



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

*“God is looking for people through whom he can do the impossible –
what a pity that we plan only the things we can do ourselves.”*

—A.W. Tozer

*“The prince of peace was born here,
but unfortunately peace is missing still in this city.”*

—Bethlehem Mayor Hanna Nasser

~MY VOICE ...

The signs were hanging on the concrete slabs at the checkpoint:

“A call to all people of faith: Visit the Holy Land now.”

New Signs in the 12 Days of Christmas

We were driving to a concert at the Lutheran International Center in Bethlehem the day before Christmas Eve, and reached the heavily fortified Jerusalem-Bethlehem checkpoint. A sign instructing people to stop sits atop a holiday message posted by Israeli tourism, as Israeli border police officers wait for vehicles at the main checkpoint passage. An Israeli Tourism Ministry sign decorated with bells and a red ribbon wished Christians ‘Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year.’ Above that was the army’s sign in Hebrew, Arabic, and English, “Stop and wait for instructions. Prepare documents for inspection.”

“A call to all people of faith: Visit the Holy Land now,” declared another Tourism Ministry sign hanging on the concrete slabs near the checkpoint. For the first Christmas season in five years, Israel and the Palestinians are cooperating to boost tourism to encourage Christian pilgrims to visit the Holy Land during the holiday. “This is our personal greeting for a happy holiday from Israel,” said Rafi Ben-Hur, the Israeli Tourism Ministry’s deputy director. “We see the pilgrims as a bridge for peace.” Israeli army representatives handed out baskets of candies to pilgrims crossing into Bethlehem from Jerusalem. The pilgrims were being asked to give the candies to Palestinians, “from the Israelis,” Ben-Hur prompted them. “We certainly hope that these events are a positive sign for the future.”

There have been many visitors in the past. A young couple, pregnant with child, arrived on a donkey once. Several eastern men on camels arrived sometime later—January 6th, twelve days after the western Christmas marks that gift-giving event in some other Christian traditions. Millions of others over the centuries have followed in their footsteps—and still do today.

The wall is continuing to be built. The separation fence still keeps two peoples from easy visits to each other, or working for a peaceful future. But there are encouraging signs! Even candy from Jewish Israeli soldiers to Palestinian children...at Christmas. *Peace on earth!* —GEW

*For special animated cartoon at the wall—click on: <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/jerusalemletter/>

~OTHER VOICES...

Hamas Gains in Local Elections

With the new elections next week, everyone is wondering what the impact will be.

Preliminary results of municipal elections held recently in 26 areas under Palestinian control have catapulted the Hamas organization into power in at least one-third of the towns and villages. Hamas' showing was stronger than expected, particularly in areas where Fatah, the ruling party of former president Yasser Arafat, thought it had a stronghold. The Arab news service *Al-Jazeera* said, "The results are certain to send a message of the Islamic group's strength to Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen)," the Fatah presidential candidate in the Palestinian Authority election campaign for a successor to Yasser Arafat. Hamas is boycotting the January 9th election.

Fatah claimed it won in 14 areas, conceding nine to Hamas, which countered that it won in 17 areas. Some confusion was caused by each party's claiming the same candidate to be its member. Voter turnout was high, reaching more than 90 per cent in some areas. Thousands of Arabs who had left in the past several years returned from Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in the past few weeks to vote in the elections.

"I'll Bring Peace to Israel" –Bush

***"Peace is not something that is arrived at through words,
but through deeds."***

President George W. Bush said before Christmas that he would bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians during his second term in office, making a strikingly bold assessment of his foreign-policy goals for the next four years. "I want you to know that I am going to invest a lot of time and a lot of creative thinking so that there will finally be peace between Israel and the Palestinians," Mr. Bush told the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Aharonoth*. "I am convinced that, during this term, I will manage to bring peace."

Bush entered the White House determined not to follow the path of his predecessor, Bill Clinton, who devoted much of his presidency to an ultimately fruitless search for an end to the conflict. But as he prepares for the start of his second term next month, Mr. Bush sees the elusive quest as a principal ambition of the next four years. Washington regards the Palestinian elections on Jan. 9th as a crucial first step to consolidate the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, a moderate with whom Washington believes it can work.

At the same time, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon is forcing through his plan to withdraw soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip next summer. "Next year is very important, as it will bring peace," said Bush. "Sharon understood this. It is very important that the Palestinians also understand that peace is not something that is arrived at through words, but through deeds."

Asked about Syria, he said, "Syria is a very weak country, and therefore it cannot be trusted. For now, [President] Assad should wait; first peace between Israel and Palestine, and then we will see what should be done with Syria."

—Lekarev Report

There will be no publication of *MennoLetter* in February. I am now spending vacation time as a volunteer in *Hogar Las Palmas*, a home for street children in Misiones Province, Argentina, my posting during the 1990s. *MennoLetter* will next be issued on March 1st 2005.

BY US Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

“The Middle East’s Second Chance: Action Now Can Revive the Peace Effort.”

Last year, when the Palestinian moderate Mahmoud Abbas briefly served as prime minister, the United States, Israel, and the international community failed to give him the support he badly needed, making it all too easy for Yasser Arafat to undercut him. Now, we have a second chance. Arafat is gone and Abbas is favored to win the Palestinian presidential election in January, having made “the total cessation of violence” his highest priority. He is currently seeking commitments from all the Palestinian factions for a cease-fire and is determined to bring the various security services under control.

His recognition of Palestinian responsibility to act decisively against incitement and terrorism will give Israel what it has been lacking: a partner for peace. But Abbas’ reemergence also raises a fundamental question. Arafat had the capacity to make peace, but lacked the will. Abbas has the will, but does he have the capacity to overcome violence, corruption, and the sense of victimization that are a legacy of Arafat’s leadership? Israel, the United States, and the international community have a shared responsibility to help him build a capacity for peace.

Already, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is taking steps to facilitate elections and to deal directly with the Palestinian leadership. “We’re ready to make painful compromises for a genuine and durable peace,” he said. And I believe Sharon is sincere. But there is more Israel must do to support Abbas—if he demonstrates his commitment to end terrorism.

***“Israel should transfer responsibility for security to the Palestinians
wherever they show they are ready to assume it,
and take down checkpoints not vital to Israel’s security.”***

First, it should hold Palestinians to a tough but not impossible standard when it comes to violence. Sharon and Abbas agree that Syria and Iran direct many terrorist activities. The future of Israelis and Palestinians should not be handed over to radical leaders in those countries. The test for the Palestinians should be whether they make a concerted effort against terrorism. The sooner they meet the basic responsibilities of statehood, the sooner they will have a state.

Second, Israel should transfer responsibility for security to the Palestinians wherever they show they are ready to assume it, and take down checkpoints not vital to Israel’s security.

Third, Israel should coordinate its disengagement from Gaza with the Palestinians. Egypt has a role to play in training Palestinian security forces and fighting arms smuggling.

Fourth, Israel must convince the Palestinians that its disengagement plan is truly “Gaza first,” not “Gaza last.” Sharon should reiterate his commitment to the ‘road map’ (the initiative sponsored by the US, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations) directly to the Palestinian people. Sharon has taken an important symbolic step by calling for the removal of all settlements in Gaza and four more in the northern West Bank. This is an underappreciated breakthrough revealing his understanding of the demographic pressures Israel faces. If the peace process gets back on track, he should act quickly to remove unauthorized outposts and end settlement growth.

***“We can’t repeat past mistakes; we must act with urgency.
An international pledging conference in spring 2005 may prove worthwhile,
but Abbas can’t wait that long.”***

[Cont’d]

As always, the US has a critical role to play in this process. We should bolster Abbas' ability to deliver tangible benefits to the Palestinian people. Hamas has supplanted the Palestinian Authority as an economic and social benefactor. It pays significant sums for school and college tuition for young Palestinians. It delivers social services to the destitute. But Abbas must gain the means to reassert the primacy of the Palestinian Authority. We can help by funding highly visible projects—such as building hospitals and schools—that will help Abbas put thousands of people to work. But we can't repeat past mistakes; we must act with urgency. An international pledging conference in late spring 2005 may prove worthwhile, but Abbas can't wait that long.

***“If second chances are rare, third chances are virtually unheard of.
The time to act is now.”***

Finally, the US must demand that neighboring Arab countries take visible steps toward normalization with Israel. Jordan and Egypt should return their ambassadors to Israel. Others in the region should begin once again to meet openly with Israelis to discuss economic matters, business opportunities, water supplies, regional security, the environment and other issues of common concern. Two-thirds of Palestinians and Israelis support a two-state solution. Yet nearly the same proportion in both communities believes the other side really wants a one-state solution. Now, pragmatic leadership from the Palestinians, Israel and the US can break that dynamic and restart the peace process. If second chances are rare, third chances are virtually unheard of. The time to act is now.

—Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware is the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He recently returned from a trip to the Middle East.

***“Israelis should refuse peace because
it denies the dream of establishing greater Israel...”***

“Israel Not a Democracy because Non-Jews Vote.”

Rabbi Noam Nivenat, brother of the Israeli Minister of Education, is spearheading a campaign to prosecute Israeli soldiers and officers who participate in the slated withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The Israeli settler movement, under the title of the ‘Security Wall,’ succeeded in gathering 3,000 signatures from Israeli occupation soldiers agreeing to refuse military orders to conduct a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

The campaign is led by Rabbi Nivenat, who has also wants to explode the Dome of the Rock. He is calling to destroy the Muslim holy site in order to build the Third Temple, and to “establish the Israeli Kingdom from the Nile to the Euphrates.” The Rabbi stated his case by saying, “Israelis should refuse peace because it denies the dream of establishing greater Israel from Egypt to Iraq which can only be established through occupations and war.”

In addressing the slated withdrawal from Gaza, Rabbi Nivenat said that his group will “establish religious tribunals to try all officers and soldiers who assist in evacuating Jews from their homes considering it is a crime against Judaism.” But when asked about the democratic process since the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, approved the withdrawal of occupation forces from the Gaza Strip, the Rabbi responded, “The minority is not obliged to accept decisions that are bad for society. Democracy means the rule of the people and we are not in a democracy because there are citizens who are non-Jews who participate in elections.”

Rabbi Nivenat reiterated the principles of the late Rabbi Kahana, who called to remove Palestinians from Palestine. “We are at war with a strange people and we have to do what is necessary to get rid of them.”

—Middle East Fellowship NEWS

“A new diplomatic approach should be tried...”

Syrians Will Enjoy Israeli Apples

For the first time, Israel and Syria agreed last month to allow the Druze farmers in the Golan, in northern Israel, to sell their apples across the border in Syria. Following approval of the deal by the Defense Ministry, the first batch of the 15,000 tons of produce bound for Syrian markets has begun to pass through the security gates at the Golan border. The decision came a few weeks ago after Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom called for mutual confidence-building measures between the two countries.

Shalom said at a conference that this new diplomatic approach should be tried with the Syrians, and that rather than trying to negotiate a final-status deal with Syrian President Bashar Assad, Israel should adopt an ‘evolutionary’ step-by-step approach similar to what is now being employed vis-à-vis the Palestinians. “I call for the beginning of confidence-building measures in defined areas like on issues concerning the environment, and in the limited trade of goods produced on both sides of the border.”

BY Amiram Barkat

200,000 Israelis Have Left Since 1990

About 40,000 Russians went West, with Canada their favorite destination.

Nearly 200,000 Israelis have emigrated since 1990, the Central Bureau of Statistics told the Knesset Immigration and Absorption Committee recently. An official said that some 184,000 emigrated between 1990 and 2002, and that there has been a rise in the number of emigrants in recent years apparently as a result of the economic and security conditions in the country. The Bureau estimates there are some 572,000 Israelis living overseas, but those numbers do not include the children of Israelis born outside the country, so it is significantly lower than the Foreign Ministry’s estimate of some 709,000 Israelis overseas.

According to the immigration agency specializing in immigrants from the former Soviet Union, some 74,000 immigrants from those areas left Israel between 1990 and 2000, but about 40,000 of them went West, with Canada their favorite destination. According to the Absorption Ministry, some 8.8 percent of immigrants from the former Soviet Union ‘drop out’ and leave Israel, a proportion considered less than the dropout rates in other groups of immigrants.

Since the beginning of the year, 20,352 new immigrants arrived in the country, compared with last year’s 22,189.

—Ha’aretz news service

BY Moti Bassok

***“In terms of their statistical profile,
Christians resemble Jews more than Muslims.”***

Christians About 2.1% of Israel’s Population

A total of 144,000 Christians live in Israel, of whom 117,000 are Arab and 27,000 are new immigrants, according to a new report released by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) ahead of Christmas. The new immigrant Christians, who came to Israel under the Law of Return that grants citizenship to non-Jewish first-degree relatives of Jews, arrived mainly during the major wave of immigration in the 1990s from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

[Cont’d]

Approximately 11 percent of all 12th-graders in the Arab education system are Christian, and they lead the population in attainment of matriculation certificates. In 2003, 64 percent of Christian students were eligible for matriculation certificates, as opposed to 49 percent of Muslim students and 57 percent among Jews. Approximately 98 percent of Israel's Christians live in urban settlements, with 20 percent in Nazareth, 12 percent in Haifa and 10 percent in Jerusalem. Sixty percent of all Christians live in northern Israel.

In terms of their statistical profile, Christians resemble Jews more than Muslims. The number of births per woman stands at 2.3 for Christians, while among Jews the number is 2.7, and among Muslims, 4.5. The birth rate among Christians has been in continuous decline over the years, along with their proportion in the general population. Their proportion in the Arab population has declined precipitously from 20 percent in 1949 to 15 percent in 1972 to 9 percent at present. In 2003, the Christian population grew by 1.4 percent—the same rate as the Jewish population—while the Muslim population grew by 3.3 percent and the Druze by 2.1 percent.

In 2002, the median age when Christian men married for the first time was 28.6 years of age, almost two years later than Jewish men and three years later than Muslim men. The median age for Christian women to marry for the first time was 23.4, younger by a year than their Jewish counterparts and three years older than Muslim women. Of all Christian students who finished high school in 1994/5, 34 percent began higher education within six years, as opposed to 31 percent of Jewish students, 22 percent of Muslims and 21 percent of Druze.

—*Ha'aretz*

The great court used to convene in one of the Temple's chambers in Jerusalem.

Newly Formed Sanhedrin Ascends Temple Mount

In a dramatic but unpublicized move last month, members of the newly established Sanhedrin ascended the Temple Mount, Judaism's holiest site. Close to fifty recently ordained '*samuchim*,' members of the Sanhedrin, lined up at the foot of the Temple Mount one Monday morning. The men, many ascending the Temple Mount for the first time, had immersed in *mikva'ot* (ritual baths) that morning, and they planned to ascend as a group. Despite prior approval from the Israeli police who oversee entry to the Mount, the officers barred the group from entering the Mount together, saying they could only ascend in groups of ten.

Many of the *samuchim* refused to ascend under the restrictive conditions, especially as a group of over 100 gentile tourists filed past the waiting rabbis and up onto the holy site. "It is unconscionable that on the eve of Hanukkah, which celebrates the rededication of the Holy Temple, we should once again be barred from worshipping—and by our own people," said Rabbi Chaim Richman of Jerusalem's Temple Institute.

The Sanhedrin, a religious assembly of 71 sages that sat from the time of the Holy Temple through 425 CE, was the highest Jewish legal-judicial tribunal in the Land of Israel. The great court used to convene in one of the Temple's chambers in Jerusalem. On October 14, the Sanhedrin was reestablished in Tiberius for the first time in 1,600 years. [See *MennoLetter*, November, page 7]. Those behind the revival of the Sanhedrin stress that the revival of the legal body is not optional, but mandated by the Torah. "We don't have a choice," says Rabbi Richman, "It is a religious mandate for us to establish a Sanhedrin."

—*Leharev Report*

“Belonging to the Temple of the Lord (Yahweh), holy to the priests.”

Israeli Museum: Solomon’s Temple Relic a Fake

Five people have been charged in Jerusalem with running a sophisticated antiquities forgery ring that created hundreds of fake biblical artifacts, including some that were hailed as among the most important archaeological objects ever uncovered in the region. The forged treasures include an ivory pomegranate touted by scholars as the only relic from Solomon’s Temple, an ossuary that reputedly held the bones of James, Jesus’ brother, and the “Yehoash inscription.”

The thumb-sized ivory pomegranate was long touted by scholars as the only relic from Solomon’s Temple. But the Israel Museum now contends it’s a forgery, in what investigators say is the third major antiquities scam in 18 months. The pomegranate was bought from an anonymous collector by the Israel Museum for US\$550,000 in the 1980s. The announcement came as police and the Israel Antiquities Authority were wrapping up a large-scale investigation into antiquities fraud.

The pomegranate was examined independently of the probe by the Israeli authorities, said James Snyder, the director of the Israel Museum. A team of experts found that the pomegranate dates to the Bronze period, or about 3,400 years ago, meaning it is considerably older than the first Jewish Temple, and that the inscription was added recently. The inscription, in ancient Hebrew lettering, reads: “Belonging to the Temple of the Lord (Yahweh), holy to the priests.”

Scholars had believed that the cream-colored pomegranate, which has a hole in the bottom, was used as a scepter top carried by a temple priest. The temple was built in the 6th century BCE and expanded by Herod before being destroyed in the year 70 CE. Today the Dome of the Rock—a Muslim shrine that is part of the Al Aqsa complex—is located near the site of ancient temple.

Indictments against several people are to be handed down next week, the official said. One of those to be charged is collector Oded Golan, the Justice Ministry confirmed. Golan owns the two most spectacular artifacts to be declared fakes last year, including a burial chest purported to be that of James, the brother of Jesus, and a stone tablet with inscriptions on how to maintain the Jewish Temple.

*“The burial box is authentic...
the debate around it is fraught with ‘archaeological politics.’”*

Last year, Israel’s Antiquities Authority said the inscriptions on the purported burial chest of Jesus’ brother and on a tablet with instructions for temple repairs were also fakes. The James ossuary, with the words, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus,” had been touted as a major archaeological discovery—the oldest physical link between the modern world and Jesus. Israeli experts said that while the ossuary, a 2,000-year-old limestone box, was indeed ancient, parts of the inscription were added in modern times.

The existence of the box was first revealed in 2002 by the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, a Washington-based magazine. Its editor, Hershel Shanks, said he still believes the burial box is authentic and that the debate around it is fraught with “archaeological politics.”

Shanks had also arranged for the box to be transported to Toronto for a special exhibition.

—Israelinsider

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