



Menno Letter from Jerusalem

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

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**“You have favored Your land; You have returned the captivity of Ya’acov.  
You have forgiven the iniquity of Your nation and You have covered all their sin.”**

—*Psalm 85:2-3*

**“If the state of Israel is ready to give me up, I am ready to give it up.”**

—*Yossi Berebi, a Jew in Gaza*

*ready to become Palestinian instead of leaving his home*

~ *MY VOICE* ...

## **“Who Can Come to Help?”**

*It took less than an hour to lay the house—and their lives—in ruins.*

The Israel Committee Against House Demolition [ICAHHD] with their director, Jeff Halper, were present at the site. At 10 a.m., dozens of police jeeps and ambulances appeared on top of the hill, and started to move down toward the houses. Earlier that morning the bulldozers moved into the nearby neighborhood of Isawiyya, where they demolished a gas station. ICAHD copied me on their urgent memo to their friends and supporters: *“Police, bulldozers, and a crane have been spotted entering [the Palestinian area of] Beit Hanina this morning. More houses have probably been marked for destruction. Who can come to help?”*

A week earlier a bus-load of international journalists were moving across the east side of the Mount of Olives when Jeff pointed across the valley: “Watch that orange crane, and those men in orange outfits!” Under the gaze of dozens of police that had closed off the streets and surrounded the property, several men were carrying furniture from a house, and tossing it all unceremoniously onto a huge pile that was forming, as we watched in horror and disgust.

**Neighbors were kept back** but they were leaning over patio railings higher up the slope, and peering from rooftops at a sight was no longer uncommon, but no less terrifying: another house of their friends was about to be demolished, and left for the owners to find in a mangled heap of concrete and steel rods. It all took less than an hour. Then the tall crane with steel jaws and grappling hook collapsed into itself again; the huge bulldozer led the way, and the police jeeps followed in procession along the street and around a corner. *Out of sight!*

**The neighborhood folks—and our bus—rushed in.** There was nothing we could do... nothing anyone could do! The young Palestinian mother was sobbing into the arms of a neighbor. Her children were in a special school and didn’t yet know there would be no home to return to that afternoon. She pointed to their two small wheelchairs in the pile of furniture...

This three-year-old house of a Palestinian truck driver lay in ruins, and much of the furniture was damaged in the pile outside. He had built it bit by bit as he slowly saved his money, so he could move his wife and three children—two of them handicapped—out of a tiny shared apartment and into a new life of their own. He was aware of some risk of building without a permit. He also knew that as a Palestinian he would almost never qualify to get one from the Israelis. Those were the rules for Palestinians. “So leave then if you don’t like it.”

He may have to now. And he doesn’t like it one bit. —*GEW*

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

BY Julie Fellmayer

**“Peace is the reason for the camp but it’s not the main focus.”**

### ***Previous Attack Leads to Summer Peace Camp***

***The aim is coexistence through giving Arab and Jewish children a chance to spend time with each other in a relaxed and fun environment.***

The lawns of Givat Haviva near Haifa were littered with white makeshift tents, brightly painted with drawings and slogans for peace and coexistence. Loud rock music blared and the screams and laughter of over-excited children could be heard from every corner of the campus. Candy wrappers overflowed in the garbage cans and art projects were thrust in one’s face with demands from tiny voices that you admire their work.

Not that the staff at Givat Haviva were complaining about the excess energy and noise! The kids, aged 9-12, were there for the Peace Summer Camp. This camp, which takes place every year for two weeks, brings Arab and Jewish children together from villages, kibbutzim, and towns in the region. The aim is coexistence through giving Arab and Jewish children a chance to spend time with each other in a relaxed and fun environment. “Peace is the reason for the camp but it’s not the main focus,” says a 17-year-old counselor at the camp. “We just want the kids to realize that everyone here can be their friend.” Building bridges between the two communities is an important part of the work done at the camp, as the children do not often have a chance to interact with people from the other side.

Considering the barriers of language, culture, and conflict it is easy to see how neighboring communities can be so separate. The camp is here to provide a stepping-stone towards interaction with the ‘other.’ Saeed Arda, a camp leader, makes it clear that the goals of the camp are not excessively idealistic. “We don’t expect them to become best friends; we expect them to respect each other.”

***“The members of the kibbutz, who had always fostered good relations with the neighboring Arab villages, were shocked by the attack.”***

This expectation is more than a goal of the camp; it is a pledge for peace in the entire region. The importance of the fun and playful atmosphere is underlined by the events that initiated the camp. In 2002, Kibbutz Mezer, where many of the children participating in the camp are from, experienced a horrific attack. A gunman from the West Bank entered the kibbutz and shot a woman and her two young children in their home. During his escape he shot two more people who had rushed to the scene.

The members of the kibbutz, who had always fostered good relations with the neighboring Arab villages, were shocked by the attack. However, they were determined not to let it destroy the relationships they had with their Arab neighbors, especially Meiser, an Arab-Israeli village just a kilometer from the kibbutz. The people of the surrounding Arab villages came to Mezer to offer their condolences, and from there the two communities made a decided effort to send a message of peace and cooperation. From the horrible tragedy of that attack, the summer Peace Camp was born.

The task of enhanced coexistence and cooperation set by the parents of the campers is not an easy one, especially considering that the Jewish children don’t speak Arabic and only a few of the Arab children have begun to learn Hebrew. The children themselves seem not to notice the bi-national aspect of the camp; most joined for the fun of it all. Sammy, 10 years old, and 11-year-old Eyad, from Meiser, said they came to the camp “to swim, play, and make beautiful things.”

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

**“Like adding fuel to the fire,” said Saeb Erekat.**

## ***Planners Approve Jewish Homes in Muslim Quarter***

**“When the first tractor puts down the first stone it will lead to the next uprising.”**

Jerusalem planners have approved the construction of 21 apartments for Jews in the walled Old City’s Muslim Quarter. The plan has to go through several more bureaucratic stages before final approval, but Palestinian officials accuse Israel of creating facts on the ground ahead of a peace deal that would determine the fate of Jerusalem. “It will be like adding fuel to the fire, and we urge US intervention to block this decision,” said Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator.

Israel captured East Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast War and annexed it into its capital, a decision not recognized internationally. Palestinians want East Jerusalem, including the walled Old City, as the capital of a future state. Israeli moves to settle Arab neighborhoods of the city have sparked violence in the past. The current plan could be even more incendiary because it does not involve private property transactions, but is backed by the government. The municipality would have to rezone a ‘green’ area to build the apartments. “It is clear that when the first tractor puts down the first stone it will lead to the next uprising and could have international impact,” an Arab official said. The Old City consists of four quarters: Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Armenian.

Today, a handful of Jewish families already live in the Muslim Quarter, in fortified complexes. About a dozen other properties are owned by Jews, including Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who bought an apartment there in 1987. For several years, Sharon used the apartment to hold political meetings, but today rarely visits the heavily guarded compound.

Israeli human rights activist Danny Seidemann said Sharon’s goal is to strengthen the hold on Jerusalem while the world’s attention is focused on the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Earlier in the month, the Sharon government decided on the route of its separation barrier that will cut off six Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem from the city. Palestinian officials have accused Israel of drawing the barrier to reduce the Palestinian population of the city. Israeli officials now admit publicly that they intend to alter the Arab/Jewish percentage.

The approval of the Jewish neighborhood in the Muslim Quarter “is yet another example that Mr. Sharon is using the withdrawal from Gaza...to consolidate an Israeli stranglehold over East Jerusalem in a way that no government, including his own, has ever, ever dared to do in the past,” said Seidemann.

—Associated Press

**BY Amira Hass, *Ha’aretz***

**“In place of my house I found a pile of cinder blocks.”**

## ***“The Village Near the Settlement is Unlawful”***

**I** was born here, in Khirbet Tana, and I inherited the land from my grandfather. I am a shepherd and have a family of ten. All of us are shepherds, and that is our sole source of livelihood. In June I moved to Beit Furik, because in the summer the sheep can’t take the heat in Khirbet Tana. On Tuesday, July 5, 2005, at around 8:30 am, I received a phone call from one of the shepherds in the area who told me that the Israeli army was demolishing our houses. I immediately went there and when I was two and a half kilometers from the houses in Tana, Israeli soldiers in an army jeep prevented me from getting any closer.

The soldiers left the area at around noon. In place of a house I found a pile of cinder blocks. My family and I live in two new structures built of cinder blocks and mud. We built the house to live in and protect ourselves from the cold in winter and the heat in summer. The soldiers also destroyed the livestock pen. We kept the taboun [a large brick oven] in the pen. They didn’t leave us anything, [and] demolished other houses and huts of people in the area.”

[Continued]

This is the account that Hanani, 51, gave to a B'Tselem field researcher. The home of Ibrahim, 72, was also demolished. He still remembers his grandmother as the owner of the surrounding land. He and his brothers and sisters were born in Tana. "I don't know any other place. Here I got married and my nine children live here... Between June and August we move to Beit Furik...to herd the sheep and live there in tents, but it's only temporary. There isn't enough land or water there for herding. They didn't only demolish homes, they also destroyed the elementary school building. It had two classrooms where the children study up to fourth grade. It's the only school here. They also destroyed part of the fence around the mosque, an ancient mosque built more than 200 years ago."

Information about the destruction of Tana has been completely swallowed up by the media inundation of disengagement-related news from Gaza.

On July 5, Israel Defense Forces soldiers and the Civil Administration demolished 22 structures and sheep pens, which served 450 persons. Only two structures and the mosque were spared. "These are largely temporary structures, without permits, built on an active firing zone used by the IDF," the Civil Administration wrote to *Ha'aretz* newspaper in response. "A military closure order exists for the site. It is superfluous to note the great danger of the residents being in the firing zone. These are structures that are not permanently occupied; they are occupied mainly in the winter, primarily by residents of Beit Furik, where their permanent residences are located."

For Israeli authorities, every structure built after 1967 that does not have a permit from the occupation authorities is unlawful and therefore subject to demolition, ignoring the continuity of Palestinian existence here over hundreds of years, with traditional agriculture, coping with natural hardships and the preservation of pre-capitalistic agrarian traditions.

When the absence of permits does not keep people away, the firing zone comes and does so under the guise of concern for residents. This is the same firing zone that for some reason is not dangerous to the Jewish settlers of Mechora, only a few kilometers from Tana.

—from a report in *Ha'aretz*

**BY Mohammad Ghazal**

## ***50 Human Rights Activists Denied Entry into Israel***

**T**he Israeli ministry of interior refused entry to 50 human rights promoters seeking to cross into the West Bank via the King Hussein border crossing over the Jordan River two weeks ago. These activists from Spain, France, Italy, Holland, Germany and other nationalities were turned back by Israeli border officials on the final leg of a journey from Strasbourg to Jerusalem to spread awareness of the Palestinian cause.

"Their passports were stamped with refused entry and no reason was given," Emad Fuqaha, executive director of the Earth Association for International Development, the organization that helped coordinate the journey, told *The Jordan Times*. The 50 are part of a 100-caravan convoy. Fuqaha said a total of 80 participants from the convoy were allowed entry into the occupied territories.

David, a French human rights activist, who was denied entry, expressed frustration and anger at the decision. "I am upset and sad. How come the Israelis prevent me from expressing my opinion. It is my right to pass," he complained. "I am only expressing support and advocacy with the Palestinians. It is illogical and it bothers me a lot, especially since I came from Strasbourg through this long journey only to be stopped at the end."

The fifty activists staged a protest on the Israeli side of the bridge, while their fellow travelers held a solidarity demonstration on the other side of the border in an effort to persuade Israeli officials to allow them to enter. The 100-caravan convoy grouping more than 200 human rights lawyers, university students, and activists, rounded off their two-day stop in the Jordanian Kingdom where they discussed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and expressed support for the Palestinian issue.

—*The Jordan Times*

**“The United Church of Christ has disqualified itself as a legitimate partner for a just and equitable peace in the Holy Land.”**

## ***Jews Condemn Church Resolution***

**J**ewish leaders condemned resolutions passed by the United Church of Christ that call for Israel to dismantle its security fences around Palestinian territories and for companies to use “economic leverage” to promote peace in the Middle East. The measures, passed by the UCC’s rule-making body at its annual meeting last month, seek to hold Israel to a different moral standard, said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean for the Simon Wiesenthal Center. He called them “functionally anti-Semitic.”

“The UCC has disqualified itself as a legitimate partner for a just and equitable peace in the Holy Land,” Mr. Cooper said. Peter Makari, the church’s executive director for the Middle East and Europe, defended the General Synod’s votes, saying the church remains committed to religious dialogue and participation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

“These resolutions condemn all acts of violence on both sides and indicate a clear desire by the synod to end violence and promote peace,” Mr. Makari said, adding that the synod discarded a previous resolution endorsing divestment against companies involved with Israel in favor of a proposal to use the tools of “economic leverage”—including divestment—to promote peace. Such efforts would begin with trying to persuade companies to stop profiting from conflicts in the Middle East. If that failed, church officials might sell stock in those companies.

The second resolution calls for the Israeli government to tear down the security barriers around the Palestinian territories. “The wall has devastating effects on the lives and livelihoods of Palestinians,” Mr. Makari said. “It prevents the opportunity for interaction for people who desperately want there to be peace.”

David Elcott, the American Jewish Committee’s US director of interreligious affairs, criticized the resolution. “We understand Christian concerns about a wall, but we believe that saving human lives is more significant than property,” he said. “That wall has saved the lives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.”

—Associated Press

**BY Eoin Murray**

## ***Palestine-by-the-Sea: Welcome to “Costa-del-Gaza”***

**For years Israeli surfers have prized its waves and sandy beaches.**

**W**hen Alexander the Great reached the southeast Mediterranean he encountered resistance along the coast of what is now Israel. To deter any other rebellious towns he crucified 2,000 men, and from that point town after town surrendered to him unconditionally. Then he reached Gaza. The local population made it clear that he was unwelcome and began an intense military campaign against him. Eventually, as many people in Gaza will happily remind you, Alexander left having contracted the disease that would eventually kill him.

There have been many subsequent invasions—Napoleon, the Ottomans, the British—in this narrow strip of territory into which 1.4 million Palestinians and 8,000 Israeli settlers are now squeezed. The two sides of present-day Gaza are the poverty-stricken Palestinian population and the Israeli settlers who, as half of one percent of the population, control 45% of the land. The Palestinian civilian population exists around, but subjugated to, these settlers, in Gaza’s dense and decayed refugee camps.

The fate of the settlements causes alarm on both sides: the Israelis worry about a public-relations disaster if it demolishes homes the Palestinians badly need, while the Palestinian National Authority fear that the settlements’ well-appointed homes would be seized by unruly elements in a way that would tarnish its fading authority and do little to alleviate Gaza’s extraordinarily acute housing crisis.

But what will come next? A long-term suggestion floated in the international community is to build a tourist-friendly “Costa-del-Gaza.” A rumor that the special envoy James Wolfensohn may secure a deal to build a port connecting Gaza and Egypt, and even an underground trench linking Gaza to the West Bank, may support this. But even if the reality that this construction is viable, it is not clear that such plans will meet Gaza’s essential needs for economic investment, work, and—more than anything—housing.

The sheer lack of horizontal space to build on, a growth rate that on current trends will double Gaza’s population every eighteen years, and an Israeli military policy of house demolitions (1,200 homes in 2004 alone, according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights) contribute to this severe crisis.

The value of land in Gaza, in financial and status terms, is colossal. Land is the prize of the wealthy, the powerful, and the connected. Most refugees in Gaza, who are financially and socially excluded, feel a sense of dislocation from land. Some are reluctant to own land because of national sentiment; they believe they will one day return to their family lands inside what became (after the 1948 *nakba*/catastrophe) the established state of Israel. Most others are simply too poor to own land and will benefit substantially if the land inside the former settlement blocs can be converted into high-rise, low-cost housing.

The symbolic opportunity for thousands of Palestinians to reclaim land, parts of which they have had no access to since 1967, and to live on this land, is highly significant. The land where the settlements lie stretches along much of Gaza’s magnificent coastline; Israeli surfers have prized it for years for its hospitable waves and sandy beaches.

This is a prospect that many Palestinian and international civil-society activists view with trepidation. Some families will welcome the housing, the access to the sea, possible associated income and living-space; but once the euphoria wears off most Palestinians will realize that what Israeli human rights organizations call “one big prison” will have become an even bigger prison than before.

—*The Electronic Intifada*

### ***USAID Wants to Buy Gaza Hothouses***

**T**he American government is willing to pay some \$8 to \$10 million to buy the Gaza settlers’ hothouses and give them to the Palestinians to save the jobs of about 4,000 Palestinians who work there, a spokeswoman for the United States Agency for International Development said. “We have reached an agreement in principle, but there are still legal, financial, and implementation details that need to be worked out.”

The hothouses cover some 1,000 acres and their fate—being taken down, moved, or sold—must be dealt with this month when Israel is scheduled to begin pulling out of the area. Exports from hothouse produce are worth close to \$120 million annually. Only 59 of 160 farmers in Gaza have come to an agreement with the government to move their businesses.

***...in related Gaza news:***

The United Arab Emirates will build a new town for Palestinians on the site of demolished Jewish settlements once Israel withdraws from the Gaza Strip, the state news agency reported recently. It said the development, to be named the Khalifa bin Zayed City after UAE President Sheikh Khalifa, would house 30,000 to 40,000 Palestinians and cost at least \$100 million.

### ***Israel Considers Rail Link to West Bank and Gaza***

**O**ne of the many provisions in the Oslo accords that were never implemented was an idea known as “safe passage.” Safe passage meant that Israel would provide the Arabs of the Palestinian Authority with an overland route through Israel’s pre-1967 boundaries, allowing them to travel freely, with a minimum of restrictions, between the two territories. The idea had major logistical problems, and the upsurge in suicide bombings that began shortly after the Oslo accords were signed seemed to put the idea of safe passage permanently on hold.

The Palestinian Authority reportedly has conditioned its cooperation on implementing the withdrawal and expulsion of Jews from Gaza and northern West Bank on implementing the safe passage provisions of the Oslo accords. Israel and representatives of the Palestinian Authority have announced an agreement to create a land link between Gaza and the West Bank in order to implement the safe passage concept. Initially Israeli security forces would escort Palestinian vehicle convoys; Israeli proposes a railway link at a later stage.

Israeli officials have already approached the World Bank with a request to finance the railroad at a cost \$175 million. The World Bank, however, has suggested building a four-lane highway instead, sunken into a five-meter wide trench. Israelis would be able to cross the highway via overpasses that would be built at various intervals over the trench. The estimated cost of this project is only \$130 million. The World Bank also believes it would be easier to operate than a rail line.

—Lekarev Report, Jerusalem

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### ***Toronto-Area Readers Note:***

*A Coalition of Church-related organizations and NGO's working for a just peace presents an international conference in Toronto from October 26-29, 2005.*

### ***A Call for Morally Responsible Investment: a Non-Violent Response to the Israeli Occupation***

#### **Who Should Attend This Conference?**

If you are part of an organization that has been working for a just peace in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, you may be interested in joining us as we explore and dialogue about morally responsible investment as a non-violent response to the Israeli occupation. This conference is primarily designed for organizational representatives—international, national, regional and local.

#### **Structure of the Conference**

In addition to the program of over 15 internationally recognized speakers, the conference will include equal time for discussion and question periods, small group workshops, non-denominational theological reflection, and networking.

#### **Vision**

We recognize the beginnings of a global movement on Morally Responsible Investment and related economic strategies to bring a just peace in Israel-Palestine. This will be the focus of much related peace work in the coming years. Thus Canadian Friends of Sabeel seeks to draw together those working for a just peace in Israel-Palestine to explore the emerging non-violent economic strategies to achieve this end.

#### **Conference Program & Featured Speakers \***

- Dr. Hanan Ashrawi:** Internationally recognized spokesperson for peace and Palestinian rights, professor at Birzeit University, first Commissioner General for the Independent Palestinian Commission for Citizens' Rights, and former member of the PA Cabinet.
- The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek:** SABEEL Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem.
- Dr. Jeff Halper:** Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), Jerusalem.
- Shamai Leibowitz:** Israeli human rights attorney from Tel Aviv; member of *Courage to Refuse and Gush Shalo*.

\* For program and complete list of speakers, see [www.sabeel.ca](http://www.sabeel.ca)

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