



Menno Letter from Jerusalem

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

**“A state lacking justice cannot survive...
the countdown to the end of Israeli society has begun.”**

—Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Israeli Knesset

**“Arafat is an obstacle to any process of reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians.
Israel will work to remove this obstacle in a manner, and at a time, of its choosing.”**

—from an Israeli cabinet statement

“There is no room for political stands in this war.”

—Israeli Air Force Chief Major-General

~ MY VOICE...

Living in Days of Awe

***It's not always easy—but absolutely essential—not to confuse the faith, worship,
and traditions of Judaism with the current political stance of the Israeli government.***

Explosive, they reported. No, not another suicide bomber but perhaps something that will, in the end, turn out to be much more powerful and effective in moving Israel and Palestine closer to a peaceful solution for living so near each other. A widely circulated article by the former Knesset speaker, Avraham Burg, has caught the attention and imagination of many people, including those who never expected such an honest, painful, and direct statement from right inside the Israeli soul. *The Tablet* of London carried an excellent analysis of his thesis, which is excerpted on page 3. When one hears about a situation “getting worse before it gets better,” one hopes it is perhaps like a pendulum swinging to its extreme position—it doesn't stop there, but returns. So the swing of struggles here.

The Jewish New Year—*Rosh Hashana*—last week opened the Days of Awe of the High Holy Days in the Jewish calendar. For the next ten days Jews feel themselves drawing closer to God in a time of prayer and repentance, until they reach the spiritual heights of Yom Kippur, this year on Monday, October 6. When this somber Day of Atonement descends over practitioners of Judaism around the world, all work ceases for a day of prayer and fasting, to seek dependence upon God. “Forgive and pardon our sins on this Day of Atonement,” reads a traditional Yom Kippur confessional. Prayers of confession by the whole congregation accept responsibility not only for one's own misdeeds, but for those of one's family and community as well. In our current darkened environment in this land, one indeed chooses to hope, longingly, for communal repentance and forgiveness—whether Jewish or not.

It's not easy—but absolutely essential—not to confuse the faith, spirituality in worship, joy of Torah study, and other traditions of Judaism with the current political stance of the Israeli government. The one we joyfully embrace with spiritual dedication. The other we reject strenuously, and work to counteract the harsh social and economic effects on the marginalized and oppressed. That's a deliberate separation not everyone understands. In this issue, we see the dreadful expansion of the separation wall while yet lauding the literacy of Mary Blye Howe in writing about her happy discovery of Jewish worship and spirituality in her new book, *A Baptist Among the Jews* [see page 7]. These are the complexities of the days we are living: awful, awe-ful! —GEW

~ OTHER VOICES...

An Israeli Rabbi's Soul-Searching on Yom Kippur

“Reciting the viduy/confession is not the occasion for a ‘balanced’ view, [but] an opportunity to examine those matters which we can find the courage to deal with only when we are strengthened by the intensity of Yom Kippur.”

Preparing Ourselves to Recite Our Confession

The state of Israel has been transformed from a welfare state with one of the smallest gaps in the world between the rich and the poor, to one which has one of the greatest rifts between these two groups in the West. Three years into the current intifada there is not a one of us who is not angry and traumatized in the face of ongoing Palestinian violence. While not excusing Palestinian terror, Yom Kippur is a time to rise above the unchallenged assumptions and justifications which prevent us from looking honestly at ourselves. It is all too easy for us to be trapped in our own real and justified pain. However, life is not a zero sum game in which admitting our shortcomings weakens us or negates the shortcomings of others. Finding a way out of crisis requires us to add the conclusions of our own painful *kheshbon nefesh* (soul searching) to those truths which are more readily clear to us.

The examination of our deeds tells us we also have much to atone for. Israeli Arabs have been systematically under-represented in all areas of Israeli society, while their communities have been disproportionately over-represented in terms of poverty and unemployment. In the Territories, unfair allocation of water, land expropriations, harassment by settlers, humiliation, and despair have left Palestinians with little faith in the peace process or hope for a better future. While we are all too aware of the terrible ongoing attacks which we suffer, we often prefer not to know about our actions which cross our tradition's red line between self defense and harming innocent civilians.

In so far as we take the traditional *viduy* [confession] of Yom Kippur seriously, we are obliged to look upon ourselves in a way that will cause us unease. Reciting the *viduy* is not the occasion for a 'balanced' view, or for repeating the accepted version of events. Rather it is an opportunity to examine those matters which we can find the courage to deal with only when we are strengthened by the intensity of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel said: "In a democracy there is a small group of guilty people, but each one of us must bear responsibility." Our soul searching on Yom Kippur is what permits our joy at the spiritual harvest festival of *Sukkot*.

—From a release by Rabbis For Human Rights

Number 77—Another UN Veto!

“The US is unwilling to condemn an action that would, if carried out, be a war crime.”

The recent US veto of a UN Security Council resolution compelling Israel to retract its threats to kidnap or murder Yasser Arafat should give all Americans pause for thought. What can be deduced from the fact that the US government is unwilling to condemn the threat to perform an action that would, if carried out, be a war crime? One thing is that the US government must think it would be acceptable for say Syria, or Iran, to threaten to kidnap or murder George Bush because they don't think he is a 'partner for peace.'

Even more significant however is the overwhelming and sustained nature of global opposition to Israel's behavior. This is the 77th time the US has vetoed a Security Council resolution, in the great majority of cases to protect Israeli lawlessness. After the failure of the Security Council resolution, the UN General Assembly passed a similarly-worded resolution by a massive majority, with only four votes against (embarrassingly, the US, Israel, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands). The reality is that Israel is able to act with complete impunity, in violation of Security Council as well as General Assembly resolutions, not to mention the Geneva Conventions, so long as US support is sustained.

—from an editorial in *Jewish Peace News*

From an article by Clifford Longley

“A light unto the nations! Once that has gone out, what is the point of being Jewish?”

Explosive, With the Fire of a Prophet

“The Jewish people did not survive for two millennia in order to pioneer new weaponry, computer security programs, or anti-missile missiles.”

No Christian could have said such things, without an instant accusation of anti-Semitism. The former speaker of the Knesset, Avraham Burg, has published a blistering article in Israel and republished in the famous New York Jewish magazine, *The Forward*. An editorial warns readers that, while they may be startled by the vehemence of Burg's language, he is basically right. Burg himself is a highly respected Israeli Labor politician, of impeccable Orthodox credentials. He brings rare passion to bear on Israel's recent dealings with the Palestinians, which he says are marked by such moral blindness as to call into question the eternal Jewish claim to be “a light unto the nations.” Once that has gone out, he asks, what is the point of being Jewish?

But as *The Forward* editorial points out, what makes his argument compelling is its cold demographic logic. In as little as 10 years, Jews will be outnumbered by Muslims in the combined territories of Israel, West Bank, and Gaza. When that happens, the Sword of Damocles will finally have fallen on the founding Zionist vision of Israel as a Jewish democracy. Either Arabs are forever to be denied citizenship and the vote, in which case Israel could no longer be called democratic, or the majority must prevail, in which case it could no longer be called Jewish. Either way marks the end of the Zionist dream, by definition. One begins to see why the dreaded ‘two-state’ solution has suddenly started to appeal to Sharon. It is the only way Israel can survive the demographic time bomb.

Morally, what Burg says is explosive. “The Jewish people did not survive for two millennia in order to pioneer new weaponry, computer security programs or anti-missile missiles,” he declares. “We were supposed to be a light unto the nations. In this we have failed. It turns out that the 2,000-year struggle for Jewish survival comes down to a state of settlements, run by an amoral clique of corrupt law-breakers who are deaf both to their citizens and their enemies. A state lacking justice cannot survive...the countdown to the end of Israeli society has begun.”

It is the callousness of Jewish indifference towards the suffering of ordinary Arabs, women, and children particularly, that represents for him the final moral disgrace of Israel. “Israel, having ceased to care about the children of the Palestinians, should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centers of Israeli escapism. They consign themselves to Allah in our places of recreation, because their own lives are torture. They spill their blood in our restaurants in order to ruin our appetites, because they have children and parents at home who are hungry and humiliated. We could kill a thousand ringleaders a day and nothing will be solved, because the leaders come up from below....”

There can be no level of atrocities, by frequency or by intensity of outrage, no quantity of deaths caused by suicide bombers, to justify choosing a different way [than a two-state solution]. The cat-and-mouse game between the Israeli army and the Palestinian terrorists is irrelevant, whoever seems to be winning. The great wall that is being constructed to separate Palestinian areas from Jewish areas even within the West Bank is irrelevant. Arresting, deporting, even assassinating the Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, is irrelevant. Killing the leaders of Hamas one by one or 20 at a time is irrelevant. Only one thing is relevant to Israel's brighter future, and that is the road map to the two-state solution. All the rest leads to perdition.

It is actually exhilarating and even liberating to find such a powerful Zionist argument against Israel's present conduct. Non-Jewish critics of Israel feel the weight on their consciences of non-Jewish treatment of the Jews over 2,000 years, and are too ashamed to say what they really feel. But what they feel is very much what Avraham Burg is now writing: that this cannot go on, this is intolerable, the world may not look away, must stop making excuses for its silence. We cannot hide behind the Holocaust forever.

—from an article in *The Tablet*, www.thetablet.co.uk

Israeli Air Force Commander:

“We are going after terrorists. We are the most moral army I know.”

Shock Waves in the Ranks

Israeli Air Force pilots refuse to carry out targeted assassinations of Palestinians.

In a move that produced shock waves throughout Israel last week, 27 active and reservist Air Force pilots signed the letter stating a refusal to carry out targeted assassinations and other operations in the Palestinian territories. Officials indicate that the 27 will be immediately suspended and, if they don't withdraw their refusal, ultimately dismissed from the force. Nine of the pilots are in active service and were immediately grounded by Air Force command.

The letter was addressed to the Air Force commander, Major-General Dan Halutz. It reads: “We new and old soldiers refuse these illegal and immoral orders that have been carried out by the State of Israel. We, who were brought up to love Israel and to contribute to the Zionist ideal, cannot take part in operations in the center of populated civilian areas, and refuse to endanger innocent Palestinian civilians.” The pilots wrote that they would also refuse to transport IDF troops on missions into and out of occupied Palestinian territories, nor would they provide air support for combat troops in those areas.

The refusal came as a shock to the army, which will treat the statement as a political rather than ideological refusal. This may mean severe ramifications for the letter's signatories. The IAF in the next few days is planning to call the nine active pilots to meetings with the heads of their bases. After it has studied the contents of the letter and its legal aspects, the IAF will make a formal decision on how to react.

Air Force Chief Maj.-Gen. Dan Halutz said he would take time to respond to the letter. “We are talking about 27 out of thousands, so we need to put things in perspective,” he said. “We are in a vicious war against terrorism. We don't choose our wars. This war is prescribed for us. There is no room for political stands in this war. We have no intention of harming innocent civilians, and when we have done so, we have apologized... We are going after terrorists. We are the most moral army I know. I am ready to deal with anyone who comes to me and shows me any one single operation we carried out which was not moral or legal.” —*from The Lekarev Report*

BY Hasan Abu Nimah,

former ambassador from Jordan to the UN

Arabs Oppose Israeli Violations of International Law

“The day will come...when this abnormality and injustice will be corrected.”

The Arab Group at the United Nations has managed to successfully turn its defeat at the Security Council into an important victory at the General Assembly. It was absolutely the right decision to pursue the matter at the General Assembly when the American veto had, days earlier, blocked Security Council action against the Israeli Cabinet decision to deport Palestinian President Yasser Arafat from his land.

When the Arab group decided to take its case against Israel to the Security Council, it must have been fully confident of the validity of the complaint, first because the Israeli action constituted an open violation of the international law, particularly of the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and secondly, because it was instantly rejected, and strongly condemned, worldwide. Third, besides the Israeli deportation measure, the world opinion was further infuriated when the Israeli deputy prime minister revealed that killing Arafat was one of the foreseen options. The US was itself one of the many countries which voiced strong reservations. Surprisingly, though, none of these factors was sufficient to dissuade the US from insisting on the standing practice of protecting Israeli defiance of international law, and the continued Israeli aggression, by a destructive veto.

Israel will obviously ignore the international will, as it did in every similar previous situation, without worrying about any consequences, with US protection of flagrant Israeli defiance guaranteed.

But although this has been the case with all UN resolutions coming from the Security Council or the General Assembly so far, the legal value of these resolutions can never be diminished by non-implementation. It is true that the damage caused by the Israeli defiance of the international rulings, to both UN credibility and integrity and to world peace and conflict resolution, has been tremendous. It is also true that the relevant accumulated UN resolutions have placed Israel and its behavior, since its creation, completely outside the perimeters of international law. History has been correcting, as we are witnessing, past injustices and long-standing wrongs. The day will come, not in the foreseeable future though, when this abnormality and injustice will be corrected too.

—Excerpted from an article in *The Jordan Times*

For full story, see: <http://jordantimes.com/wed/opinion/opinion3.htm>

“The Same Blood for Peace”

“In the global family, all wars are civil war,” said Ghazi Brigithe, a Palestinian Muslim. He and his friend, Rani Elhanan, a Jewish Israeli, have come together to speak to us from the Association of Bereaved Families. Rani’s 14-year-old daughter was killed by a suicide bomb. Ghazi lost two brothers. In their pain, the two men came to understand that killing is not a Muslim or a Jewish custom, but a government policy.

They tell me of the 1400 lectures on non-violence and peace building they have given in schools, of blood banks they organized. Palestinians donate blood for Israeli wounded, and Israelis do the same for Palestinians. Rani calls it, “the same blood for peace.” My indignation grows when I recall the hours and pages of violence that I hear from the media, while the efforts for peace go unnoted.

—Janet MacDonell, O.L.M., 2003 CPT September delegation

Christian Peacemaker Teams is an ecumenical initiative
to support violence reduction efforts around the world, including Hebron.
Photos of CPT projects can be viewed at: <http://www.cpt.org/gallery>

“We have no quarrel with the Israeli people.”

“Where is Justice for Us Now?”

Angela Godfrey from *Israeli Coalition Against Home Demolitions* took us on a tour to see part of the security fence (Apartheid Wall) that is completed near Jayyous, west of Nablus. We walked down a track from the village to a gate in the security fence in the valley below to meet Sharif, a local farmer. We had to talk to him through the fence, although the village was his home.

Sharif explained that the fence runs five or six kilometers inside the West Bank from the recognized 1967 boundary. He and 60 other farmers are cut off from their land. “We grow not only the olives you can see from here, but also citrus, grapes, avocados, mangoes and guavas,” he said. “We can only go through the gate either way during the five minutes that the soldiers open it, at three times during the day. To work the farms, most of us live in sheds on the land, leaving our wives and families at home. In addition, the water is in the valley, and we can no longer pump it up to the village. It is only supplied to the village for a couple of hours every three days or so.”

Sharif said that in 1947, many Palestinians fled their land when their villages were attacked. They have never been able to return. Now they are determined to hang on—both to their farms and to their homes. “We have no quarrel with the Israeli people,” he said. “We have lived near each other and traded our produce peacefully with them all this time. But where is justice for us now?”

—by Christina Gibb, in *CPT Newsletter*

Bedouin Families, Farmers Caged by the Wall

In the farming village of Jayyous in the West Bank of Palestine, the Israeli Government's separation wall snakes about six kilometers inside the internationally recognized 'Green Line,' the boundary between Israel and Palestine, separating villagers from their fields and, in some cases, their homes. Such is the case of the Bedouin Abu-Amar family which consists of four school-aged children, a shepherd, and his wife. Upon completion, the Wall is expected to extend some 650 km in length, which will confiscate or destroy over 150,000 dunams (37,000 acres) of Palestinian land.

Daily access to the land has become a snarl of arbitrary restrictions and regulations set up by the Israeli Military. There are presently two gates in the west and the south of Jayyous, that are now completely controlled by the Israeli Military. Prior to the wall, there were ten dirt roads completely accessible to the farmers at all times. The Abu-Amar family face unique circumstances since their home is located roughly half a kilometer beyond the South Gate, and now depend on the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) for access to their village. For more than a week now the lock on the gate has been missing, yet farmers and family sometimes wait for hours for the IDF to arrive and let them through.

The existence of the Wall makes simple tasks like going to the market or filling their water pump an ordeal requiring coordination with local community groups and foreign volunteers, who have also been asked to accompany the children twice daily through the gate to go to and from school. When ISM volunteers reached the gate recently to assist in a water tank delivery, and to accompany the Abu-Amars to their home, Israeli construction workers had erected a second gate beyond the south gate, blocking the entrance to the pathway of the Abu-Amar home. This new gate stands nine feet high and was shut, making it impossible for vehicles, water tanks, or donkey carts to enter. This fence was erected without notice to the village or the family. According to the information given to ISM by the Israeli workers, the construction of a six-foot-high coiled razor wire fence is expected to extend for about one or two kilometers in either direction from the new gate. Not only will this second gate severely impact the lives of the Abu-Amars, but it will also prevent farmers from reaching their fields during the upcoming Olive Harvest. —from *International Solidarity Movement report*

Wall Collapses on Temple Mount

An interior wall has collapsed in a Muslim building on the Temple Mount. The Islamic Waqf, which administers the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock shrines atop the Temple Mount, accused Israeli authorities of instigating the failure of the wall by preventing engineers from maintaining it. The collapsed wall is situated near the Islamic Museum. But Israelis charged the Waqf with directing 'unsupervised' work in and around the Temple Mount resulting in the loss of archaeological treasures. "It looks terrible," said Eliat Mazar, an Israeli archaeologist and Temple Mount expert. "This collapse might cause a terrific series of collapses."

Last December, international media focused on a bulge that had developed on the southern wall of the Temple Mount. Jordanian engineers have inspected it and took a sampling of the protruding wall. A scaffolding was erected and some repair work is now underway.

The Temple Mount is the foundation of the Jewish Temple that was destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans. Because it is the only remnant of that structure, it is considered the holiest site for observant Jews. Muslims claim it is the third holiest in their faith because of the Al-Aqsa mosque.

*****Tourism in Israel has jumped during 2003: by the end of this year 1.2 million tourists will have visited Israel—50% more than in 2002!***

Many North Americans still feel that they dare not, or should not, visit Israel just now. But we keep repeating that those of us who live here suggest otherwise. Many groups are coming: last month I noted the Anglican Young Theologians Conference, also Bat Kol Institute's study sessions for Bible teachers [July & November], Ecce Homo's Biblical Studies Program, the Jerusalem University College semester, an upcoming visit of a German Mennonite Peace Committee... and so on, to name only a very few of the things going on.

There are some areas we don't visit, of course, just like in many North American cities. But our on-site studies, visits to holy places, worship in churches and synagogues, and meetings and meals with Palestinians and Jews continue unabated.

We believe that travel opportunities to see the holy places of the Bible, and to study the **Book**, with the **People**, in the **Land** should not be missed. And not just with the idea of "standing alongside the Palestinians" or "Supporting Israel" or other current slogans, but also *for yourself*. To learn, to listen, to participate—and to *teach*! Regardless of the news reports that foreign TV screens choose to focus on!

—BOOK REVIEW—

"Told with exceptional grace and clarity, her tale of discovery gives us a story of hope, reconciliation, and respect and admiration across traditions of faith."

"A Baptist Among the Jews"

What a shame it would be if anyone missed such an excellent book just because they aren't Baptist! In that sense, it has the wrong title—if the idea of a book's label in the end is to sell more copies. Mary Blye Howe is still a Southern Baptist, but her story is about her delightful and amazing encounter with Jews and Judaism—one which she says has changed her life, certainly her understanding of faith and spirituality. Tony Campolo notes, "This book does not so much explain Judaism as provide a 'feel' as to what it means to enter into Judaism as an outsider. You get a taste of the mystical and joyful excitement of our Jewish friends that carries you way beyond any understanding of Judaism as some kind of legalistic religion."

Howe admits to having been uninformed about Jewish ritual and tradition. To satisfy her curiosity she joined a Jewish study group with a Hasidic rabbi, and had an eye-opening experience of studying that led her to a deeper, richer relationship with her God. Her Christian upbringing had been conservative. She explains, "During those years, I was so legalistic that I once canceled my subscription to a magazine because it condoned women working outside the home."

"Growing up, I had a vague notion from my church and the Greek New Testament that Jews loved rules and had little heart or passion for God. In our eyes, Jews followed rules while *Christians* were passionate about God. God had done everything to get them to wake up, to love him, to acquire an understanding of what he wanted, but their hearts were too hard to hear the good news. *What an awakening I was in for!* As I began studying and worshiping with the Jews, they would begin to influence every aspect of my spiritual life...My experience of prayer was profoundly deepened..."

Howe's easy style is often funny, personable, serious, and convincing! Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says "this book is kosher!" *Christianity Today* editor, John Wilson, hopes a young, bright film director will discover Howe's story because "it could become another *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*."

Published in 2003 by Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, San Francisco. *Highly recommended.* —GEW

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