

MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

“Jeremiah warned and warned the people of Israel that their own oppression of the poor and their militant foreign policy were bringing destruction upon them.”

—*Rabbi Arthur Waskow*

“While the Road Map isn’t working, our Jewish and Christian friends must stand by us and continue to visit.”

—*Israeli Tourism Minister*

~ *MY VOICE* ...

Truth as Victim in One-Sided Analysis

“Christian fundamentalists continue to present major concerns for most Christians here.”

The heat of summer isn’t always registered by thermometers. The political reports that had cooled a couple of months ago have returned to ‘red hot’. The much touted peace moves—always with enthusiasm cautioned, as we too did in this space—led to the old and familiar level of mutual recriminations as to why negotiations failed. Certainly Hamas had made it clear that if the Israeli occupation doesn’t end, they will continue the only means of resistance they have found effective to get their message out: suicide bombing! Readers already know the ‘facts’ of August 19th so this report looks to offer two other perspectives—from both sides. Neither is pleasant reading. Both are true.

Christian fundamentalists continue to present major concerns for most Christians here. The local churches have been consistent—and increasingly vocal—about the damage they feel is being done by literalistic application of *selected* Bible passages to respond to the complexities of Middle-Eastern politics, cultures, and religions involved in the conflict. SABEEL, a local Palestinian liberation theology group, has decided to organize an international conference next spring that will focus on the issue. “Challenging Christian Zionism” will run from April 14-18, 2004.

The *MennoJerusalem Summer Internship* session has come to a close for this year. Robert & Lois Witmer, longtime church workers in France and Quebec, now retired in Cambridge, Ontario, served as volunteer coordinators for the participants locally. Marian Hostetler of Indiana; Kristen McManus of New York, a student at Eastern Mennonite University; Emily Hershberger of Oregon, studying at Goshen College, covered a good deal of this land, met a range of peace and justice workers, lived with Muslim and Christian families, visited Jewish and Christian worship sites... and generally spent their months listening and learning all they could about what makes this land tick, and what our church is doing on various fronts. McManus reported: “It was an incredibly wonderful summer, full of many surprises and twists, and I wouldn’t change it for the world. These experiences are part of what shapes us as human beings and makes us what we are.” That’s what it’s all about! —GEW



The Hebrew month of Elul has just begun. It is the ‘month of repentance’ in which Jews around the world focus on preparing themselves for the New Year which begins with Rosh Hashanah on September 27th and Yom Kippur soon after.

'Blood Brothers' author, Elias Chacour, is president.

First Christian Arab Israeli University Opens in Galilee

**“...where academic excellence ...pluralistic living, and respect for difference
builds upon the resources and richness of diversity.”**

After four years of intensive planning and negotiations, Father Elias Chacour, President of Mar Elias Educational Institutions, last month announced the good news of a momentous event in the history of Israel. Official accreditation for the establishment of Mar Elias University Campus in Galilee, has been granted by the Council of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education of the State of Israel. This endorsement completes the process of accreditation that was initiated three years ago when the Mar Elias University project was accredited by the American North Central Association of Colleges and Schools as a branch campus of the prestigious University of Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.

Mar Elias University campus (MEUC) will be the first ever Christian Arab Israeli university in the region and will meet a vital need for a serious academic environment where Arab Palestinian Christian, Muslim and Druze Israelis, as well as Jewish Israelis will have the opportunity to study together with students from the Middle East regions. International students will also be welcomed and exchange programs encouraged.

MEUC will continue the twenty-year-old established ethos of Mar Elias Educational Institutions as an apolitical and non-confessional organization, providing an innovative model of academic excellence and research combined with pluralistic living, in which acknowledgement and respect for difference builds upon the resources and richness of diversity. It will provide a much needed beacon of hope in the Middle East as Arabs take their place beside their Jewish brothers and sisters in realizing the goals of justice, peace and reconciliation.

In keeping with the goal of academic excellence, seven professors and 64 holders of PhDs have been recruited for the faculty and MEUC is now actively seeking the cooperation of an Israeli university to be a local companion and mentor. Courses will be taught primarily in English with some courses offered in the Arabic or Hebrew languages. Intensive English courses will be made available, and scholarships will be offered based on academic excellence. *E-mail:* office@m-e-c.org

~ OTHER VOICES...

News reporting needs facts, “the story” of what happened. But often the real story is in the pain and suffering, the emotions of the people involved. Instead of all the ‘facts’ of the suicide bombing of August 19th which you already know, we have chosen to talk about people who are victims, telling you their names, and something about them...

“She Died Sanctifying the Name of God.”

With the future of the US-backed peace plan tottering on the verge of collapse, security officials braced for the possibility of a return to heightened violence in the weeks ahead.

Liba Schwartz, 57, a mother of five and grandmother of eleven, used to go for prayers every day at the *Kotel*, the Jewish term for the Western ‘wailing’ Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Both her son, Yoel, and husband, Rabbi Yisrael, called her that Tuesday night, asking her to hurry home. But Liba would not leave until she finished reciting her portions of *Tebilim*/prayers. Her family would not hear her voice again. She was on the No. 2 bus that was the object of the terrorist bombing two weeks ago. “Her being killed after praying at the Kotel... it’s as if she has completed her mission in this world,” said Yoel, “She died sanctifying the name of God.”

These people were killed for one reason—because they were Jews. They weren’t criminals or soldiers; they were religious Jews, coming from a time of prayer, longing to see the Temple rebuilt,

and the coming of the *Mashiach*/Messiah. For this they lie dead, or wounded in hospitals. One of the young victims, a 22-year old girl, was to be married the next night. She had gone to the Western Wall with a girlfriend to pray for the last time as a single woman, in preparation for her wedding. Now there will be no wedding; the dress hangs in a closet, the door of which no one wants to open, while her family and fiancé weep.

On Israeli radio there is a song being played over and over again. It is called *KeSheb Halev Bocheb*, “When the Heart Cries”:

*When the heart cries, only God hears; The pain erupts from the depths of the soul.
Man falls before he descends deeper, with a small prayer that cuts through the stillness.*

*Sh'ma Yisrael, My God, You can do all; You gave me my life, You gave me it all;
In my eye a tear, the heart weeps silently, and when the heart is silent the soul cries out:
Sh'ma Yisrael, My God, now I am alone. Strengthen me, my God, take away the fear;
The pain is great and there is nowhere to run to. Please make it stop as I am losing my strength.*



Lilach Kardi was nine months pregnant and a mother of a one-year-old child. Six years ago, her parents both died, leaving Lilach to raise and care for her now 14-year-old brother.

“She was traditionally orthodox but, after her parents died, she became *Haredi* (ultra-orthodox),”

her friend said of her afterward. “She was such a righteous and modest person.

Lilach was very much attached to the Kotel; she used to go every day.”

Nachman always phoned his brother, **Menachem Leibel**, to check on him after any terror attack. After this one he said of his brother: “He used to go every day so we knew he was at the Kotel yesterday. We called his cell phone. He always used to answer after terror attacks, but this time he didn’t pick up. I started going to the hospitals. Within an hour and a half I had been to all of them. He wasn’t on any of their the lists. That’s when I realized he probably wasn’t one of the wounded.” Menachem, 24, was buried the following day.

Nava and Yaakov Zargari live with their six children in a small apartment in Jerusalem. On Tuesday, they took five of their six children to the Kotel. **Shmuel Zargari**, 11 months, was killed in the explosion. His parents were critically wounded and hospitalized, missing Shmuel’s funeral.

Binyamin Bergman, 15, was murdered on his way back from a friend’s Bar Mitzvah. He was a yeshiva student. His uncle described him as “a great, talented child, always helping everyone.”

Goldie Taubenfeld, 43, and mother of thirteen children, lived in an orthodox community near Monsey, New York, and was in Israel with her husband and two of her children for a family wedding. Both she and her son, Shmuel, were killed in the attack.

Baby Shmuel was three months old.

The 600 pupils of a yeshiva/religious school were called in from their summer vacation to recite prayers when they learned that their principal, **Shalom Mordechai**, and one of his two son’s were among those killed in the blast. The other son was severely wounded. The yeshiva spokesman described him as “a devoted, modest, wonderful educator.”



The United States demanded that Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas clamp down on terror groups, and backed Israel in postponing pullbacks on the West Bank. “The messages we are issuing to the Palestinians is that they must act on security,” a State Department spokesman said. At least five of the victims in the suicide bombing were US citizens. “The two leaders said this latest attack on Jerusalem only reinforced the need to crack down on terrorists and terrorist infrastructure,” White House spokesman Scott McClellan said. “They agreed that the way forward to peace is through the dismantlement of terrorist organizations.” —from the *Lekarev Report*, and other sources

By Rabbi Arthur Waskow

Does Jeremiah's Prophecy Apply Today?

"It is totally clear that in neither people is there enough energy for nonviolence to stop the violence of the Israeli government on the one hand, or Hamas on the other."

Yesterday—reports of the disgusting mass murder on the Number 2 bus in Jerusalem.

Today—reports from ICAHD, Israel Committee Against House Demolitions, about Israeli government plans to demolish the building planned as a center for nonviolent action against the Occupation—what used to be the four-times demolished Shawamreh family house, as well as a flood of home demolitions elsewhere. On a scale of disgusting violence, the bus-bombing is in isolation far more disgusting than the home demolition, and the one is therefore hard to address in the wake of the other. But when I take account of this demolition not alone but alongside all the egregious acts of the Sharon government to use violence against the Palestinian people, I see protesting the demolitions as a burden hard to bear but not impossible.

The surpassingly disgusting mass-murder bombing in Jerusalem is 'justified' by its perpetrators on the grounds of recent Israeli attacks on Palestinians, also in violation of the Road Map truce, which the Israeli government 'justifies,' of course, on the grounds of previous attacks by some Palestinian groups. And no doubt the new bombing will be cited by Israeli authorities to 'justify' new Israeli violence, including assassination attempts (which of course not only kill accused persons without trial but are very likely, as in the past, to kill people known to be innocent as well), the continued building of the Wall through Palestinian farmlands, home demolitions having nothing to do with alleged terrorism, and the continued failure to remove even the most egregious new settlement outposts, as also promised under the Road Map.

By now you would think that both sets of actors in this situation understood the dynamic. In fact, I believe that they do and are quite aware that more people on 'their own side' will die as a result of their actions. They view this as worth it because each 'side'—the Sharon government and Hamas—is gambling that through violence it can win total control of the land between the Jordan and the Sea. Dead people are, in their minds, simply casualties of this war strategy. Meanwhile, some of the few practitioners of nonviolence in the region are under renewed attack: the Shawamreh family (whose house in Anata has been demolished four times although they have never been accused of any involvement with terrorism or violence whatsoever), and such allies of nonviolent Palestinians as the *Israel Committee Against Home Demolition*, leaders of *Rabbis for Human Rights*, and the *International Solidarity Movement*. These groups are trying heroically to act with nonviolence in a terrible situation.

Yet it is totally clear that in neither people is there enough energy for nonviolence to stop the violence of the Israeli government on the one hand, or Hamas on the other. It takes outsiders to cope with such a disastrous dynamic, and leaves to those outsiders any possibilities for peace. This is unfortunate, but what else can we expect when two adults who have experienced brutal abuse as kids are thrown into the same room, each experiencing any act that the other calls 'self-defense' as an act of continuing abuse against itself?

A word of Torah: The village of Anata where this demolition is planned is the same as the Biblical village of Anathoth, the home of Jeremiah. Desperately, Jeremiah warned and warned the people of Israel that their own oppression of the poor and their militant foreign policy were bringing destruction upon them. Yet at the very moment the destruction began, Jeremiah hid away in his home town, in an earthenware pot, a deed of redemption, asserting that despite impending captivity the newly exiled would return to redeem and live in their homes.

Question: Was this an ethnic proclamation, or an ethical prophecy? Did it speak on behalf of any people whose land is robbed from them by an outside power, even if they contributed to the robbery through their own misdeeds, or did it speak solely on behalf of the Jews? Who today will redeem the homes of the people of Anathoth?

—The writer is Director of The Shalom Center, www.shalomctr.org

By Alison Jones-Nassar, formerly with Bethlehem Bible College

Despicable Performance by US Media Charged

“I have never felt so repulsed or offended...The time has come for Americans to hold their media accountable.”

I have been appalled and disgusted by recent coverage of the Middle East crisis, as well as thoroughly confirmed in my conviction that the US media contributes overwhelmingly to the problem and not the solution. Since the beginning of last week, the RTD* featured front-page photos of Israeli children fearfully gazing through windows; MSNBC depicted images of 9/11 juxtaposed with footage of suicide bombings in Israel; and CNN prominently quoted an Israeli spokesperson as saying “Palestinians need to learn to love their children as much as they love terror.” I have never felt so repulsed or offended. Where are the front-page photos of Palestinian children, their anxious faces contemplating yet another school year full of fear, violence, and frustration? Palestinian children have been killed at a rate *three times as high* as that of Israeli children, and the day-to-day circumstances that they face are exponentially worse. Who considers the enormous anxiety and exhaustion of parents confronting yet another year in which the only thing they and their children have to look forward to is more chaos, more imprisonment, more poverty, more death, more hopelessness?

Having recently arrived [back in Virginia] from Bethlehem with my family, and having lived through more than two years of gratuitous military savagery and collective punishment including tank shelling, helicopter attacks, endless 24-hour-a-day curfews, and brutal house-to-house searches, I know what Palestinian children are facing and what Palestinian parents are feeling. They do not “need to learn to love their children.” Rather, it is Americans who need to learn that parents and children everywhere want and need the same basic things: freedom from fear and oppression, freedom to live and grow with dignity, freedom to realize the potential for grace that we all possess.

Israel could have been enjoying the benefits of an effective ceasefire long ago simply by agreeing to comply itself to the same terms to which Palestinians are so stringently held. By refusing to comply through repeated assassinations—not to mention ongoing settlement construction, land confiscation, movement restrictions, and day-to-day humiliation of civilians—and then seeking the sympathetic tears of the international community when the other side responds in kind, Sharon’s government demonstrates the ugly cynicism with which it is willing to exploit the suffering not only of Palestinians but of its own citizens. The participation of the US media in this performance is not just despicable, it is criminal. This collaboration will only generate more death, more suffering, and more hatred, and our media is intimately responsible for all the innocent blood which has been and will continue to be shed. The time has come for Americans to hold their media accountable.

—from her letter to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. She is author of ***Imm Mathilda: A Bethlehem Mother’s Diary***

By Danny Rubinstein

Nonviolence! Why Didn’t We Think of That Before?

Voices in the territories are calling for a switch to nonviolent struggle.

In the Palestinian press, writers speak of the power of the weak.

The most famous statement made by Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) before he was appointed to this position was that the Palestinians need to end the “military intifada.” He wrote and spoke about this often, explaining that Palestinian groups that use guns, explosives and suicide attacks do huge political damage to the Palestinian cause. “We must conduct the struggle and the intifada without violence,” he said.

The idea is not new. Years ago, there were Palestinians who recommended adopting the nonviolence used by Mahatma Gandhi against British rule in India and by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his fight for civil rights for blacks in the US. The most prominent Palestinian proponent of this idea was a young man named Mubarak Awad, who had been educated in America. About 10 years ago,

Awad tried to interest the Palestinian public in the West Bank and Gaza with this idea. But the Israeli Interior Ministry deported him and he returned to the US. Today as well, a number of prominent Palestinians are caught up in promoting nonviolent struggle.

The Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza constitutes more than one-third of the inhabitants of Greater Israel. Together with Israeli Arabs and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, they constitute about 45 percent of this population. A lecturer at Bir Zeit University noted a few years ago that if the Palestinians were to sit quietly and let Israel establish more and more settlements and annex the West Bank and Gaza, their victory would be assured.

The argument is well-known: Israel would be suffocated if it attempted to swallow the West Bank and Gaza, with their three-and-a-half million inhabitants. If Israel kept the Palestinians under an apartheid regime or in artificial enclaves, and if they waged their struggle nonviolently, they would quickly win the sympathies of the entire world. Israel would soon be as isolated and universally boycotted as South Africa was in its day, and it would be forced to give in. Against this background, an organization called the Common Ground News Service (which is part of a larger organization that deals with conflict resolution) has embarked on a media campaign aimed at explaining to the Palestinian public why it is worth their while to use nonviolent methods and how such methods should be used. The campaign includes articles in Palestinian and Arab newspapers, such as *Al-Hayat* in London and *Al-Quds* and *The Jerusalem Times* in Jerusalem.

Abu-Bachar said the use of weapons and violence during the current intifada and the killing of civilians have caused the Palestinians to lose international sympathy. Additionally, Israelis who used to be sympathetic to the Palestinian cause have ceased to be so. He cited petitions and opinion polls that show that most Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza believe in nonviolent struggle and think that such a struggle brings out the weakness of the stronger party, who is unable to employ his full strength against the weaker side.

Other people who are encouraging the use of nonviolence are the groups of volunteers from abroad who come to help the Palestinians. The most common methods of nonviolent struggle are demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, conferences and petitions. The problem is that even quiet demonstrations have sometimes quickly degenerated into violence. Teenagers throw stones, and Israeli soldiers respond with tear gas and rubber-coated steel bullets that have more than once caused serious injuries or even death. [Excerpted from an article in *Ha'aretz*, Jerusalem.]

“Bible-believing Christians believe all that land belongs to Israel.”

Tourism Minister Seeks Support of Christian Fundamentalists

“It’s just a question of time before everyone understands the road map is a road trap.”

Tourism in Israel has suffered a blow during the last three years. Thousands of people have lost their jobs in tourism related industries. Some hotels have been completely closed and shops have gone bankrupt. Tourism Minister, Benny Elon, has been on an aggressive campaign to rebuild what was Israel’s second largest industry. The goal of the Tourism Ministry’s new initiative entitled “*Project Go Israel*” is to bring one million tourists to Israel in the coming year.

Elon recently completed a Bible Belt tour of the United States, including visits to Memphis and Atlanta. “In the Bible belt, I received a very warm reception,” Elon said, “as our Christian evangelical friends understand quite clearly the importance of Israel fighting terror, and not giving in to the whims of Palestinian Arab terrorists. Our friends throughout the United States understand my criticism of the State Department [which warned against visiting Israel] and the need to continue to visit the State of Israel.” He said that *Project Go Israel* is intended to “continue to revitalize Israel’s tourism, for while the Road Map isn’t working, our Jewish and Christian friends must stand by us and continue to visit.”

When Elon’s trip was reported in the *Washington Times*, it quoted evangelical Christian leaders strongly opposed to the Road Map plan. “We either have to oppose the road map or oppose the Bible,” says Mike Evans, and Ed MacAteer is quoted as saying, “Bible-believing Christians believe all

that land belongs to Israel. It is a fatal, fatal mistake that George Bush is making. He is probably the most powerful man in the world, but he ain't more powerful than God. Every grain of sand on that piece of property belongs to the Jews because God gave it to [them]." Benny Elon added, "It's just a question of time before everyone understands the Road Map is a road trap."

—Leah Rafaeli, *Lekarev Report*

Palestinians Are Thirsty While Settlers Swim

Reuters recently ran a piece describing the acute water shortage among Palestinians in the West Bank. Israel controls most of the water supplies, and the illegal Jewish-only colonies (illegal under international law) fill up their swimming pools while many Palestinian families do not have enough water to grow food or bathe regularly. While Israel blames the shortage on Palestinians' illegal drilling (illegal under regulations which Israel imposes on the occupied territories), while Palestinians point to grossly iniquitous water distribution policies as the reason why they need to drill in the first place.

The current regime of roadblocks and sieges makes water delivery precarious if not impossible for many West Bank Palestinian communities. The shortage is not, fundamentally, a function of Israeli military policy, that would be solved by Israeli military withdrawal. Rather, the water crisis has been engineered by the Israeli government through the strategic construction of Jewish-only colonies. Reuters quotes a think-tank as saying that "Israeli settlement policy had been guided in part by the imperative of securing control over high-yield aquifers." —in *Jewish Peace News*

Temple Mount Reopens to Christians and Jews

Two weeks ago the Israeli government announced it would reopen the complex to Jewish and Christian visitors for two hours every morning. The *Waqf*, or Muslim council, which oversees day-to-day affairs at the compound objected, complained it was not consulted. The compound is known to Jews and Christians as the Temple Mount, having been the site of two biblical Jewish temples. To Muslims it is the *Haram al-Sharif*, or Noble Sanctuary. Within the complex is the *Al Aqsa* mosque and the Dome of the Rock, from where Mohammed ascended to heaven.

One group that visited included several adherents of the Temple Mount Faithful, a group that seeks to rebuild the Temple, worrying the security authorities. More than 60 other Jews made uneventful visits to the site the same day. During the tour, some of the Temple Mount loyalists recited Psalms. However, in an effort to avoid anything the Muslim Waqf might consider provocative, they recited the Psalms from memory, and quietly rather than aloud. A few even managed to bow down to the ground—a tradition that the various Temple Mount movements have been trying to establish on the mount for many years.

—*Ha'aretz*

A 3000-Year-Old Biblical Legal Case of Theft?

Dr. Nabil Hilmi, an Egyptian University professor, is rallying attorneys and politicians around the idea of reverse slave reparations—suing the Jews who suffered in slavery in Egypt for 400 years—because, he claims, they stole tons of gold before they left! "It's a little late for such a claim," writes Joseph Farah of *WorldNetDaily*. "It's normally the slave who asks for recompense, rather than the slaveholder," he said. "Indeed, if Exodus is the historical record of the wholesale rip-off alleged by the Egyptians, it's a record that suggests the Egyptians willingly gave silver, gold and clothing for their journey." Exodus 12:31-36 provides the biblical account.

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