep our focus on justice for all and to not become pro-Jew or pro-Palestinian, but pro-people, pro-justice."**

If you found this issue informative, forward it to others and encourage them to add their personal and/or church names to our distribution list. Also, please help us by announcing this publication and its availability in your church bulletin, on your web page, or in other church communications. To subscribe or unsubscribe, to praise or complain, write to newsletter@mennojerusalem.org Views expressed in MennoLetter are not necessarily those of the editor or of our church agencies. Contents copyrighted by the writer—if reprinting outside of local congregational publications, please request permission from the publication office above. With shalom/salaam from Jerusalem. —Glenn Edward Witmer

WHY NOT ENCOURAGE 3 OR 4 GOOD FRIENDS TO REQUEST SAMPLE MennoLetter ISSUES TOO. We'll all thank you!