



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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*A Middle East View by Mennonite Church Liaison,
Glenn Edward Witmer*

“What I would like to see is Jews becoming good Jews,
and let God do the rest.”

—Rev. Thomas C. Oden, United Methodist Church, on evangelism of Jews

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“It seems that this is not a war against terrorism.

This seems to be a war against the hope and future of the Palestinian people.”

—Dr. Munib Younan, Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem

~MY VOICE ...

*Discovering God in new places and new voices
is one of the blessings of living with other cultures.*

All Facets of the Diamond...

Among the most beautiful aspects of this international assignment are the innumerable opportunities to discover and learn about the amazing variety of religious expression and forms of praise being practiced. This is true in all three major religions so prominent in this Holy City of Jerusalem—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, identified by their symbols in the masthead above—and especially interesting in the diverse representations of Christian worship that involve the ancient churches, some as old as the story itself.

For the past two weeks, church leaders and congregants have been gathering daily at 6 p.m.—each day in a different church—to share in the annual services of Ecumenical Prayers for Peace. From the ornate, almost palatial chandeliers of St. James Armenian Orthodox Cathedral in the Old City, to the modest beauty of the Catholic Syrian Vicariate across from the Garden Tomb; and from the soaring hall of St. George’s Anglican Church on Nablus Road, to the quiet and charming sanctuary of St. Mark’s Syrian Orthodox Church, near the traditional site of another prayer service—Acts chapter 12—when an imprisoned apostle knocks on the door of a worshipping group of believing Jews, then hears an astonished Rhoda shout out to the prayer group, “*Peter is at the door!*” We also prayed with the Maronites and the Greeks, the Lutherans and Presbyterians, the Copts and the Ethiopians—one prayer together, in an array of languages and rituals.

“And in that day a great shofar will sound.”

—Isaiah 27:13

*I never tire of the experience, and the wonder of it all...*for 2000 years this city has practiced its liturgies in ways most of us have not had the blessing to experience. God is praised, thanked, beseeched, and glorified with accents, colors, sounds, and fragrances like the garden of delights that must have been Eden. As much as I enjoy—and miss—the four-part rousing harmony of Mennonite songs of praise, I admit also to being drawn to the beautiful and profound worship moments in the liturgies of ancient cultures I am only beginning to understand. I shudder now with the recollection that the clothes we once wore, and the vehicles we drove, were enough to have separated Christians from sharing worship. How God must moan...

Throughout September, Jews celebrate their High Holy Days of *Rosh HaShana* [New Year] and *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Celebrated next weekend, *Rosh HaShana*—literally, “head of the year”—is also *Yom Teruah*, the Day of Sounding the Shofar, a reminder of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Hearing the shofar and the prayerful music of the service never fails to send a shiver of emotion through me. It is a time to review the past year, considering both the good that has been done and where each has fallen short. It is also *Yom Ha-Din*, the Day of Judgment. The focus of the day is the synagogue—a time of remembrance and judgment that impacts Jews less as individuals than as community.

“Forgive and pardon our sins on this Day of Atonement.”
— *Yom Kippur confessional*

Yom Kippur, on September 16th, is more than anything else about forgiveness and God’s mercy. In the days that follow, the services and rituals focus on ways to correct the wrongs that have been done, with the goal of *teshuvah*, repentance. It is a solemn day, a time for thought, prayer, and fasting. In the synagogue, Jews confess their sins as a congregation, accepting responsibility not only for personal misdeeds, but for those of the family and community. The beautiful prayer, *Avinu Malkenu* [Our Parent, Our Ruler] is sung and recited a number of times, a prayer asking God to forgive us despite our failings. *Despite our failings...*

How beautiful to find new ways to share prayer and times of worship with others. While we do not *need* new language or rituals or traditions to approach God—our accustomed ones are fine!—when we do find them it is like admiring a stunningly beautiful and complex-shaped diamond from more sides, shining light on every facet, and gasping at its beauty and overall creation. Each individual facet sparkles with reflected light; but seeing all facets together, in their brilliance, is illumination beyond belief. *Thanks be to God!*

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## *Wall of Temple Mount in Danger of Collapse*

A Jordanian delegation arrived at the Temple Mount last month to check the situation of a section of the wall at its south-eastern corner, visible to the right upon entry from the Dung Gate. It is just below the famous *Al-Aqsa* Mosque which could suffer severe damage in the case of any collapse of the wall near that point. “It seems that it’s about to fall—perhaps within a matter of months,” reports Israeli archeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar of Hebrew University. “I have trouble believing that it will last the entire winter.”

Dr. Mazar explained that the danger area on the other side of the bulge is where the major works of construction were carried out by the *Waqf* [the Moslem body that controls the Temple Mount] starting in 1996, when then prime minister Netanyahu allowed them to build the largest mosque in the ancient site of Solomon’s Stables, and the area was entirely changed. “Tractors worked there, and tremendous quantities of fill—composed of ancient artifacts—were taken out,” she said. “These walls were not built to carry tractors and loaded trucks. The path of the rainwater was also changed in the process, and water is trickling down the walls and eating away at them. The bulge can clearly be seen from the road around the southeast corner of the Mount; if a year ago it was a ‘fourth-month’ bulge, now it looks like it is in its eighth month.”

Dr. Mazar said that the Jordanians and the *Waqf* seem to be doing nothing, nor is Israel able to do anything; but it has stationed two policemen there to watch. Jews are not allowed onto the Temple Mount... “The *Waqf* has placed some scaffolding to try to hold up the wall, but is doing no work there. The scaffolding itself is a joke; it’s not strong enough to hold up the wall. The wall has to be taken down and rebuilt, that’s the only thing that will help.” —*Arutz Sheva, News of Israel*

## *Hunger Crisis Looms in Territories*

*In a recent report on hunger in the territories*, the U.S. Agency for International Development says that a humanitarian emergency grips the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The report cites an increase in malnutrition in the territories; increasing numbers of families, it says, are unable to obtain basic foodstuffs, particularly foods rich in proteins. Prepared for USAID by several universities and research groups over an eight-week period, the report examined the Palestinian population’s access to food in the territories. The study concludes that these

malnutrition statistics warrant classification (according to standards used by health officials) as a 'humanitarian emergency,' particularly in the Gaza Strip.

*Israel tried to soften the diplomatic public relations damage* caused by the report's publication. At a press conference Israeli officials said that the Palestinian population does not face starvation, and that responsibility for malnutrition problems in the territories rests with Palestinian Authority institutions, and the population itself. The study has found that 19.7 % of children in the territories suffer from anemia, which is classified as a 'moderate' level health problem. Anemia is generally a function of poor diet. A relatively high level (10.8 %) of anemia was also found among women ages 15-49.

*USAID researchers who investigated* the availability of foodstuffs in stores serving the Palestinian population in the territories found a serious shortage of foods that contain protein. Researchers found that dairy products, particularly milk powder and milk products for infants, are lacking in more than half of the food shops in the territories, with a particularly severe shortage in the Gaza Strip. The report concludes that the major reason for food shortages in the territories is roadblocks put up by Israelis, along with closures and curfews in the territories. The report's main conclusion is that a food emergency prevails in the territories, but that this situation is reversible if there is immediate humanitarian relief. *—Ha'aretz in Hebrew*

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Diverging paths on Judaism evident among Christian churches...

“The Covenant Between God and the Jewish People is Eternal”

“The two faiths must not target one another for mission,” U.S. Catholic and Jewish leaders have concluded, “but jointly heal the sick world instead.” According to the U.S. Bishops' Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee, campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church. Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal of the National Council of Synagogues said, “We believe both faith groups are beloved of God and assured of His grace.” He stressed the joint mission of Christians and Jews to ‘heal a sick world’ and ‘the imperative to repair the damage we humans have caused to God’s creations.’ Rosenthal added, “We believe we are partners in bringing blessings to all humankind for this is God’s will.” Both organizations were partners in an interfaith project called “Reflections on Covenant and Mission.”

The Catholic rejection of the direct evangelization of Jews corresponds to the view of most of the mainline Protestant churches, though not all branches of evangelicalism. However, the Rev. Thomas C. Oden, a leader of the theologically orthodox Confessional Movement within the United Methodist Church, stated that he concurred with the Catholic position. “What I would like to see is Jews becoming good Jews, and let God do the rest,” he said, adding that he also agreed with the Catholic view that the Covenant between God and the Jewish people was eternal.

There is not unanimity of opinion as to the force of the recent document. Cardinal William Keeler said that [the document assailing campaigns aimed at converting Jews to Christianity] does not represent a formal position of the U.S. bishops' conference, [although] “there has been growing respect within the Catholic community for the Jewish tradition and the lasting covenant which God made with them.” At the same time, he said, the faithful should be open to the action of God’s grace to bring people to accept the fullness of the means of salvation which are found in the Church.

DO YOU HAVE A COMMENT? We invite readers' comments and views especially about this vital matter.

In the wake of increasing numbers of statements being formulated by a wide range of churches on their relationships to Jews, take a moment to let us hear *Your Voice*—newsletter@mennojerusalem.org. A summary of opinions will appear in the next issue. [No names will be used without written permission.]

~ OTHER VOICES...

They are Jews, born and raised outside Israel, who under Israel's 'law of return' have a legal right to Israeli residence and citizenship, but...

“WE RENOUNCE ISRAEL RIGHTS!”

In a letter to *The Guardian*, 45 prominent British Jews renounced their right to Israeli citizenship. Among them are writers, academics, artists, and activists distancing themselves from current Israeli government policies. The signatories do not believe that the accident of having been born Jewish should give them any privilege over someone who has been born a Palestinian, nor do they believe that safety from anti-Semitism can be attained by “taking on the role of occupier and oppressor.” They wrote: “We are Jews, born and raised outside Israel, who, under Israel's ‘law of return’, have a legal right to Israeli residence and full citizenship. We wish to renounce this unsought ‘right’ because:

- *We regard it as morally wrong* that this legal entitlement should be bestowed on us while the very people who should have most right to a genuine return have been forced into fleeing and are excluded.
- *Israel's policies towards the Palestinians are barbaric*; we do not wish to identify ourselves in any way with what the Israeli government is doing.
- *We disagree with the notion* that Zionist emigration to Israel is any kind of ‘solution’ for diaspora Jews, anti-Semitism, or racism; no matter to what extent Jews have been or are victims of racism, they have no right to make anyone else victims.
- *We wish to express our solidarity* with all those who are working for a time when Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip can be lived in by people without any restrictions based on so-called racial, cultural, or ethnic origins.

“We look forward to the day when all the peoples of the area are enabled to live in peace with each other on this basis of non-discrimination and mutual respect. Perhaps some of us would even wish to live there, but only if the rights of the Palestinians are respected. To those who consider Israel a ‘safe haven’ for Jews in the face of anti-Semitism, we say that there can be no safety in taking on the role of occupier and oppressor. We hope that the people of Israel and their leaders will come to realize this soon.” —*A Jewish Voice for Peace*

Israel to Distribute Anti-Nuclear Fallout Pills

Israel is about to equip its citizenry with an antidote to the fallout from a radioactive weapon. The Defense Ministry decided to include iodine capsules in the protective kits it distributes to the public. The pills, costing about \$1 apiece, are meant to block the influence of radioactive iodine by buttressing the thyroid gland, considered a key mechanism for sustaining the body's immunity. Asked when the capsules would be added to Israelis' gas mask kits, directed largely against the effects of biological and chemical warfare, a ministry spokesperson said, “In the near future.” —*Ha'aretz*

“Mr. President... We urge you to act.”

As was noted last month, there are growing concerns about the 'fundamentalist Christian right' having undue influence over American government policy, and also with the common view that all evangelicals hold the same theological position. [See “Misusing the Bible, Misleading the President” on page 4 of MennoLetter, Vol. I, No. 4.] Last week, Churches for Middle East Peace met with US Agency for International Development staff to discuss the dire situation of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza. Their letter to the President [next page] was faxed to officials at the State Department and USAID.

The Honorable George W. Bush
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President,

As representatives of national churches and organizations in the United States with strong ties to the Middle East, we urge the U.S. government to seize the opportunity to lead the region into a new era of peace and democratic transition. Along with many moderate Israelis and Arabs, we stand ready to support a credible peace process that will fulfill the vision we share with you and Secretary of State Colin Powell of a viable Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace with the state of Israel. However, at this time the continued violence between the Palestinians and Israelis and the humanitarian crisis of the Palestinians living under Israel's military occupation are foremost in our minds and are the subject of our letter and appeal to you.

Let there be no doubt of our deep and abiding compassion for the Israeli people who live with fear, suffer appalling wounds, and die from Palestinian attacks. We condemn such attacks and believe as you do that the people of Israel rightly demand and deserve security from attacks on civilians and the state itself. *The Palestinian people, as well, deserve security from attacks on civilians.* We know from fact-finding trips and reports from Palestinian Christians of disproportionate attacks with heavy weapons, killings, collective punishment, closures and curfews, blockades, demolitions, land seizures, mass arrests.

The Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem observed, "It seems that this is not a war against terrorism. This seems to be a war against the hope and future of the Palestinian people." Moreover, the close ties between the governments and peoples of Israel and the United States give the impression to some that the United States supports, and is complicit in, Israel's actions. Israel's use of U.S.-supplied weaponry against Palestinians living under occupation, such as took place in Gaza City on July 23, further increases this impression.

We urge you to act on the appeal you made to Israel on April 5 that, "Israel should also show a respect for and concern about the dignity of the Palestinian people who are and will be their neighbors." When your demands of Israel—to be compassionate at checkpoints and to spare innocent Palestinians daily humiliation, to ease closures and allow people to work, to withdraw its forces from reoccupied areas and to stop settlement activity—are disregarded or met with token response, we urge you to follow up with the same intensity as in your public exhortations to the Palestinians.

The reoccupation of Palestinian land and lives by the Israeli military has led to a humanitarian crisis of shocking dimensions... We fear that the humanitarian crisis is deepening a sense of desperation among Palestinians and contributing to the ongoing cycle of violence.

This disastrous situation cannot be allowed to continue. *Churches for Middle East Peace urges you to support, with immediacy and vigor, the deployment of an international peacekeeping force to separate the Israelis from the Palestinians and restore hope to each.* Such a move would not only fundamentally change the stalemated dynamics on the ground, but would also set the stage for a third party role during the troop withdrawal, negotiation, and implementation phases of a fresh peace process. This moment is tragic, as both peoples and their leadership remain caught in a cycle of vengeful violence. [continued next column...]

While the human and political dimension of the Israeli-Arab conflict are sufficient cause for our concern and appeals to you, its profound religious dimension sustains our hopes and prayers for peace. We pledge ourselves... *"to continue a joint quest for a just peace that leads to reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, for the common good of all our peoples."* We pray that you will join us and the leaders of these three faith communities in Israel and Palestine in that quest.

Sincerely,
James H. Matlack
American Friends Service Committee

...and other signatories from Churches for Middle East Peace whose membership includes: Mennonite Central Committee, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Disciples of Christ, Church of the Brethren, Presbyterian Church, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church, among others.

"[Mr. Bush,] if you're motivated by a desire to please the evangelical community," said **Richard J. Mouw**, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif., "you've got to know that some of us are not pleased by the heavy-handed favoring of the Israeli side in all of this."

Gary M. Burge, professor of theology at Wheaton College in Illinois and chairman of *Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding*, said he wants Mr. Bush to know that "Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, just to take two names, do not represent the evangelical voice of America. They represent a segment . . . but not the majority."

The administration's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is widely seen as tilting heavily to Israel and has pleased *conservative Christian evangelicals*, one of the Republican Party's most important constituencies.

~ YOUR VOICE...

In the lead article last month I introduced Matthew Krabill, an undergraduate at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, who has just spent three months in Israel/Palestine as a ministry intern. The idea behind this new venture is to provide students not only with a wide variety of experiences related to the Land and the People, but also opportunities to examine first-hand the range of church-related programs that touch those areas. Matthew prepared a series of reflections about his experiences, and agreed to include one of them in MennoLetter—in his own words...

One of the questions that I am often asked by Palestinian Christians is, “How can the America that believes in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness support Israel when it continues to harass, destroy, and occupy the little land we have left?” This question is hard enough to answer. But it’s the following question that leaves me speechless: “But why do American Christians support Israel as well? Why don’t they help us? Why not even us Palestinian Christians?”

For many reasons Christians have been paralyzed, unable to make objective criticisms of Israeli policies. There seem to be 4 factors that continue to shape and cloud our vision: [1] We bear a subliminal sense of guilt for the persecution of Jews throughout history, climaxing with the Holocaust; [2] Because we share common roots, Christians have rightly concluded that we share a spiritual destiny with Judaism; [3] We feel that we are witnessing a miracle in the 21st century. The nation of Israel is God’s doing; [4] Israel will play a role in the end times. Evangelical eschatology demands that we keep a firm commitment to Israel.

I’m suggesting that we Christians need to examine more seriously our commitment to the state of Israel. And we can do that by looking at several issues. [Note: the following comes from a variety of books, two of which are Donald Wagner’s “Anxious for Armageddon” and George Burge’s “Who are God’s People in the Middle East?”]

Land. Does modern Israel correspond to biblical Israel? In other words, is there a direct line that can be drawn from the time of Solomon to the present-day government in Jerusalem, 2002? Assuming that continuity exists between the Old Testament and the 20th century, how does Israel’s nationhood compare with that of God’s people in the Bible? If it

qualifies prophetically, does it also qualify ethically and morally?

If Israel makes a biblical claim to the land, then Israel must adhere to biblical standards of righteousness. Land promises are a by-product of a covenant with God. The Old Testament continually calls God’s people to protect “the alien, orphan and the widow.” Israel is a tenant, not an owner: “the land is mine - with me you are but aliens and tenants (Lev. 25:23).” Furthermore, Israel is warned time and time again that it will be expelled from the land for its unfaithfulness. What would Jeremiah have to say about 250,000 Jewish settlers living in the West Bank? Would Isaiah keep quiet when bulldozers flatten entire Palestinian communities to make room for new Jewish settlements?

“When did you become Christian? is a question Palestinian Christians hear from tourists on a regular basis. And it’s one that wounds them deeply.”

Eschatology. Christians are convinced that Israel is playing a role in the end times. The creation of the state in 1948 set off the eschatological time-clock, and ever since then, we have been persuaded that we are witnessing the signs of the very end.

Back to my original question: “How can American Christians support Israel while neglecting their Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters?” Breaking news: *Not all Palestinians are Muslim.* Not all Arabs for that matter. Tourists are frequently surprised when meeting Arab Christians. “When did you become Christian?” is a question Palestinian Christians hear on a regular basis. And it’s one that wounds them deeply. There has been a continuous Arab Christian

population in Palestine for almost two thousand years.

Acts 2:11 tells us that there were Arabs present at Pentecost. There are 8-10 million Arab Christians in the Middle East, which is significantly more than the Jewish population in Israel. In Israel/Palestine (as of 1995) there were an estimated 120,000 Arab Christians, the largest groups being Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox. But these numbers are dwindling rapidly and are now as low as 2-3%. The communities of Ramallah and Bethlehem in 1948 were each about 90% Christian. Today, each city is below 50%.

Church leaders talk frequently of the ‘museumification’ of the church, fearing that soon the living church of Israel/Palestine will be a conglomeration of empty buildings. Western Christians have an important role to play. We have been eager to support Israel’s life and future but in doing so have neglected Christ’s ancient church in the cities of his birth, childhood and ministry.

In our desire to see biblical prophecy fulfilled we have turned a blind eye to the injustices afflicted upon the Palestinian people. Has our commitment to eschatology become greater than our commitment to the pain and suffering of people whom God loves? Now more than ever, we need to stand with the Palestinian Christians. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. —Matthew Krabill

Readers’ comments, suggestions for theme articles, and critiques are welcomed. Feel free to write to us.

“And the Winner is... nobody!”

According to a poll taken by a Washington-based center which examined 525 nightly newscasts on ABC, NBC, and CBS, 78 % of the on-air appraisals of Israel on the evening news shows were negative. The Palestinians' evaluation was even worse, with 92 % of the newscasters commenting in the negative. But most damning of all was the rating of the Israeli *treatment* of Palestinians—96 % negative!

It seems that everyone involved in the Middle East is getting terrible ratings. President Bush's handling of the Middle East crisis was 72 % negative. Nearly 4 out of 5 (79 %) of the newscasters' comments on the Bush administration's reaction to the conflict were negative. Secretary Colin Powell, meanwhile, is doing better than anyone; his coverage was most balanced, with 55 % negative coverage versus 45 % positive.

—www.palestinechronicle.com

Dare not Muslims and Jews work together for peace...in Israel?

Congressional Staff Delegation Refused Entry to Israel

Israel last month refused entry to a nine-person U.S. Congressional staff delegation co-sponsored by Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel (JPPI) and American Muslims for Jerusalem (AMJ). This was to have been the first Jewish-Muslim co-sponsored Congressional delegation to Palestine and Israel. The bipartisan delegation planned to meet with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, American and international humani-tarian organizations, and U.S. government officials.

The delegation planned to cross from Jordan into the Israeli-occupied West Bank via the Allenby Bridge. After five hours, Israeli security personnel informed the delegation that the Ministry of Interior refused them entry. JPPI co-founder, Josh Ruebner, was angered by the rebuff: “Members of Congress and the American people should be outraged by Israel's refusal to admit a congressional staff delegation. This unprecedented slap in the face to Members of Congress is Israel's way of repaying the institution which gives it \$3 billion of tax-payer money every year. What does Israel not want Congress to see?”

The U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem reportedly refused to intervene for the two American Muslims on the delegation when requested. Khalid Turaani, Director of AMJ, objected that this amounted to condoning what he called Israel's blatant ethnic and religious profiling. “The State Department consistently has winked at Israel's pattern of discrimination against, and intimidation of, American Muslims seeking to further peace and to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestinians suffering under Israel's occupation.”

“For Richer, For Poorer...”

Avraham Moshe and Chavi Adamkar decided to spend the happiest day of their lives making others happy. They were married in a modest ceremony in the Jerusalem Rabbinate. Then they surprised 600 needy people

—who come daily to the Meir Panim Soup Kitchen for a free hot meal— by celebrating their wedding feast with them, turning the modest lunchroom into a wedding hall for a day, with white tablecloths, fancy dishes and silverware, a sumptuous feast, and a band playing music.

“Our purpose was to give some joy to people who don't have much,” the happy couple said. “We fulfilled the mitzvah [Torah commandment] of making a meal for poor people on our wedding day.

I'm thrilled that we were able to bring so much joy to needy people.” —Israel National News

Erratum: In last month's article, ‘Terrible Days of Mourning’, page 3, the date given for the slaughter of 100,000 Jews in the Bar Kochba revolt should have read 135 C.E. [i.e., A.D.] not B.C.E.

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