



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

*“We are not against the Jews: we are against Zionism...
I think that in the future, all the Jews will understand
that we are fighting for them too.”*

—Yasser Arafat, 1977

“God once again is speaking through a Bush.”

—US election rally banner

*“The fact that Christian churches belonging to centrist
denominations in the US are moving away from support for Israel,
is a warning signal...for Israeli decision-makers.”*

—Nathan Guttman

~MY VOICE ...

“Can these ‘blood brothers’ talk civilly to each other again?”

The Advent of Hope in a Holy Land

The news finally came about Arafat’s death. Not unexpected; not worryingly. His obvious health deterioration in recent years prepared us for the inevitable moment of change in the half-century saga of a man who fought to change for the better the life circumstances of the Palestinians. Whether he went about it the right way—perhaps the only way he knew how—or failed to achieve his ultimate goal for his people is for others to debate. What his passing did was to uncork a huge flow of ink from all sides, most predicting a hopeful future. Would peace break out, or would the absence of the ‘autocratic leader’ unleash the political aspirations of many lieutenants waiting in the wings? Would Israel now agree to bilateral talks again or find another reason to go it alone?

It’s too soon to tell, but the chatter in the streets suddenly has more hopeful tones, with more positive language than one has heard in recent years. Can these ‘blood brothers’ talk civilly to each other again? Will the estranged cousins work together—in industry, construction, travel, and the vast array of opportunities that are up for grabs? The Ministers of Tourism from Israel and Palestine finally broke the ice after four years of non-communication, and made heady promises: some of the roadblocks, fences, and obstacles are to be dismantled in an effort not only to allow a degree of freer movement between Israelis and Arabs, but to remove the negative image of siege that has kept millions of tourists away during the past four years. I was able to take two study groups through the former military barriers entering Jericho with surprising ease last week.

For Christians, the season of Advent is filled with a sense of hope for new life, joy, light, and hope. As we approach the darkest days of the calendar year we know that, just beyond, the tide will turn: days get longer, the sun gets brighter, and hope is renewed. We pray that this season of Advent will be a joyful spiritual experience, but also one of light and hope politically. —GEW

Happy Hanukkah!

Jews around the world are getting ready to observe a holiday for eight days in honor of the historic victory of the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil. The Hebrew word *Hanukkah* (or *Chanukah*) means ‘dedication.’ In the 2nd century BCE, the Syrian-Greek regime of Antiochus sought to pull Jews away from Judaism, with the hopes of assimilating them into Hellenism—Greek culture. Antiochus outlawed aspects of Jewish observance, including the study of Torah, which began to decay the foundation of Jewish life and practice. During this period, many of the Jews began to assimilate into Greek culture, taking on Greek names, and marrying non-Jews.

In response, a band of Jewish settlers took to the hills of Judea in open revolt against this threat to Jewish life. Led by Matitياهو, and later his son Judah the Maccabee (‘The Hammer’), this small band of pious Jews led guerrilla warfare against the Syrian army. Antiochus sent thousands of well-armed troops to crush the rebellion, but the Maccabees succeeded in driving the foreigners from their land. Jewish fighters entered Jerusalem in December, 164 BCE. The Holy Temple was in shambles, defiled and desecrated by foreign soldiers. They cleansed the Temple and re-dedicated it on the 25th day of the Jewish month of *Kislev*. When it came time to re-light the Menorah, they searched the entire Temple, but only a small jar of oil—one day’s worth—bearing the pure seal of the High Priest could be found. Miraculously, the small jar of oil burned for eight days, until a new supply of oil could be brought.

From then on, Jews have observed a holiday for eight days in honor of this historic victory and the miracle of the oil. Today, the observance of *Hanukkah* features the lighting of a special menorah with eight branches (plus one helper candle), adding one new candle each night. Other customs include spinning the *dreidel* (a top with Hebrew letters on the sides), eating ‘oily’ foods like potato latkes (pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (jelly doughnuts), and giving *gelt* (coins) to children.

~OTHER VOICES...

Tourist entities and Christian communities all over the world called upon to start organizing tours to the Holy Land.

Post-Arafat Christmas Revival for Bethlehem

As memorial posters of Yasser Arafat fade fast in Bethlehem’s Manger Square, Palestinians in the birthplace of Jesus dare to hope this Christmas will not be as bleak as the last few. Townspeople ruined by years of bloodshed and blockade are looking to the emergence of new leaders acceptable to Israel and US peace brokers after Arafat’s death to rescue the tourism vital to Bethlehem’s economy. The countdown to Christmas in the biblical West Bank town got off to perhaps the most optimistic start last Sunday—Advent—since before the Palestinian intifada, or revolt, erupted in 2000.

“We loved Arafat like other Palestinians. But he ended up isolated and ineffective. Abu Mazen could reopen doors to the world for us, help us breathe again,” said merchant Nasser Allawi, referring to Mahmoud Abbas, the favorite to succeed Arafat as Palestinian Authority chairman in the forthcoming elections on January 9th. Washington deemed Arafat an obstacle to peace but counts on Abbas, a critic of violence, to negotiate with Israel for a Palestinian state.

The intifada and Israel Defense Forces incursions and clampdowns to subdue militants have wrecked the livelihoods of many ordinary people. It could hardly get any worse in Bethlehem, fabled as the cradle of Christianity and home to the Church of the Nativity. Almost all the many

shops where olivewood crib scenes once flew off the shelves are boarded up, festooned with washed-out, torn pictures of Palestinian militants slain by Israeli troops.

The West Bank separation fence, and the Jewish settlements that are growing on the hills around, compound the shrine town's sense of isolation. An army checkpoint remains astride the main road from nearby Jerusalem once plied by legions of Christian pilgrims. But in central Manger Square there was hopeful talk of a "new era" among townsfolk attending last Sunday's services in the Church of the Nativity and the handful of shopkeepers still awaiting customers.

Some were heartened by a meeting last week, the first in over four years, between the Palestinian and Israeli tourism ministers. They agreed to work for easier access for pilgrims to Bethlehem and appealed to Christians to visit the Holy Land. Others counted on Abbas, a Muslim, to come to the Church of the Nativity's celebrated Christmas Eve mass after years in which Israel confined Arafat to his Ramallah compound more than two years ago. Prior to his confinement, Arafat made annual Christmas visits to Bethlehem for the service. During that period, an empty draped chair was set in the first row of the Church for the mass.

—Reuters / Ha'aretz

BY Judy Lash Balint

Dreaming of a Bright Green (-back) Christmas

"The Israeli and Palestinian Ministers of Tourism...announce that both ministries will cooperate in promoting tourism to the Holy Land."

*I*t's hard to accuse Gideon Ezra, Israel's steely-eyed Minister for Internal Security of being a woolly-headed peace-and-love type. Ezra spent more than 30 years working for the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security force. He was widely reputed to have served time as a secret-service Mossad operative and has represented Sharon's Likud party in Israel's parliament for eight years. But at a news conference in Jerusalem last week Ezra, Israel's Minister of Tourism, announced that soon masses of tourists would be flocking into places like Nablus, Hebron, and Ramallah. Bethlehem and Nazareth, cities with majority Arab populations, got mentioned too.

In a joint statement signed by Ezra and his Palestinian tourism counterpart, Mitri Abu Aita, the two ministers pledged to cooperate in promoting tourism to the region, and announced that they "will take effective measures to assure the safe and smooth passage of pilgrims and tourists...and will provide the appropriate atmosphere...in terms of traffic to assure the best services for tourists and pilgrims to the Holy Land." In the spirit of Christmas and to help boost tourism, a significant contributor to Israel's GNP, Ezra went on to wax lyrical about how from now on, Palestinians and Israelis will have booths side by side at all upcoming trade fairs. "Tourism will open a new gate for cooperation. Tourism can open the way for peace in the Middle East. We're opening a new era in relations."

This was the first such meeting between the two ministers in four years. "Believing that tourism is not only a major economic force, and an important tool for [a] nation's prosperity, but also a means of bringing peace and building bridges of confidence between peoples of the Middle East, the Israeli and Palestinian Ministers of Tourism announce that both ministries will cooperate in promoting tourism to the Holy Land." The arrival of the peak Christmas travel period spurred the signing and is yet another positive sign that tourism in the area is well on its way to recovery.

Ezra and Abu Aita "call upon all tourist entities and Christian communities all over the world to start organizing tours to the Holy Land."

—from *israelInsider*

BY Barry Davis

Making Cross-Cultural [Air]Waves

Most radio stations in North America don't have to grapple with issues like which language the DJs speak or in which language the songs are sung. But those choices are at the very core of *All For Peace*, Israel's newly launched joint Israeli-Palestinian radio station. "Here Israelis and Palestinians work together as equal partners," says Shimon Malka, Israeli co-director of the East-Jerusalem based studio. "The emphasis is on the ability to accept the fact that you may not agree with your partner, and that your partner sees the situation in a different light," explains Malka, who works hand in hand with Palestinian co-director, Maysa Siniora. "That's the primary step to living together."

The new station opened for business in March this year with 11 staff besides Malka and Siniora. The initiative came from the Palestinian organization *Biladi*, *The Jerusalem Times*, and the *Jewish-Arab Center for Peace*, which operates out of the Givat Haviva Educational Seminary in northern Israel. Partial funding is provided by the European Union. It currently broadcasts exclusively via the Internet [www.allforpeace.org] although plans to start FM transmissions have been in place for some time. There are still some logistic problems to overcome, such as how to get the requisite transmitter across the Green Line to Ramallah.

Malka says the station does its best to try for the middle ground so as not to alienate potential listeners with contrary opinions. "We want to influence society. We specifically want people who care, people who get emotional about important issues to hear our points of view. We've been using violence for the last 30 to 50 years, and we haven't achieved anything yet," says Palestinian co-director Siniora. "So I believe it's time to think of a different way..."

—Givat Haviva, *The Jewish-Arab Center for Peace*

BY Abdullah II, King of Jordan

The Road from Here

"We can't win the war on terror if we don't act together. We Muslims were the first targets of the extremists..."

From time to time, history holds moments of great potential, when we can look forward with hope even as we experience crisis and uncertainty. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, just such a moment may be here. With the sad passing of Yasser Arafat, Palestinians have lost a leader who kept their hope of independence alive for more than half a century. Now an opportunity exists to honor the best of that legacy, in a new drive for progress and peace in a part of the world that has seen too much bloodshed. Today the Arab-Israeli conflict remains the world's central challenge. Israelis and Palestinians both need an end to its bitter violence. So do the global millions who suffer the collateral damage: ongoing extremist violence and deep cynicism about international justice.

In 2002, Arab countries took a bold step forward, committing themselves to a two-state solution that includes security guarantees for Israel to live in peace with its neighbors; a sovereign and democratic Palestine; and a process that leads to a comprehensive settlement, addressing the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. The two-state solution recognizes what I and my late father, King Hussein, have long argued. For lasting peace, Israel must be fully integrated into the entire region, from Morocco to Yemen. But this depends on creating an independent Palestinian state, whose people are, at last, able to live in dignity and hope. Unless this happens, there will be no region-wide acceptance of Israel and no real peace.

[cont'd]

"The world's most powerful, most visible democracy has a chance

*to send a strong message to the region's people, especially its youth
—a message of deeds, not words.”*

In 2003, the parties agreed on the road map to peace. The United States and the eight leading industrialized nations are also on board. But the process has been trapped in an ongoing cycle of violence. Now, events provide fresh opportunities. New Palestinian leadership can carry forward the vision of a viable, independent Palestine by delivering on the reforms that statehood involves: competent governance, investments in public welfare, fighting corruption, tougher security against terrorism and a real partnership at the peace tables. In Israel, the government can recommit to the road map and move swiftly to withdraw from Gaza and take other confidence-building measures that will refute the charge that its recent policies are intended to sideline the peace process and further divide people. Both sides can now make the compromises that a comprehensive, lasting and just peace requires.

Just as important, with its elections over, the United States can now refocus on this critical issue. The world's most powerful, most visible democracy has a chance to send a strong message to the region's people, especially its youth—a message of deeds, not words. That means fulfilling the promise of a rebuilt, violence-free, democratic and sovereign Iraq. And in the spiritual heart of the region it means leading the peace process and insisting that both sides engage in genuine dialogue and live up to their commitments spelled out in the road map—one that President Bush has said could lead to the creation of a Palestinian state next year.

Americans know how important it is to reach the world's Muslims. In the aftermath of 9/11, American leaders pledged that the war on terror was not a war on Islam. They acknowledged Islam's commitment to peace and recognized the great contributions of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. They called on people of all faiths to stand together, and called on all nations to join the United States in its fight. And for good reason. We can't win the war on terror if we don't act together. We Muslims were the first targets of the extremists, whose stated goal is to bring down moderate governments and stop the growth of democratic civil society. My country has played a significant role in the global alliance against terrorism, and more: we have led a regional effort for reform and development to counter the voices of hatred and cynicism.

My country's vision is of a modern civil society rooted in Arab-Islamic values. The Koran teaches: “Be just: that is next to piety.” As a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be unto Him, I am committed to the struggle for tolerance and progress. At the end of the day, the success of regional reform depends on a renewed commitment to peace and progress, supported by a courageous America. That achievement will bring global healing.

Perhaps now, in a moment shaped by both loss and hope, the time has come.

—From the New York Times

BY Nathan Guttman

A Warning Signal from the Churches

“The idea of divestment originated in the struggle of Western human rights organizations against South Africa during apartheid.”

A few weeks ago, Israel's foreign minister, Silvan Shalom, held a press conference during the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities in Cleveland; the audience of journalists was composed mainly of representatives of the Jewish media in the United States. One of the first questions they asked the foreign minister concerned the attitude of the State of Israel toward the decision of the institutions of the Presbyterian Church to withdraw some of its investments in Israel because of Jerusalem's policy in the territories. For a moment, Shalom appeared to be

confused by the question, but even after his aides had explained the issue to him, he was forced to admit that he is not at all familiar with the matter.

The staff of the Foreign Ministry hastened thereafter to explain that “there was no need to bother the minister about this issue” which, according to a senior Israeli official is being handled at lower levels. But the incident itself shed light on substantial differences in approach between the State of Israel and the American Jewish community when it comes to handling the threats of divestment from Israel on the part of the Presbyterian Church and other US bodies. To the organized Jewish community in the US, this is an important issue. In the eyes of American Jews, the church’s new approach is a significant threat both to Israel’s status in the United States and to the delicate fabric of relations between organized Judaism and organized Christianity there.

The idea of divestment originated in the struggle of Western human rights organizations against the government of South Africa during the period of apartheid. The success of the organizations in convincing businesses and academic and religious institutions to divest from racist South Africa had a real effect on the country’s economy; and in the opinion of those who initiated the struggle, it hastened the end of the apartheid regime. The idea of using the method in Israel has been popular mainly among pro-Palestinian activists on American campuses since the beginning of the second intifada in October 2000.

The effort is directed at institutions with investments in Israel, such as the pension funds of the Presbyterian Church, which are worth about \$7 billion; part of this sum is invested in Israel bonds. Municipalities, universities, and workers’ organizations have similar investments

Supporters of the approach of the Israeli government, which prefers to ignore the issue, can point to the fact that during the four years since the start of the intifada, not a single dollar has been withdrawn from investments in Israel. But the American Jewish community sees a more worrisome picture, of which there are many examples, from annual conventions of students who support divestment, to discussions in the institutions of the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Anglican churches in the United States, to the bitter battle against Caterpillar, manufacturer of the bulldozers used by the Israel Defense Forces to destroy homes and crops in the territories.

The success of the Jewish community in temporarily halting these initiatives is what enables Israel to treat the question of divestment as a curiosity, or as an internal American issue. But the very fact that discussion of the subject continues, and that the Christian churches belonging to the centrist denominations in the US are moving away from support for Israel, is a warning signal, not only for the American Jewish community, but for Israeli decision-makers as well.

—*Shalom Center & Interfaith Peace Network*

PA Orders Media to Stop Broadcasting Incitement

Responding to a longtime Israeli request, the Palestinian Authority has instructed all of their media to cease broadcasting remarks that could be interpreted as incitement against Israel, the London-based Arab paper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* has reported. According to the report, the order came 24 hours after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the battle against incitement was a precondition to Israel’s acceptance of the PA as a partner in the implementation of the Road Map.

The PA also intends to offer the resumption of work by the joint committee against incitement. However, Palestinian officials said that since the PA recognizes the fact that incitement is a fundamental part of cooperation, it would also follow Israeli media and unacceptable remarks made by Rabbis and Israeli Defense Force commanders.

—*Lekarev Report*

**“History was made as Jews and Arabs,
from the towns and villages throughout Galilee, sat together.”**

New Creation in Galilee

The Galilee Olive Harvest Festival was an auspicious time to celebrate a new joint project between the 7th grade students of Mar Elias Educational Institutions—developed by Fr. Elias Chacour—and the Galil Jewish/Arab School in Misgav, Israel. On Saturday November 6th the performance of Haydn’s “*Creation of the World*” by Jewish musicians and singers of the Ra’anana Symphonette and the Galil Elyon Choir, drew an evenly mixed audience of 1200 people to the new Church of the Sermon on the Mount at Mar Elias Campus in Ibillin. History was made as Jews and Arabs from the towns and villages throughout Galilee sat together, not for apologetics, encounters, or dialogue but rather to simply enjoy in common the beauty of the creation narrative that holds such profound significance for all the peoples of this land.

During the concert over seventy Arab and Jewish youngsters, meeting for the first time, enjoyed their own program of activities in other locations on the campus. Many did not speak each other’s language but all spoke the language of children as they laughed and giggled their way through musical appreciation, games, and folkloric dances. Creating a homely ambience where it is normal to sit together in enjoyment without the necessity for defense is MEEI’s contribution to a new lived vision of coexistence in Galilee.

The chill may help control another locust invasion from Egypt. Snow Falls on ‘Dewey’ Mount Hermon

Winter made its presence felt throughout the country last week with plummeting temperatures, hail, thunderstorms, and snow on northern peaks. Strong winds buffeted the coast, causing waves of up to six meters high in the Mediterranean. Several centimeters of snow accumulated on Mount Hermon during the course of Monday and later, in the evening, fell in northern reaches of Golan and Galilee peaks. Staff at the Hermon ski site expressed optimism over the early winter snowfall, while stressing that it would be insufficient to open the site yet for skiing.

At the base of Mt. Hermon is Banyas, renamed Caesaria Philippi in Jesus’ lifetime—the site of the challenging question posed by Jesus to his student followers: “Who do you say that I am?”

* * *

A cloud of locusts smothered the southern city of Eilat on Sunday as millions of the ravenous plant-eating insects continued to swarm across the border from Sinai, Egypt, and into Israel. The Israeli Air Force, measuring the swarm on radar, said the cloud of flying insects was about 10 kilometers/seven miles long. Although first reports of locust sightings in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv were reported late Sunday night, the increasingly chilly weather should block the insects from moving any further north, as they cannot survive freezing temperatures.

Members of one of our study groups, visiting Qumran and Ein Gedi along the Dead Sea several days ago, picked up dead locusts from those sites.

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