



# MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

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“No country can conduct its  
affairs without a decent respect for world opinion.”

—Thomas Jefferson

“A Palestinian state, when it’s created, must be a real state,  
not a phony state that’s diced into a thousand different pieces.”

—U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell

“We need to work together to stop any kind of religious extremism  
that dehumanizes other religions and nations.”

—Dr. Munib A. Younan, Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem

“I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.”

—Thomas Jefferson

## ~MY VOICE...

“The challenge is not to become inoculated against the barrage of bad reports,  
ever more graphic and frequent.”

## Longing For Reconciliation, and Hope

Here are some of the recent names: Christine Saadeh, Rachel Corrie, Muwaiq Abdel Raziq Badawni ...there are dozens more. People who have been killed by Israeli military units in one way or another. Badawni was the target of the latest Israeli extra judicial execution, illegal under international law and the Geneva Convention. Was he guilty of something? The military said yes, but no court or judge was involved. He received a bullet in the head. Another bullet killed 10-year-old Christine from Bethlehem. No one ever considered her dangerous...she was just driving by with her family when the bullets started flying. She is the niece of our maintenance man at Tantur Institute where I live.

Rachel, an American, was crushed by a bulldozer that was preparing to demolish yet another Palestinian home—there have been many hundreds already; she placed herself between the house and the machine, trying to make it stop, and failed. *The Coalition of Women for Peace* placed an announcement in an Israeli paper shortly after: “We extend heartfelt condolences to the Corrie family and to all members of the International Solidarity Movement on the murder of Rachel, during her valiant and nonviolent efforts to prevent the destruction of a Palestinian family’s home. The occupation has led to a cheapening of human life—Palestinian, Israeli, and others.”

*All around us the destruction and dehumanizing goes on.* The challenge for writers, workers for peace, and all citizens concerned with what is happening to this land is not to become inoculated against the barrage of bad reports, ever more graphic and frequent, it seems. “There’s been another assassination. Another murder. Another house crushed and another family homeless.” Then there is another... In the aftermath of the carnage and loss of innocence for this society, one feels that even hope itself may become a victim of the terror and bloodshed.

*Perhaps that is what makes even more noble the valiant efforts* of thousands of people involved in an array of agencies, groups, movements, and parties who vigorously oppose the current state of affairs, who raise their voices and demonstrate their opposition. Often they are ignored, many times drowned out—sometimes with the boos of critics. But they persist, and keep alive our hope, and future dreams. While some work to oppose the government or the military, many are active at another level, that of working for reconciliation among the many diverse religious, cultural, and political entities that are part of this society and its citizens—the core area for change.

Churches and NGO's are active everywhere. The *Women's Interfaith Encounter* in Jerusalem meets regularly to share experiences among its Jewish, Muslim, and Christian members. Israeli *Rabbis for Human Rights* are actively involved with Palestinians. *Nazareth Village*, the reconstruction of a first-century village of Jesus' time, has had thousands of Muslim school children as visitors. Father Elias Chacour's group is taking its final steps, after ten years of effort, to open an Arab Christian University, Mar Elias, in Ibillin, "where Christians, Muslims, and Jews can study together in Israel" says its Vice President. And many, many more similar efforts across the spectrum of society.

It's enough to give one HOPE again. —GEW

### *A means of reconciliation, 'From Remembrance to Peace': "The Pain Will Unite Us"*

A group of Israeli Arab intellectuals is planning to participate in a trip to Nazi death camps in Poland this spring, hoping to gain a deeper understanding of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and to use the trip as a springboard for implementing a change in damaged Jewish-Arab relationships. Participants in the mission, called 'From Remembrance to Peace,' are careful not to compare the scope of the atrocities of the Holocaust with the contemporary Palestinian plight.

The idea of Arabs visiting Polish concentration camps was born in the wake of deteriorating relations between Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens, especially after the violent riots of October 2000 during which thirteen Israeli Arabs were killed by security forces. A mission statement issued by the group says: "Just as we want to heal our own pain, we are looking for a way to heal the pain of the other. From the acceptance of this principle, we decided to go deep into history to search for a path for a restored future."

Father Emil Shufani, head of the Catholic community in Nazareth initiated the project. Shufani, a writer and school principal, believes that study of the Holocaust can lead the way to healing the rift between Arabs and Jews. "There is potential in the subject of the Holocaust that we have not understood and known," he said. "The initiative is meant to reach places of pain—to learn, to touch, to take part of the pain and suffering unto ourselves; because it is the pain that will unite us. We want to understand what the destruction was, and what the suffering was. We don't want anything in return. We seek to touch the pain of the other in order to understand and move forward." The group is made up of university lecturers, writers, doctors, religious leaders, and private businessmen. It claims to have no political interests or affiliations and is planning a quiet and respectful trip touring the Nazi death camps. "We are trying in a way that was not tried before to reach Jewish pain and connect to it. May it be God's will that the visit to Auschwitz will make it better for both nations," said a group participant. —*Yediot Aharonot*

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*The continuing heavy rains* have corrected a typographical error in last month's *MennoLetter* which had listed the rise in the water level of the level of the Kinneret/Sea of Galilee so far this season as 3.5 meters. At the time, that should have read 2.5 meters. However, because of the unusual rainy weather this year the increase is now about 3.8 meters since the rains began this winter—an influx of over 600 million cubic meters of water, bringing the lake up to 210 meters below sea level. Last week water was flowing from the Jordan River into the Kinneret at a rate of 100 cubic *meters per second* [*m<sub>ps</sub>*] compared to 71 cubic *m<sub>ps</sub>* a month ago, and just 16 cubic *m<sub>ps</sub>* at this time last year.

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

*“Up until now there has been just one superpower, the United States...”*

### *A Perspective of Hope, Instead of Despair*

*Some people in the audience were stunned at what they were hearing. Did this man know what he was talking about? Who could see the UN in any positive light during recent events?*

“Never before in the history of the world has there been a global, visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war.” Dr. Robert Muller, eighty years old, former assistant secretary general of the United Nations, now Chancellor emeritus of the University of Peace in Costa Rica, had witnessed the founding of the UN and has worked in support of or inside the UN ever since. Recently he was honored for his service to the world through the UN and through his writings and teachings for peace. Muller continued in front of his audience, “The whole world is in now having this critical and historic dialogue—listening to all kinds of points of view and positions about going to war or not going to war. In a huge global public conversation the world is asking, Is war legitimate? Is there enough evidence to warrant an attack? Is there not enough evidence to warrant an attack? What will be the consequences? The costs? What will happen after a war? How will this set off other conflicts? What might be peaceful alternatives? What kind of negotiations are we not thinking of? What are the real intentions for declaring war?”

All of this, he noted, is taking place in the context of the United Nations Security Council, the body that was established in 1949 for exactly this purpose. And at this moment in history it is the place where these conversations are happening, and it has become the most powerful governing body on earth, the most powerful container for the world’s effort to wage peace rather than war. Around the globe the largest peace demonstrations in the history of the world are taking place. Muller also made reference to a recent *New York Times* article that pointed out that up until now there has been just one superpower, the United States, and that this has created a kind of blindness in the vision of the US. But now, Muller asserts, there are two superpowers: the United States on one side, and the merging, surging voice of the people of the world. —Forwarded by Kevin Ogle

### *‘Deviating From the Principle of Separation’*

*Israel’s frontier with the West Bank is 365 kms long;  
The government has decided to fence off the whole line.*

The idea of a separation fence between Israel and the West Bank was born of necessity: when it turned out Palestinian terrorists were crossing the Green Line undisturbed to sow death in Israeli cities, the security fence was seen as a way to block their freedom of movement. It is also a way to prevent the undisturbed infiltration into the country of illegal Palestinian workers, estimated in the tens of thousands. From the start, the fence was not meant to delineate the permanent border between Israel and the Palestinian state; it was a unilateral Israeli step meant to improve security for the residents of the state of Israel. That is how it was defined by its initiators, and by the prime minister, who approved its construction in early June 2002. Therefore, the fence should have gone up along the Green Line to establish the zone it was intended to create.

But last week it was revealed the defense establishment has decided to divert the route of the fence eastward, deep into the West Bank, to surround the a number of settlements and their environs, indubitably to please the settlers, who have managed to dictate policy to the governments of Israel for the past 35 years, determining the attitude of the state toward the Palestinians. Moving the fence deep into Samaria gives it the significance of a political border; the settlers are striving to make sure it encompasses as many settlements over the Green Line as possible, no matter how far they are from it. Instead of making it as short as possible, as cheap as possible, and making certain it clearly delineates between Israeli territory and Palestinian territory, the fence is going to become a new obstacle to reaching an agreement between the two peoples. —From an editorial in *Ha’aretz Daily*

*“We have to make sure that we show even-handedness.”*

## *West is ‘Hypocritical’ on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said the West was hypocritical not to demand the same sort of adherence to UN Security Council resolutions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it does from Iraq. Straw told the BBC that with regards to the Middle East, he himself had been guilty of double standards “to a degree” but he promised that a new international peace plan, the so-called “Road Map,” was close to realization. Straw said he understood concern in the Arab world about what he called injustice against the Palestinians. “There is a real concern too that the West has been guilty of double standards, on the one hand saying the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Iraq must be implemented; on the other hand, sometimes appearing rather quixotic over the implementation of resolutions about Israel and Palestine,” Straw said.

Earlier Prime Minister Tony Blair told a press briefing, “We have to make sure that we show the even-handedness that I think the Arab world rightly demands by giving priority to the Middle East peace process. I am absolutely determined that we take forward this peace process because I believe it to be in the interests not just of the Palestinians but of Israel, too,” he said. Israeli diplomatic sources said that Straw’s words were “very upsetting,” and added, “It is too bad that Europe doesn’t distinguish between a bloodthirsty dictator who threatens the entire world and a democratic country dealing with the worst wave of terror the world has ever seen.” —*Ha’aretz*

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*The new Israeli Justice Minister* plans to introduce legislation that will allow civil marriages in Israel for Jews denied the right to marry according to *halacha* (Jewish religious law). A draft version of a civil marriage bill was prepared by members of *Shinui* party and approved by the National Religious Party during coalition negotiations clarifying issues of religion and state. The proposed legislation will grant every person the basic right to marry and raise a family. In Israel today “there are some 300,000 ‘*halacha* rejects’, for example: a man and a woman not of the same religion, or of a recognized religion. Under the new proposal, the Justice Ministry would recognize couples from civil ceremonies as being married, thus saving them from the need to go overseas to marry.”

## *Army Hardens Position on Conscientious Objectors*

*Never before in Israel have there been so many young objectors, men and women, openly declaring their refusal to enlist on grounds of conscience.*

Conscientious Objection as a visible and powerfully symbolic form of resistance to Israeli belligerence has reached a critical stage. Never before in Israel have there been so many young objectors, men and women, openly declaring their refusal to enlist on grounds of conscience. In recent months, some 320 high school seniors, girls and boys, signed a public letter declaring their refusal to serve in the Israeli army. While young women can obtain exemptions on grounds of conscience, young men such as pacifist Jonathan Ben-Artzi, one of the signatories of the High School Seniors’ Letter, are currently being court martialed after seven consecutive prison terms imposed in disciplinary procedures. Yoni now faces the daunting possibility of a three-year sentence.

Amnesty International is concerned about the number of Israeli soldiers and reservists detained because of their refusal to perform military service or to serve in the Occupied Territories. Conscripts refusing on grounds of conscience, and because they believe that the army is committing human rights violations, are imprisoned while other conscripts can be granted deferral from performing military service on religious grounds. The total number of conscientious objectors (COs) imprisoned since the current Palestinian intifada began is more than 180. Some are young conscripts while others are army reservists. Recently the Israeli army has hardened its position towards the conscript COs, and they have been sentenced to repeated terms of imprisonment of between 14 and 42 days each. Some of the young COs are now serving a sixth or even seventh consecutive prison sentence. *For more information see:* [http://web.amnesty.org/web/web.nsf/pages/IOT\\_Conscientious\\_Objectors](http://web.amnesty.org/web/web.nsf/pages/IOT_Conscientious_Objectors)

## *World Bank and UN Report 'Disastrous Situation' in Palestine*

The World Bank study released in March quantified the disastrous situation of the Palestinians. Sixty percent of Palestinians now live in poverty, and investment in the Palestinian economy has collapsed from an estimated \$1.5 billion in 1999 to just under \$140 million last year. The study said that Palestinians need \$1.1 billion in humanitarian aid this year just to cover the most urgent day-to-day needs.

Another study, by the UN, reports that nearly two million Palestinians are living on less than \$2 per day. Both reports put the cause of the collapse of the economy on the closures imposed on Palestinian areas by the Israeli army. These reports follow studies in the summer of 2002 on the nutritional consequences for the Palestinian children, which found that over 22.5 percent of Palestinian children under age five suffer from acute and chronic malnutrition. A UN economic advisor said, "There is a profound humanitarian crisis...It cannot be resolved by aid. Only a political solution can offer some hope of resolving the crisis."

## *60 New Settlements in Two Years*

*The reoccupation, terrorism, global recession, and loss of tourism all hurt Israel's economy.*

For over 30 years, US government officials have voiced opposition to Israel's building of settlements in the land occupied in 1967. Yet more than 60 new settlements have been established in the last two years, and the number of settlers increased by more than 11 percent since 2000. The reoccupation, terrorism, global recession and loss of tourism have all hurt Israel's economy, now experiencing its worst recession in decades. Even so, Prime Minister Sharon invested almost \$500 million in the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories in 2001. This calculation does not include the defense ministry costs of protecting the settlements.

In the last few months, there have been major news articles and polling on the settlements that reveal little popular support for settlements, even among Israelis—62 percent support dismantlement of most settlements as part of a peace agreement. In the meantime, Israel is requesting more help from the US in the form of \$9 billion in loan guarantees, which would allow Israel to receive loans from US commercial banks at a lower rate. —*Peace Now*

*"CMEP asks you to support placing meaningful conditions on new aid to Israel, conditions that will require Prime Minister Sharon to stop all settlement activity immediately and to begin the process of returning the settlers to Israel."*

—*Letter to President Bush from the Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP)*

## *"For Better or For Worse?"*

Wedding guests are bringing gas masks with their gifts as Israelis press on with marriages despite fears of an Iraqi missile strike. Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau asked couples not to cancel weddings unless they had no other choice. Friends of an Argentine immigrant couple who were married last week arrived toting gas masks they picked up at Ben Gurion airport. The shoebox-sized kits were piled into a corner of a wedding hall for the ceremony. "I bought a gas mask especially for my son's wedding," the groom's mother said. Iraq fired 39 Scud missiles at Israel during the 1991 Gulf War. As the war in Iraq began, the military told Israelis to keep gas masks within reach.\* Rabbi Lau also encouraged people to read Psalms to protect the country. The reading of Psalms encourages the likelihood of prayers being answered, according to Jewish tradition. —*The Associated Press*

\**MennoniteLetter* editor Witmer tried on his gas mask while overlooking the Temple Mount; see PHOTO at: <http://mennonitechurch.ca/news/jerusalemletter/>

*Devout Jews in Israel do not listen to the radio* or watch television during Shabbat. However, in times of crisis or war, Israel has a 'silent radio' system, developed to alert its citizens in case of imminent attack. The stations remain on, but quiet, and only begin to broadcast in the event of an incoming missile attack or other emergency. Because the threat of a missile attack from Iraq has not passed, the 'silent radio' system will remain operative each Shabbat for the duration of the war.

### ***“This Makes Many of us Christians Ashamed.”***

“When President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, who claim to be Christians, appear frequently on TV and talk about going to war, they represent the primitive warrior god of certain parts of the Bible whom we totally reject and find offensive,” says SABEEL in a recent release. “We believe they are acting contrary to the spirit and message of the Bible. They are not being peacemakers, but ‘warmakers’, and this makes many of us Christians ashamed. We follow the God of peace who wills peace and who makes us God’s children by virtue of loving, seeking, and pursuing peace. President Bush’s apparent motto is: *Seek WAR and pursue it.* The Bible says, *Seek PEACE and pursue it.* To whom should we listen?”  
—SABEEL Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center,  
Jerusalem

### ***Arafat Makes List of World’s Wealthiest***

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat made *Forbes* magazine’s list of the world richest people. With a personal fortune of at least \$300 million stashed away in Swiss banks, Arafat is featured in *Forbes* special annual issue on the world’s top 500 billionaires. Arafat placed No. 6 on a list of world leaders in the “kings, queens, and despots” category. Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd topped the list at \$20 billion, and Saddam Hussein was fourth with \$2 billion. *Forbes* wrote that Arafat has “feasted on all sorts of funds flowing into the PA, including aid money, Israeli tax transfers, and revenue from a casino and Coca-Cola bottler. Much of the money seems to be used to pay off others. New Finance Minister Salaam Fayad is now cleaning up the PA’s finances, cutting off much of Arafat’s cash flow.”

*The favorite name for Palestinian families having babies these days is Saddam,* according to a London-based pan-Arab daily. It said several male infants born in local hospitals in the last few days have been named Saddam in honor of the Iraqi president. “Many Palestinians are proud of this name,” said a Nablus reporter. “And many families keep posters of Saddam Hussein in their homes.”

### ***Work Begins on ‘Bulge’ in Temple Mount Wall***

The final stage of a major repair of the southern wall of the Temple Mount compound, during which most of the stones in the bulging part of the wall will be replaced, has finally begun. Last year, the Israel Antiquities Authority warned if the bulge were not repaired, the wall could collapse. The bulge covers an area of about 190 square meters. At its center, the bulge protrudes about 80 centimeters from the wall. But engineer Raaf Najam, deputy chair of the Committee for the Repair of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, and the head of the Jordanian team that is carrying out the repairs, said that once the current phase of the work is completed, this danger will be removed. Engineers will replace the stones over about 140 square meters of wall, with each stone that is removed being replaced by another the same size and shape. According to the Jordanians, the bulge was caused by faulty drainage of rainwater and sewage over a period of many years.

**Recommended reading:** Alain Epp Weaver’s article entitled “On *Exile: Yoder, Said, and a Theology of Land and Return,*” published in the Winter 2003 issue of *CrossCurrents*. The article looks at how the motif of exile functions in the theology of the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder and the political and critical writings of Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Said, and goes on to explore how the view from exile might inform theological approaches to questions of land and refugee return. Click on: <http://www.crosscurrents.org/Weaverwinter2003.htm/>

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