

# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

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

*“We acknowledge with shame the historic burden of persecution...  
all too often inflicted by Christians who have maligned Jesus’ own people in Jesus’ name.”*

—Church Leaders’ Letter

*“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world;  
indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

—Margaret Mead

*“We painted, we talked, we played. It was fun to work with [Jews].  
I discovered they are good.”*

—Muhammed Al-Khatib, aged 12

## *~MY VOICE ...*

*It’s a song from an old Mennonite hymnbook which I sang as a youngster:*

### *“And the Jews Crucified the Lamb!”*

**Mennonites, unfortunately, still do not deserve mention among those who have tackled,  
at an institutional level, the fundamental theological issues and historical roots  
of Jewish-Christian relations.**

*This is not a film review of *The Passion of the Christ*. I haven’t seen the movie, and won’t get an early opportunity here in Jerusalem. But in an important way, Mel Gibson’s film of Jesus’ last 12 hours before the crucifixion, already has a special bearing on an aspect of the church assignment I am involved in: *How do Christians respond to Jews and Judaism?**

After explaining the ‘R’ rating for the film’s extreme violence, the commentaries soon get to the question, “Is the movie anti-Semitic?” Reviewers come down on both sides, but the Jewish writers react most strongly to the issue. Non-Jews regularly point to the film’s treatment of the Jews shown on screen, with the Marys, the disciples, and Jesus himself being the most prominent of them. Yes, all good and wonderful people! “Perhaps the Chief Priest should have been more responsive...” said the CNNer, trying to be thorough. “But I don’t think it was overly critical of

### **YES or NO?**

*If you have seen the film, did it stir any anti-Semitic sentiments?*

*Might you have reacted differently if you were Jewish?*

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Jews.” And *Time* wrote, “The Rabbis saw the upstart [Jesus] as dangerous, blasphemous, possibly insane for proclaiming himself the Messiah and telling his followers they would live forever if they ate his flesh and drank his blood. The film sees the Rabbis as doctrinally pure but politically corrupt. But Gibson also shows many Jews (and no Romans) treating Jesus with a kindness and charity one might call ‘Christian.’” He concluded it was not anti-Jewish. But he missed a more subtle underlying concern.

The critical issue for Jewish commentators has to do with painful reminders of the cruel and oppressive history of Christian-sponsored hatred from the institutions to which Jews had to be submissive, almost since this story happened. The Canadian Jewish Congress, whose release follows this article, best summarized what concerns their constituency in dealing with people’s beliefs, “...the actualization of the deicide charge, flowing from some of the Gospel accounts and the perverse use to which these were put, [and have] led over these two millennia to the immeasurable suffering of the Jewish people.” Our shared 1900-year history is just too real, and only in recent decades have a few Christian churches focused on ways to revise and correct age-old concepts—mainly the Catholics, Anglicans, and United Church of Canada.

Mennonites, unfortunately, still do not deserve mention among those who have seriously tackled, at an institutional level, the fundamental theological and historical issues of Jewish-Christian relations. We have, to our credit, removed a song from an old hymn book, which included the line, “And the Jews crucified the Lamb,” which I remember singing as a youngster!

One of the goals, from our perspective in Jerusalem, is to encourage North American Christians to broaden their understanding of Judaism [avoiding here the word ‘Israeli’], to discover how religious Jews read their Scriptures, how those views compare with ours, and how we live with the differences. Some of that effort is through our work at Bat Kol Institute, where half of our instructors for the Christian student body of Bible teachers and pastors, are Jewish.

It is also my hope that the broad range of new writing on this subject since the seventies will find its way into the hands of pastors and Adult Education teachers, church paper reviewers, and you all-important pew-people who are the core of our congregations. Some will become frightened and others protective, but more, I believe, will thrill to new perspectives and profound insights that will be revealed, leading to a new, bold, and vibrant passion for the Christ. —GEW

## *~OTHER VOICES ...*

BY Keith M. Landy, Canadian Jewish Congress

*“The subject matter of the film deals head on with events that are at the very root of the historic divide between Christianity and Judaism.”*

### ***Down to the Root of the Historic Divide***

***“We acknowledge with sadness and regret, and with no little shame, the historic burden of persecution, which Jews have borne throughout western history; a burden all too often inflicted by Christians, who have maligned Jesus’ own people in Jesus’ name.”***

Among Christians who have seen Mel Gibson’s dramatic representation of Christ’s Passion there are those who have praised it and affirmed that it does not stir anti-Jewish feelings. The story the film depicts is at the core of the Christian faith, and as Jews we are sensitive to both the profound meaning of the crucifixion for Christians and to how deeply the Passion engages their intellect and emotions. The subject matter of the film, however, also deals head on with events that are at the very root of the historic divide between Christianity and Judaism.

Crucifixion it must be stressed, was a Roman, not Jewish, form of capital punishment. Historically, all of what transpired at the time of Jesus is unclear. What *is* clear and significant, especially for Christian-Jewish relations, is that the actualization of the deicide charge, flowing

from some of the Gospel accounts—and the perverse use to which these were put—has led over these two millennia to the immeasurable suffering of the Jewish people. It is this reality that worries Jews and Christians about Gibson’s film.

Admittedly, the state of Christian-Jewish relations in many countries, and certainly in Canada, has undergone a remarkable transformation for the better in the past few decades. We only have to look back over the earlier history of Canada, when two principal themes—the rejection of Jesus and the deicide charge—dominated Christian attitudes towards Jews, to appreciate how much things have evolved. Since the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, the founding in 1977 of the Canadian Christian Jewish Consultation, Catholic-Jewish relations have progressed to a point one would not have believed possible two generations ago.

Four documents dramatically reflect these changes in Canada: the Anglican Church’s *From Darkness to Dawn: Rethinking Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism*; the United Church’s *Bearing Faithful Witness*; the Roman Catholic Church’s *Renewing Our Common Bonds with the Jewish Community*, and the most recent, *A Church Leaders’ Letter against Antisemitism*. These documents, among other things: [a] Categorically reject the deicide charge: “This calumny should never again be repeated” (*Renewing...*); [b] Recognize and glorify Christianity’s Jewish roots: “Jesus was and always remained a Jew” (*Renewing...*), “Understanding Torah must become an important undertaking for Christians, perhaps the most important biblical study” (*Bearing...*), and “We...are deeply grateful for the Jewish roots of our faith traditions” (*Church Leaders’...*);

[c] Abandon supercessionism (i.e., the notion that Christianity’s advent negated God’s covenant with the Jewish people) and affirm Judaism’s vigor and inspirational power not only for its adherents but also for other believers: “The Jewish people’s...election and mission have a permanent validity and they play a decisive role in the religious history of humanity” (*Renewing...*), and “We...declare our unqualified gratitude for the gifts of the Jewish people to world civilization in general and Canadian society in particular” (*Church Leaders’...*);

[d] Understand antisemitism and its roots, and commit vigorously to fight for its eradication: “We acknowledge with sadness and regret, and with no little shame, the historic burden of persecution, which Jews have borne throughout western history; a burden all too often inflicted by Christians who have maligned Jesus’ own people in Jesus’ name,” and “We challenge all churches, parishes, congregations, and people of good will to find ways and means to expose and eradicate antisemitism. (*Church Leaders’...*) and, [e] Commit to pursue Christian-Jewish dialogue, for its own sake, yes, but also as a means for *tikkun olam*, repairing of the world: “...our common calling with Jews to align ourselves with God’s world-mending work” (*Bearing...*).

All these many years, Canadian Christians and Jews, multilaterally and bilaterally, have worked together very hard and very successfully for rapprochement between our two faiths. We are confident, therefore, that our Christian partners are most sensitive to our concerns over anything in *The Passion of the Christ* that might help fuel antisemitism. We are relying on them to play a constructive, harmony-fostering role in the viewing of the film for those Christians who have not been engaged much or at all in the dialogue process, and for whom the results of this process have perhaps not filtered through.

As antisemitism is dangerously on the rise throughout the world, we are also looking to them for leadership in sensitizing their fellow Christians in those countries where Christian-Jewish relations are less advanced, on the importance of acceptance, respect, and peaceful co-existence. It is our hope and expectation that, apart from the central role that *The Passion of the Christ* is to play in moving Christians and strengthening them in their faith, Gibson’s film also will be used to foster greater mutual understanding and further demystification of Christian and Jewish beliefs. In other words, we must not allow the film to be a source of tension; we must translate it into an opportunity.

—Keith M. Landy is National President of the Canadian Jewish Congress

BY Rabbi Dow Marmor

*The writer is Rabbi Emeritus of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, a member of the Board of Consultants for Bat Kol Institute in Jerusalem, and former Executive Director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. He offers his opinion on the recent Gaza news.*

## ***“The Squire, The Horse, and The Jew”***

*“I often think of that story in an effort to understand what Israel’s Prime Minister is up to.”*

**T**he late Prime Minister Rabin is said to have been fond of the story about the Jew who is about to be condemned to death by the local squire in some God-forsaken village in Eastern Europe. The Jew asks for a year’s delay of execution. He undertakes in that time to teach the squire’s horse to speak. As a reward, he hopes that the squire will annul the sentence. The squire agrees and the Jew is temporarily freed. The latter’s wife receives the news with a mixture of relief and trepidation. “How will you be able to teach the horse to speak?” she asks. Her husband, the eternal optimist, reassures her: “A year is a long time. In the course of it the squire may die, the horse may die, or I may die.” The wife expected strategy but got only tactics.

I often think of that story in an effort to understand what Israel’s Prime Minister is up to. It’s difficult to discern any strategy in his actions, but there are plenty of tactics. As a general, Arik Sharon is said to have been an excellent tactician but a poor strategist. Which may be one of the reasons why he never became Chief of Staff.

I could have chosen many examples to illustrate my unease, but I’m going to concentrate on one: Mr. Sharon’s declaration that the Israeli settlers will be evacuated from the Gaza strip in an act of unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the area. As plausible as it looks, on closer examination the statement seems to be all tactics and no strategy...

***The Squire May Die***~ We’re told that “it will take time” to implement Sharon’s decision. To start with, pundits say, nothing tangible can happen before the summer. They are now talking about the end of the year, after the American presidential elections. Other reasons for further delays may crop up in due course. As the Jew told his wife, a year is a long time.

In that time the squire may indeed die. For the Palestinian Authority (PA) is weak, and its squire, Yasser Arafat, is sick. One Prime Minister, Abu Abbas, has already left without accomplishing anything. His successor, Abu Ala, may be on his way out too. There’s much to suggest that the PA will implode sooner or later, burdened by internal rivalry, large-scale corruption, and impotence in the face of Israel. The implosion may lead to a more amenable regime or, more likely, to total anarchy, with the various terrorist organizations carving up the spoils. It’s already being said that the PA has no control over Gaza and that, should the Israelis leave it, a Hamas state will be established there. In either case, the squire may very well have died of one cause or another. The evacuation of the settlers may then be delayed indefinitely.

***The Horse May Die***~ The implosion may also explain why the horse may die. Israel has argued that it has no partner to negotiate with. That’s why the Geneva Accord is viewed, even by many of its supporters, as pie in the sky. That’s why all the other beautiful plans have resulted in nothing. The latest casualty is likely to be the so-called Road Map. The horse that is the PA may depend for its feed on European subsidies but its life is in the hands of the Americans. And America is going to be otherwise engaged until the present President is re-elected in November or replaced in January.

A lot can happen in that time that will make it possible for the Sharon plan not to materialize. Israel seems already preparing for its non-consummation. Hence his suggestion that the settlers from Gaza be resettled in the West Bank, even though there are enough empty apartments inside Israel—in fact, not far from Gaza—that could easily absorb them all. Thus also

the statement in the name of the Minister of Defense that Israeli troops may stay in Gaza even after the withdrawal. Some withdrawal!

As I write this, the Minister of Tourism in the Government of Israel is on yet another speaking tour in the United States in the noble pursuit of promoting tourism. But when speaking to Christian evangelicals (a great source of tourism) he's also telling them why he's opposed to Sharon and why his party, together with the National Religious Party, may leave the government, if Sharon's plan is implemented. (Note: He's speaking against his Prime Minister while outside the country—in front of Gentiles!) This would cause a government crisis that may be sufficient reason to leave the settlements where they are now, despite the declaration to the contrary.

*The Jew May Die*~ I hope that Arik Sharon will be blessed with a very long life, stay in good health, and enjoy much happiness. His political demise, however, is in the cards because of the current police investigations into the financial affairs of his family, particularly in relation to the possible cover-up of illegally obtained election funds. There's also talk of having to advance the next general election on constitutional grounds. In other words, it's not at all certain that he will even be the Prime Minister long enough to implement this or any other announced tactical move.

Mr. Sharon's departure from office would only be good news for the extreme right-wing parties. For it's reasonably obvious that, should he have to leave, his successor will be someone on the right of him, most likely Binyamin Netanyahu. In my book, this is enough of a reason to pray for the political life of Ariel Sharon beyond this year and the next, or even the one after that.

—Jerusalem, February 19, 2004. This article appears by special permission of Rabbi Marmur.

## ***Rabbis Proclaim a Fast over the Gaza Decree***

***Many people doubt that Prime Minister Sharon will in fact ever carry out his recently announced policy of withdrawing all Jewish settlers—and by implication, Israeli soldiers—out of Gaza. But just in case...***

The Council of Rabbis of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip called for a day of prayer and fasting to avert Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "evil decree" to evacuate the 7500 Jewish residents of Gaza. The Rabbis based their call on the great Jewish Sage Maimonides' sanctioning of public fasts in times of trouble. "In light of the threats to the communities and outposts throughout Judea, Samaria and Gaza," the Rabbis wrote, "all people who are capable are requested to fast to annul the evil decree and save the entire Nation of Israel, wherever they may be."

Quoting from Maimonides, the Rabbis noted that Jewish law states that "it is customary to fast as a result of trouble which comes upon the community until there is mercy from the heavens." They added that those unable to fast should "increase their prayers" and recite Psalm 83. "There is no question that Gaza is historically and biblically part of the Land of Israel," explained council rabbi Nahum Eliezer Rabinowitz, "and therefore forbidden to be handed over to non-Jews." They argue that the remains of a fourth-century Gaza synagogue show it to be the largest of the Roman period in the Land of Israel. The Romans included Gaza when they formed the province of Palestine.

Rabbi Dov Begun of Jerusalem noted that giving over any part of the Land of Israel that is both within the borders promised to Moses and Joshua, and held under Jewish sovereignty, constitutes a transgression of Torah law and endangers the people of Israel.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a related development, some Palestinians expressed their delight over Sharon's plan to unilaterally evacuate all Jews from the Gaza Strip, calling his words a 'victory' for the Palestinian resistance. One stated that he wanted to see Israel get out of Gaza as it did southern Lebanon in 2000, and said that such a scene would make the Palestinian victory complete. Meanwhile Israeli

military commanders warn that a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza will cause a drastic increase in Palestinian terrorism against the Jewish state.

A senior Palestine Islamic Jihad leader told the Reuters news agency, “There is no doubt that Prime Minister Sharon’s declaration [that he plans to remove all Jews from Gaza] is the result of the level of resistance of the Palestinian people.” He added that a withdrawal from Gaza does not mean that Palestinian resistance would end. “The removal of settlements, or even a withdrawal from Gaza, will not end the occupation. Therefore the resistance will continue.”

In the meantime, American officials have said that the United States would agree to transfer settlers from the Gaza Strip to the main settlement blocs on the West Bank. However, the officials said that Washington would insist on dismantling of some settlements on the West Bank during the first stage of withdrawal. No financial aid is to be given to Israel during this time period.

The Americans also plan to make it clear that they reject any expansion of existing settlements and they are opposed to measures which could lead to annexation and expropriation of ‘Palestinian’ land. In addition, the Bush administration wants Israel to coordinate the Gaza Strip withdrawal with Washington.

—Lekarev Report

BY Gideon Levy

## *When Soldiers Become Bullies*

*“Confiscating cars is only one example of how an IDF regime of bullying has emerged.”*

Three armed bullies in black ski masks get out of the jeep quickly. One breaks into shouts at the taxi driver who is letting off a female passenger, waving a rifle in the driver’s face and ordering him out of the car. The bully then orders the frightened driver to hand over the keys to his taxi and get going. The helpless driver hands over his keys. In a feeble voice he asks if and when he can get his taxi back. “Maybe at the end of the day, maybe Wednesday. We’ll see,” says the thug, sticking the keys into his pocket, getting back in the jeep and driving away.

Highway bandits in Chechnya? Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades? No! These bullies were Israeli soldiers. They confiscated the car from its owner—as they routinely do—because he let out a passenger on the other side of a blurry yellow line painted onto the Tulkarm road. The road is blocked by an unmanned iron bar. Passengers are supposed to cross on foot, from taxis on one side to taxis on the other—it’s not at all clear why—and the drivers know that if they cross the yellow line the soldiers will appear out of nowhere and confiscate the cars, or slice the tires. Indeed, one of the soldiers threatened to slice the tires of our car, parked past the yellow line.

This ‘battle heritage’ is passed down through the Israel Forces without obstruction, and Palestinians drivers know it. Any time they venture onto one of the few West Bank roads left to them, they are taking a risk. Maybe they’ll be shot ‘by mistake,’ or their car will be confiscated for some vague reason. That’s why the few roads of the West Bank where Palestinians are allowed to drive are nearly always empty. The driver whose car was confiscated, Samr Abdullah, did not know how to get home.

A brigadier who serves in the territories said in a private conversation recently that the confiscation of cars and ID cards is prohibited by the army. Really? After all, if the army wanted to put an end to it, it could easily do so. The IDF Spokesman’s Office also says there is no policy of confiscating cars and, if it turns out that the events we witnessed really happened, “the soldiers will be severely punished.” Is the IDF Spokesman’s Office being naive or disingenuous, or was this really the first time it heard about soldiers confiscating the keys to a Palestinian car or slashing its tires? It’s not clear what’s worse. Any Israeli soldier nowadays can take any Palestinian car for any reason and for as long as he wants. When every soldier is a king, any group of soldiers can turn into a gang.

Confiscating cars is only one example of how an IDF regime of bullying has emerged and is being strengthened in the territories. There is a great deal of hypocrisy in talk about how anarchy will reign in the territories after the IDF leaves. The disintegration of law and order begins inside the army. Every day one can see soldiers confiscating ID cards from residents, making them line up for hours in the sun and rain for no reason whatsoever. In the last three years, an atmosphere of ‘anything goes’ has taken root in the IDF in the territories. Any soldier can do whatever he feels like to any Palestinian; the incident won’t be investigated, the soldier won’t be punished.

The disintegration of the rule of law does not stop with the soldiers. Recently two brothers who organized nonviolent demonstrations against the separation fence were arrested, with the intention of throwing them into long months of administrative detention without trial. At the last minute one was freed by a judge who ruled that nonviolent demonstrations are no cause for administrative detention. But his brother got four months of detention for his ‘terror-supporting activity.’ Serious questions are raised by the arrogance of security officials who lock people up for attempting to organize nonviolent demonstrations against a fence being built on their property.

There is a direct and disgusting line between the car confiscators and those who jail demonstrators without trial. Both are manifestations of gangland rule. Despite the separation fence, that kind of behavior will inevitably cross the Green Line.

—Ha’aretz, Jerusalem

**“Make them days of feasting and gladness,  
and of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor.”**

—Esther 9:19

## ***What is the Jewish Festival of Purim?***

***The first weekend in March looks like Hallowe’en—the masks and costumes even seem to be surplus Wal-Mart items from last October. But a party atmosphere and gaiety everywhere spread through the streets, with youngsters as well as many adults dressing up.***

**P**urim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from destruction because of the intervention of Queen Esther against the plot of the wicked Haman. There is an entire book in the Bible devoted to this story, *Megillat Esther* or ‘*The Scroll of Esther*,’ where Esther, the young Jewish queen of Persian King Ahasuerus, risked her life to convince the monarch to keep his evil advisor Haman from killing the Jews. An ambitious man, Haman tried to play upon fear of the Jews to consolidate his own power. He cited the classic argument of anti-Semites: “They follow different laws and customs from everyone else.” He appealed to human greed, urging Persians to kill Jews and take their possessions.

The feast is celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar in the Jewish calendar (March 7<sup>th</sup> this year) around the world, outside of Jerusalem. There are four requirements which are obligatory for Jews on Purim: the reading of *Megillat Esther*, festivity and rejoicing, *shalach manot* (sending gifts), and *matanot l’evyonim* (gifts to the poor). One is required to read the book of Esther both by day and night, and both men and women are obligated to hear it read in synagogue—in other words, in a community setting. It is a *mitzvah* to have a sumptuous meal on Purim, including meat dishes and wine. This feast must be held during the day. The miracle of Purim came through wine—Vashti’s downfall and Haman’s downfall came through a wine feast in the biblical account.

Thirdly, Jews are required to give at least two gifts to the poor on Purim, each gift being “sufficient to buy at least a loaf of bread.” The gifts to the poor are given during the day, usually after the reading of the *Megillah*. It is also customary to give a gift to another acquaintance. The food must consist of something edible or drinkable without further cooking or preparation. You may send meat, fish, cooked pastry, wine, and other beverages—to as many people as you wish!

**“We painted, we talked, we played. I discovered they are good.”**  
***Jewish/Palestinian Children Produce Art Exhibit***

The fruit of a two-year series of workshops involving Jewish and Palestinian children in Jerusalem was opened at the Jerusalem City Hall. Last month a group of 150 Palestinian and Israeli schoolchildren unveiled its version of a new reality in Jerusalem. Reflecting much needed optimism, they developed a touching display of a world where bullets are made of chocolate, flowers grow from fists, and loud noises that go bang in the night are just fireworks of joy.

Dr. Kitty Cohen, a child Holocaust survivor, created the program in response to the intifada. Her goal was to help Palestinian and Israeli children, ages 9-12, to express their own pain, fear, and anger through art within their own communities. Later the Israeli and Palestinian children joined together for a second series of individual and joint projects that looked at their shared feeling and experiences of mourning and fear, and then to their hopes for the future. Their final paintings were liberally scattered with symbols of unity, partnership, and serenity.

“We learned to work together; it was fun,” said 12-year-old Muhammed Al-Khatib who, like his classmates, had never previously met a Jewish-Israeli child. “We painted, we talked, we played. It was fun to work with them. I discovered they are good.” Another Jewish student, aged 11, explained that the workshops seemed like any normal situation of kids playing together. He said simply, “We just want peace.”

**There was a wealthy and flourishing community near the Dead Sea.**  
***Discovery of 2500-Year-Old Jewlery and Makeup Kit***  
***“These finds confirm the biblical accounts of Jews returning from exile in Babylon.”***

Israeli archaeologists excavating in caves near the Dead Sea have come upon a very rare find! They discovered a woman’s 2,500-year-old hoard of jewelry, a makeup kit, and a small mirror. The fashion accessories are believed to have belonged to Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, according to Tsvika Tsuk, chief archaeologist for the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. “This find is very rare. Both for the richness of the find and for that period, it is almost unheard of,” Tsuk said.

Hidden under a stone-like accumulation of sediment thrown up by a nearby spring, archeologists using metal detectors found a necklace made of 130 beads of semiprecious stones and gold, a scarab, an agate medallion of Babylonian origin, and a silver pendant with an engraved crescent moon and pomegranates. They also found what appears to be a makeup kit containing an alabaster bowl for powders, a stick to apply the makeup, and a bronze mirror.

“These finds confirm the biblical accounts of Jews returning from exile in Babylon,” Tsuk said, referring to the return of the Jewish people in 538 BCE after the Babylonian captivity under Nebuchadnezzar. Tsuk said the find shows that there was a wealthy and flourishing community of returnees living in the area at the time, adding, “These are not the belongings of a simple person.”

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