

MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

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***“A society that disregards loss of human life,  
caused by its own soldiers, is a tainted society.”***

—Gideon Levy

***“Conscientious refusal is not any more a marginal occurrence.  
It has reached the very heart of the Israeli army.”***

—Gush Shalom

***“As long as the occupation continues,  
the number of conscientious objectors will grow.”***

—Adam Ma’or, 19, on trial in a military court

## *~ MY VOICE ...*

*Whether refusing violence or reporting only what supports one’s own version of the story,  
both sides are finding new ways to win the battle of minds and conscience.*

### ***When Silence Shouts Loudest***

***“What we have here are ideological criminals... and these are the worst  
since they not only break the law, but flout its authority.”***

An amazing month of developments! Not the army incursions through Palestinian olive orchards, not more deaths at a bus stop, not more kilometers of the hated separation wall...those continue. But rather silence, inaction, refusal to carry out military orders! In this issue we look at growing opposition that the Israeli government is facing from within its own ranks—from Knesset members, from soldiers and officers, from the domestic press—determinedly opposing what still seems to be an unstoppable front of military might in support of the government’s policies. But the political establishment is not sitting still either in the face of the assaults.

“Ideological criminals!” “Flouting authority!” “What they don’t do out of love, they will be made to do out of fear!” That was the military prosecution’s reaction to a group of five young Israelis who refused to be part of an occupying army they conscientiously felt they could not support. An elected member of the Knesset sees the attitude spreading, and 30% of Israeli young people already support the rights of individual conscience in these matters. The fight for the support of Israeli public opinion continues unabated.

But of major concern for those of us who watch from the bleachers, and try to listen to both sides of the story, is the awareness that many Israelis—and internationals—are not getting the full account of what the army is doing. When another dreadful bombing took place near Tel Aviv last week, the press almost unanimously spoke of it as marking the end of a period of ‘relative calm’ in violence—almost three months since the previous one. But Israeli journalist Gideon Levy

sharply disagrees. “There is no greater lie than this,” he writes [*see following article*]. “During this quiet, dozens of Palestinians were killed, and almost no one bothered to report it. That is how it becomes possible to speak of quiet, then claim that the Palestinians disturbed it.”

The Palestinian Center for Human Rights tallies this account: According to the IDF’s own figures, between October 4 and December 25, a total of 12 Israelis died and 3 were wounded in Palestinian attacks, all of which targeted military or paramilitary personnel acting to enforce the illegal occupation of the West Bank or Gaza Strip. A dreadful toll!

***“Those who have seen it for themselves—fighter pilots, ‘refuser’ soldiers, peace workers—are shouting against the silence.”***

By contrast, however, between those same dates no fewer than 117 Palestinians were killed, including 23 children, and many hundreds more were injured by the Israeli military. In addition, Israeli forces destroyed 486 Palestinian homes, [in some cases as collective punishments, pursuing an explicit policy that is in breach of the Geneva conventions], they continued to expand illegal Jewish-only settlements, maintained a system of effective apartheid for road and land use, and refused to dismantle the network of military checkpoints that violate the rights of Palestinians to move and assemble freely. Palestinians took no comparable additional measures against Israel.

Why was the press largely silent about the rest of this story? Is it because the slow, steady creep of daily violence and oppression is less interesting to report than a bomb that instantly kills four bystanders? What does the phrase ‘relative calm’ mean? Their silence in reporting means that Israelis really do not have the information they need to make up their minds about current government policy. But those who have seen it for themselves—fighter pilots, ‘refuser’ soldiers, peace workers—are shouting out against the silence. —*GEW*

## ***~ OTHER VOICES...***

**BY Gideon Levy**

***“The images of giant bulldozers and tanks demolishing more and more houses...were hardly shown in Israel.”***

## ***The Price of Ignorance***

***“Israel counted 81 days of quiet without terrorist attacks. But there is no greater lie than this. The quiet was only here. During this ‘quiet,’ dozens of Palestinians were killed, and almost no one bothered to report it.”***

***T***he recent suicide bomber was from Beit Furik, one of the most imprisoned villages in the territories, and surrounded by earth roadblocks on all sides. It’s a place where the sick and women in labor have to risk walking through fields to get to the hospital in adjacent Nablus. At least one woman in labor gave birth at the Beit Furik checkpoint and lost her infant. Few Israelis are capable of imagining what life is like in Beit Furik: almost universal unemployment, poverty, endless siege, and humiliations of life inside a virtual prison. A young man like Hanani, 21, had no reason to get up in the morning other than to face another day of joblessness and humiliation.

However, Israelis have little interest in knowing the lay of the land from which terror springs. The Israeli media have next to nothing to say about life in Beit Furik. Life there and the killing in Nablus do not justify a suicide bombing at a bus station, but whoever wants to fight terror must first and foremost improve life in Beit Furik. Israel counted “81 days of quiet” without terrorist attacks. But there is no greater lie than this. The quiet was only here. During this ‘quiet,’

dozens of Palestinians were killed, and almost no one bothered to report it. That is how it becomes possible to speak of quiet and then claim that the Palestinians disturbed it.

The fact that the Israeli media does not speak of Palestinian deaths does not mean that they did not happen. The eight Palestinians who were killed in one day in Gaza last month, for example, together with destruction that is unknown in Israel, weren't enough to generate any interest in Israel. They barely got a mention. The international community dealt prominently with this frightening killing, and the United Nations secretary-general issued a special statement condemning them. But there was only one place where the entire event was ignored—*the country whose soldiers perpetrated the killing*. The images of giant bulldozers and tanks demolishing more and more houses, and the scenes of the dead and 42 wounded, among them women and children, being taken to hospitals, were hardly shown in Israel.

This has nothing to do with media critique; it's about our image. A society that disregards loss of human life, caused by its own soldiers, is a tainted society. A society that conceals from its citizens vital information of this kind is undercutting their sense of judgment. The situation is further compounded when one examines the attitude of the Israeli society toward its victims: there aren't many societies that immerse themselves in bereavement so intensely. What we have, then, is a dual morality: we count only our own dead, all the rest don't exist.

This is a deliberate aim. It permits presenting the Palestinians as the only guilty party, and it falls on fertile ground. The majority of the public doesn't want to know what the IDF is really doing in the occupied territories. But the media, therefore, are in serious breach of their duty. Both those who support the occupation and those who are against it are entitled to get complete information about the price it exacts. The presentation of killing as such a marginal matter also sends a dangerous message to Israeli soldiers: there is nothing terrible about killing more and more Palestinians.

—*excerpted from his article in Ha'aretz*

## ***Rabbi Who Faced Bulldozer Now Faces Trial***

***Rabbis for Human Rights Director, Arik Ascherman, described as “one of the gutsiest and decentest Rabbis—Jews—human beings—on our planet” has been arrested; on January 14 he will be put on trial by the State of Israel for nonviolently trying to prevent the bulldozing of a Palestinian home...a home that no one claims has anything to do with terrorism or terrorists.***

“**I** will be put on trial on January 14th, 2004,” Arik writes, “facing two counts of standing in front of bulldozers which were demolishing Palestinian homes. Let me briefly tell you about the home of the Maswadeh family of Beit Hanina, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, so you can appreciate the compelling Jewish ethical stance which Rabbis for Human Rights has taken—not only with our mouths, but with our whole beings. The Maswadeh family sought to build a home to accommodate their growing family. Despite a letter from the Municipality stating that the Maswadeh family's home was in a location for which a permit could be obtained, the bulldozers came, rendering an entire family—Sufian Maswadeh, his wife, children, sick grandmother, as well as his brother's whole family—homeless, within a matter of minutes.

“I personally was in negotiations with the mayor's office the night before trying to prevent the demolition and I was there in the morning when the bulldozers came. I am proud to report that the RHR board made the bold decision not to plea bargain, but rather, in the best tradition of civil disobedience, to put the very policy of home demolitions on trial.”

—*Rabbi Arik Ascherman's letter appeared in a Shalom Center release. He is a frequent human rights speaker for incoming church and study groups*

BY Amos Harel & Mazal Mualem

**“As much as we are divided  
over the confused policy of Sharon’s government which is endangering Israel,  
it is essential...for the army to defend all of us.”**

## ***New Embarrassments for Israeli Military***

“We say to you today, we will no longer give our hands to the oppressive reign in the territories and the denial of human rights to millions of Palestinians, and we will no longer serve as a defensive shield for the settlement enterprise.” So read a letter to the Prime Minister’s Office sent by thirteen reservists in the ultra-elite *Sayeret Matkal* unit of the Israel Defense Forces [IDF] recently, declaring their refusal to serve in the occupied Palestinian territories. It has caused another stir in Israeli media and more embarrassment for the Israeli Army leaders. The announcement carries weight because of the group’s almost mythic standing of honor in Israeli society: among other glories, the elite troops of this unit carried out a daring operation in 1976 at Entebbe airport in Uganda to rescue some 100 hostages on an Air France plane hijacked by terrorists.

The Sayeret letter is the third such public declaration of reservists refusing to serve in the occupied Palestinian territories... Four months ago, a group of Israel Air Force pilots announced their refusal to carry out air strikes in the territories.

***“There’s no place for refusal  
because it is the elected government  
that issues the orders to the army.”***

An army spokesperson responded, “It is grave when reservists use their military records and the name of their unit for the purpose of expressing their political ideas... In a democracy there’s no place for refusal because it is the elected government that issues the orders to the army. As much as we are divided over the hesitant and confused policy of Sharon’s government which is endangering Israel, it is essential that this battle be waged in the public sphere, and for the army to defend all of us. Every soldier has the right and the obligation to refuse a blatantly illegal order, but I am convinced that the IDF would never lend a hand to the giving of blatantly illegal orders to soldiers, including those in Sayeret Matkal.”

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also served in the elite unit, said that “if people base their military service on their political opinions, be they left-winged or right-winged, we won’t have an army or a state left. It is time to stop using military service as a political axe.” A member of the Knesset, a major-general who served in Sayeret Matkal, added, “Refusal harms society’s strength. I condemn any form of refusal. No person or group has the right to determine which missions are to be carried out.”

But Effi Eitam, Chairman of the National Religious Party, said that he sees the letter as a break in Israeli society and that he expected the wave of refusal to grow; another colleague called the letter a brave step intended to save Israel from the occupation.

The Sayeret letter is the third such public declaration of reservists refusing to serve in the territories since the outset of the current intifada. In early 2002, the “Courage to Refuse” movement released a letter signed by reservist soldiers and officers refusing to serve in the territories, which to date has over 570 signatories. Four months ago, a group of Israel Air Force pilots announced their refusal to carry out air strikes in the territories.

—Ha’aretz

BY Adam Keller

*“A democratic state may find it necessary  
to punish a conscientious objector, but it should not try to break his will  
and force him into acts which are against his conscience.”*

## ***“Conscientious Objectors—the Worst of Criminals”***

*It doesn't matter how long it will take: in the end they will be made to do it!  
'What they don't do out of love, they will be made to do out of fear.'*

This should have been The Day, the culmination of more than a year of legal struggles, the day when the Jaffa Military Court would finally hand down its judgment on five young Israelis who refuse military service. More than an hour before court time, hundreds of demonstrators turned up, holding signs: *Refusing to Serve the Occupation!* and, *We are all Refusers!*

Prosecutor Captain Yaron Kostelitz had earlier won his case and was visibly heartened by the Court's acceptance of his arguments: “Your Honors did well in finding these five guilty, but your verdict must be completed by handing down a suitably harsh punishment. What we have here are ideological criminals, and former Supreme Court Judge Yitzhak Zamir already noted that these are the worst of criminals, since they not only break the law, but flout its authority, and therefore should be doubly punished. The very fact that they are idealistic people and in many ways positive characters should be counted against them since it helps them find followers and spread their law-breaking further into the society.” [Kostelitz did not refer to a recent poll showing that 30% of Israeli youths regard military service refusal as legitimate.]

In his summation before the Court, defence lawyer Dov Chenin commented, “I object to the terminology of ‘ideological crime’ which my colleague of the prosecution introduces. It lumps together various criminal offenses which have no similarity whatsoever. The five standing trial today did not commit any violent act, and indeed the act of which they have been convicted was their refusal to be in any way party to violence... A democratic state may find it necessary to punish a conscientious objector, but it should not try to break his will and force him into acts which are against his conscience.”

However, the prosecutor made clear what the military system has in store for the five: “These persistent lawbreakers must be made to render the military service which they owe to their country. It doesn't matter how long it will take: in the end they will be made to do it. If a heavier punishment and the fear of a still heavier one is the only way, then this way must be taken. It happened before. There were refusers as defiant as these ones, and the military courts knew what to do with them. Take Gadi Elgazi in 1980: he refused four times and was sentenced to a month each time; and when he persisted the military court gave him a whole year.”

“And that didn't help either!” sounded the voice of Gadi Elgazi in person, from among the public benches.

“What they don't do out of love, they will be made to do out of fear!” retorted Kostelitz.

It was already long into the evening when the presiding judge made his announcement: “You understand, of course, that a judgment cannot be expected tonight.”

—Excerpted from a report of the court session of December 23.

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Y SPECIAL NOTICE for ONTARIO CONGREGATIONS Y

*Check out MennoJerusalem's Bible & Photo Tour through Israel and Palestine in April.
While independent of the SABEEL Conference described on the last page of this newsletter, its
timing allows participants to take in both. Write for details to: office@mennojersalem.org*

BY Teresa Watanabe

**“The wary view of Islam by many evangelical Christians
is rooted in part in their commitment to Israel.”**

Christianity vs. Islam: Seminary Reaches Out to Muslims

One of America’s leading evangelical seminaries has launched a project for making peace with Muslims, featuring a proposed code of ethics that rejects offensive statements about each other’s faiths, affirms a mutual belief in one God, and pledges not to proselytize. The \$1-million project initiated by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, is being hailed by both sides as a pioneering attempt to ease continuing conflict. But in an illustration of sharp theological divides, some conservative evangelicals are challenging the ethics code and asserting that they do not believe in the same God as Muslims.

Tensions between Muslims and evangelical Christians have been aggravated by a series of negative remarks about Islam by national evangelical leaders since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Those included the characterization of Islam by evangelist Franklin Graham as an evil religion, and assertions by the Rev. Jerry Falwell that the Prophet Muhammad was a terrorist. Both have since apologized for their statements.

The Fuller project, funded by a grant from the US Department of Justice, is intended to develop practical peacemaking practices for Christians and Muslims, publish a book about them, and train local communities in their use. “We hope to lead a large portion of evangelical Christians into a better understanding of Islam,” said Sherwood Lingenfelter, Fuller’s provost. “After 9/11 there was a great deal of hostility in the Christian community toward Muslims. It is important for Christians to gain a respect for them and treat them with dignity and not assume they’re all terrorists.” He said the wary view of Islam by many evangelical Christians was rooted in part in their commitment to Israel. Many believe that the physical presence of the State of Israel is required for Christ’s return and therefore vigorously defend Israel from perceived Islamic enemies, he said. Others, including many at Fuller, disagree that Israel would play any special role in the ‘second coming,’ he said.

***“Some conservative Christians decried the code and predicted
it would bring an uproar from their ranks.”***

Muslim leaders, who regard tensions with evangelical Christians as one of their greatest interfaith challenges, say they are delighted by the Fuller initiative. “We are changing the course away from accusations and poisoning the well of relations to what can develop into a project in the service of God,” said Yahia Abdul-Rahman, of the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California. The project proposes to convene two national conferences of Christian and Muslim scholars to develop parallel peacemaking practices based on the Koran and other Islamic sources.

Some conservative Christians decried parts of the proposed ethics code and predicted that it would bring an uproar from their ranks. “For Fuller to declare that Christians and Muslims worship the same God would be a radical departure, not only from the evangelical tradition but also the tenets of orthodox Christianity,” said John Revell, a spokesman for the Southern Baptists.

The controversy over whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God recently flared anew when President Bush affirmed a shared belief with Muslims at a London news conference—a view that was immediately disavowed by conservative evangelicals.

“The Koran explicitly rejects Christianity’s central beliefs in the divinity of Jesus and a triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” said Albert Mohler, Jr., of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. “The more we know about Christianity and Islam, the more we see there is a basic incompatibility. The essential ground of conflict and controversy cannot be removed.”

—excerpted from an article in the Los Angeles Times

“Christian Zionism is highly problematic
for all who believe in the biblical mandate of justice...”

“Challenging Christian Zionism”—Conference

From April 14-18 the Fifth International SABEEL Conference will be held in Jerusalem. Entitled ‘Challenging Christian Zionism: Politics, Theology, and the Israel-Palestine Conflict,’ it has drawn impressive international participants, including The Most Revd & Rt. Hon. Rowan D. Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. The following is from their website.

The phenomenon of Christian Zionism was once a fringe concern for those who struggle for justice and peace in Palestine. But over the past few years it has become a potent religious and political force in the Palestine-Israel conflict, with an estimated 100 million adherents world-wide. The policy of the United States of America towards Israel is increasingly determined by politicians who are themselves Christian Zionists, or who count among their most ardent supporters millions of such Christians.

Christian Zionism is highly problematic for all who believe in the biblical mandate of justice for all God’s people. It is implicated in the support of political policies that directly and negatively impact the lives of Palestinians. All who are interested in peace with justice in the Middle East need to better understand this ideology and its impact on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities world wide. The conference will bring to Jerusalem theologians, academics, peacemakers, and non-violence activists from around the world for lectures, workshops, Bible study, and worship. Conference themes include:

- What are the theological, social and political roots of Christian Zionism?*
- How is the Bible used to support Christian Zionism?*
- What is the relationship between Christian Zionism and anti-Semitism?*
- How does Christian Zionism influence attitudes and policies towards Palestinians?*
- How is it influencing religious communities and political leadership around the world?*

‘Sabeel’ is an Arabic word meaning ‘the way,’ as well as ‘channel’ or ‘spring’ of life-giving water. The organization is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. It strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities.

–See www.sabeel.org for more program and registration information.

The eight-day Jewish Hanukkah festival has ended. A candle was lit each night throughout the week, comprising eight on the final night. The holiday commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE, and the re-establishment of Jewish religious freedom and supremacy over harsh repression and Hellenist (Greek) assimilation. Two Divine miracles are remembered on Hanukkah: the burning of the lone flask of oil for eight full days in the Temple, and the victory of the “few against the many” in the Maccabees’ revolt against the Syrian-Greeks.

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