



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

Vol. II, No. 9, November 2003

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

**“The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.”**

—Psalm 33:17

**“Thousands of Palestinians are illegally residing in their own homes
and on their land, between the ‘obstacle’ and the State of Israel.”**

—Amira Hass, on the Israeli separation fence

**“As the hours went by, these strangers, these ‘enemies,’ were coming to an understanding
of the relationship they had in Christ.”**

—Salim Munayer, on the Musalaha Desert Encounter

~MY VOICE ...

Using the R-Word to Encounter ‘The Other’

***Meeting face to face! Talking to each other, understanding the differences and
discovering the similarities! How simple an idea—but how difficult to do at times!***

The German Mennonite Peace Committee is now in its second week of touring—getting involved in olive-picking, living with Palestinian families, and learning first-hand about life and its challenges in the West Bank. For the previous six tour days I had the opportunity of providing the group of ten with an orientation to the land and people on the Israeli side, and guiding them around Jerusalem and through Galilee. It’s one of the most exciting aspects of my Israel assignment—helping to create the bridges that can connect internationals with Israelis and Arabs in this country, doing so in the context of the people and places that Jesus knew so well. This weekend, another Bat Kol Institute group of Bible teachers, priests, and church workers from around the world has assembled to begin a month of intensive Bible study, including on-site teaching in Galilee, the Negev, and in Sinai [with a climb up Moses’ mountain]. And yes, we’ll share home cooking with Jews and with Palestinians.

The ‘R’ word—**Reconciliation!** Meeting face to face! Talking to each other, understanding the differences and discovering the similarities! How simple an idea—but how difficult to do at times! In this issue of *MennoLetter* we report on a number of encounters between Israelis and Palestinians—from the Jordanian desert to the ice of Antarctica. While the Israeli army continues to construct its dividing wall, slicing families off from their land and neighbors, creating barriers to communication and exchanges, adding to the hostility felt by the Palestinians toward the occupation, there appear some glimmers of hope and persistence from those who refuse to see the wall as an impenetrable obstruction to be humbly endured, but rather as another hurdle of broken relationships to overcome.

These reconciliation voices are small against the roar of the hungry and angry bulldozers. But they are rehearsing a chorus of alternatives for peace that may yet produce a grand finale, especially if produced in concert with our help. We too need to make our voices heard. —GEW

**UPDATE ON TRAVEL *The rising trend in the number of tourists coming to Israel continues:
September 2003 saw 90,500 tourists enter the country—an increase of 24% over
September 2002, and 16% over September 2001.***

~OTHER VOICES...

Yair Ettinger

*“Funding for coexistence projects has risen
to the level before the outbreak of violence three years ago.”*

It’s Good to Talk, Jews and Arabs Discover

**“The removal of barriers between Arabs and Jews could only be accomplished
via significant actions designed to influence policy.”**

Spontaneous meetings between Jews and Arabs have diminished over the course of the past three years and numerous polls have indicated that alienation between the two peoples has increased. Nevertheless, organized gatherings of Arab and Jewish citizens held in the name of ‘coexistence,’ once a target of criticism and disparagement from both sides before the *intifada*, are now a blossoming business that brings in millions of dollars every year. The organizers of these meetings claim that there are a wide variety of such groups and their numbers are now unprecedented.

The Coexistence Organizations Network, which launched its Web site a few weeks ago, has recently signed a Jewish-Arab Philharmonic Ensemble as the 101st member of its network. Dan Patir is managing director of the Abraham Fund Initiatives, an umbrella organization supporting dozens of groups which jointly established the network together with the Citizens Accord Forum. He reported that the number of requests he now receives from groups seeking funding for coexistence projects has risen to the level before the outbreak of violence three years ago. From the Abraham Fund Initiatives website—see www.coexnet.org.il—one can see that the scope of daily joint Arab-Jewish activity is quite extensive. Dozens of organizations are operating around the country and dealing with a rich variety of issues, including economic development, welfare, education, youth movements, environmental protection, culture, art and academic research. The fund claims these activities draw tens of thousands of participants, and that the numbers are rising.

Many of the participants—Jews and Arabs—cut ties initially, out of shock and fear, and then later out of anger or the realization that these meeting failed at the decisive moment. Criticism of the coexistence organizations, contemptuously called ‘dukis’ (from the Hebrew word for coexistence, *dukiyum*), stems from the fact that despite the widespread participation, their influence on bridging the Arab-Jewish divide was negligible. Some of those criticizing the groups claimed that the removal of barriers between Arabs and Jews could only be accomplished via significant actions designed to influence policy. Groups like *Ta’ayush* and *Sikkuy*, for example, act to create a political reality and thus lost their place in the network of coexistence groups.

Dr. Yifat Maoz, of Hebrew University’s communications department, has researched coexistence groups and says that in comparison to other countries suffering from ethnic and national tensions such as the United States and Northern Ireland, “relative to its population, Israel is positioned at a very high level.”

—published in *Ha’aretz*

Rabbi Michael Lerner

The Geneva Accord:

Israeli & American Jewish Doves Coming Out of the Closet

“American politicians...were terrified to question the Sharon government.”

Last week, Israelis and Palestinians meeting in Geneva signed a peace agreement that resolves all the major issues between them. The only problem remaining: the current governmental

leadership of Israel and Palestine are not yet signing, and on Israel’s side there are accusations that this agreement is an act of treason that undermines Israeli security. In fact, the Israeli

negotiator, Yossi Beilin, had almost completed this accord at Taba two and half years ago, but was stopped by Ehud Barak a week before Ariel Sharon was elected.

The terms provide for a return of Israel to the pre-67 borders with minor border modifications that give Israel control over the Wall and other Jewish sections of Jerusalem, trades some Israeli land for some Palestinian land in order to incorporate within Israel a few border settlements, and provides security for both sides. The Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people and agree to a demilitarized state.

For the past three years Israeli and American advocates of peace have been forced to keep a low profile as extremists grabbed the public agenda. There was a remarkable dance going on between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the Palestinian extremists. Fundamentalists in Palestine have not accepted, and will not accept, a secular Palestinian state; they would be perfectly willing to wait decades until conditions are ripe to create an Islamic state. For them, the complete nightmare would have been to have Yasser Arafat's secular regime become the founders of a new Palestinian state.

Yet Arafat was too popular to overthrow directly. So instead, the Palestinian fundamentalists entered into a *de facto* alliance with Ariel Sharon. They would engage in acts of terror against Israeli civilians whenever acts of Occupation became so outrageous that recruiting suicide bombers became possible, and Sharon would respond by blaming the terror on Arafat and engage in horrendous acts of repression, obliterating the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority and simultaneously demanding that that obliterated infrastructure take powerful steps against the Palestinian terrorists.

Of course, this treacherous scenario might have been put in danger by pressure from the international community. The extremists were frightened by the Road Map announced this past spring, and they did all they could to subvert it. Ariel Sharon gave the agreement lip service, then proceeded to escalate the building of a Wall through the West Bank that would effectively obliterate the Road Map by deciding in advance to incorporate part of the West Bank into what would be *de facto* Israeli control.

In addition, Sharon escalated targeted assassinations, moving from 'militants' to civilian leadership of the Islamic fundamentalist community. This, in turn provided the excuse for the Palestinian rejectionists to escalate violence against Israeli civilians, which in turn brought a decision by Sharon to eliminate—whom? Not Hamas or Islamic fundamentalists, but Arafat!

But what could the doves do? As Israelis became more scared in daily life, they became more willing to side with Sharon. And as world opinion became more explicitly angry at Israeli acts of repression against the Palestinian people, American Jews began to circle the wagons and see anti-Semitism every place where anyone dared criticize Ariel Sharon. American politicians, recognizing that many Jews will make support for the Israeli government their single-issue criterion about where to invest political and financial support, were terrified to question the Sharon government.

No wonder, then, that American and Israeli doves are eagerly embracing the Geneva agreement. That breakthrough decisively silences the standard criticisms: that there is no one with whom to negotiate (Palestinian Authority figures have welcomed the Geneva Accord, unlike the Sharon government which is claiming it is a disaster); that the Palestinians will never settle for anything less than the full obliteration of the Jewish state; or that Palestinians will always miss an opportunity to compromise.

The Geneva Accord has a huge advantage over other approaches to Middle East peace work. Unlike the Road Map or the Oslo Accord, this plan spells out from the start what the final settlement will look like. It provides a hopeful picture. No wonder Israeli and American doves are coming out of the closet to celebrate it. But whether that can be translated into the political clout to get Ariel Sharon to accept these balanced and reasonable terms remains to be seen.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun, is national chair of The Tikkun Community, an interfaith pro-Israel and pro-Palestine alternative to AIPAC and the pro-Ariel Sharon lobby. See also: www.tikkun.org You can read the terms of the Geneva Accord at: http://www.tikkun.org/community/index.cfm/action/current_projects/article/14.html

“Supporters... want to see the restoration of the biblical State of Israel.”

Zionist Websites Blacklisted by US State Department

In an unprecedented move, the US has extended its terrorism blacklist to include four strongly Zionist websites maintained by supporters of Rabbi Meir Kahane. The sites have now been listed as operated by “foreign terrorist organizations.” A State Department official said that this is the “first time, to our knowledge, that any website has been designated.” The four are: www.Kahane.org, www.Kahane.net, www.Kahanetzadak.com, and www.newkach.org. The officials say that Kahane’s supporters, “who want to see the restoration of the biblical state of Israel,” are accused of a number of attacks against Arabs, as well as making threats against Israeli officials.

Dr. Salim Munayer, Director of *Musalaha*, Bethlehem

Palestinian and Israeli Youth Share Desert Encounter

Musalaha—an Arabic word for ‘reconciliation’—organizes events for young people from ‘the other side’ to meet, to share experiences, and to understand each other’s beliefs.

“...***For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably***” (Gen. 33:10b). These were the words of Jacob to Esau, as they embraced and reconciled, leaving their past differences behind. I watched as this phenomenon took place amongst the group of 35 young Palestinian and Israeli adults we had taken into Wadi-Rum, Jordan, for five days. For so many of them, this was their first time to meet believers, or anyone, from the ‘other side.’ Usually, all it took was one experience of being together to bring people to this place of humbleness, to realize that, yes, they could see the Lord in ‘the other.’ As the hours went by, these strangers, these ‘enemies,’ were coming to an understanding of the relationship they had in Christ. For many, this was a breakthrough experience; for others it was very difficult.

The logistics of crossing the border into Jordan are complicated. There is a different arrangement for each different nationality, and they have to cross at different borders into Jordan. The group of Israeli and foreign passport holders crosses at the southern border, while the Palestinian passport holders can only cross the border near Jericho. Miscommunications caused many headaches, but finally we were all able to get together.

Two days were spent riding jeeps, camels, observing the stars, worshipping and studying God’s word together. On our last night, the group discussed some difficult issues specific to our political realities. Even while discussing such difficult issues, participants assured each other that they would continue to embrace their brothers, and to “receive them favorably.” This was a truly touching time for many of us, and it was followed by the taking of the Lord’s Supper together. Our time there in the desert made a deep impression on many of us. While in the bus going home someone passed around his hat and asked everyone to sign it. He said that this hat was going to be his reminder that through the power and love of Jesus Christ he was able to come together and be reconciled with his Israeli brothers and sisters. Another participant described her experience: “A Palestinian from Bethlehem served time in an Israeli prison during the first *intifadah*. An Israeli reservist did his military service as a jailer in that same prison and still serves there on his reserve duty today; now these two sit together in the desert, to hug and commit to pray for one another.

I was so encouraged to observe those who, for the first time, came in contact with the ‘other side,’ to see their initial reactions, the slow maturing process, the learning and ability to see each other as family, brothers and sisters in the faith, as ‘new creations’ in Christ Jesus, where ‘the old things have passed away and all things have become new.’

—for more information: salim@netvision.net.il

*Upcoming at Musalaha: Conference on Reconciling Young People, November 6-8. As a continuation of their work with youth leaders, **Musalaha** and **Youth for Christ** have invited youth workers from Northern Ireland. Guests will share with local youth leaders their experiences of working with youth in conflict and violent situations.*

***“In order to succeed—and survive—
these erstwhile ‘enemies’ will have to work together as a team.”***

Breaking the Ice—for Peace!

On January 1st, 2004, four Israelis and four Palestinians—two women and six men—will set off on a sea and land expedition to the distant reaches of Antarctica. Their expedition is called, ‘Breaking the Ice.’ This journey combines the spirit of adventure with a quest for understanding. It will force people separated by deep political and religious differences to cooperate in pursuit of a shared goal. In order to succeed—and survive—these erstwhile ‘enemies’ will have to work together as a team, sharing hardships and challenges that none of them could surmount as individuals. They will confront both physical and mental obstacles. In order to get over those obstacles they will have to find the way to work as a team. The expedition members will spend every moment of the ensuing days and nights together, sharing berths, tents and meals—and often roped together for safety.

The team will set sail from Patagonia in southern Chile, navigating through the Drake Passage, a thousand-kilometer stretch of sea considered among the most dangerous and unpredictable on earth. Their boat will carry all the gear and provisions required for a 35-day journey, along with satellite communication and video production equipment. ‘Breaking the Ice’ enjoys the political support and patronage of such persons as the Secretary-General of the United Nation, Kofi Annan; former Israeli Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Shimon Peres; the President of the German Parliament, Wolfgang Thierse; and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

—*Extreme Peace Missions*, http://www.breaking-the-ice.de/bti_home.htm

Amira Hass

“This is clearly bureaucracy in the service of ethnic cleansing.”

Caught in Between—Israeli Policy & the Fence

“Farmers cannot make their way to their land, hothouses and orchards have been destroyed, olives are left unpicked, teachers and students fail to get to school..., feed for the livestock does not arrive consistently, and the animals are being sold or slaughtered, or left to die...”

The situation of the Palestinians whose homes or farmland fall between the new separation barrier and Israel’s internationally recognized border is becoming a bureaucratic nightmare. There are already tens of thousands of people caught in this trap, and there will be many more as the barrier is extended. Technically, Israel has declared that all the Palestinians currently living in the zone are doing so illegally and can be thrown out at any moment by the IDF. Even if Israel does not forcibly expel these residents, it is making life much more difficult, possibly intolerably difficult, for Palestinians who choose to stay. This is clearly bureaucracy in the service of ethnic cleansing. —from the introduction by *Jewish Peace News*

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“**O**ne of the questions raised immediately after it became clear that, for the most part, the separation fence would not be built along the length of the Green Line, but in fact somewhere to the east of it [within Palestinian territory], was the fate of the Palestinians living to the west of the fence. As of now, this fate is shared by approximately 12,000 persons living in 15 Palestinian villages and towns. They are shut in between the separation fence to the east, and the Green Line to the west. As construction of the fence continues, deep into the territory of the West Bank, more Palestinians will find themselves in this situation. Additionally, the fence affects the lives of tens of thousands of

other people, whose homes are east of the fence, and whose land, on which they earn their livelihood, is to the west. All told, the route that the first stage of the fence will take has so far cut off from the West Bank about 25,000 acres of Palestinian-owned land, some of which is settled, most of which is farmland.

“The issues are real. Even before the Palestinians had a chance to come to terms with the loss of their land for the sake of the series of fortifications that is known as the ‘obstacle,’ they discovered that their ordinary lives had been completely disrupted, that it was possible to further disrupt their already disrupted reality of internal closures in the West Bank, curfews on cities and villages, and military attacks. Farmers cannot make their way to their land; hothouses and orchards have been destroyed; olives are left unpicked; teachers and students fail to get to school because the gate of the separation fence is not opened on time; feed for the livestock does not arrive consistently, and the animals are being sold or slaughtered, or left to die; water pipes for drinking or irrigation have been cut; siblings and parents are not permitted to visit; garbage trucks are unable to complete their routes; cesspits are not being drained on time.

“All of the above examples have been documented, with a hundred different variations, in all of these trapped communities. Bureaucracy abounds: for example, a school principal who submits the application for a teacher’s entry permit must note, aside from the name and address of the school, the classroom, institution that certified the teacher, serial number of teaching certificate and the date and place of issue. A visitor must note the name and other personal details of the long-term resident who is hosting him; the farmer has to list details of the land he is farming: whether they are village lands, number of section and sub-section, type of crop grown. A merchant has to note the type of commerce, the commercial license, who issued it and where. If the applicants want to stay overnight in the seam zone, they have to submit a request for overnight stay, and note the details of his host. Applicants must explain why they want to pass through a certain ‘control point’ and why they wish to stay overnight in the seam zone. They must submit a series of supporting documents.

“Thousands of Palestinians are essentially illegally residing in their own homes and on their land, ‘between the *obstacle* and the State of Israel.’ And Israeli soldiers have full rights to throw them out without delay.”

—excerpted from, *IDF Redefines Palestinians West of the Fence*, in *Ha’aretz*

### **...Some facts about the wall:**

- \* Ratio of the height of the Israeli Apartheid Wall to the height of the Berlin Wall: 2 to 1
- \* Length of the boundary (the 1967 Green Line) between Israel and the West Bank: 217 miles
- \* Projected length of the western part of the wall, roughly along the Green line: 621 miles
- \* Number of Palestinian residents in Qalqilya: 42,000
- \* Number of roads that lead in and out of Qalqilya now, after the construction of the wall: 1 (one)
- \* Number of Palestinians in nine villages around Qalqilya who have been dependent on the town for selling their agricultural products but are now trapped on the wrong side of the wall: 18,000
- \* Number of olive trees that the Mayor of Jayyous, a village near Qalqilya, used to own: 960
- \* Age of the oldest trees among them: 500 years
- \* Of the original 960 olive trees, number of trees left standing after the construction of the wall: 50

—Sources: “Building a Barrier to Peace,” *The Scotsman*; “Between Walls and Snipers,” *The Jordan Times*.  
Compiled by Scottish Friends of Palestine, [hugh@tintord.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:hugh@tintord.freeserve.co.uk).

**...For more information about the wall:**

The **Palestinian Environmental NGO Network** (PENGON), an MCC partner, has a new website with information, personal stories, and responses to frequently asked questions about the wall: [http:// www.stopthewall.org/](http://www.stopthewall.org/).

The **World Council of Churches** has released a report entitled, “*Security or Segregation? The Humanitarian Consequences of Israel’s Wall of Separation.*” It can be viewed at: [http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/ what/international/palestine/securityorsegregation.html/](http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/palestine/securityorsegregation.html/).

The **World Vision-Jerusalem**/West Bank/Gaza office has just issued a moving report entitled “*Who Will Wipe Away Their Tears? A Call to End Violence Against Children in Israel and Palestine.*” World Vision Jerusalem director writes, “No child should ever have reason to fear—let alone die from—a suicide bomber. No child should ever fear a violent death from an occupying military. No child should experience the trauma of bombings, tanks, and undercover death squads. No children should die for the sins of adults.” Copies of this powerful report can be obtained by e-mailing Allyn Dhynes <[allyn\\_dhynes@wvi.org](mailto:allyn_dhynes@wvi.org)> or Holly Dhynes <[holly\\_dhynes@wvi.org](mailto:holly_dhynes@wvi.org)>.

**I’m Eli Bronstein from the Bronx, and Jerusalem belongs to ME.**

**I’m Nathan Jablonski from Russia, and Jerusalem belongs to ME.**

**I’m Sarah Falasha from Ethiopia, and Jerusalem belongs to ME.**

**I’m Jacob Cohen from the Amazon, and Jerusalem belongs to ME.**

**I’m Itzhak Shapiro from the North Pole, and Jerusalem belongs to ME.**

**I’m Mohammad Salam from Jerusalem; I guess I must have been confused all this time.**

**—from a cartoon seen by Clarence Musgrave, minister of St. Andrew’s Church, Jerusalem**

## ***Excavating a New Testament Site***

An archaeological team from the University of Nebraska working with ground-penetrating radar has completed another session of digs at Bethsaida, the home of St. Peter and several of the disciples. Unlike other cities from the biblical period, Bethsaida has been well preserved. Buildings discovered there indicate an organized and stable society from the 10th century BCE. A road paved with basalt stones, four meters in width, leads to the gate of the city of Bethsaida, which overlooks the Sea of Galilee from the northeast. About 50 meters of the road were exposed during the most recent digging seasons at the site. In Matthew 11, Jesus criticizes this city for its lack of faith—along with Capernaum and Korazim—despite having worked miracles in each of them.

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