



# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

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

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*“The ultimate measure of our worth  
is not where we stand in moments of comfort and convenience,  
but where we stand at times of challenge and controversy.”  
—Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*“No one shall be subjected to torture  
or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.”  
—Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

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## *~MY VOICE ...*

*The religious and cultural traditions continue in the Holy City, but the mood remains  
somber in the light of the political and economic crises...*

### *A Less Joyful Ramadan, Hanukkah, and Christmas*

The month—and the year—are going out with a bang! More bombings accompanied the recent Likud primary that reselected the current prime minister, Ariel Sharon, as head of his party. That choice was itself not much of a ‘bomb’ since it was generally expected—to the delight of what seems to be a majority of Israelis who lean to the right politically just now. Indications are that he will also continue leading the country after the general election in January, to the dismay of those who see his confrontational and violent policies as a hindrance to hopes for a just peace. The ancient town of Bethlehem once again suffers under invaders, curfews, and the frustration of looking forward to another Christmas darkened and threatened by military maneuvering, creating an atmosphere of despair for thousands of local Christians [see following article].

The Muslim holy month of Ramadan is ending [see article page 3], and the Jewish Hanukkah began last Friday evening. It commemorates the victory of the Maccabee family and its followers over the Greek-Syrian king who attempted to destroy Judaism in the second century BCE. When the victorious Maccabees returned to the temple in Jerusalem to cleanse it after desecration by the Syrians, there was just enough ritually pure oil to last one day. But through a miracle, the oil kept burning for another seven days—enough time to prepare for a new supply. It is this event that is called to mind in the Jewish celebration of lighting the Hanukkah candles during the eight days of celebration. Lights are everywhere in Jerusalem, as are such typical foods as potato latkes with sour cream or applesauce. A delicious Hanukkah treat is *sufganiot*, sugar-dusted jelly doughnuts!

Christians too have started their new liturgical year with this first Sunday of Advent. Churches of every tradition plan musical or ceremonial treats to celebrate the coming holidays. At Nazareth Village, there will be a re-creation of the Nativity story where visitors walking through the site can

‘witness the annunciation’ and follow Joseph and a pregnant Mary on a donkey as they journey to the site where Jesus is to be born.

Once again we ‘expats’ can share in the multiplicity of events that make up the colorfully diverse elements of life with Jerusalem’s Christians, Muslims, and Jews. It ought to be a time of joy, celebration, and mutual sharing in festivities, but the mood this year has a more somber cast. This month’s *MennoLetter* touches on some of the most critical issues... —GEW

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## “O Littler Town of Bethlehem”

*As the Christian population declines, Christian leaders on the front lines are baffled by the Western churches’ neglect of Palestinian Christians.*

“The Christian minority in Bethlehem is bleeding,” said Mayor Hanna Nasser, himself a Christian, at a recent conference of the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation in Washington, DC. “In the last 18 months, more than 1,500 Christians from Bethlehem and adjacent Beit Jala and Beit Sahour have emigrated. Only 40 percent—13,000—of Bethlehem’s residents today are Christian, compared with 95 percent in 1948,” Nasser said. The decline results from two factors: The initial founding of Israel in 1948 forced Moslems to leave southern Palestine for Bethlehem refugee camps, which shifted the demographics; now Christian emigration is causing the population drop due to “the continuous political unrest and difficult economic conditions and injustice imposed by the Israeli occupation.” Church records kept by Franciscan Fathers in Bethlehem helped the mayor trace his family roots there back to 1609. Most Palestinian Christians have far older legacies in the Holy Land. They consider themselves converts of Jesus or St. Paul.

Nasser explained, “Christians are driven to seek safer places where human rights and daily bread for their children can be secured.” The mayor welcomed Yasser Arafat’s recent designation of 10 towns in the Palestinian Territories as ‘Christian’... Even if the Christian presence is a minority, these towns will retain Christian mayors. They include Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, Ramallah, Bir Zeit, Jifna, Aboud, Taybeh, Zababdeh, and Ein Areek.

The Western churches’ neglect of Palestinian Christians baffles Christian leaders on the front lines. “Christian holy places in Palestine have not yet had the necessary care or support that matches their religious value and significance,” the mayor said. “I urge all Christians of the world to stretch out a hand of support to keep these Palestinian Christians steadfast in their home land. It is a sacred duty to keep the holy land a place of living worship and to safeguard its 2000-year Christian legacy.” But he added that, ultimately, “only peace is likely to reduce the Christian emigration and to empower the viability of their communities in the Holy Land.”

—*Orthodox Christian News Service*

*In a related story:* Pope John II has allocated \$400,000 to the peoples of the Holy Land as an expression of concern for the crisis they are enduring. The aid is not only for the urgent needs of the distressed population of the West Bank, but also “to encourage Christians to remain in these battered places as so many missionaries are already doing in such a heroic way. The support is offered to improve living and working conditions in their land so they might be a fertile seed of humanity and peace. With the occupation of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which lasted 39 days, there is proof of how necessary the presence of Christians in the Holy Land is,” said the statement. “The continuous acts of violence between Palestinians and Israelis represent, unfortunately, a persistent threat to the lives of all the inhabitants of the region,” it said. “Hospitality homes for pilgrims are empty, while in Bethlehem about 80% of the population is unemployed. The desire of many people to leave the country is well understood. The safekeeping of the holy places would be in serious danger if Christians were to abandon them.”

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

*When we look for the good and beautiful in the other,  
we may discover that non-Christians have something wonderful to teach us.*

### *Fasting with Eyes, Ears, and Mouth! —A Muslim Example for Christians*

Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic calendar, began on November 6<sup>th</sup> for Muslims around the world. It is a time to give generously and to fast so that one might feel a bit of the hunger and pain of others. Mary Jensen of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem discovered special insights for Christians too. “It’s a month of fasting, devotion and good works... Our Muslim friends and neighbors in Palestine and Israel fast from dawn until dusk, then in the evening they are able to eat and celebrate with family and friends.

“A taxi driver took time to describe Ramadan in his halting English: ‘It’s not just fasting *here*,’ he said, pointing to his mouth. ‘We are fasting with our eyes, so I do not look lustfully at a woman. We are fasting with our ears, so I do not want to hear bad words. We are fasting with our minds and hearts, so I try to think good things and do good things. Ramadan is fasting with my whole body, to be a good person.’ The man was very intent on helping me understand what Ramadan meant to him.

“At sundown during Ramadan a loud boom like a cannon shot is heard in Jerusalem. It is the signal that Muslim people may now eat. As soon as the boom is sounded, I hear a young boy racing for the kitchen! As Christians, to be respectful of our Muslim friends’ Ramadan observance, we try not to eat in their presence during the day. Yet a Muslim teacher graciously prepared a delicious lunch for some American visitors to her school, and a Muslim woman cooking for needy families in the *Al Ama’ri* refugee camp, to eat after sundown, offered food to the Chicago group during the afternoon. She insisted we eat it immediately. Seeing such Ramadan observance up close and personal reminds me of God’s love for all people and how we can share God’s love with one another.”  
—from a newsletter by Mary Jensen, ELCJ

### *A First-hand Look at ‘The Facts on the Ground’*

*Christian Peacemaker Team members Mary Lawrence and Greg Rollins recently spoke to the Bat Kol study group about the CPT program of ‘violence reduction’ in Hebron and other West Bank areas. Here another West Bank visitor, a recent international participant who joined a CPT delegation, reports first-hand experiences:*

“We came to this country with an understanding that Israelis, fearful for their existence, were pursuing a policy of occupation that was both unjust and a breeding ground for more violence. During our first days here, with *Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions* (ICAHD), we were told that many Israelis, even Rabbis, were not happy with government policy. The image they used was that of a prison: the Palestinian lands are a prison, with the Israeli settlements as watch towers and the roads as walls. We saw those roads—which are for Israeli use only—cutting communities in half, eating up land, and making communication impossible.

“We saw not only massive settlements built since 1993, but large hilltops labeled as settlements, not yet built upon. Israelis can get permits to build on 500% of their land (that is, with five-times coverage, such as a five-storey building) while Palestinians may only build on 25% of their land (one-twentieth as much), and even that land can be confiscated. (The city currently has demolition orders on up to 1000 Arab residential buildings.) The policy, ultimately, is to have small widespread populations, unable to move between areas in an independent Palestine in name only—in other words, the Bantustan solution.”

CPT

—from a report by John Engle, a current delegate with CPT

## *Durable Peace Agreement Being Pre-empted?*

*“Israel is pre-empting any chances of a durable peace agreement based on a vision of two viable states, one Israeli and one Palestinian, living side by side,”  
says Palestinian researcher.*

The November Session Bat Kol Study Group has just completed its intensive study month, and the Bible teachers and clergy from eight countries have returned home. One of the highlights last week was the visit to Bethlehem-area Palestinian homes for a meal and conversation, followed by a consciousness-raising meeting with Dr. Jad Isaac, Director at the Applied Research Institute, Jerusalem (ARIJ, a Mennonite Central Committee partner organization since the early 1990s). His illustrated lecture on the Israeli military presence, and the carving up of the land for Jewish settlements, highlighted the conflicting policies of the current Israeli government and those parties—Palestinian and international—who foresee disaster for the future of the Palestinian people with such measures.

MCC’s Country Representative, Alain Epp Weaver, recently wrote that Dr. Isaac has been examining GIS satellite images of the West Bank to analyze Israeli colonial expansion (through the construction of illegal Israeli ‘settlements’ which Isaac insists should more accurately be called colonies). For him, the facts on the ground point in one direction: Israel is pre-empting any chances of a durable peace agreement based on a vision of two viable states, one Israeli and one Palestinian, living side by side.

Since Ariel Sharon became Israel’s Prime Minister in March 2001, the growth of existing Israeli colonies—and the construction of new ones—has skyrocketed. ARIJ has identified 24 new colonies in the West Bank, the expansion of 45 more, and the establishing of 113 new ‘outposts,’ i.e., caravans placed on hilltops which later develop into a full-fledged colony. The placement of new colonies and outposts is strategic: first, Jerusalem is being progressively encircled by rings of Israeli colonies which break up the contiguity of Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and which separate East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.

*“These various developments leave Palestinian population centers separated from one another, and will create various isolated ‘cantons’.”*

Secondly, the ‘separation’ fence which cuts through the north of West Bank is isolating some neighboring villages from the rest of the West Bank...These various developments leave Palestinian population centers separated from one another and will create various isolated ‘cantons’ (what Isaac and many other observers call ‘bantustans,’ referring back to the ‘homelands’ created by the apartheid-era government in South Africa) within the West Bank—the canton of Bethlehem, for example, or of Ramallah, Nablus/Jenin, or Hebron.

Although Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has voiced his readiness to accept a Palestinian state, [what he] envisions for it is at most 40% of the West Bank, a state which would have no territorial contiguity, little control over vital natural resources such as water, and which would thus be economically unviable.

Israeli colonial expansion appears to be putting the nails in the coffin of any plans for a viable two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Against the daily reality of new bypass roads being built, new 25-foot high guard walls with watchtowers being built, and more colonies constructed, talk of USA and *Quartet* (US/UN/Russia/European Union) ‘roadmaps’ for the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005 appear naïve at best and dangerous at worst. ‘Naïve’ because it seems clear that Israeli colonial expansion which has already happened has possibly undermined the viability of any Palestinian state. ‘Dangerous’ in that Israel will attempt to present a willingness to accept a Palestinian ‘state’ in the discontinuous 35-40% of the West Bank as a ‘painful compromise.’

*—from Alain Epp Weaver’s introduction to MCC Palestine Update #66*

## *Egyptian Cleric Defends Suicide Bombers, Considers Falwell a ‘Terrorist’*

In an interview with *Insight* magazine, the newly appointed grand mufti of Egypt—the highest religious authority in the land and a man who has the power to issue fatwas (death warrants) and interpretations of *shari’a* law—has defended Palestinian suicide bombings and called the Rev. Jerry Falwell a terrorist because of his views on Islam [see *Hizbollah Leader Blasts Christian Zionists*, *MennoLetter* No. 7, page 6]. As in most other Arab countries, the Egyptian state appoints the grand mufti; President Hosni Mubarak named Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb to the post earlier this year after his predecessor issued a ruling in favor of suicide bombings by Palestinians. Ironically, Al-Tayyeb has taken a stance similar to the previous grand mufti.

Throughout the 90-minute interview, Al-Tayyeb repeated in detail his reasoning for encouraging Palestinians to kill innocent civilians through suicide attacks. Palestinians, he said, are justified in killing Israeli civilians “because they are defending their land and have no other weapons at their disposal.” The grand mufti pointedly condemned as a traitor any Palestinian who refuses to take such a step. Al-Tayyeb also offered his own definition of terrorism. He says Falwell, an influential leader in the American Christian community, is a terrorist because his views about Islam have offended Muslims. “Why do the Americans always speak about Islamic terrorism?” he asked. “Why don’t they speak about the extreme right-wing Christian terrorists?”

—in a report from *For Your Glory*

*“The man was behaving in an obviously severely traumatized manner  
[but] the soldiers continued to humiliate him.”*

### *Human Rights Indignities Continuing*

Israeli soldiers forced a Palestinian man to strip naked and crawl around in the mud making animal noises in an incident that was a stark reminder of the continued brutal and inhumane control that Israeli forces are exerting over the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The incident occurred in the West Bank city of Nablus a couple of weeks ago when the 25-year-old man was attempting to reach the local medical clinic. Three armed Israeli soldiers ordered him to stop and wait. For approximately one hour he was held—either sitting on the wet and muddy ground or standing in the cold rain. The soldiers then decided to amuse themselves by forcing him “to crawl around like an animal on all fours, and make animal noises,” according to eyewitnesses. They added that although the man was behaving in an obviously severely traumatized manner, the soldiers continued to humiliate him and threaten him with their weapons.

Earlier this year, soldiers buried a man in the sand at a checkpoint in Gaza. Recently, an Israeli soldier was found to have been openly stealing and feeding to stray dogs the lunches of Palestinian workers trying to cross checkpoints on their way to work. The prohibition of torture and degrading treatment in international law is absolute: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” says Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Similar phrases appear in many other international human rights texts to which Israel is a party.

—from *Palestine Monitor*. See also: [www.palestinemonitor.org](http://www.palestinemonitor.org)

***Tourism Slowly Climbing Back Up:*** During the month of September 73,000 tourists entered Israel, 7% fewer than in September 2001, but a continuation of the upward trend of the past few months. The number of entering tourists has climbed an average of 2.6% in each of the past few months, or an average increase of 5% in the second third of this year compared to the first third.

## *Human Chain Stops Bulldozer Destruction*

*“Men and women, old and young, made their way to the land, linked arms and confronted the oncoming vehicles.”*

Two weeks ago, over 150 Palestinian farmers and international and Israeli human rights activists gathered in the path of Israeli police jeeps and bulldozers with the goal of blocking the bulldozers from continuing with the destruction of olive groves and agricultural land in Jayyous, West Bank. Despite a curfew that was imposed on the village, men and women, old and young, made their way to the land, linked arms and confronted the oncoming vehicles. At the same time, four international activists chained themselves to olive trees scheduled to be uprooted to make way for the ‘separation wall’ that the Israeli government is building.

The will of these civilians to use their bodies to resist the continued destruction of their land won out as the jeeps and bulldozer pulled back, waited about an hour, then withdrew from the area completely. Soon after, the Mayor of Jayyous, accompanied by Canadian Darlene Cox and an Israeli activist, planted a sapling on the site, in the place of the hundreds of Jayyous’ olive trees that had been uprooted, as a symbol of life and the determination of the people that will not be crushed. The gatherers then broke out in song, first the Palestinian national anthem, then “*We Shall Overcome*” before they marched through the town in defiance of the Israeli-imposed curfew.

*“We want the world to know that this wall is not being erected to provide security for the Israelis; it’s another ploy...to steal more Palestinian land.”*

The site of the gathering this morning is a site where a great amount of work has already been done to clear the land for the separation wall, and only 50 meters from the homes of Jayyous residents. The wall being erected by the Israeli government is being brought 6-8 kilometers inside the Green Line and is destroying and isolating up to 80% of Jayyous’ agricultural land. “We want the world to know that this wall is not being erected to provide security for the Israelis; it’s just another ploy by the Israeli government to steal more Palestinian land. They are taking our land and water and sowing the seeds of hatred,” said village representative, Sharif Omar.

*—From a report by the International Solidarity Movement [ISM].*

*For more information: [www.jerusalem.indymedia.org/news/2002/11/89084.php](http://www.jerusalem.indymedia.org/news/2002/11/89084.php)*

## *“What Have I Done!”*

*—Israeli Soldiers Treated for ‘Intifada Syndrome’*

A special rehabilitation village has been set up to take care of former combat soldiers who suffer from a deep mental crisis, a hundred of whom are at present undergoing treatment. Some suffer from nightmares, and are unable to face up to operational failures and having harmed civilians. Veterans of elite units are being treated at the ‘Izun’ rehabilitation village near Caesarea, by a staff that includes seven reserve officers. The project is supported by Orit Mofaz, wife of the new Defense Minister. The treatment is financed by the ex-soldiers’ parents. Four newly admitted patients are ex-members of the *Duvdevan* [Special Forces] unit carrying out arrests and assassinations while disguised as Arabs.

They joined the most elite of units, full of motivation. They served terms of three years and more, fought in the hardest battles of the Intifada, but also had to face the civilian Palestinian population. Now discharged, their difficulties are exposed—the personal problems and crises, the self flagellation. The magnitude of the phenomenon is frightening: dozens went on backpacking trips to the Far East where they became addicted to drugs, and some tried to commit suicide.

*—Eitan Rabin in Ma’ariv*

## *American Jews & Arabs Agree on Palestinian State: Poll*

*An overwhelming majority of both groups agree with the basic premise that Palestinians have a right to live in a secure and independent state of their own.*

The organizations *Americans for Peace Now* and the *Arab American Institute*, headed by pollster James Zogby, have jointly released a poll conducted a month ago of the views of American Jews and American Arabs. Among the more important results: an overwhelming majority of both groups agree with the basic premise that Palestinians have a right to live in a secure and independent state of their own (Jews: 85.5%; Arabs: 96.6%). A plurality of the two groups also express similar views as to who is blame for the conflict, with 42.1% of Jews and 49.6% of Arabs blaming both sides.

The poll suggests that there is solid support in both communities for an agreement along the lines suggested by the Taba talks in early 2001, including Israeli withdrawal from most settlements, a border close to the pre-1967 lines, a shared Jerusalem, and the right of return for Palestinians to confiscated land and homes. A majority of Arab Americans (65.8%) and a plurality of Jewish Americans (45.4%) feel that the Bush administration should be more involved in peacemaking, and that it should steer a middle course without favoring either side. Large percentages on both sides rate poorly the Bush administration's handling of the conflict.

Some of the less hopeful news: most Jews (71.8%) believe that Israel should continue to respond with a combination of military force and negotiations. On the other hand, a large majority of Jews are willing to see an evacuation of settlements in the context of a peace agreement. The poll results indicate that Arab Americans and Jewish Americans ought to make common cause in demanding a serious American response to the conflict and engagement of the two sides.

For detailed poll results: [www.aaiusa.org](http://www.aaiusa.org) or [www.peacenow.org/nia/pr/poll.pdf](http://www.peacenow.org/nia/pr/poll.pdf) >here

—from *Peace Now*

## *Human Rights Group Condemns Suicide Bombings*

In a searing report recently published, Human Rights Watch condemns Palestinian suicide bombings and other attacks on Israeli civilians as crimes against humanity and war crimes, and calls for the prosecution of those responsible, including the political leadership of militant groups such as Hamas. In an exhaustive 160-page report, the organization found no evidence to support Israeli government accusations that Yasser Arafat and his Palestinian Authority ordered suicide bombings and attacks on civilians. But the report does accuse Mr. Arafat of not doing enough to prevent attacks. Past prosecutions against senior political leaders for crimes against humanity have depended on establishing their responsibility through a direct chain of command. In Mr. Arafat's case, the report says, there is no conclusive evidence that any such chain of command exists.

More than 415 civilians have been killed and more than 2,000 injured in attacks by Palestinian militants since the outbreak of the current intifada, nearly all of which were suicide bombings. In interviews with witnesses, the report provides a harrowing picture of the effects of the bombings.

***No MennoLetter next Month!** MennoLetter from Jerusalem will not be published in January. The current issue brings Vol. I to a close for 2002; you will receive Vol. II, No. 1, on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003. During December, for my holiday period, I will be visiting some previous church assignment locations in Bolivia and Argentina for a time of voluntary service work, followed by itineration to a number of North American churches and colleges in Ontario and Pennsylvania for the month of January. My return to Jerusalem is on January 29<sup>th</sup>. —GEW*

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