



# MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

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*“Nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will.  
Its seat is in the heart and it must be an inseparable part of our very being.”*  
—Mohandas Gandhi

*“War may sometimes be a necessary evil.  
But no matter how necessary, it is always evil, never good.  
We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other’s children.”*  
—President Jimmy Carter

*“We do not seek to be victims nor do we seek to be heroes. All we want is to be ordinary.”*  
—Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish

*“As Christians we must commit ourselves to be the voice of those silenced.”*  
—Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem

## ~MY VOICE...

**This is a tough month, to live and to write about.** While the rest of the world worries over what the White House will do next regarding Iraq, here the Israelis, Palestinians, and ex-pats look at the fallout of those American decisions. As embassies send their non-essential personnel home, and advise their citizens here to exercise extreme caution, family and friends at home express their concern and hope that we too will be packing our bags and moving to presumably safer ground. No, we write back. We plan to stay...our lives and work cannot be dictated by war-mongers, and bulldozing foreign policies. If only it would be so simple to leave for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who are going through one of the worst periods of their lives.

I struggled in vain to balance out the reporting in this issue, to have Israeli input that would speak coherently to the peace and justice issues being raised this month. There *are* many sane voices and passionate fighters for human rights—on the Israeli as well as the Palestinian sides. Next month this space will focus on some amazing efforts at cross-cultural and inter-religious reconciliation that rarely get enough press attention internationally—and almost none in these parts! But I’m afraid that this month it’s a fairly harsh attack you will read in these columns, from an array of sources responding to terrible scenes of destruction, of frustrating helplessness in the face of militaristic bullying, and heart-rending accounts of lives being torn and shredded like wasted goods.

*The accounts you will read of the ‘Apartheid Wall’* [don’t miss *The Guardian* map site, page 6], new efforts at land grabs and settlement construction, and the horrors of forced transfers of innocents from their homes—stories that seem to be lifted from the Nazi era textbooks—all raise our hackles, churn our stomachs and very beings at the injustice that slithers in from all sides, nudges here, pushes there, destroying all around. Surely we as civilized citizens of the world cannot tolerate this. As Christians, our voices dare not remain silent as though nothing is wrong. Let us not remain impassive, unconcerned—distant and uninvolved—while our fellow human beings are in danger of losing their humanity, if not their lives. *We dare not say we didn’t know it is happening!* —GEW

*The repugnant idea of the 'transfer' of the Palestinians—  
enforced mass expulsion—now appeals to many Israelis.*

## *Israel: A New Palestinian Diaspora*

Israeli journalist Amira Hass has reported that Israel might conduct a mass, involuntary expulsion of some or all of the Palestinian people. She points to clear warning signs indicating this real possibility, and the warning signs are not being addressed. The debate over such a move is gradually acquiring legitimacy and popular acceptance in Israel, as the far-right Moledet party is working to encourage the voluntary emigration of Palestinians and to court international support for an 'approved' (i.e., government-sanctioned but involuntary) expulsion of those who do not choose to leave.

The majority of Israelis do not support such ethnic cleansing. But the *Ha'aretz* journalist, based in Ramallah, raises questions about whether the government is prepared to block groups of militant extremists from taking the matter into their own hands. She points to the fact that the higher ranking military officers are increasingly drawn from rightwing religious factions and other groups that openly favor expulsion. Moreover, the attorney general, while rejecting 'transfer' schemes, refuses to take action against the criminal behavior of its proponents. Hass points to 'mini-transfers,' small-scale migrations of Palestinians in response to Israeli terrorism. Israelis seem unconcerned about these events and content with the illegal, mass confinement of the Palestinian population within their homes or towns. "Anyone traveling in Israeli-only sections might get the impression that the expulsion has already happened: the roads, Palestinian villages, lands and orchards, are deserted."

All Palestinians, whether Israeli Arabs or those in the West Bank or Gaza, remember the 1948 expulsion and unceasingly vow: "This time we won't let them drive us out." The Palestinians are well aware of the danger, though their legal expertise and their links to the international community on both sides of the Green Line separating Israel from the occupied territories provide some protection.

*—Judith Norman in Jewish Peace News*

## *Sharon Faces Belgian Trial after Term Ends*

Belgium's highest court said in a recent ruling that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel could be tried for war crimes under the nation's laws, although not as long as he enjoyed the immunity of his office. The case against Mr. Sharon dates back to 2001, when survivors of the 1982 massacres at refugee camps in Beirut filed a criminal complaint, holding him and another Israeli responsible for the deaths of their relatives. Some 800 Palestinians were killed by Phalangist troops, Israeli allies at the time, in the two refugee camps. An Israeli commission of inquiry in 1983 concluded that Sharon, then defense minister, had a personal responsibility for the events.

By filing their case in Belgium, the survivors hoped to make use of the country's 1993 law that allows the courts "universal jurisdiction" over crimes against humanity or war crimes anywhere. This ruling recognized the immunity of high public office, like the posts of prime minister, president and foreign minister. But the judges implied that the case against Mr. Sharon could be pursued after he left office, lawyers said. Citing that ruling, a lawyer for the plaintiffs, hailed the decision as a victory.

*—Marlise Simons, New York Times*

## ***NEWS FLASH!** Mennonite Worker in Jerusalem Hit by Sniper!*

On the streets of the Muslim Quarter, while returning from meeting with the newly arrived CPT delegation this week, *MennoLetter* editor Witmer was hit by a sniper who aimed from a shop rooftop. Witmer was struck twice, on the knee and then on the back of the neck. This second one caused the greatest problem since the snow was soggy wet, and the snowballs being hurled at passersby ran icy cold down the inside of our clothes. ☺ Teenage gales of laughter echoed through the streets as we dashed for safety... *We've just had one of the biggest snow storms in 50 years, with a foot of snow, flash flooding on the roads, thunder and lightning—closing all schools and shops. Rivers are overflowing, and the Sea of Galilee is up 3½ meters, a much needed blessing!* Now, if only all the shots fired here could just melt away as quickly...

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

Dr. Lev Grinberg, Director of the Humphrey Institute of Social Research asks,  
*“Who will be sentenced for the killing of more than 1,200 Palestinians  
and for the collective punishment of more than 3,000,000 civilians during the last 18 months?”*

### *Israel’s State Terrorism*

What is the difference between State terrorism and individual terrorist acts? If we understand this difference we’ll understand also the evilness of the US policies in the Middle East and the forthcoming disasters. When Yassir Arafat was put under siege in his offices and kept hostage by the Israeli occupation forces, he was constantly pressed into condemning terror and combating terrorism. Israel’s State terrorism is defined by US officials as ‘self-defense’, while individual suicide bombers are called terrorists.

The only ‘small’ difference is that Israeli aggression is the direct responsibility of Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Ben Eliezer, Shimon Peres and Shaul Mofaz, while the individual terrorist acts are done by individuals in despair, usually against Arafat’s will. One hour after Arafat declared his support of a cease fire and wished the Jews a Happy Passover feast, a suicide bomber exploded himself in an hotel in Netanya, killing 22 innocent Jews celebrating Passover. Arafat was blamed as responsible for this act, and the present IDF offensive has been justified through this accusation. At the same time, Sharon’s responsibility for Israeli war crimes is being completely ignored. Who should be arrested for the targeted killing of almost 100 Palestinians? Who will be sent to jail for the killing of more than 120 Palestinian paramedics? Who will be sentenced for the killing of more than 1,200 Palestinians and for the collective punishment of more than 3,000,000 civilians during the last 18 months? And who will face the International Tribunal for the illegal settlement of occupied Palestinian Lands, and the disobedience of UN decisions for more than 35 years?

Suicide bombs killing innocent citizens must be unequivocally condemned; they are immoral acts, and their perpetrators should be sent to jail. But they cannot be compared to State terrorism carried out by the Israeli Government. The former are individual acts of despair of a people that sees no future, vastly ignored by an unfair and distorted international public opinion. The latter are cold and ‘rational’ decisions of a State and a military apparatus of occupation, well equipped, financed and backed by the only superpower in the world.

Yet in the public debate, State terrorism and individual suicide bombs are not even considered comparable cases of terrorism. The State terror and war crimes perpetrated by the Israeli Government are legitimized as ‘self-defense’, while Arafat, even under siege, is demanded to arrest ‘terrorists.’

*–Dr. Lev Grinberg is a political sociologist and  
Director of the Humphrey Institute for Social Research at Ben Gurion University, Israel*

*The Israeli state is very intelligent and focused  
in its drive to subdue and destroy Palestinian society.*

*Art Gish of CPT writes from Hebron,*

### *“The Israelis are neither stupid nor crazy”*

At first glance, nothing makes sense here in Hebron. Why would the Israeli military close universities on the pretext of ending terrorism when those closings make the students both angry and idle? Why did Israeli bulldozers flatten the main produce terminal in the hungry city of Hebron? Why has a major part of Hebron been under 24-hour curfew for 90 days? Why are the Israelis demolishing the Palestinian economy?

Recently, I took a bus from Hebron to Bethlehem. Soldiers had a roadblock just north of Hebron. All Palestinian traffic was stopped for two hours. Why? Certainly not for security reasons on the road ahead, because Israeli buses and cars breezed by as we sat waiting. Suddenly the soldiers said we could go and we were on our way to Bethlehem. This is an example of daily restrictions on the free

movement of Palestinians with no reasons given. What did this accomplish? It certainly disrupted the lives of many Palestinians. It made everyone angry and disgusted at the Israelis. It helped bring neither peace nor security to anyone.

The increasingly harsh treatment of Palestinians certainly will not bring peace. Making people desperate and angry will not bring peace. Taking away people's hope will not bring peace. Humiliating and degrading people will not bring peace. Are the Israeli occupiers stupid or crazy? No. The Israeli state is very intelligent and focused in its drive to subdue and destroy Palestinian society. The only explanation that makes any sense to me is that Israel is in the process of ethnically cleansing major parts of the occupied territories. The answer I most frequently receive from Israeli soldiers when I ask them why they are acting in such seemingly nonsensical ways is that all of Palestine belongs only to Jews, and Israelis can do anything they want. International law, they say, does not apply to Israel because Israel is operating under God's law. The state of Israel is now in defiance of close to 400 UN resolutions.

No, the Israelis are neither stupid nor crazy. Their strategy of slowly taking more and more and cleansing more and more areas of Palestinians is part of a clear strategy of gradually confiscating most, if not all of the Palestinian land. This policy of ethnic cleansing is euphemistically called 'transfer.' The Israeli government is smart, focused, and knows exactly what it is doing.

*—Christian Peacemaker Teams[CPT] is an ecumenical initiative to support violence reduction efforts around the world.*

<http://www.cpt.org>

*According to Justin Huggler in The Independent:*

**"It has become known as Israel's 'Berlin Wall'—with electrified fences and concrete."**

## *Bethlehem Divided with Wall of Concrete and Fear*

As you arrive from Jerusalem, the first street of Bethlehem, lined with old, carved limestone houses, is deserted. Where the tourists used to throng, the restaurants are boarded up. In a few months, a high concrete wall will run down the middle of this street, blocking a neighborhood of Bethlehem from the rest of the city. The inhabitants here, predominantly from Bethlehem's fast-dwindling Palestinian Christian community, will be cut off from their city by a concrete wall guarded by Israeli army patrols. They will be allowed to cross into Bethlehem only through an Israeli army checkpoint, with permits the army can issue or withhold as it sees fit.

The wall is part of what has become known as Israel's "Berlin Wall", electrified fences and concrete walls the Israeli government is building around the West Bank to seal it off and stop Palestinian militants crossing into Israel. Here, as elsewhere, the wall is not following the 1967 border but dipping deep into the West Bank. The reason it is slicing into Bethlehem, say Israeli authorities, is so Rachel's Tomb will be on the Israeli side of the wall, guaranteeing easy access for pilgrims. For the 500 or so people who will be cut off from the rest of Bethlehem, the wall is a disaster.

"Why do they need the wall?" asks the Mayor of Bethlehem, Hanna Nasser. "That whole area around Rachel's Tomb is already under full Israeli control under the Oslo Accords." The tomb is already surrounded by a concrete wall, and there are Israeli army guard-posts on top of the buildings around it. "Why do they need it unless they have hidden intentions?" says Mr. Nasser, suggesting the real reason for walling off the area is to force the people to leave, so the land can be annexed to Israel. That sentiment is echoed by Dr. Jad Isaac, of the Applied Research Institute, Jerusalem, a Palestinian organization that makes maps of Israeli settlement-building in the occupied territories using satellite images. These show Bethlehem being surrounded by fences to protect new settlement suburbs of Jerusalem built in the occupied West Bank. "There will be no room for Bethlehem to expand naturally," Dr. Isaac says. "The population density will become so high people will start leaving freely. We will be forced to migrate."

[http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle\\_east/story.jsp?story=380487](http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/story.jsp?story=380487)

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb writes:

*“If a preemptive war against Iraq is possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then [so is] an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israel.”*

## *The Iraqi War’s Effect on the Palestinians*

The overwhelming majority of Palestinians oppose a possible war against Iraq for very rational, genuine reasons: Palestinians are first and foremost afraid that Israel will exploit the world’s preoccupation with war on Iraq and the sole media focus on that part of the world, to carry out its dirtiest fantasies with the Palestinians. The first measure expected from the Israeli Military Government is that a 24-hour curfew will be imposed for the duration of the war. 2.5 million Palestinians will be put under house arrest for months. Over 1.5 million children will be prevented from going to school. Employees will be unable to go to their work and sick people will be unable to receive medical care. The same scenario happened during the gulf war in 1991.

A war on Iraq will put Israel in the political blind spot to do these operations away from the eyes of the world. A reoccupation of the Gaza Strip will mean the total cancellation of what remains from the 1993 Oslo Agreement. A war will even bring Israel into its biggest temptation, fulfilling the desires of right wing Zionists, by using this war as a unique opportunity to ‘transfer’ large numbers of Palestinians forcefully out of the West Bank and Gaza, something called in other contexts ‘ethnic cleansing.’ If a preemptive war against Iraq is possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israel is not out of range of today’s politics.

*As Christians we must commit ourselves to be the voice of those silenced.* The seeds of war and military occupation will never bring peace. As Christians we stick to the biblical truth that the fruit of Justice shall be peace. Islamic Fundamentalists, who have a Western-phobia, as well as fundamentalist Christians, who have a Muslim-phobia, will use this war to widen the gap between the Arab-Islamic world and the USA. The context of war provides an ideal environment for terrorist groups—those who hate America, on the one side, and those who hate the Muslim world, on the other, will increase also. The price of this mutual hate will be paid mainly by Christians living as minorities in the Muslim World, or to some degree by Muslims living as minorities in the Western World. As Christians

we are called to break these stereo-types of each other. We admire the witness of Israeli Jews from the peace camp who refuse to serve in the occupied territory.

*Palestinians are worried that a war will bring more misery, poverty and stagnation* into a worldwide fragile economic situation. It’s amazing how good the powers of this world are when it comes to launching a war. Suddenly, coalitions are created, the sacrifice of human lives (in other contexts called homicide) is tolerated, and funds are made available. The second Gulf War in 1991 had a cost of over US \$360 billion. On the other hand, only \$5 billion was made available by the super powers to invest in the peace process of 1993.

*Millions of new refugees are expected to be added to the other millions of displaced people* in the Middle East as a result of this war.

Palestinians are asking themselves, “Aren’t the same destructive powers which we find in Saddam’s actions also at work in many of the superpowers?” Most of them lack a sense of genuine concern for human lives, and real stewardship of our planet’s resources. The only resource they seem to be interested in is oil.

“My colleagues, we have an obligation to our citizens, we have an obligation to this body to see that our resolutions are complied with.” This was the conclusion of Secretary Powell in his address to the UN Security Council on February 5. We wonder how the same countries and the same council have been dealing with their obligation towards the Palestinian People. We would like to see Powell presenting the satellite pictures of the illegal yet expanding Israeli colonies in the West Bank and Gaza. We ask ourselves why is it that the same country and the same council is tolerating total non-compliance by Israel with its many resolutions in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel is even refusing to allow UN inspectors into the West Bank and Gaza. A double standard is very obvious here. Iraq is oily, Israel holy.

*—Dr. Raheb is pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem*

## *See the Apartheid Fence*

*The Guardian* newspaper has put together a presentation showing  
Israeli plans for fencing off the West Bank.  
*[Be sure to click on the map and then the arrow at bottom.]*

*Click on:* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,5860,743170,00.html>

*—Special thanks to Dr. Fred Strickert, Professor of Religion, Wartburg College, for alerting me to this site.*

## *Jews Purchase More Homes in Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter*

An ancient house in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem has received new Jewish residents. The house, located just inside the Damascus Gate entrance, was recently purchased by a yeshiva [school for Torah study] from an Arab family that lived there previously. Local television reported that similar purchase efforts are continuing in other areas of Jerusalem as well. The latest acquisition: a building in a largely Jewish-owned but Arab-populated neighborhood outside the Old City that was about to be sold to the Arab tenant. Initiatives of the same sort in other neighborhoods have led to Jewish presences there, replacing Arab families.

Acquisition of the new building is especially significant to Jewish worshippers and the 55 Jewish families already living in the Arab-populated area of the Old City, because of its strategic location near the route connecting the Western Wall with Damascus Gate. The new Jewish presence in the area, say supporters, gives a renewed sense of security to Jews on their way to the Western Wall. The area has been witness in recent years to a number of incidents in which Jewish pedestrians were threatened or attacked by local Arabs. "For generations, Jews have been attracted to the center of Jerusalem and to the areas close to the Temple Mount," explained a Jewish leader. "We are just coming home."

*—For Your  
Glory*

## *Will Bedouins Also Face Expulsion from Their Homes?*

Recently Israel demolished a Bedouin mosque in the Negev Desert. The 100-square meter mosque was built with [US\$20,000] collected by the 3,000 villagers, and that Friday there were plans to hold communal prayers there. The government refuses to recognize 45 Bedouin villages in the Negev, which are home to 70,000 people, and will not issue construction permits for the inhabitants. Bedouin and civil rights groups are worried that this marks the beginning of a large-scale Israeli plan for transferring the 70,000 inhabitants of these villages and converting the land into use by government-sanctioned, Jewish-only settlements.

The Bedouin within Israel do not face anything like the brutal treatment of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Still, the work of bulldozers, talk of transfer, and plans for Jewish-only settlements are all too familiar signs that Palestinian citizens of Israel also face systematic, state-sponsored discrimination and violence. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel wrote a vehement letter to the prime minister demanding an immediate halt to steps against unrecognized villages.

*—Jewish Peace News*

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