

MennoLetter from Jerusalem

Vol. III, No. 2, February 2004

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

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***Don't let them tell you that one side is evil and the other side good—  
both sides are acting immorally and irresponsibly.***

—Rabbi Michael Lerner, Tikkun

***“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”***

—Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

***“In a democratic society some are guilty, but all are responsible.”***

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

~ *MY VOICE* ...

## *Arguing the Case for Rights—but Whose?*

**Guilty!** Or innocent! How straightforward life would be if all issues were so clearly definable. If everything were black or white. If everyone not for us were therefore against us! A place where wrong is wrong, and right is right... with no shades of grey, nor nuance, nor context. Nor perspective! And I must be complete by also adding: With no religious interpretations either.

It has been a busy month in the courts: The International Court of Justice in The Hague ordered Israel to submit in writing its arguments on the separation fence by the end of January. The Israeli Foreign Ministry's legal adviser Dr. Allan Baker initially said that starting February 23, Israeli representatives would be able to appear before the court and present their verbal arguments. There has been no decision yet whether Israel would respond verbally to the Arabs' arguments against the fence.

Two days ago, Na'im Ahmed Hussein Morrar from Budrus was sentenced to four months of Administrative Detention at a military court proceeding held in Ramallah. Na'im was abducted from his home along with his brother in the early morning hours of 15 January 2004 for their role in organizing the village's nonviolent resistance against the destruction of their land and the erection of a wall that will turn their village into a ghetto.

An Israeli military court handed down one-year prison sentences on five high-school-aged draft-resisters who refused to join what they consider an occupation army. The sentence comes on top of a year and more of pre-trial detention. But a columnist wrote, "Let everyone know that of all people, no Jew should ever support the idea of 'just following orders.' Everyone must have the right to refuse to support injustices, to refuse to kill, to destroy homes, to occupy another people."

And the country is awaiting the prosecutor's decision on whether the current Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon will be indicted for allegedly receiving bribes from real estate developer...

It goes on and on; meanwhile, thousands upon thousands of Palestinians live the uncertainty of even daily subsistence and employment, and a large percentage of Israelis feel increasing shame over what is being done in their name. Some have lost hope; others refuse to stop the legal fights for peace with justice. *Some are guilty, but in a democracy all are responsible.* —GEW

## ~ OTHER VOICES ...

BY Thomas L. Friedman

*“The Bush team rightly...denounces Palestinian suicide madness.  
But it says nothing about the injustice of the Israeli land grab in the West Bank.”*

### ***“Israel Must Get Out of the West Bank”***

**“Israel’s withdrawal is not a cure-all for this. Israel will still be despised. But if it withdraws to an internationally recognized border, it will have the moral high ground.”**

Let’s not mince words. American policy today toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is insane. Can anyone look at what is happening—Palestinians, gripped by a collective madness, committing suicide, and Israelis, under a leadership completely adrift, building more settlements so fanatical Jews can live in the heart of Palestinian-populated areas—and not conclude the following: That these two nations are locked in an utterly self-destructive vicious cycle that threatens Israel’s long-term viability, poisons America’s image in the Middle East, undermines any hope for a Palestinian state, and weakens pro-American Arab moderates? No, you can’t draw any other conclusion. Yet the Bush team, backed up by certain conservative Jewish and Christian activist groups, believes that the correct policy is to do nothing. Well, that is my definition of insane.

Israel must get out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as soon as possible and evacuate most of the settlements. I have long advocated this, but it is now an urgent necessity. Otherwise, the Jewish state is in peril. Ideally, this withdrawal should be negotiated along the Clinton plan, but if necessary, done unilaterally. This can’t happen too soon, and the US should be forcing it.

Why? First, because the Arab-Muslim world, which for so long has been on vacation from globalization, modernization, and liberalization, is realizing that vacation is over. There is not enough oil wealth anymore to cushion or employ the huge population growth happening in the region. Every Arab country is going to have to make a wrenching adjustment. Israel needs to get out of the way and reduce its nodes of friction with the Muslim world as it goes through this unstable and at times humiliating catch-up.

Three dangerous trends are converging around Israel. One is a massive population explosion across the Arab world. The second is the worst interpersonal violence ever between Israelis and Palestinians. And the third is an explosion of Arab multimedia—from *Al Jazeera* to the Internet. What’s happening is that this explosion is feeding the images of this Israeli-Palestinian violence to this Arab population explosion—radicalizing it and melding in the heads of young Arabs and Muslims the notion that the biggest threat to their future is J.I.A.—“Jews, Israel, and America.”

Israel’s withdrawal is not a cure-all for this. Israel will still be despised. But if it withdraws to an internationally recognized border, it will have the moral high ground, the strategic high ground, and the demographic high ground to protect itself. After Israel withdrew from Lebanon, the Hezbollah militia, on the other side, went on hating Israel and harassing the border, but it never tried to launch an invasion. Why? Hezbollah knew it would have no legitimacy—in the world or in Lebanon—for breaching that UN-approved border. And if it tried, Israel would be able to use its full military weight to retaliate. Demographically speaking, if Israel does not relinquish the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinians will soon outnumber the Jews and Israel will become either an apartheid state or a non-Jewish state.

Moreover, an Israeli withdrawal will strip the worst Arab leaders of an excuse not to reform, it will create more space for the best Arab leaders to move forward and it will give Palestinians something to protect. In sum, Israel should withdraw from the territories, not because it is weak, but because it must remain strong; not because Israel is wrong, but because Zionism is a just cause that the occupation is undermining; not because the Arabs would warmly embrace a smaller

Israel, but because a smaller Israel, in internationally recognized boundaries, will be much more defensible; not because it will eliminate Islamic or European anti-Semitism, but because it will reduce it by reducing the daily friction; not because it would mean giving into an American whim, but because nothing would strengthen America's influence in the Muslim world, help win the war of ideas and therefore better protect Israel than this.

The Bush team speaks of bringing justice to Iraq. But it says nothing about the injustice of the Israeli land grab in the West Bank. It destroyed the Iraqi regime in three weeks and has not persuaded Israel to give up one settlement in three years. To think America can practice that sort of hypocrisy and win the war of ideas in the Arab-Muslim world is a truly dangerous fantasy.

—*The New York Times*

**BY Gideon Samet**

**The wall has gone up as a tribute to unbridled political power.**

## ***“A Tyrant is Taking Root Here”***

***The fence and its outrageous manner of construction will remain as a stark symbol of the brawny methods, and reckless disregard of results, of one-man rule.***

The separation fence folly is turning into one of the worst scandals in which an Israeli government has become entangled. And it's not because of the political motive: Sharon has engaged yet worse maneuvers to undermine prospects for an agreement, and to perpetuate Israel's destructive non-action. The fence/wall is such an egregious scandal because of the heedless manner in which a decision was reached to build it. There was never a substantive discussion about it; nor were its negative global implications forecasted. After every last word is said about Sharon's actions and mistakes, the fence and its outrageous manner of construction will remain as a stark symbol of the brawny methods, and reckless disregard of results, of one-man rule.

Reminiscent of other episodes in his past, the fence affair illustrates Sharon's undeniable knack for managing a totally wrong-headed maneuver with what appears to be deft, efficient aplomb. Constructing hundreds of kilometers of fence and spending sums that could be allocated elsewhere to cover almost all the state's budget holes, Sharon has led the government and all its experts toward a boondoggle that will now have to be changed from top to bottom.

How did it come to pass that nobody in the government's policy-making circles stood up to correct the mistake? What does the construction of the concrete and barbed wire monster say about the way decisions are reached in the Sharon government? The wall proves that more than Sharon's fundamental policy principles are flawed. At first glance, it appears peculiar that Sharon, amid a plethora of political troubles, has allowed himself to get bogged in a mire of international criticism, in an extravagant waste that will cause him to further throw away tens, or perhaps hundreds, of millions of shekels due to rash behavior. But the truth is that Sharon, who originally opposed the fence, has spent this money to promote another one of his improvised tactics: The fence is designed to serve as a makeshift interim solution that shoves aside diplomatic resolutions that the prime minister has done his utmost to derail. The fence was no accident: it embodies the spirit of a man who thinks he can do anything without anyone being seriously consulted. The wall has gone up as a tribute to unbridled political power.

—*Ha'aretz, Jerusalem*

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***Every morning, devout Jews around the world say the following prayer:***

***“My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking falsely. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent; and let my soul be like dust to everyone. Open my heart to your Torah, then my soul will pursue Your commandments. As for all those who oppose me and design evil against me, speedily nullify their counsel and disrupt their design.”***

BY Chris Morris, BBC in Jerusalem

*“Don’t fall ill here between six in the evening and eight in the morning,”  
says Raad Mustafa. “If you do, you’ll die.”*

## ***Lost Hope in Middle-East Conflict***

*“There’s a woman in labor,” the driver shouted. “Wait!” came the reply.*

The metal gate is open when we drive through the Israeli checkpoint into the green fields surrounding the Palestinian village of Deir Balut. But at night it’s always closed, and the main road into the village is blocked off by lumps of concrete.

“Don’t fall ill here between six in the evening and eight in the morning,” says Raad Mustafa. “If you do, you’ll die.” And he should know. Last month his heavily pregnant wife, Lamis, awoke with stomach pains and contractions in the early hours of the morning. The village doctor said they had to go to hospital quickly so an ambulance was called to take them to Ramallah. But what about that gate? In the bitter cold, Raad and Lamis approached the checkpoint at the edge of the village. The husband was carrying the wife in his arms. From the grey observation tower came the voice of a soldier: “Stop or I’ll shoot. Don’t move!” And so they waited.

Agonizing delay. “Five minutes, then ten,” said Raad, then half an hour and more—just standing there in the freezing wind. The ambulance arrived at the other side the checkpoint but it too was ordered to keep its distance. Most roads are blocked to Palestinians. “*There’s a woman in labor,*” the driver shouted. “Wait!” came the reply.

More delay; another half-hour.

After a while, a military jeep arrived with a key to the gate. But the ambulance wasn’t allowed through. So the driver crawled under the bars of the gate pushing a stretcher. Lamis’s condition wasn’t good. He covered her with a blanket and tried to get back to his vehicle. But the soldiers wanted to check papers first and they wanted to check under the blanket as well. More delay—another half-hour.

The first little girl, Latifa, was born at the checkpoint before the ambulance had a chance to move more than a few meters. The soldiers weren’t happy; they wanted the vehicle out of the way. “She was fine to begin with but then she started to turn blue, it was so cold,” says Raad of his daughter. He runs his fingers back through his hair and runs the images back through his mind. Raad wasn’t allowed to go with the ambulance so he wasn’t there when the second little girl, Moufida, was born a few minutes further down the road.

By the time they’d reach the hospital, Latifa was already dead and Moufida lived for just a few hours. They now lie together buried in the village graveyard.

—BBC News Online, carried in Jewish Peace News

***“The movie undermines the sense of community  
that has existed between Jews and Christians for decades.”***

## ***Jewish Leaders Criticize Gibson’s Depiction of Jews***

***“It’s very disturbing...It’s not just another verse from the Gospels. It’s a chilling verse  
because I know, and everyone knows, that that verse is the basis of blood libel.”***

Representatives of two Jewish groups who attended screenings of Mel Gibson’s upcoming movie “*The Passion of the Christ*” said it contained offensive stereotypes about the Jewish role in the crucifixion. The American Jewish Committee, which sent its interfaith experts to church screenings in Florida and Illinois, said that the movie contained “unnecessary and destructive imagery of Jews” and “represents a disturbing setback” to relations between Jews and Christians.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Jewish rights group, Anti-Defamation League, said it is an “unambiguous portrayal of Jews as being responsible for the death of Jesus.”

Gibson, who directed, funded, and co-scripted the film, has repeatedly denied that his movie maligns Jews. Jewish groups have been worried that Gibson’s script would ignore modern teaching by Roman Catholics and many other denominations that Jews were not collectively responsible for Christ’s death. The notion of Jewish guilt fueled anti-Semitism for centuries.

An article about the film in *The New Yorker* magazine last September indicated Gibson would keep out a biblical verse that upsets Jews and has been used to justify anti-Semitism: “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25). That verse was not included in a version of the film *The Associated Press* saw. But Rabbi James Rudin, a longtime interfaith expert for the American Jewish Committee, a New York-based public policy group; Rabbi David Elcott, the organization’s director of inter-religious affairs; and Foxman all said the verse was now in the film. “It’s very disturbing that it was added,” Rudin said. “It’s not just another verse from the Gospels. It’s a chilling verse because I know, and everyone knows, that that verse is the basis of blood libel.” Rudin and Foxman feared it will generate ill will toward Jews, especially overseas.

“The movie undermines the sense of community that has existed between Jews and Christians for decades,” Elcott said. “This film makes it more important than ever for like-minded Christians and Jews to reassert their dedication to promoting interfaith harmony.”

The movie is scheduled to be released on Ash Wednesday, February 25.

—*The Associated Press*

**BY Arthur Herzberg, American Jewish leader**

*Israel is too serious a matter to leave its future  
in the hands of the politicians who make up its governments.*

## ***“World Jewry is Not an Amen Chorus!”***

**Israeli politicians have said for decades that their goal [is] to dominate every body in which they supposedly consult Jewish opinion that might be critical...each prime minister has expected the ‘leaders of the Diaspora’ to obey their political line and never to dissent.**

*In* the middle of the First World War, the then prime minister of France, Georges Clemenceau, expressed his growing exasperation with the poor results on the front against the Germans by declaring that “war is too serious a matter to leave to the generals.” Nearly forty years after the great victory in the Six Day War of 1967, the world Jewish community is finally on the verge of saying out loud: Israel is too serious a matter to leave its future in the hands of the factional politicians who make up its governments.

In fundamental fact, Jewish interests in the Holy Land were never deeded by the international community exclusively to those who lived there. The root of the Jewish claim under international law to the right to establish a national presence in the land of their ancestors lies in the Balfour Declaration of November 1917. The British government addressed this document to a leading figure in the Diaspora, Lord Rothschild of England, rather than to the chief Jewish negotiator and then *de facto* leader in Britain of the World Zionist Organization, Dr. Chaim Weizmann.

At the moment when this declaration was made, there were 50,000 Jews in Palestine and over a half a million Arabs. Nonetheless, the British government declared that the need of the Jews for a home of their own, and the longstanding connection of this worldwide people with the Holy Land, entitled them to superior consideration. The Balfour Declaration expected that an international ‘Jewish agency’ would be constructed to foster the growth of the Jewish connection with the land. To this day, even after its creation as a sovereign state in 1948, Israel has presumed, without question, that the Jews of the world are obligated by special concern to help the up-

building of the new entity. The basic institutions of the Diaspora are expected to carry a special burden, both economic and political, in the defense of Israel.

The trouble with this construct is that there is no mechanism whatsoever through which concerned Jews of the Diaspora can give effective voice to opinions that the incumbent government of Israel does not want to hear. Israeli politicians have said aloud for decades that they make it their goal to dominate every body in which they supposedly consult Jewish opinion that might be critical. From right to left, each prime minister has expected the 'leaders of the Diaspora' to obey their political line and never to dissent.

It is an open secret that someone from the Israeli government will veto you for election to a leading role anywhere in the Jewish establishment if you are known to hold independent views. One of my own proudest moments was the day some thirty years ago when Abba Eban and I, who were both suspected, correctly, of being 'doves,' were described in an article by one of the neoconservatives as "functional anti-Semites." To disagree with the then dominant line of Menachem Begin's government, that it was Israel's destiny to hold on to the West Bank, was not to be discussed as an argument about policy; such views were to be defamed as "Jewish anti-Semitism."

This kind of nonsense is ending in these very days. The great divide has come now because it is clear that the present government of Israel simply does not tell the truth.

—Arthur Herzberg is author of "*The Fate of Zionism: A Secular Future for Israel and Palestine.*"

## ***Canada: \$110,000 to Build Arab-Jewish Relations***

The Government of Canada's Human Security program has provided a contribution of \$110,000 to the Women's Center at Givat Haviva, the office of Canadian Ambassador to Israel Donald Sinclair announced recently. The Givat Haviva campus is home to many innovative projects that aim to improve relations between Arabs and Jews, provide better understanding of the essence of democracy and citizen's rights in Israel, and build bridges with Israel's Arab neighbors. More than 12,000 adults and children attend Givat Haviva workshops, seminars, and courses every year. "It is a Canadian tradition to invest in efforts that promote peace," said Ambassador Sinclair. "That is one of the goals of our Foreign Affairs' Human Security program and Canada is proud to be associated with Givat Haviva, an organization that has been devoted to the goals of peace since its establishment more than 50 years ago."

Ambassador Sinclair attended the opening of a new and unique Women's Facilitator course, one of several in Givat Haviva's Counseling Center for Peace Education. The Women's Centre is located a few kilometers from the central Israel city of Hadera.

"Givat Haviva recognizes the many contributions Canada has made to peace throughout the world," said Mohamad Darawshe, Givat Haviva spokesman, "and we are pleased that Canada has recognized the important work of Givat Haviva in educating for peace," adding that Canada's support was especially important in the current climate of extremism. Givat Haviva also received the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education in 2001.

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

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A senior official with the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation has issued a directive demanding that all journalists who work for Arab satellite TV stations henceforth refer to any Palestinian killed by the IDF as a *shaheed* (martyr). This was directed mostly at Palestinian correspondents who work for the Saudi-owned *Al-Arabiya* 24-hour news channel, who have been using the term 'dead' instead of 'martyred' when referring to Palestinians killed in the ongoing violence. Officials accused journalists of showing "insensitivity" by not referring to the victims as martyrs.

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**New Book Release:** ‘*Mudhouse Sabbath,*’ by the author of ‘*Girl Meets God.*’

## ***Lauren Winner’s Faith Still a Bit Jewish***

*Although it’s been seven years since Lauren Winner converted from Judaism to Christianity, she confesses, “I miss Jewish ways.” In this small jewel of a book, she looks at 11 things she misses about the Jewish tradition, and how they might enrich Christian practice.*

“I’ve reflected on what I understand are the two over-arching themes of Sabbath law in Judaism. One of those is the general command not to work on the Sabbath, and the other is the general command to be joyful. So I tried to reflect, in both my family and community, on ways that I could undertake them both. One way is that I’ve stopped shopping. That was something I only discerned to be not very in keeping with the spirit of the Sabbath and resting, not interfering with creation. I have found it helpful not to try to check my e-mail or use my cell phone on the Sabbath, which sounds like a small thing. But those are implements that connect us to our work and they put me in this state of very low-grade, constant tension that someone is trying to get a hold of me. So I simply try not to check e-mail or use my cell phone on Sabbath.

“Another of the things I realized was missing from my spiritual life was that as a Jew who observed the rather rigorous Jewish dietary laws, I had to pay attention all the time to what I was eating, who was preparing my food, how it was getting to my table. And after I stopped keeping kosher I was much more likely to order take-out, to kind of eat standing up over the sink, to choose the drive-thru at McDonald’s. I began to realize that I was unthinkingly using food as a fuel. I wasn’t offering any gratitude to the Creator who had provided it for me.

[*On Judaism’s mourning process.*] “If there’s a place where there is a discipline to mourning, it’s in Judaism, which marks the days. Churches don’t grieve well, often because of a lack of ritual. The first period that is demarcated in the Jewish community would be the seven days, the week after someone dies. That is a time when the mourner is not expected to do anything else but be grief stricken. People come to your home and provide all of your meals.

“The second period is the period of the following month, which is a time when the mourner gradually edges back into his or her normal day-to-day rhythms, but there are still actually a lot of restrictions on what the mourner can do. And then the rest of the year of mourning is recognized, the mourner is required to say a prayer every day, and it is a prayer that can only be said with a quorum of ten other Jews gathered for prayer. But it doesn’t say anything about mourning. It is entirely a prayer that praises God. It begins, “Magnified and sanctified may his great name be,” and goes on from there as a hymn of praise.

“I think all of us who have mourned know that sometimes we don’t feel like praising God in the middle of our grief. So the Jewish mourner is required to do it even though he or she may not feel like it, and to do it in their community even though they may feel like staying in bed. I think it’s what is so insightful about the Jewish tradition of mourning—recognizing it takes a long time.

[*On prayer and liturgy.*] “I was schooled in liturgical prayer as a Jew, and then have spent my entire Christian life in liturgical communities. The concern that people have about liturgy, or the fear that people have, is that it gets boring and can become rote. But I find that when I don’t have to think all the time about what words I’m going to say next, then I am free to enter into reverencing God in prayer. The other great gift of liturgy is that if you have a set of liturgical prayers your prayer life is not going to be subject to your own emotional whims.”

—From an article that first appeared in the January 19 issue of *Christianity Today*. Used by permission.

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