



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

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*“It would be morally reprehensible for the US to be ‘evenbanded’  
between democratic Israel and the terrorist infested Palestinian infrastructure  
that refuses to accept the right of Israel to exist at all.”*

—Zionist Organization of America

*“O God, please strengthen me just once more,  
and let me with one blow  
get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.”*

—Samson, Judges 16:28

*“No protected person may be punished for an offence  
he or she has not personally committed.”*

—Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, article 33

*“The world stands on three pillars:  
Truth, Justice, and Peace.  
When justice is served, truth is served, peace is served.”*

—Rabbi Shimon Ben-Gamliel, Talmudic Sage

## ~MY VOICE...

*“Can you imagine the terror of having massive US bulldozers  
bear down on your home while your family is sleeping?”*

### *Another Idea of Terror*

**Terror!** Not a new word, but a word given new applications in recent times—all around the world. In the Middle East there has been a history of ‘terror’, usually for the expansion of political influence and territorial domination. It is happening now, and both the Israelis and the Palestinians make much of the word *terror* in pointing accusing fingers of responsibility at the other side. The world perhaps most frequently hears of Middle East terror in the word ‘terrorist’—the suicide bombers that splash blood-red headlines and a new round of TV denunciations. At 6:00 am on May 18, there was another bombing—and more are expected, if only because some of the perpetrators have vowed to continue their resistance against the occupation of their lands through what they believe is the only effective method they have. They don’t have an American arsenal of weapons to blow up things like the Israelis do, they say. They only have themselves.

*But there has been more terror since May 18.* Can you imagine the terror of having massive US bulldozers bear down on your home while your family is sleeping, with only enough time to awaken children and escape without any possessions? That’s terror. Or to be walking along the street when Apache helicopters zoom overhead and begin firing at a passing car, wounding or killing many innocents in an apparent search for another ‘terrorist.’ Sorry—*collateral damage*; the innocents weren’t our target. [It’s usually said without the ‘sorry’.] That’s terror.

*In this month's MennoLetter*, Naim Ateek's article on a Palestinian Christian View of Terror adds an important perspective on the issue, as Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen and Israeli PM Sharon finish another round of talks in anticipation of President Bush's arrival shortly for a summit—to eliminate terror. Many Palestinians hope he succeeds, and reduces the terror of home destructions, the terror of illegal extrajudicial killings from the air, and most of all, the terror of a life until curfew and occupation. And yes, the Israelis hope the terror from suicide bombings will end too.

As this issue closes, CPTer Greg Rollins sits for the 11<sup>th</sup> day in an Israeli prison awaiting threatened deportation. He was arrested in Hebron where he and another CPT member were observing the detention of about thirty Palestinian men by the Israeli soldiers at a check point. They had to hand in their passports and visas and were detained together with a Palestinian observer. After about three hours the other observer and most of the Palestinians were released. Rollins, from Surrey BC, was taken to the police station near Kiryat Arba Israeli settlement where he was arrested. The Team alerted the CPT [Christian Peacemaker Team]Chicago office, the CPT lawyer, and the Canadian Embassy. So far no charges have been laid. Rollins' petition challenges the policy restricting foreigners from "Area A"—formerly controlled by the Palestinian Authority—and his arrest under that policy. The outcome is critical for CPT and the work of many similar peace organizations.

*The illegal settlements—not only those in Hebron*—remain a touchy issue, with Palestinians insisting that the encroachment on their land must not only stop, but be rolled back to pre-intifada lines. Hard-core settlers, backed by some American Christian organizations, are preparing to fight back. The recent vote in the Knesset to 'accept' the road map proposal, including such discussion of the settlement problem, has raised many hackles. Calling the Israeli Cabinet's decision to adopt the internationally backed peace plan "an act of national treason" and a "national catastrophe," Eliyakim Haetzni from Hebron said that decision was "a historic day in the same sense that the destruction of the Temple was historic." He said that supporters of the plan reminded him of Holocaust-era Jews who "willingly boarded those trains believing everything that the Germans told them."

Haetzni, a Hebron resident and a spokesperson of the *Council of Jewish Communities in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip*, vociferously opposes the possibility of evacuating Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and has said that settlers may resort to physical violence to prevent the handing over of their homes and land to the Palestinians.

We will see more terror—from both sides! —GEW

*Over 25,000 in the three years since the intifada began...*

## *The Invasion of Nazareth Village*

What would you do with 106 fourth-graders who turned up at your door one morning—half of them Arabs and half Jews? More than 25,000 have already done so at Nazareth Village since the intifada started almost three years ago, sharply reducing the international visitors to this wonderful reconstruction of a 1<sup>st</sup>-century village. So last Monday, when three more busloads arrived at the door to the 10-acre site, Village guide Amer Nicola was ready to show them around the exhibits and the working farm that leads to the ancient village reconstruction. At the request of their teachers, the children heard the presentations about the boyhood life and times of Jesus in Hebrew and Arabic...through the Parable Walk, into the synagogue [meticulously copied from 1<sup>st</sup>-century ruins at Gamla and Masada], the carpenter's and weaver's houses, and even to the animal pens of sheep, goats, and donkeys. A new-born colt got extra pets from the excited children.

Why would Muslim and Jewish children be brought to the Village to hear about the time of Jesus of Nazareth? "There is increasing interest on the part of local teachers in having their students hear about the other cultures and religions around them," said Village director, Michael Hostetler who relates to MMN in Elkhart. "There is a learning process in sharing these experiences with others, and the teachers were delighted to see the interaction of the students—they walked together and they ate together before their four-hour excursion was over. The guide talked about present-day Nazareth, then moved back into the time Jesus would have known—the farming practices, traditions of his day, even the Roman occupation!"

Another bridge of understanding and reconciliation was being built as the children baked bread together over an open fire. Another avenue for peace was being followed as these Muslim and Jewish youngsters heard about another Jew who taught us another way.  
[For more on Nazareth Village, click on: [www.nazarethvillage.com](http://www.nazarethvillage.com) or write to: info@nazarethvillage.com]

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

*Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon:*

### *“The Time Has Come to Divide This Land”*

*“These are the words that frighten many Israelis... The compromise Israel is being asked to make is one which no Jew or Christian should be willing to accept.”—Barbara Richmond*

The most troubling words spoken by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon were these: “The time has come to say yes to the Americans, the time has come to divide this land between us and the Palestinians,” Sharon told the press after the cabinet meeting which accepted the Road Map. These are the words that frighten many Israelis. They only hope and pray that the veteran strategist, Sharon, has made his most shrewd of moves so far and that somewhere deep in his heart he is quite assured that the Palestinians will do as they have always done before—ruin any opportunity they have in front of them—just as they did with Oslo, just as they did with Camp David. As Bible believers we are very concerned about this move, given that the Book of Leviticus clearly says that the Land belongs to the Lord and it is not to be sold or divided. Arab affairs expert Dr. Guy Bechor of the Interdisciplinary Institute in Herzliya said, “It should be clear that if the plan passes, it will go down in history that on May 25, 2003, Israel’s most right-wing government ever approved the most leftist program in history: a Palestinian state in all of Judea and Samaria beside the bi-national State of Israel; the uprooting of all the settlements; the division of Jerusalem; the pushing off of the discussion of the ‘right of return’ to a later date; and withdrawal from the Golan Heights in accordance with the Saudi initiative that is included in the Road Map.” The compromise Israel is being asked to make is one which no Jew or Christian should be willing to accept. The “Road Map” lays out a plan whereby Israel gives away some of its God-given land for a Palestinian state by 2005. Terrorism is thereby rewarded.

Israel, living in the very heart of the war against terrorism, enduring unrelenting terror attacks against her civilians, is asked to compromise. President Bush himself said that there will be no negotiating with terrorist elements; you are either with us or against us in the war against terror. So why must Israel be expected to do what Bush will not do? Israel is now being asked to make a sacrifice which no other nation in the world would be willing to make—entrust the safety of her people and her children to the worthless promises of a terrorist regime. Israel is an independent, democratic state, the only one in the Middle East. May her leaders have the courage and strength necessary to do whatever it takes to preserve, protect and defend the Land and the People of Israel.

—Barbara Richmond in *For Your Glory*

### *Fundamentalist Christians Gearing to Fight on Israel’s Behalf*

It’s no secret that President Bush enjoys broad support from conservative, evangelical Christians. Since 9/11 and the war on terror, he has been gaining much broader support from the Jewish vote as well. Last week, a prominent group of evangelical leaders sent President Bush a letter warning him of the dangers of the roadmap. As word spread of the likelihood that the Israeli cabinet would approve the roadmap, as they did a few days ago, the well-organized conservative Christian lobby has prepared for action against it, alongside their Jewish counterparts. US House Republican leader, Tom DeLay, speaking to Jewish political activists in Washington last week, said, “Israel is not the problem in the Middle East. Israel is the solution.”

*A Rabbi with tears streaming down his face,  
recognizing that prophecy is being fulfilled as  
the lost children of Israel are coming home,  
whispered,  
“Surely the coming of the Messiah is very near.”*

## *Hunting Down Jews*

**“What suffering and trauma  
they had been forced to endure,  
living publicly as Catholics but secretly as Jews.”**

Five centuries after Queen Isabella of Spain sought to erase all vestiges of Jewish life on the Iberian peninsula, a growing number of her victims’ descendants are emerging from the shadows, seeking to reclaim their long-lost heritage. One such person is Nuria Guasch Vidal, whose ancestors were forcibly converted to Catholicism in Spain. At great personal risk, her forefathers secretly preserved their cherished, yet hidden, Jewish identity, handing it down from one generation to the next, clandestinely defying the Spanish Inquisition and its henchmen.

As a child growing up outside Barcelona, Nuria never did quite understand why her family did not celebrate Christmas or go to church like their neighbors, or why every Friday evening they would set an elaborate table for dinner and proceed to dip the bread in salt before the meal. It was only when her 88-year-old grandfather lay on his deathbed and pulled Nuria aside that she began to learn the truth about her family and her past. After firmly instructing her not to allow a priest in the room once he passed away, Nuria’s grandfather cryptically said, “I want you to reflect on your heritage and think for yourself. And then you will find the answer to all those questions you have been asking. It is your duty to return.”

For Nuria, her research of other relatives left no doubt: her forefathers had been Jews. And were it not for the persecution they had faced at the hands of the Inquisition, that is what they would have remained. The descendants of the *anousim*—‘those who were coerced,’ in Hebrew—grapple today with profound issues of identity, history, and faith.

*“Let us go to the hill of the  
Lord.”—Isa. 2:3*

## *Ecumenical Forum for Young Theologians*

**For dialogue between three  
world religions...and to  
encourage and deepen**

**our engagement in the peace  
and justice movement in our  
own place of ministry.**

The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Anglican Diocese of Oxford’s Continual Ministerial Education department are presenting the second study-tour of the Holy Land, September 3-15, 2003,

What suffering and trauma they had been forced to endure, living publicly as Catholics but secretly as Jews, surrounded by hostility, antagonism, and outright hatred. The Inquisitors employed an array of tools designed to ferret out and quash any remaining Jewish embers in Spain. Torture, informants, denunciations, and public executions were part of the reign of terror they imposed on anyone suspected of ‘relapsing’ to Judaism. According to historian Cecil Roth, over 30,000 so-called Judaizers were put to death by the Inquisitorial zealots in Spain and Portugal, many of them burned alive at the stake in front of cheering crowds of Christian onlookers, while hundreds of thousands of others were tried and convicted by its courts for following Jewish practices.

The Inquisition continued functioning for centuries, hunting down ‘secret Jews’ as far afield as Angola and South America. It was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the persecutions were formally ended. What Ferdinand and Isabella, Spain’s 15<sup>th</sup>-century monarchs, had sought to demolish through Inquisition and expulsion, Nuria was determined to bring back to life. With her husband Edward, Nuria recently appeared before a rabbinical court in Jerusalem where they were formally welcomed back to the people of Israel. They began to study with an Orthodox rabbi, slowly remaking Judaism the focal point of their lives, adopting the rituals and lifestyle of traditional Jews. They now attend synagogue regularly, observe Shabbat, and keep kosher. After the rabbinical court decision, Nuria decided to become ‘Nurit,’ and Edward fittingly took the name ‘Yitzhak’ [Isaac] after the patriarch who was nearly sacrificed on the altar, only to be saved at the last minute by Divine intervention.

The first thing Nurit did after returning to Jerusalem, when she approached the ancient wall of the Holy Temple, was to touch its stones. She then cast her eyes heavenwards, filled with tears, and addressed her grandfather:

“I did it, Grandpa, I have returned. I am a Jew.”

*—adapted from Michael Freund’s article in Jerusalem  
Post*

with an optional visit to Jordan from September 15-19. The Ecumenical Forum brings together Christians from the world-wide family of churches. It has set itself the task of studying critically, and voicing clearly, the challenges faced by many Christian denominations today. The Forum seeks to foster grass-roots dialogue

between Christians from many backgrounds and, in the past year, has been able to conduct its first study tour of Palestine and Israel, which set itself the task of identifying the challenges of life in the Christian Diaspora.

This year, the organizers are preparing a program to study sources of dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews, and to observe the opportunities for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. The study tour will be centered on dialogue at grass-roots level with varied interest groups in Palestine and Israel. The aim of the program is to expose participants to the practicalities of dialogue between three world religions, to provoke further thought and study, and to encourage and deepen their engagement in the peace and justice movement at their own places of ministry.

Students of theology, interested lay people, and recently-ordained clergy are invited to apply for a place on this study program online. Cost for the core program is US\$700, plus an extra US\$400 for the Jordan module, if taken; this includes accommodation, full board and all transfers from Jerusalem. Some bursaries are available from the organizers. *For more, click on: [www.jerusalem-news.org.uk](http://www.jerusalem-news.org.uk)*

*Naim Ateek, SABEEL*  
***Suicide Bombers:  
A Palestinian  
Christian  
Perspective***

**“Our daughter was killed because of the terror of Israeli occupation.**

**Every innocent victim from both sides is a victim of the occupation.”** —*Nurit Elhanan, an Israeli*

*It is easy for people to either quickly and forthrightly condemn Palestinian suicide bombings as a primitive and barbaric form of terrorism against civilians, or condone and support it as a legitimate method of resisting an oppressive Israeli occupation that has trampled Palestinian dignity and brutalized their very existence. As a Christian, I know that the way of Christ is the way of non-violence and therefore I condemn all forms of violence and terrorism, whether coming from the government of Israel or from militant Palestinian groups.*

***“Women started to strap themselves with explosives, make their way to Israeli Jewish areas, and blow themselves up.”***

Having said that clearly, it is still important to understand the phenomenon of suicide bombings that tragically arises from the deep misery and torment of many Palestinians. When healthy, beautiful, and intelligent young men and women set out to kill and be killed, something is basically

wrong in a world that has not heard their anguished cry for justice. *The Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation* of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip took a very important turn since the early 1990s. Young Palestinian men, and more lately women, started to strap themselves with explosives, make their way to Israeli Jewish areas and blow themselves up, killing and injuring dozens of people around them. Between the beginning of the second intifada in September 2000 and February 2003, Palestinian militants carried out 69 suicide bombings in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank including Jerusalem, as well as inside Israel, killing 341 Israelis including soldiers, men, women, and children. In the same period, the Israeli army killed 2,106 Palestinians including police, men, women, and children.

For the last 35 years, the Palestinians have been engaged in resisting the occupation of their country. For many years they have worked through the international community to bring an end to the Israeli occupation, but they have been unsuccessful. Historically speaking, the Palestinians did not begin their resistance to the occupation with suicide bombings. [*There were no suicide bombings before the Oslo Peace Process.*] It is the result of despair and hopelessness that started to set in when an increasing number of Palestinians became frustrated by the Israeli oppression and humiliation. For these young people, daily life has become an experience of death. They

feel they have no options and very little to lose. Consequently, they are willing to give themselves up for the cause of God and the homeland (*watan*), believing that with God there is so much to gain. They have a simple and plain logic: as Israeli soldiers shell and kill Palestinians indiscriminately, Palestinian suicide bombers strap themselves with explosives and kill Israelis indiscriminately. Groups like Hamas refer to these acts not as suicide bombings but as ‘martyrdom operations’ and ‘martyrdom weapons.’ Nationalism and faith have been fused together and imbued with power. People regarded the suicide bombers as martyrs and believed that paradise awaited them. Other Muslims argued strongly that Islamic law forbids the killing of non-combatants, and therefore the killing of innocent Israelis is wrong.

*“[He] called on his government to execute the families of Palestinian suicide bombers.”*

There are voices inside Israel calling for more drastic and severe measures to curb the suicide bombings. One of those was Gideon Ezra, the deputy public security minister who once called on his government to execute the families of Palestinian suicide bombers. He argued that if potential suicide bombers know that their families will be wiped out then they will refrain from committing the act.

Apparently, Ezra was basing his suggestion on a Nazi practice that used to arrest and inflict suffering on the families of those who were suspected of undermining the state. Shockingly, Ezra’s words did not draw any protest or criticism from the Israeli government.

*By contrast, there are many courageous voices that called on their Israeli government to examine its harsh policies against the Palestinians that breed suicide bombings.* In one case, Rami and Nurit Elhanan lost their 14-year-old-daughter who was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber in September 1997. In spite of the tragic loss, the parents became actively involved in peacemaking. They blamed the Israeli occupation, saying, “Our daughter was killed because of the terror of Israeli occupation. Every innocent victim from both sides is a victim of the occupation.” In discussing suicide bombings from a religious perspective, it is worthwhile to reflect on the story of Samson in the Book of Judges (13-16). It is a story of a strong young man who rose up to save his people who were oppressed by the coastal powerful neighbor, the Philistines. Obviously, from the perspective of the

*“...He was captured by the Philistines and tortured. They pulled out his eyes and kept him in jail.”*

Israelites, he was regarded as a hero and a freedom fighter, while from the perspective of the people of power—the Philistines—he was, in today’s

language, a terrorist. Samson was very successful in his brave adventures against his enemies, but eventually he was captured by the Philistines and tortured. They pulled out his eyes and kept him in jail. In order to celebrate their victory over their archenemy, Samson, the Philistines brought him to a big event attended by 3,000 men and women, including their five kings.

His final act of revenge took place when he pushed the two main columns of the building and pulled it down, killing himself and all the attendees. Samson’s final prayer seems very similar to the prayer of a suicide bomber before he blows himself up. “Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.”

*“Was not Samson a suicide bomber?”*

Read in the light of today’s suicide bombers, how do we evaluate the story of Samson? Was not Samson a suicide bomber? Was he acting on behalf of the God of justice who wills the liberation of the oppressed?

Do we have the courage to condone both as acts of bravery and liberation or condemn both as acts of violence and terror? Or do we hold a theology of a biased God who only stands with Israel whether right or wrong?

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More info: [Sabeel@sabeel.org](mailto:Sabeel@sabeel.org)

“It doesn’t matter if we’re dealing with a Jew or an Arab; the main thing is to save lives.”

### *Kidney Transplants Unite Jewish & Arab Families*

Members of two families, Jewish and Arab residents of the Galilee, have undergone simultaneous kidney transplant procedures, saving the lives of their loved ones who suffered from chronic kidney problems. The families say that the experience has left them feeling closely connected to each other and hope that their actions will serve as a message promoting peaceful relations between Israeli Jews and Arabs. Last month the ‘cross transplant’ kidney operations were performed at the same in two cities. Ilia Halon, 45, an Arab truck driver from Acco, received a kidney donated by Yigal Ozri, 38, a Jewish resident of Kibbutz Naot Mordechai. At the same time Ozri’s ten-year-old son received a kidney donated by Halon’s wife, Lena.

“We searched for a match that would suit us, and we underwent a series of tests, until we found a father and son, who were Jews,” Halon said. “It made me very emotional, because we were dealing with a child, and to donate to him is a religious commandment.” During the past year, his health had been continually deteriorating, leading him to decide to seek a kidney donor and stop dialysis treatments. None of his family members, including his wife, were suitable donors.

After the two families received approval from the Ministry of Health, they prepared themselves for the upcoming operations. The families met in person once prior to the procedures but did not have the opportunity to speak to each other. The emotional meeting of the two families took place following the successful surgical procedures. “I wish the boy a complete recovery,” Halon told Ozri, “and that he gets to go home and continue with his life. It doesn’t matter if we’re dealing with a Jew or an Arab; the main thing is to save lives. After all, we are all human beings, and I hope that all citizens of the nation, Jews and Arabs, will view our acts as a positive message.”

—[www.israelinsider.com](http://www.israelinsider.com)

*Gila Svirsky, The Women’s Coalition for a Just Peace*

### *Peace Coalition Women Demonstrate in Tel Aviv*

*“After all, my daughter had the courage to stand in front of a bulldozer.”*

In what may have been one of the most moving moments of protest in Israel, hundreds of women and men wearing stark black lay down in the large Tel Aviv plaza. At first it seemed too hot to attempt such an act—exactly at noon—and first efforts to lie flat on one’s back seemed a misguided idea. But then the unaccompanied voice of Reem Telhami began its chant, the haunting harmonies reminiscent of the call of the muezzin during Ramadan at dawn before the sun has risen, and soon there was utter silence. I lay there, too, the heat pressing against my arms, back and legs, my eyelids luminescent with sun, and soon I too was inside Reem’s deep, mournful lament.

So began Friday’s demonstration of the Coalition of Women for Peace, marking 36 years of Israeli occupation, calling for its end and an end to the killing that has enveloped our lives. How can this still be happening to us? Haven’t 36 years been enough? The speakers alternated—Jews and Palestinians from Israel, two Palestinian women from the territories, and one woman representing the internationals who risk their lives in an effort to intervene nonviolently. Cindy Corrie, Rachel’s mother, wrote a letter that was read at today’s event: “There have been times when I have been quiet because I felt there were others who knew more. But I am no longer intimidated by experts and critics. After all, my daughter had the courage to stand in front of a bulldozer.”

—Gila Svirsky. For coalition website, see: [www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org](http://www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org)

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