



Menno Letter from Jerusalem

Vol. II, No. 6, July 2003

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

*“Individual citizens have the duty to violate domestic laws
to prevent crimes against peace and humanity from occurring.”*

—Nuremberg War Crime Tribunal, 1950

“...vocal dissent is of little weight, if not linked with dissenting action.”

—John Howard Yoder

*“I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

—God

~*MY VOICE*...

Living With a Piece-Meal Peace

Shalom! Salaam! Peace!... Similar meanings, but not quite synonyms. The Middle-Eastern words for peace carry a connotation of much more than ‘the absence of war’. It is a pleasant greeting—used instead of both ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ here. It also implies a wish for well-being, and the general good of the other. To mean just ‘no war’ is far from the sense of it. Last month, the first word here was ‘*Terror!*’ It too, we know, means different things to different people.

It was a strange feeling last night, watching the live news footage of Israeli tanks pulling back from northern Gaza, watching young Palestinian boys who usually throw stones to register their mood now waving at the ‘enemy’, hoisting their green, black, and red flag proudly where the Israeli star of David had flown earlier. It was night-time, as though being done secretly, or embarrassedly. But the war machines rumbled back out nonetheless, to the joy of all in sight. But not of ALL! Extremist Palestinian elements, fervently Zionist Jews, and loud fundamentalist Christians cried foul! This cannot be happening! Peace? Yes, but not THIS piece! Not my backyard, nor hilltop, nor traditional homeland. The megaphones shouted: “*Palestinians—go across the Jordan!*” “*Jews—into the sea!*”

With the expressions of hope that one always hears—and needs to hear—at moments like these, barely a sentence of it is spoken without the qualifier, “But lets see how long the cease-fire lasts.” The first time the Israelis use a helicopter to assassinate a suspected Hamas leader [and surrounding innocent civilians], and the first attempt of a suicide-bomber to wreak bloody havoc—the deal is off! If the terror threats against Israel don’t stop, the military will retaliate harshly. If the Israelis don’t leave the occupied areas, the suicide bombers will continue. *Here we go round the mulberry bush.*

This issue of the newsletter again deals with the harsh reaction of the local Christians—and their international supporters—toward the American fundamentalist churches. “Christian Zionism is the enemy of peace in the Middle East, says the Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem. “A menace,” is how the ecumenical leader of SABEEL describes it. For us as a church, it is disheartening to see the divisions within our own groups almost as much as the fighting that goes on endlessly among the Israelis and Palestinians. It seems we are no better: we each want a piece—for ourselves—of the spoils. —GEW

~ OTHER VOICES...

“Israel Cannot Declare Palestinian State!”—Rabbinical Council

A council of Rabbis opposed to the ‘road map’ peace plan released a statement voicing their opposition to a Palestinian state as part of the peace formula of the road map plan. “No government has any right or mandate to decree the establishment of any foreign state or to give over any part of the State of Israel to foreigners,” read the statement. The Rabbis also wrote that any move to give the Palestinians a state was null and void “in the name of God of Israel who promised the Land of Israel to the nation of Israel for ever.” The Rabbis met Monday night in emergency session in Jerusalem to discuss ways to present a united front against the government’s plan to implement the road map and dismantle illegal outposts.

Churches for Middle East Peace:

Christian Commitment to Peacemaking is distorted by Christian Zionists

“...there is an alternate Christian perspective to that of Christian Zionists.”

There are many sources for news and views about what’s going on in the Middle East. Some followers of Pat Robertson’s 700 Club are looking at weather patterns. The Christian Broadcasting Network reported that May’s damaging tornados were a repercussion of US pressure on Israel that put the “covenant lands of Israel at risk.” According to CBN, a researcher has proven that “when Israeli settlements are touched, there are also occurrences of hurricanes, tornados, and major problems in the American economy.” This forecast may seem foolish to most Americans and irrelevant to the serious business of crafting foreign policy. However, the Christian-evangelical community along with its Christian Zionist wing is a significant constituency for the Bush Administration and Republican-majority Congress. Joining with some hard-line Jewish groups, Christian Zionists have launched “The Committee for a One-State Solution” with an eight-state billboard campaign to stop the Road Map and its goal of a two-state resolution of the conflict. The locations for the billboards were selected (according to the chair of *Americans for a Safe Israel*) in states where the Republican presidential win was slim, in order to make President Bush aware “that a disaffected Christian Community can adversely affect” the coming presidential campaign.

It is crucial for all advocates of a political and diplomatic solution—based on applying the rational elements of international law and negotiation—to counter the message of the Christian Right. For those of us, including *Churches for Middle East Peace*, whose political activism is also grounded in a faith-based commitment to justice and peacemaking as Christians, there is an additional responsibility to say publicly that there is an alternate Christian perspective to that of Christian Zionists.

“The Bible is My Roadmap”

This is the title of an internet petition circulated by Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Tim LaHaye opposing the Road Map and a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Beginning with “Save the Settlements,” the text asserts that the “peace plan rewards terrorists,” talks about “tiny Israel giving its Bible land to terrorist regimes,” and “dividing Jerusalem and giving a portion of the city and our holy sites to an Islamic terrorist organization that has killed Americans.” Playing on internal Administration disputes, the petition asserts: “The State Department has been giving Israel’s land to the PLO for more than a decade.” In May, TV preacher Pat Robertson asked his supporters to mount a nationwide protest against the State Department and demand the dismissal of William Burns, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East. Some State Department officials believe there is a campaign by conservatives to accuse the diplomatic corps of being disloyal to Bush.

Selling the Roadmap to Congress

*“We are not, nor do we aspire to be, an honest broker.
America stands with Israel.”*

The diplomatic problems of implementing the Road Map will be compounded for the President by domestic politics. The Christian conservatives are a core constituency for President Bush, and passionately pro-Israel. They are deeply distrustful of the European Union and the UN who are part of the “Quartet” sponsors of the Road Map. On Capitol Hill, the religious right has joined forces with the neoconservative wing of the Republican party and pro-Israel Democrats to form a broad coalition of lawmakers who do not want Israel pressured to make concessions.

As Secretary of State Powell headed to the Middle East in May, Representative Mike Pence (R-IN), who sits on the House International Relations’ Middle East subcommittee, said “America is not a neutral party in the negotiations in the Middle East. We are not, nor do we aspire to be, an honest broker. America stands with Israel.” According to CQ Weekly, a reputable Capitol Hill publication, one of AIPAC’s (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, a lobbying group) legislative priorities is Congress’ “codification” of the major changes that Israel seeks in the Road Map. Such legislation could be in the form of a non-binding resolution or attached to an appropriations bill that would restrict the Administration’s ability to fund peace-related initiatives.

What’s In a Name?

*“...some have distorted biblical passages as their rationale for uncritical support
for every policy and action of the Israeli government.”*

News reports often use the political term ‘Christian Right,’ ‘Christian fundamentalists’ or refer generally to ‘conservative Christians’ or ‘Evangelicals.’ Yet, not all who fall within those groupings hold to biblically-mandated support for Israel. The term ‘Christian Zionist’ is probably most accurate, even though ‘Zionism’ itself is a concept that emerged in the late 19th century among Jewish intellectuals out of the ferment of nationalist, socialist and utopian ideas that swept through Europe at the time. The Zionist movement sought and achieved the founding and development of a Jewish homeland (now Israel) in Palestine, then a part of the Ottoman Empire. Now many Zionists, both Israeli and American-Jewish, support ending Israel’s occupation and establishing a Palestinian state.

Not so with Christian Zionists. Central to Christian Zionism is the abiding relevance of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Organizations associated with Christian Zionism are: the Christian Coalition of America, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, National Unity Coalition for Israel, Christian Broadcasting Network, Christians for Israel-US, Gary Bauer’s American Values, and International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem.

Evangelicals Who DO Support Peace

Christian Zionists may identify themselves as evangelical Christians, but not all evangelical Christians agree with their uncritical support of Israel. In July of 2002, nearly 60 prominent evangelical theologians and heads of organizations wrote to the President, voicing an even-handed policy towards Israelis and Palestinians that affirms two states, “free, economically viable and secure.” They asked that the President vigorously “oppose injustice, including the continued unlawful and degrading Israeli settlement movement,” which they characterized as “the theft of Palestinian land.”

Regarding theology, they wrote, “Significant numbers of American evangelicals reject the way some have distorted biblical passages as their rationale for uncritical support for every policy and action of the Israeli government instead of judging all actions—of both Israelis and Palestinians—on the basis of biblical standards of justice. The great Hebrew prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, declared in the Old Testament that “God calls all nations and all people to do justice one to another, and to protect the oppressed, the alien, the fatherless and the widow.”

Ignoring Palestinian Christians

US Christians travel to the Holy Land as pilgrims and are a major segment of the tourism industry. They visit the holy sites but most have virtually no contact with Arab Christians themselves. Arab Christians hold strongly negative views of Christian Zionism, which is considered by some to be an instrument of Western colonialism and American imperialism. The zealous support given Israel's claim of sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, and the building of settlements in "Judea and Samaria" by these Western Christians, angers both Christian and Muslim Palestinians. Some evangelical churches even have supportive relationships with settlements.

Among Palestinians, there are the traditional churches—Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic—and the so-called "Reform" churches established in the 19th century—Lutherans and Episcopalians or Anglicans. They work ecumenically through the Middle East Council of Churches. These Christians consider themselves, and are considered by the Muslims, to be an integral part of the Palestinian community, even though they are a minority of less than two percent.

From Jerusalem, Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, has written that "Christian Zionism is the enemy of peace in the Middle East." The Rev. Naim Ateek, director of Jerusalem's Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theological Center, has called pre-millennialism a 'heresy' and Christian Zionism a 'menace.' —*CMEP*

Formed in 1984, Churches for Middle East Peace is a Washington-based program of the Alliance of Baptists, American Friends Service Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, Catholic Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Institutes, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church of the Brethren, Church World Service, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Franciscan Mission Service, Maryknoll Missioners, National Council of Churches, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. *For further information, see www.cmep.org.*

Gideon Levy in *Ha'aretz*

End the Fake Evacuations

Most Israelis don't like seeing their own people forcibly dragged.

The operation to evacuate the West Bank outposts undertaken by Ariel Sharon's government is a farce that is bad for the peace process. It would be better to stop this charade as soon as possible, because its damage is immeasurably greater than any good it might be doing. The only ones gaining from this absurd eviction performance is the prime minister, the right wing and the settlers. The losers are the Palestinians and, mainly, the peace process. The Americans, who are full partners to this deceit, should also pull themselves together and realize that this absurdity is no good for peace. This is neither evacuation nor a confidence-building measure; it is a deception with a heavy price. This is not the evacuation of real settlements and, more importantly, not the evacuation of settlers. This is a farce in which all the actors understand the rules and are playing their role on the stage only to accumulate more power and more sympathy, rather than advance any political process.

The first one to gain from this false spectacle is of course the prime minister. Half the nation is again tempted to believe that here is 'a new Sharon,' a 'complex and fascinating' figure which has undergone 'a historic change,' an Israeli de Gaulle, the only one who could make peace. Sharon has evacuated a few caravans and evicted a few dozen radical settlers from one point to another in the occupied territories, and already he is enjoying the best of all worlds. His one hand appears to be evacuating while the other is assassinating.

His only goal—pleasing the American administration—is achieved in full at zero cost. The right wing is a little angry, but it knows full well that Sharon will never evacuate a proper settlement. Thus the prime minister can go back to being the evil old Sharon, who orders the assassination of Hamas leaders in the middle of an international political effort to achieve a cease-fire agreement with them. Thus, in exchange for the pseudo-evacuation, the Palestinians got 24 people killed in three days, in a series of assassinations whose harm to peace far surpasses the good of the fake evacuations. If these are the first of the 'painful concessions' Sharon had talked about, it is not clear at all on whom the pain is being inflicted.

The outposts' evacuation is good for the settlers, too. They have paid nothing, but already they are once again the victims, the robbed, the usurped. They know that the louder they holler, the smaller the price they will be asked to pay in the future and public sympathy toward them will grow. The pictures of settlers being dragged on the earth are good for them. Most Israelis don't like seeing their own people forcibly dragged. The settlers' semi-violent resistance to the evacuation of the outposts, most of which were built only as stage scenery for this play, may also convince many that there is no chance of ever evacuating the settlements, without terrible bloodshed.

Evacuating all the settlements is a crucial stage on the way to a just peace. The recent evacuation of outposts is not a step on the way to evacuate settlements but the opposite, it is an obstacle to it. If Israel sincerely aspired for peace and building confidence with the Palestinians, it would have evacuated real settlements, those whose removal is supported by a broad public consensus. Removing the hundreds of road barriers from their way inside the territories and releasing a large number of their prisoners, would have helped Abu Mazen establish his position, as the United States and Israel wish him to do. It would have infused hope in his people and signaled real intentions for peace.

—*in Jewish Peace News*

*“...I put on a headscarf and slip into the crowd as a Palestinian.
No one will guess I'm Jewish, still less that I'm a British MP.”—Oona King*

Israel Can Halt This Now

*“Escaping the ashes of the Holocaust,
they have incarcerated another people in a hell similar in its nature...to the Warsaw ghetto.”*

The no man's land separating Israel from the Gaza Strip gives way to what can only be described as desecrated land. Razor wire and crushed buildings line the route. Torn slabs of concrete look like tattered cardboard on a rubbish heap. In front of us two Israeli tanks block our path. Behind us, the border will shortly be sealed to prevent Palestinian reprisals for the helicopter attack launched hours earlier against an extremist Hamas leader. A Palestinian woman and her young child, on their way to hospital, are dead, and 35 are injured.

Later that afternoon we hurriedly leave the building we are in when a missile lands nearby. As two British MPs traveling with *Christian Aid*, we are alarmed. For Gaza residents this is business as usual. More than a million Palestinians live on this tiny piece of land, more than three-quarters of them on about \$2.00 a day. Life below the poverty line for these Palestinians contrasts with the 5,000 Israeli settlers who occupy one-third of the land and enjoy watered gardens, first world housing, and protection by the Israeli army. This protection means Palestinians wait for hours—sometimes days—at Israeli checkpoints, trying to find work or get access to essential services such as medical care.

The sun is setting on Gaza. From my hotel balcony I hear demonstrations in the street below. It occurs to me that I can put on a headscarf and slip into the crowd as a Palestinian. No one will guess I'm Jewish, still less that I'm a British MP. The sounds lead me to the hospital where a man carries in an injured girl. But most of the Palestinians just stand waiting. They wait for Israelis to stamp their permits, and they wait for a Palestinian state. They are no different from us: deny them human rights and they will respond with unacceptable terrorist violence.

That's what Jews did when they set up the Stern Gang and blew up Jerusalem's King David Hotel in the 1940s. Ninety-four people died. The leader of that terrorist group, on Britain's 'most wanted' list, went on to be the Israeli prime minister. Many Jews revere him, even while they abhor the terrorism that ruins their lives today. Israelis must be freed from terrorism, such as the recent horrific attack in Jerusalem. All terrorism, not least Palestinian terrorism, is abhorrent. But it is also predictable. When the Israeli government chooses to launch an attack in Gaza (as it did again after the bus bombing), it cannot have been ignorant of its effect on the peace process and the certainty of Palestinian reprisals.

The original founders of the Jewish state could surely not imagine the irony facing Israel today: in escaping the ashes of the Holocaust, they have incarcerated another people in a hell similar in its nature—though not its extent—to the Warsaw ghetto. Any visitor to the Palestinian ghetto can see

the signs: residents are sealed off and live under curfew; the authorities view torture as acceptable and use collective punishment as a means of control; soldiers drive families from their homes, confiscate property and demolish neighborhoods; unemployment runs in places at 80%, and utilities such as water are withheld; the economy has 'client' status, and is subservient to the occupiers in every way.

As the more powerful side in the dispute, Israel must break the cycle of violence, comply with UN resolution 242 and withdraw from territories occupied in 1967. As the occupying power, Israel must uphold the fourth Geneva convention and end all collective punishments. Illegal settlements must be dismantled. Repair of water, sewage, and other essential infrastructure should take place immediately. Just under 80% of all water resources in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are redirected from Palestinians to Israelis.

The international community has to recognize the scale of the humanitarian disaster now facing Palestinians, and George Bush must put greater pressure on Sharon to give meaning to the road map. No story should hold the horrors I have witnessed, so similar to humiliations suffered by the Jews.

—in *The Guardian*; Oona King is a Member of Parliament

Tourism Bouncing Back

Tourism to Israel rose a whopping 36% in May 2003 over May 2002, it was announced by Tourism Ambassador of Israel to North and South America. "This news is very exciting," stressed Levi, "because it builds on a 17% increase in April, and double-digit increases in the first three months of 2003." Tourism from North America makes up approximately 25% of the total number of tourists to Israel, says Levi, a 20% growth in share since 2000. "There is a new optimism taking root in our part of the world," Levi observed, "and one of the immediate results of this optimism is the decision by Americans not to delay further their planned visits to Israel."

Rev. Alex Awad, Bethlehem

"If I, a Christian pastor, cannot truly love my enemies,
what must it be like for the average Palestinian?"

Feeling Their Pain

*"I long for the day when...I can feel the pain of my Jewish neighbors
in their time of calamity."*

We live so close to each other and yet we do not feel one another's pain. When a suicide bomber succeeds in killing Israelis in Jerusalem, I can usually hear the sirens of ambulances and emergency vehicles from my apartment in Beit Safafa. I then rush to the TV to watch the horrible details. I do not like what I see or hear but I have a big problem. It is a spiritual one.

My problem is that I do not feel the pain of my Jewish neighbors who lose their lives or are burned, injured or traumatized due to the bombings. It is a real issue for me because as a practicing Christian I am called to love my

enemies. I think one way to express that love is to truly share the pain of others when they suffer.

When innocent Palestinians get assassinated by Israeli attacks in Gaza, Jenin, Hebron, Bethlehem and elsewhere in the West Bank, my heart goes out in sorrow to them. I wish I had the same compassion for innocent Israelis who are killed or hurt. My spiritual dilemma is further complicated by the fact that I am a pastor of a Christian congregation in East Jerusalem and thus often preach peace and reconciliation and call on members of my congregation to love their enemies regardless of racial or political realities.

I confess it is much easier to speak about forgive-ness than to actually forgive and it is much harder to practice love than to preach it. Then I think if I, a Christian pastor, cannot truly love my enemies, what must it be like for the average Palestinian?

I have tried to examine my heart in an attempt to understand why I feel the way I do. Why do I care less when innocent Jews are killed? The answer to this question is not so much found in my

heart as it is found in my mind. Although I am religious and care much for my spiritual well-being, I am also rational. Rationality, mingled with a sense of patriotism, overcomes my spiritual motivation and desire to love my enemies.

Rationality tells me that for every innocent Israeli killed in these cycles of violence, at least three innocent Palestinians are also annihilated. Rationality tells me that even if the death on both sides of the conflict is numerically equal, the suffering on the Palestinian side far outweighs the suffering of Israelis. Palestinians cannot order curfews and imprison Israelis in their homes and cities. Palestinians have no power to set up checkpoints on the borders of Israeli cities, Palestinians cannot employ bulldozers to demolish the homes, businesses and farms belonging to those who kill them and steal their land. Rationality tells me that a nation who occupies another deserves the pain resulting from an occupied population.

I cross the Bethlehem checkpoint on a daily basis. My eyes, which are windows to my intellect, see injustice every day. I see the demolished homes, the collapsing economy, the masses under perpetual and suffocating closures and the daily suffering of an entire population. When I look eastward, near the check point, the settlement of Har Homa built on land Israel confiscated from Palestinians after 1967 stares me in the face.

Turning to the west I see the Aida refugee camp, one of three refugee camps in Bethlehem, which is home to Palestinians who were forced to flee their villages in 1948 in what is now called Israel. Then straight ahead I see Rachael's Tomb, a holy place turned into a prison-like fortress. Looking behind me it is impossible to avoid the settlement of Gilo that was also built on Palestinian land Israel annexed after 1967.

The realities I view, along with the stories I hear are imprinted on the walls of my soul and influence my entire person, including my spiritual outlook. Injustice makes me very upset and definitely affects my attitude. Consequently, when pictures of innocent Jews slaughtered by a Palestinian suicide bomber are shown on my TV screen, I rationalize instead of empathize. I continue to blame Sharon or the occupation or the latest Israeli bombing attack that snuffed out the lives of a number of Palestinians.

I long for the day when deep in my heart I can feel the pain of my Jewish neighbors in their time of calamity as much as I feel the utter despair of my people. I long for the day when we on both sides of the political divide can step into each others shoes and understand the anguish and hopelessness that the other side is feeling. Perhaps then we can become better aware of our common humanity, cry together and express forgiveness to the other. Only then perhaps, will we triumph over those on both sides, who thrive on violence, destruction and bloodshed.

—Rev. Awad is Dean of Students at Bethlehem Bible College; from a letter to the editor of Ha'aretz.

From the Editor:

MennoLetter will not be published next month—August, 2003.

I will be spending the next five weeks with our group of international Bible teachers, professors, and priests for the ongoing Study Programs of Bat Kol Institute where I am involved in administration activities, and teach at sites around the country: in particular, Geography & Archaeology of the Land. [For information, see www.batkol.info]

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