



Menno Letter from Jerusalem

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

“Anything war can do, peace can do better.”

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu

*“Freedom that depends on the subjugation of another people
is not freedom.”*

—Rabbi Michael Lerner, TIKKUN Community

“If we all hold hands, we can’t fight.”

—Fabian, age 6, Brooklyn, NY

~MY VOICE...

*“[North] Americans must understand how much despair currently pervades
both Israeli and Palestinian societies.”*

The Price of Freedom—From Exodus to Hope

Western Christians throughout the world have just celebrated what they usually call Easter. Arab Christians in Jerusalem, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the rest of the Arab countries refer to it as the “Feast of the Resurrection.” Whereas others refer to the site of the crucifixion as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Arabs call it “Kanisat Al-Qiyamah”—the Church of the Resurrection. I prefer their term. It gets right to the point that Paul makes in I Corinthians 15:14 [NIV], *“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, and so is your faith.”* It is our source of hope.

All too mindful of last year’s Passover massacre in Netanya, Israeli Jews made their final preparations for celebrating Passover as Jerusalem and the country were on high alert against another terror atrocity. Matza factories worked non-stop to supply every family with their portion of unleavened bread. Over 200 million matzas were consumed over the holiday. During Passover, devout Jews and many secular ones comply with strict rules to commemorate the exodus from slavery in Egypt to a new-found freedom.

At the core of the holiday’s rules is the prohibition on leavened products, like bread, which are cleared out of home cupboards and hidden by paper wrapping in supermarkets. Countertops that were exposed to yeast or grains are cleaned thoroughly and sometimes covered in foil. Ovens are sanitized, and pots and pans are dropped in huge vats of boiling water to remove every last trace of bread and leaven, symbolic of sin in the scriptures. Even fast-food chains like McDonald’s change their menu for Passover, replacing fluffy hamburger buns with unleavened biscuits. “It’s not just physical cleaning of the home,” said one young man. “It’s also a spiritual cleaning of the soul.” There is a sense of renewed hope in the cleansing.

This week the world has been presented with the political road map for another attempt at peace in our region. Church leaders have urged the Bush administration to move swiftly and resolutely toward reviving sincere Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations while offering elements considered essential if the road map is to truly compel both Israelis and Palestinians to take effective steps for establishing two peaceful and secure states side-by-side. Rev. Mark Brown of the Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs enumerated one of the key elements that must be present: “Americans must

understand how despair currently pervades both Israeli and Palestinian societies. The first objective of any road map must be to begin the process of restoring hope to the people... Both peoples now fear violence, whether it's an Israeli dreading the random possibility of a terrorist bomb attack or a Palestinian fearful that he or she might become the innocent victim of an Israeli assassination or retaliatory attack." Or having the family home bulldozed!

Judaism teaches that an understanding of salvation or redemption that does not include repentance for sin and separation from a past lifestyle in order to embrace a new way of holiness and righteousness is really no 'salvation' at all. The Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament concur. Dare we now hope for another 'resurrection' to provide the fighting sides with true hope for change? For freedom? For liberation from the constant fears and despair that are so much a part of life here? It must not be a question of which side, Israelis or the Palestinians, acts first. Rather, both sides must take bold steps to build confidence of the their people so that at long last, a long-lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace can be obtained. It's our fervent hope. —GEW

Another Peace Activist Killed by Israeli Troops

Israel troops shot a British peace activist working with the Palestinian-backed peace group, International Solidarity Movement, recently. Tom Hurdell was standing between IDF troops and a group of Palestinian children when soldiers opened fire, said a worker with ISM who witnessed the shooting "A group of ISM people were trying to set up a small protest tent alongside a road used by the army. The soldiers opened fire." The 24-year-old was shot in the head and declared brain dead shortly after arriving at the UN Work and Relief Agency hospital in Gaza, where the shooting occurred.

Just six weeks before, American activist Rachel Corrie, 23, was killed while trying to stop an Israeli military bulldozer in the Gaza Strip. Corrie, a student in Olympia, Washington, was the first member of the group to be killed in 30 months of fighting between Israelis and Palestinians. The group claimed the bulldozer ran over her and then backed up. The army denied the claim and said the operator of the armored bulldozer did not see her fluorescent orange jacket.

Two weeks ago, Israeli troops in an armored personnel carrier allegedly shot Bryan Avery, 24, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the face. He had been working in the West Bank city of Jenin. The army said it was firing at gunmen in the area and was not aware it hit Avery. He too was wearing the standard bright-colored jacket worn by peace promoters and other observers.

Activists in the group work in the West Bank and Gaza as human shields, often placing themselves between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

—from *Jewish Peace News*

Settlement-Like Residences Seen as 'Provocation'

The US had been pressuring Israel not to allow residents of a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem take up occupancy of their homes, according to a report on Army Radio. Sources in the Bush administration say that allowing the inhibition of a Jewish enclave in a densely population Arab section of the capital could stir up tensions at a particularly sensitive time in the Middle East. But recently, after two years of delays, several Jewish families moved into a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem, immediately adjacent to the Arab neighborhood of Ras El Amoud. So far 35 of the 51 apartments that have been completed have been purchased and more families are expected to move in during the coming weeks and months. Another 68 apartments are slated for construction.

The *Peace Now* movement sees the building of a Jewish neighborhood in the heart of Arab East Jerusalem as a provocation. The construction of Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem is believed to be aimed at blocking any possibility of dividing Jerusalem. Such construction is also thought to help scuttle plans for the Jerusalem corridor espoused in the Camp David accords. Such a corridor would give Palestinians direct access to the Muslim holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem without having to pass through Israeli territory.

daily

—*Ha'aretz English-language*

~ OTHER VOICES...

By Moshe Kempinski, Old City, Jerusalem

That “Light Bluish Tinge” Won’t Go Away

Again the horrors of that terrible moment in our history is brought to mind. It comes just after the celebration of Passover and Easter...

Last Tuesday another sacrifice was commemorated—Holocaust Remembrance Day.

As we approached Holocaust remembrance day I was reminded of a movie I saw several years ago. The movie was over two hours long, but I remembered that I could not watch it past the section dealing with a visit to the concentration camp of Maidanek. As people stood in the gas chambers of this cursed place, the holocaust survivor who was acting as their guide told them to look at the ceiling. The ceilings were streaked with a light bluish tinge. The guide explained that those light blue streaks were the remnant of the poisonous gas Zyklon-B that snuffed the lives of so many innocents in those chambers. Every year a very well meaning group of Christians would come and paint the gas chamber and would try to whitewash the blue singed ceiling. Their efforts proved to be fruitless as the blue singed testimony returned several months later. It could not and would not be covered. It was destined to remain as a painful horrific testimony.

As the guide described the last moments of the men women and children in those terror filled chambers an incredible realization overwhelmed me. The last words uttered by most of those frightened people was the *Sh'ma*: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The last paragraph of the *Sh'ma* (Numbers 15) describes the string of *tchellet* (blue thread) that was to be added to the fringes of the garment. That mysterious color *tchellet* was described in the Talmud as “a light blue resembling the sea, which resembled the Heavens, which resembled the Throne of Glory.”

The blue streaks on the ceiling may have been caused by the gas on the surface level. On a much deeper level, I believe that the final *Sh'ma* of these people left an imprint on the ceilings of these terror filled rooms. It left an imprint that could not be erased. Their collective prayers even in that painful place left an imprint of *tchellet*. It left an imprint of that light blue color that was in itself a whisper of the Throne of Glory. —See also, www.shorashim.net

By Elisheva Ozeri

“Today proves that women are second-class citizens in Israel.”

For ‘Women of the Wall’ Praying Can Be Dangerous

Women’s worship at the Western Wall with the Torah may be an offense punishable by seven years imprisonment!

The Israeli High Court of Justice has ruled that the *Women of the Wall* activist group is not allowed to conduct prayer services at Jerusalem’s Western [Wailing] Wall with a Torah scroll. Reversing an earlier decision, the High Court gave the government one year to prepare a site for women’s prayer at the nearby Robinson’s Arch.

By a 5-4 vote, the High Court overturned its decision of May 2000 which upheld the right of women to pray aloud together at the Western Wall, reading from the Torah and wrapped in *tallitot* (prayer shawls). At the time, religious political parties introduced legislation that would make women’s worship at the Western Wall with Torah and *tallitot* an offense punishable by seven years imprisonment. In its ruling, the High Court determined that women’s prayer at the Wall would pose a danger to public safety and possibly lead to riots on the part of religious men, whose principles would be offended, Israel’s Army Radio has reported.

The court said that the women’s activist group was entitled to have a special designated area at Robinson’s Arch, a short distance from the Western Wall. Previously members of the Conservative

and Reform Movements have also been instructed to pray near Robinson's Arch, where the two streams of non-Orthodox Judaism are allowed to have mixed prayer services with men and women.

"We are very disappointed," said Anat Hoffman, head of *Women of the Wall*. "We thought that after 14 years, there would have at least been a readiness to see us... Today proves that women are second-class citizens in Israel." The *Women of the Wall* group has been advocating for women's prayer rights at the Western Wall since 1988, when a prayer service of the First International Jewish Feminist Conference was disrupted by verbal and physical assaults from some ultra-Orthodox men and women at the site. The group complained that police refused to provide protection against ultra-Orthodox harassment.

Notes from the Christian Peacemaker Team's *HEBRON UPDATE*:

...as the team was returning to the apartment after dinner, Israeli soldiers at the checkpoint into the old market demanded that CPTers produce identification. Afterwards, William Payne noticed he had lost 200 shekels. He returned to the checkpoint to look for it. One soldier said he found the money and gave it to Payne... During school patrol, an Israeli soldier told Payne, "You shouldn't judge Israel when you have had peaceful childhoods in safe places, and haven't had to live with the dangers we live with. I don't believe in turning the other cheek."

By Lauren Gelfond

In quiet gatherings, religious Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian women deal with the hostilities and hatred by turning to, instead of against, each other.

Bonding Through Shared Sisterhood and Faith

Focusing on the study of faith, the women learn more about their own religion and breaking stereotypes about the others.

It was ten days since Holocaust Remembrance Day, ten days since she memorialized her parents who perished at Auschwitz, and ten days since her grandson was killed in Jenin. Ester Golan, 79, was sitting in her Jerusalem apartment flipping television channels. The seven-day period of mourning was easier, she thought to herself. At least then the living surrounded her and the daily activities were prescribed. Now she was back home, alone with her memories. She tried to imagine how she would start over again, as the drone of every station focused on one tragedy after another and the heated disputes surrounding Operation Defensive Shield.

Suddenly the doorbell jarred her from a scramble of recollections and thoughts. Nothing would eradicate the pain, but her unusual visitors would remind her of something she felt short on that month: hope. At the door, an Orthodox Jewish woman and a Christian Arab woman

coming together to pay their respects, embraced Golan. On the heels of terror attacks and Israeli raids that month that led to scores of Israeli and Palestinian dead, the visit was a loaded gesture, they later admitted.

The members of the **Women's Interfaith Encounter** don't come together because they are old friends, political comrades, or outsiders to the despair, rage, or pain of the conflict. Rather, many of the women like Golan and her visitors have been personally affected by the hostilities: losing loved ones and neighbors, and witnessing horror, antagonism, and injustice. But though—perhaps *because*—they come with strong emotions and opinions from their disparate communities and experiences, they are hungry to find a bond through their shared sisterhood and faith, to temper the bitterness of their despair.

The Women's Interfaith Encounter [WIE] is a program that brings Jews, Christians, and Muslims together for faith-based and non-political dialogue. As an Orthodox Jew, Elana Rozenman felt dissatisfied with the mixed gender dialogue. After proposing a women-only group, she joined up with Christian and Muslim partners to hone out a mutually acceptable agenda and recruit 30 women—ten each from the three religions—to commit to monthly study of religion from a woman's point of view.

The WIE was officially launched in December 2001, with a joint study of Chanukah, Ramadan and Christmas traditions. “We were concerned that interfaith dialogue was basically dominated by priests, rabbis, and sheiks, and with very few women, many of them sitting quietly,” said Rozenman. “WIE created an opportunity for women to talk intimately and freely, without worrying about modesty issues that can arise with men.” For others, who expressed concern that interfaith dialogue until then was not based on equal planning between the faiths and did not attract equal numbers from the faiths, WIE offers a novel solution. It also differs from some local peace groups that bring Christian and Muslim Arabs and Jews together because of shared political ideology. Focusing on the study of faith, the women say they are learning more about their own religion and breaking stereotypes about the others.

Tension peaked a year ago, and for the first time a meeting was cancelled, following a string of terror attacks and military raids that left the women from all backgrounds reeling. After every terror attack Rozenman relives a small bit of the trauma she faced when her teenage son was severely wounded in a 1997 double suicide bombing. Interfaith dialogue helps her to lessen the intense fear and mistrust she reports feeling after terror attacks when “there are no human faces on ‘the other’—when they’re just an undifferentiated mass of people who are alien or hostile to us,” she said. “I decided to better know

the faith of ‘the other,’ hoping together we could plow a path to nonviolence through religion.”

But it’s not always easy. “It has been a shocking and painful experience for me learning about some of the things that Arabs have gone through,” she said. “Sometimes I have to push aside my own pain and thoughts about what the Jews go through in order to listen.” A Muslim woman said she had similar thoughts when learning that Golan’s grandson had been killed after being called up to serve in Jenin. “We have our anger and pain but we have to decide what to do with it. Making contact to visit with Jews, telling them about our pain, listening to theirs, is a choice.” When asked if the visit helped humanize the soldier, one Christian Arab, who was very upset about Israeli military actions, said: “I don’t know if it made him seem more human, but it certainly made me more human.”

Golan found the visit to hear of women of all faiths during this time extremely moving, even if she understands it was difficult for some. She said, “I think the visit meant something to them and also to me. I hope, I expect, I believe they can see through me and my grief, the humanity and dignity of my grandson, who reflects my values and the values my parents taught me—which is that all people are equal, created in God’s image. When they embraced me, I could feel it was sincere, and that helped me to start getting back on my feet.”

By Akiva Eldar, in Ha’aretz

“God gave the Land of Israel to the Jewish people,
therefore there is an absolute ban on giving it to another people.”

An Unholy Alliance With the Christian Right

The annual conference of the powerful pro-Israel AIPAC lobby last month confirmed powerful bedfellows. On the first day of the convention, a man named Gary Bauer took the podium. He reminded the cheering thousands that God gave the Land of Israel to the Jewish people, and therefore there is an absolute ban on giving it to another people. Bauer is not a member of Israel’s National Religious Party, nor of the Likud [governing party] central committee. He’s not even Jewish. He is a leading preacher from the Christian Right in America, one of those who believe the Jews are ‘The Chosen People’ and one day will even choose the right messiah. Bauer is a leading spokesman for arch-conservative policies, including a total ban on all abortions and favoring government funding for religious schools.

These are the people generating the spiritual energy fueling George Bush’s war on global terrorism. Evangelical Christians from South Carolina paid for the huge billboard on the Ayalon

Highway declaring “There’s no land for peace.” TV evangelist Pat Robertson has reprimanded the Israeli Foreign Minister, saying “Who do you think you are, handing Jerusalem over to Arafat?”

With Christian friends like these close to the president’s ear, the right-wing government in Israel does not need Jewish friends to rebuff political initiatives like the road map. But the Jewish activists are not giving up. The religious sources of the values that drive the Christian right are not preventing some Jewish organizations from turning them into a natural ally. Among those organizations are some that only a decade ago were thriving by exposing the anti-Semitic sloganeering in the sermons of some of their newfound friends.

Those same activists joining the crusade against renewal of the political negotiations and against a settlement freeze know what a bloody price Israel is paying for the conflict in the territories. They are familiar with the ominous economic data threatening the social stability of their beloved country. They all understand that by the end of this decade, the Jews will become a minority between the Jordan and Mediterranean.

So what drives these Jewish professionals? A new poll for one of the Jewish organizations shows that their policy does not represent the Jewish street in America. According to this poll, 63 percent of American Jewry supports active involvement by the US administration in the peace process.

By Debbie Berman

For Arabs & Jews, it’s a bit of healing in their shared history.

‘Image of Abraham’ Brings Together Arab & Jewish Children

Jerusalem museum helps Jewish, Arab children find common ground.

Jewish and Arab school children, residents of western and eastern Jerusalem who normally wouldn’t have anything to do with each other, meet on neutral ground in a program developed by the Bible Lands Museum of Jerusalem. The young participants in “The Image of Abraham” are able to utilize the museum’s rich educational resources to focus on the role of Abraham as Patriarch and trace the common elements in Arab and Jewish heritage, the bases of contemporary Arab and Jewish cultures.

One hundred and thirty Arab and Jewish children ages 9-10 took part in this year’s program. Director of Programming Amanda Weiss described the project as “a powerfully effective coexistence effort in desperately difficult times in Jerusalem.” This age group was chosen since they were old enough to grasp the historical perspective of learning the Bible but “young enough to be open and eager to take on a challenge like this,” Weiss explained. “The program is based on the common heritage that we share, of Abraham and Ibrahim.”

The fear and mistrust begins to erode as the children slowly get to know each other and take part in informal educational workshops designed around the museum exhibits. By the end, the biggest complaint was that the program would not be continuing. Many participants exchanged phone numbers. During their museum visits the children research their family trees, searching for the name ‘Abraham’ or ‘Ibrahim,’ and learn about Ancient Near Eastern cultures, tracing the elements common to Arab and Jewish heritage.

Parents of program participants expressed hope that their children would learn to live in coexistence with their Jerusalem neighbors. An East Jerusalem woman whose nine-year-old daughter is in the program said, “It is not logical being here, I know, but we had to keep coming. They want to live here in peace and we want to live in peace. This is the road we have to keep walking on, no matter what happens.”

—Christian Science Monitor

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