



Menno Letter from Jerusalem

Vol. II, No. 10, December 2003

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

**“Religion often takes the blame for conflicts
that are actually rooted in ethnic, economic, or national tensions.”**

—Princess Basma bint Talal of Jordan

**“In our tactical decisions, we are operating contrary to our strategic interest.
It increases hatred for Israel and strengthens the terror organizations.”**

—Lt-Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, Israeli Chief of Staff

“The Holy Land does not need walls but bridges.”

—Pope John Paul II

~ MY VOICE ...

**“If you want to make peace with your enemy,” said Nelson Mandela,
“you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”**

“Getting to Know You... Getting to Know All About You.”

It always seems to happen. And true to form it happened again with some members of our international study group at Bat Kol Institute this past month. We had just ended a two-hour meal and conversation time in a number of Palestinian homes near Bethlehem, and were gathering back at the bus. One of the people from South Africa commented, “They’re just like us. You know, they have the same interests and concerns that we do.” A priest from the Philippines felt the same way earlier after a few study sessions with a Rabbi. “I had never even met a Jew before and certainly never studied with one,” he said. “It really is a very special opportunity to learn about each other.” Such encounters are an important part of our programs for visiting students for that very reason: Getting to know someone face to face across a steaming platter of chicken *maklubeh* or during a shabbat family meal, hearing stories about their daily lives and embracing them as new-found friends afterward, are experiences that change one’s perceptions about ‘the unknown other.’

A participant in this study semester at Tantur learned quickly that she often gets through the checkpoint more easily if she calls out a cheery, “Hi there, how are you?” to the soldiers approaching with guns drawn to investigate. One’s first reaction at a checkpoint would sometimes be to show disgust, opposition, disdain. But that is usually counter-productive. The reconciliation efforts of Musalaha and the Jewish-Arab Center for Peace—to name just two active organizations here—operate on Nelson Mandela’s principle that meeting and working together with an ‘enemy’ are necessary prerequisites for peacemaking. Maybe the question needs to be, *What would Jesus have done?*

Repeated violence—and harsh repression—certainly aren’t working in Israel/Palestine these days. Maybe another way needs to be demonstrated. The good news is that many now are trying. —GEW

~ OTHER VOICES...

“The Christian population in the occupied territories has declined from 100,000 in 1948 to 50,000 today. Some Christian leaders fear that the community could disappear in a generation.”

Dark Days in the ‘Little Town of Bethlehem’

BY Joshua Hammer

David Mansour’s ties to the Holy Land have all but unraveled. A Greek Orthodox Christian whose family has lived in Bethlehem for generations, Mansour runs the Christmas Tree Souvenir Shop on Milk Grotto Street, just around the corner from the Church of the Nativity. For years he earned a comfortable living selling olive-wood nativity scenes to pilgrims who flocked to Jesus’ traditional birthplace at the rate of 130,000 per month. But since the start of the *intifada*, tourism has vanished, and so has Mansour’s livelihood. “My last customer? I think he came into the shop three weeks ago,” he says, blowing dust off a stack of yellowing postcards.

Mansour now feeds his family using ration cards distributed by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and he cleans the basilica to avoid being evicted by his landlord, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. With his business bankrupt, he started preparing for what was once unthinkable... a decision to emigrate to Italy in search of work. “I’ll send for my wife and five children as soon as I find something,” he says.

These are bleak times for the Palestinian Authority’s tiny Christian minority. Beset by high unemployment, the humiliations of the Israeli occupation, the spread of radical Islam, and an alleged campaign of illegal land seizures by the Muslim majority, many of them see no future on the land of their birth. Nowhere is that feeling more acute than in Bethlehem and the adjacent villages of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour [the location of Shepherds Fields]. In these biblical towns, studded with grottos, more than 1,200 Christians have fled abroad since the start of the uprising in September 2000. All told, the Christian population in the occupied territories has declined from 100,000 in 1948 to 50,000 today. Some Christian leaders fear that the community could disappear in a generation. “We’re witnessing an emigration like the one a century ago,” says Hannah Nassar, mayor of Bethlehem, referring to the last days of the Ottoman Empire, when thousands fled to Latin America to escape being drafted into the Sultan’s army.

Palestinian Christians have long occupied a precarious middle ground between Israelis and Palestinian Muslims. The influx of thousands of Muslim refugees to the Bethlehem area after the 1948 war, coupled with the low birthrate and continued emigration, sapped their numbers and their clout. Israel targeted them during the occupation: after the Six Day War, Israeli authorities seized 11,000 acres of olive groves from Christian landowners in Beit Jala to build the Jewish settlement of Gilo, and later grabbed large tracts of Christian property to construct a highway linking settlements south of Bethlehem to Jerusalem. With the coming to power of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, Christians began to feel threatened by their Muslim-dominated government. Though Yasser Arafat had a policy of protecting Christians, lower-ranking officials seized the property of absentee Christian landlords who had moved abroad, and hired Muslims to replace Christian officials who held key positions under Israel occupation.

“There is a determination to Islamicize Bethlehem,” says Father Peter Madros, an official of the Latin Patriarchate and teacher at Bethlehem University. He claims that local Muslims are seeking to change the name of Manger Square—the plaza in front of the Church of the Nativity—to Omar Square, after Omar Ibn al-Khatib, the Arabian caliph who conquered the Holy Land in 638 CE. Mayor Nassar, a Christian, denies the report, but some Muslims insist the change is long overdue.

—Joshua Hammer is author of ***A Season in Bethlehem: Unholy War in a Sacred Place***.
Excerpted from Newsweek

“We are taking sure, steady steps to a place where the state of Israel will no longer be a democracy and a home for the Jewish people.”

Political Solution Urgently Needed in Mid-East Conflict

“Many Israelis thought we could defeat the Palestinians by military means... but this hasn’t worked.”

Four former heads of the Shin Bet security service [Israel’s FBI] delivered a blistering collective criticism of Israel’s tough military policies toward the Palestinians, saying Israel urgently needed a political solution to the Middle East conflict. “We are taking sure, steady steps to a place where the state of Israel will no longer be a democracy and a home for the Jewish people,” said Ami Ayalon, the Shin Bet chief from 1996 to 2000. The blunt critique of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s policies was the latest in a series by security officials and soldiers, current and former, questioning Israel’s strategy in its battle against the three-year-old Palestinian uprising. Last month, the army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, said the network of restrictions placed on the Palestinian population had proved counterproductive, breeding greater militancy.

Mr. Sharon, a former general, has relied heavily on the military, and has insisted that Palestinian violence end before the two sides can restart negotiations toward a settlement. Granting concessions during the fighting would be “rewarding terrorism,” he has often said. A solid majority of Israelis has backed his aggressive military approach, according to polls. Mr. Sharon, Israel’s most prominent hawk, has won two landslide elections, in March 2001 and in January of this year. But the army has not been able to halt attacks, prompting some calls for a greater emphasis on diplomacy. Mr. Sharon is currently considering whether to hold talks with the recently installed Palestinian prime minister.

The former security chiefs said the government was focused almost entirely on military solutions, at the expense of finding ways to reach a permanent peace deal. “It is dealing solely with the question of how to prevent the next terrorist attack,” said Carmi Gilon, the Shin Bet chief during the mid-1990s, in the interview. Israeli leaders are not addressing “the question of how we get out of the mess we find ourselves in today.” The former security chiefs hold no important posts at present. But their views are generally respected, based on their years of firsthand experience in dealing with Palestinians, in particular the militant groups.

“Many Israelis thought we could defeat the Palestinians by military means, and this would solve our problems,” Ayalon said. “But this hasn’t worked. Our economy is deteriorating and we have to change directions.” The former Shin Bet chiefs also said that any peace deal would require Israel to abandon most of its 150 settlements, where about 230,000 settlers live in the West Bank and Gaza.

—*New York Times*

Despite significant flaws, the Geneva Accords moves closer to a just solution than any previous agreements. So why is the United States ignoring it? The Director of Policy for Jewish Voice for Peace analyzes the pros and cons of the newest plan for peace.

The Geneva Accords: An Agreement That No One is Hearing

BY Mitchell Plitnick

In September 2000, amidst tensions heightened by the collapse of peace negotiations at Camp David the preceding summer, the second intifada began. The myth that the impasse was entirely the fault of Yasser Arafat—a notion promoted by Ehud Barak, Bill Clinton, and their successors—has done a great deal of diplomatic damage. Despite this, negotiations resumed at the Egyptian resort of Taba on

the Red Sea. Reportedly, a breakthrough was near when Barak suddenly terminated discussions. While the two sides have traded accusations, blame, and occasional proposals to end the conflict, some 2,700 Palestinians and 900 Israelis have been killed in ongoing violence. The recent unveiling of the so-called “Geneva accords,” an unofficial peace proposal negotiated between

former Israeli and Palestinian officials, represent the culmination of the Taba talks. They are very similar to what was close to being agreed upon at Taba, and even represent a significant improvement. The Sharon government angrily condemned both the accords and the Israelis involved, but some 40 percent of the Israeli public support the accords. Washington and the US media have largely ignored the Geneva Accords, despite their being very much in line with the sort of settlement the US claims to have been pressing for over the past 15 years.

What do the accords actually say? They call for full recognition between Israel and a new Palestinian state, including diplomatic relations. Despite some reports, they do not call for Palestine to recognize Israel as a 'Jewish state,' but rather for both states to recognize the other as the 'homelands of their respective peoples.' Israel is required to withdraw to the international borders that existed on June 4, 1967, [the Six Day War] but the two sides would exchange land to allow Israel to incorporate some of the nearest and largest settlement blocs within its borders. The land swap seems much more equitable than past proposals.

Palestine would have much more control over its borders, however, than in previous agreements. It has sovereignty over most of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, with Israel retaining sovereignty over the Wailing Wall, under the supervision of an 'International Group' that would include Israel, Palestine, the current 'quartet'

behind the US-sponsored Road Map (US, Russia, UN, and the European Union). Palestine would get sovereignty over the Muslim and Christian Quarters of the Old City, and Israel would get sovereignty over the Jewish and Armenian Quarters. The rest of Greater Jerusalem remains with Israel. Both parties agree to allow access to holy sites under their sovereignty, and this is also ensured by the International Group.

The accords directly address the refugee question: Israel takes no responsibility for them. Most will be resettled in the new Palestinian state, in their current host countries, or in third countries. In by far the biggest Palestinian concession in this document, the Palestinians agree to only a very small number of refugees being allowed back in to Israel for purposes of family reunification, and agree to forego any future claims against Israel. There is an elaborate compensation process for those not allowed to return to their former homes.

Despite the questionable prospects for Palestinian acceptance of the agreement regarding the refugees, and the lack of a reconciliation process, the Geneva Accords are promising in that, for all their flaws, they move closer to a just solution than any previous agreements. The harsh response from the Sharon government to the accords, and the fact that they were negotiated by people on both sides who are either out of power—or out of favor—are the most likely reasons behind the US decision to ignore them.

—excerpted from *Jewish Voice for Peace*

Assimilation was how my parents learned to respond to anti-Semitism, at the cost of cutting me off from my Jewish self. When told I didn't look Jewish, I replied "thank you," because I thought that is how I was supposed to feel.

Reclaiming an Authentic Jewish Voice

BY Penny Rosenwasser

Raised as an assimilated Jew in the predominantly Christian middle-class Northern Virginia suburbs in the '50s, I breathed a silent but toxic form of anti-Semitism. I learned well how to blend in as a white person, struggling to belong. My grandfathers immigrated from Poland and Hungary, and my parents grew up with strong Jewish identities. My mother had to fight to get a teaching job in South Carolina because she was Jewish. She was finally hired on the condition that she also sponsor the school's Baptist youth group. My parents wanted us to blend in as Americans, in ways they themselves never had. They considered raising us Unitarian, until the Unitarian minister convinced them to let us keep our precious Jewish heritage. In addition to Jewish holidays, we celebrated Christmas and Easter, because they were "American holidays."

Although I attended Jewish Reform Sunday School for 12 years, I felt uncomfortable around Jews who were “too Jewish”—too loud, too whiny, too pushy, too much—and drew attention to themselves (and, I feared, to me) in the paler, quieter, neater, calmer, whiter Christian world I inhabited. There were only two other Jews in my high school class of 450; I ironed my Jewish hair every morning in a futile attempt to look like all the other straight-haired girls. When told I didn’t look Jewish, I replied “Thank you,”—I thought that is how I was supposed to feel.

Unlike the experience of many less-assimilated Jews, I did not grow up experiencing overt discrimination, hatred, or violence. My first encounter with anti-Semitism was at a small mid-western liberal arts college in the late '60s. While pledging a sorority, my sophisticated and glamorous upper-class WASP roommate told me that another sorority had discussed whether or not to admit me because I was a Jew. I was stunned. It had never occurred to me that my Jewishness was an issue—though it was silently affecting everything I did. Immersing myself in social justice activism after college, I avoided ‘Jewish issues.’ [But I] finally found stories I could relate to, awakening feelings of emotional connection to and pride in ‘my people’ and initiating a journey that led me to positively embrace my Jewishness. Jewish poet Muriel Rukeyser speaks of the gift of being a Jew in the 20th century—the pain, the responsibility, the possibility.

Nothing has taught me more about the complexity of being a Jew, or a human being, than my work for peace with justice for Palestine and Israel. On my first trip there in December 1989, I fell in love with the ancient terraced land and the golden afternoon light as I prayed for peace at the Western Wall, toured the Masada fortress ruins in the Judean desert, and bobbed in the Dead Sea.

But it was heartbreaking, infuriating, and excruciating to experience up close the brutality of occupation by a Jewish government—checkpoints and curfews, demolished Palestinian homes, massive land confiscations, children shot for throwing stones or for doing nothing at all. I struggled to reconcile my new-found positive Jewish identity with Israeli oppression of Palestinians. The fear that fuels Israeli brutality toward Palestinians, I learned, is a direct response to our history of persecution as a people.

But I don’t believe, morally or practically, that Jewish security comes from taking away Palestinian freedom. Rather, I think as Jews we have to examine and heal the source of our fear, so that we can think clearly and act justly, as called for by our prophetic tradition. Assimilation was how my parents learned to respond to anti-Semitism, at the cost of cutting me off from my Jewish self. By reclaiming that precious heritage—so rich for me culturally, politically, spiritually—I am also regaining my full humanity.

“It is not an accident that one of the earliest modern forms of political activism by religious leaders was liberation theology, which spread through Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Here God’s promise of equity was the antidote to economic disparity...”

Peace Building: Religion’s Role in Global Politics

BY Princess Basma bint Talal of Jordan

It has become clear that the chronic warfare of the past century, which has included two world wars, 250 other conflicts and several hundred million dead and wounded, was primarily the result of predatory nationalism, conditions of inequity and deprivation or a combination of these factors. In times long past, warriors led troops to battle with holy books and sacred symbols, claiming to fight in God’s name, with divine inspiration to conquer and kill. But it is also just as worthy to note that over the last century, religious figures led their fellows on stirring campaigns for freedom and justice, drawing authority from God’s prophetic messengers and words.

Religion is a force that can be harnessed for good or evil, depending upon citizens’ circumstances and the quality of their leaders. Today, faith’s heightened profile seems to have fuelled tension and conflict, as often as reconciliation and cohesion. Religion often takes the blame for conflicts that are

actually rooted in ethnic, economic or national tensions. This allows human weakness and naked aggression to be ignored because of claims that the deeds were inspired by religious fervor, even divine dictate. The conflicts of the 20th century did teach one primary lesson: Ensuring peace does not rely solely on the absence of war. Creating better economic conditions for life, alongside social stability, justice, freedom, good governance and a respect for human rights are vital components toward achieving sustainable peace.

Religion provides relief from suffering. When people feel discrimination, exploitation or subjugation politically or economically, they turn to religion. Either as an instrument of revenge, a protective blanket, a path toward challenging unjust authority or as a force for peaceful reconciliation, religion provides promise. It is not an accident that one of the earliest modern forms of political activism by religious leaders was liberation theology, which spread through Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Here God's promise of equity was the antidote to economic disparity. Similarly, economic pressures on middle class families sparked the earliest wave of Islamic activism in Arab and other Islamic countries in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The rallying cry Islamist politicians used to attract followers was a call for *adalah*, or justice, reflecting a widespread sense amongst ordinary Muslims that fundamental rights and human dignity were being denied because a small, privileged minority was exploiting its disproportionate wealth and political power.

As a Muslim, I believe religion can and must be used in the service of peace and for the well-being of humankind not in the name of terrorism, war or occupation. Religion is a bond that should bring people together, bridging ideological and cultural differences. The Holy Koran states to Jews and Christians alike: "God is our Lord and your Lord. We have our deeds and you have your deeds. There is no argument between you and us. God will gather us all together" (Surat al-Shura: verse 15).

Islam is based upon the belief in one God, but also upon diversity whether of language, ethnicity or political community. Diversity is considered a sign of the mightiness of God. Islam embraces a culture of knowing the 'other.' For Muslims, a corollary to freedom is respect for the beliefs of the 'other.' People with such common religious roots and relationships with God can be motivated to interact to achieve peace. A steady dialogue guided by religious leaders can pave the way toward creating tolerance, which can lead to peace.

—Princess Basma bint Talal heads the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development.
Excerpts from a speech reported by The Common Ground News Service.

Rania M. S. Kharma from Gaza is a Fulbright Scholar doing a Masters Degree in
Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia.

A Letter from Gaza to the Pilots

***This letter was sent by a Palestinian woman to the pilot 'refusers'
who reject combat assignments against civilian targets in the occupied territories.***

I do not know you, and I'm sure you do not know me, but I might have met some of you or your other colleagues when you visited my city many times; I am glad that I will not have to meet you again the way we used to meet. We used to meet without prior appointment; you used to come fast, loud and sudden. We never had chance to talk or to meet face to face with you. You would come from the sky, say 'Shalom' the way you were asked to do by your bosses, and leave fast.

"Everybody knew you were coming, and you were not welcome then; I guess you know why. Your presence was scary, and our children did not like the way you visited us. You used to leave lots of mess after you left; lots of blood, fear, destruction, and anger. I used to think a lot about you, every time you would visit and leave. I asked myself: If I were a pilot and my obligation was to protect my country, would not I do the same thing? I never had a clear answer for this question, first because I have no country, and second because I hope my country will not be occupying another people, because then I do not think I will see my duties as protection, but rather as aggression.

"I am from Gaza, born there and lived all my life there. I am now in the US doing my masters degree in conflict transformation. The first couple of months I spent in the US were not easy—when I heard thunderstorms I jumped! When I heard choppers I sought shelter because I expected that you were coming to say 'Shalom.' I could not even enjoy the Independence Day Celebration in Washington—the fireworks brought back those nights when we had your sudden visits.

"I do not miss you, but I've heard something different about you. During one of my classes, I am talking about you all the time, about how courageous you all are to stand up and say *No*. I realize that you might not have done this because you love us, and you do not have to love us. I do also realize that you might have done this for personal reasons that has nothing to do with our rights as human beings. But I wish to thank you, sincerely, for doing this for yourselves and your people.

"I know that your people feel the same about the sudden visits that some of my people pay to your cities and towns. I realize that many mothers at your side experience the same feelings my mother has when I am away from home during your visits to my city. I realize how they feel during the unwelcome visits from our side: pain, anger, and despair.

"I really hoped that after you declared *No*, some 'refusniks' from my side would stand up and say *No* to killing too. I trust that one day they will, once they realize that their lives would be more secure and more worth living. I wish you the best, and want you to know we have heard your voices."

Salaam, Shalom,
Rania

—reprinted from *The Other Israel*

A new volume of *Crossing Borders*, an Israeli and Arab Youth Magazine, was recently published and is being distributed to Jewish and Arab students in Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian high schools. The magazine is the work of 37 youth who met in Denmark a few weeks ago to learn about youth journalism and deepen their understanding of each other as they share their perspectives as youth on politics and life in conflict. For more information: givat_il@zahav.net.il

Tourism to Israel continues to increase: the number of tourists during October 2003 was 46% higher than the number in October 2002 and 60% over October 2001.

"A total of one million tourists are expected by year end," said the Tourism Minister.

"Tourism is the only industry that is encouraging growth in the economy."

~YOUR VOICE . . . "Just a brief glance at the leftist rubrics in your latest dispatch from Jerusalem shows me I need not bother giving it any serious consideration. The gist seems to be that if the Israelis and the Palestinians would just sit down at the table of brotherhood and negotiate, everything would be fine and dandy. But the repeated and flagrant violations of every article of the Oslo Agreement by Arafat and his gang of thugs over the last 10 years would seem to indicate the contrary. Your contention [November issue] that the views of the Sharon Government and Torah doctrines should not be confused is true. And while the Torah community is necessarily opposed to a secular Jewish state, the vast majority of Torah-observant Jews both in Israel and abroad stand wholeheartedly behind the Government in its stance against the Palestinians.

"To cite the theological hand-wringing of a group of rabbis regarding the apparent iniquity of the Sharon Government is ridiculous and mind-numbingly absurd. None of these folks is obviously Torah-observant; in fact, 99.9% of them are probably Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist and, as such, devastatingly ignorant of basic Jewish texts such as the *Gemara* [Talmud]. If they weren't, they would be firm in their belief as to the unassailable Jewish right to *Eretz Israel*.

"You need to spend less time with the Israeli left and Israeli academics and more time with genuine Torah scholars, of whom there are literally thousands at your very doorstep in Jerusalem." —*Phil Fine, Toronto*

Please introduce this publication, with its e-mail address and web access, in your church bulletin or web page. To subscribe or unsubscribe, write to newsletter@mennojerusalem.org. Views expressed in *MennoLetter* are not necessarily those of the editor or of the sponsoring agencies: MMN, Elkhart, IN & Newton, KS, USA; MC Canada WITNESS, Winnipeg, MB. When reprinting articles, please request permission. For back issues of *MennoLetter* click on: <http://mennonitechurch.ca/news/jerusalemletter/>. Contents © 2003 by the writers.