



# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

Vol. IV, No. 9, November 2005

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

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“Why are there so many Arabs here? Why didn’t you chase them away?”  
—Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, on visiting Nazareth.

“The children showed symptoms of agitation, verbal violence,  
nightmares, and concentration problems.”  
—from a report on the effect of the dividing wall on children

~ *MY VOICE* ...

BY Glenn Edward Witmer

*“Cancer is rarely violent in its early stages. It just creeps. It spreads. It consumes.”*

## *Little White Lies [with Just a Hint of Grey]*

We would never want to admit it, and we loudly protest when someone tells untruths or exaggerates in arguing against a favorite policy or situation that we support, but we feel less incensed when we hear untruths repeated that endorse our pet projects. “Yes, I suppose it is sort of a lie,” we rationalize, “...but he’s got a good point, you know!”

The political explanations for the separation wall and fence simply don’t wash. If they really were for ‘security reasons’ the politicians and army wouldn’t need to grab land; just build a wall. They wouldn’t destroy Palestinian family homes to move in Jewish settlers. And they wouldn’t need to deny basic rights to human beings to get them to move out.

With more and more visitors coming—and our new Bat Kol study group just underway—we often hear the gasps of unbelief that are expressed when people see for the first time what is really happening here. The separation Wall always impacts sharply—first at a distance from our rooftop at Tantur, then up close, when its 30-foot-high slabs of concrete dwarf ordinary people standing alongside. But it’s when we take them across the Kidron Valley, up over the top of Mount of Olives, and into the Bethphage and Bethany areas of today, that eyes moisten and they stand in stunned silence: can this really be happening—in a democracy? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Doesn’t anyone care and try to stop it? Who’s in charge? What can be done?

*Too many questions. And too hard to answer!* The articles in this month’s selection are difficult reading because they make it tough for honest and concerned people to remain unmoved. Yet the ‘system’ itself—political agendas, moneyed power brokers, fundamentalist thinking—all seem just too big a bulldozer to stop. Like a cancer, political maneuvering leads to an ever-more-permanent division of two peoples, a calculated creeping forward, and spreading on...over here, and further there, and further....

The Jerusalem Bureau Chief of *Time* magazine, Matt Rees, recently told our group, “How can we report on an ongoing story in a way that people will read and understand? Once it’s told, it’s hard to write it over and over in a way that keeps readers’ interest.” Journalists look for new actions or developments, preferably violent, in order to find a new angle for the story.

But cancer is rarely violent in its early stages. It just creeps. It spreads. It consumes. Only when it reaches a critical point is it felt and discovered—when it’s too late to save the victim.

The latest prognosis for healing here is not good! —GEW

## ~ OTHER VOICES ...

Excerpted from *The Economist*

### *Two Peoples Ever More Separate*

*Israel's building activities in the West Bank suggest that its next territorial withdrawal will be unilateral, not part of a peace deal.*

Some weeks ago, three Israelis who know something of what is on the mind of Ariel Sharon, the prime minister, seemed to say publicly what many others are thinking privately. Since the “disengagement” of settlers and troops from Gaza and part of the northern West Bank this summer, Sharon has maintained that Israel’s next territorial withdrawal will be not unilateral, as that one was, but agreed by both sides under the “road map” peace plan, which calls, eventually, for joint talks on creating a Palestinian state. But a public-relations adviser to Sharon, one of his ministers, and the head of military intelligence, were all quoted as suggesting that if peace talks make no progress, Israel might stage another unilateral pullout from some of the West Bank.

Their remarks might have been trial balloons, or merely soap bubbles, but they caused instant fuss. Such a move would anger both Palestinians, who do not want Israel always setting the agenda, and many Israelis, who resent surrendering land without security promises from the Palestinians in return. Sharon was quick to pooh-pooh the “rumors.”

But, say various sources, in high-level backroom discussions the subject is coming up time and again. “When I speak to Israelis of virtually all political stripes, they believe it’s the next thing that’s going to happen,” says Robert Malley, a Washington-based analyst for the International Crisis Group, a peace-making lobby with headquarters in Brussels. There may well be no plan to do it. Yet events could inexorably lead to it. The recent murders of three Israelis by Palestinian gunmen, and Israel’s response, gave a foretaste of how.

*“The by-pass roads that Israel has built over the years to connect its West Bank settlements... to Israel proper, have become Israeli-only.”*

Since the start of the Palestinians’ second intifada (uprising) five years ago some of the main West Bank highways, as well as the by-pass roads that Israel has built over the years to connect its West Bank settlements to one another and to Israel proper, have become Israeli-only. Some are usually open to at least some Palestinian vehicles, such as trucks and public transport. But after the shootings, Israel responded by banning all Palestinian traffic from several roads.

*Ma’ariv*, a daily newspaper, reports that the army has been told to start implementing a plan to make such bans permanent, though government spokesmen say there has been no final decision. Israel is at work (slowly, after foreign donors last year refused a request for funding) on building and upgrading roads, bridges, and tunnels to let Palestinians travel between their towns without ever turning on to a road used by Israelis.

That will complete the division of the West Bank into two road networks. Israel says this will make Palestinians’ lives easier: there will be less need for checkpoints and roadblocks. Perhaps so; but the Palestinian highways will be narrower, more winding and more hilly, so trips will take longer and cost more. They also tend to go through towns instead of by-passing them, which will mean huge snarl-ups of trucks and public transport. All this will hurt the Palestinian economy.

Signs of the creeping separation have been there for a while. The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has found that the number of fixed checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank has dropped by at least a third this year, in line with an Israeli

promise in February to ease restrictions. The highways between the main towns, on the other hand, are increasingly lined with fences and barriers to prevent access, and there are now three times as many “flying checkpoints,” which pop up and turn back Palestinian cars at random, discouraging them from using roads that may one day become Israeli-only.

What does all this mean for the future? For two years Israel has been building a barrier through the West Bank—**for security**, say the Israelis. It mostly hugs the pre-1967 border (the Green Line), but bites off the areas with the biggest settlements too, taking about 10% of the Palestinians’ West Bank territory. The ugly barrier, reminiscent in places of the Berlin Wall (about 7% of it so far consists of nine-meter high concrete slabs), has attracted international condemnation. But the common assumption is that it is intended to be an eventual international border and that the Jewish settlements on the Palestinian side, with some 70,000 residents, will be evacuated in a peace deal, along the lines apparently on offer by Israel at Camp David in 2000.

BY Adri Nieuwhof, *The Electronic Intifada*

## *The Wall’s Psychological Impact*

The Palestinian Counseling Centre (PCC) has announced the results of a survey on the psychological implications of the construction of the wall on people from five villages in the Qalqilya district of the northern West Bank.

Given Israel’s control on movement, the PCC fieldworkers and staff were faced with measures that presented tremendous challenges to the researchers. These included being prevented from entering Palestinian villages without Israeli permission, assault and humiliation at the gates to the wall, including body searches as well as document searches, and time limitations upon entering the villages due to the opening and closing of the gates at times scheduled by the Israeli army.

The research makes it clear that there is a direct correlation between exposure to the wall and psychological symptoms on adults as well as children. It is disturbing to note that children showed symptoms of agitation, verbal violence, nightmares, and concentration problems.

According to their parents, children between six and twelve years of age have become more aggressive—59% of the males and 41% of the females showed aggressive symptoms. In addition, 41% of the children in this age group showed symptoms of fear of the night on a permanent basis. According to the PCC, this means fear of the unfamiliar and the unknown and indicates fear of the future and feelings of insecurity.

Children seem to adapt easily, but their welfare depends to a large extent on the strength of their parents. “As long as the latter give the impression that they stand firm as parents and offer protection, children seem to make the best use of their resilience. If the parents have serious problems, the children will suffer directly and indirectly from this; directly because parental care falls short, indirectly because their parents’ suffering affects the children profoundly.”

According to the PCC, the wall can be seen as a construction meant to confine and isolate people, which are the key characteristics of a prison. The gates may be compared with the doors of prison cells. The wall is monitored by devices and guarded by soldiers, and those who try to get out or cross the wall or enter through gates at “inappropriate” times risk arrest or getting killed.

For more information on PCC [www.pcc-jer.org](http://www.pcc-jer.org)

BY Dianne Roe, Christian Peacemaker Team, Hebron

## *What Will Happen to Samer?*

Samer had just been released from prison when I met him in 1990. He was seven years old. The Israeli authorities said he had been throwing stones. They released Samer as soon as his father paid them some money.

Samer is twenty-two now and had just been released from prison again when I saw him at his grandmother's house in Bethany on Sunday. The Israeli authorities put him in prison this time because they caught him working in Jerusalem. He will go back to prison again if he goes outside his village.

In other words, if he wants to visit his mother or sisters, he risks imprisonment. If he wants to go to pick up his mail, that too could cost him his freedom. Samer's village, the biblical Bethany, also called Azzariyya, is two miles from Jerusalem's Old City. When Israel built a ring of settlements around Palestinian East Jerusalem they called the area 'Greater Jerusalem.' Bethany is deep inside that area. However Israel does not issue Jerusalem ID's to residents of the Palestinian population centers even though they are within the area Israel calls 'greater Jerusalem.'

Instead, with a series of fences, walls, and checkpoints Israel has turned small villages like Bethany into virtual prisons. The wall that Israel is building is already at the back door of Samer's grandmother's house.

Samer's mother was born in Jerusalem. She has the Jerusalem ID, and thus can live and work there. Her two oldest children also have the Jerusalem ID, but Samer was not so lucky. When he was born his birth certificate indicated he would have west bank ID. Samer's twin sisters were born shortly after I first met Samer in 1990 and they too were considered non-Jerusalem. The children could live with their mother until they reached age 16, when they were required to carry an ID.

Recently the twins' older sister advocated to the Israeli authorities on their behalf and when the twins reach age 16 next year, they will have the Jerusalem ID. It would be nearly impossible to do the same for Samer, now that he is already in his twenties.

According to an article in the Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, "in effect, the fence has pushed tens of thousands of Palestinians beyond the municipal borders and affected the routine of their lives and that of the residents of many Palestinian villages alongside Jerusalem. ... 52% of those interviewed said they had difficulties reaching their places of work or that they had lost them entirely."

What will happen with Samer? If the present Israeli policy continues, he will be forced to risk imprisonment when he wants to look for work. He and hundreds more like him will spend what is potentially the most productive years of their lives, in and out of Israeli jails.

BY Isabelle Humphries, *Washington Report*

## *'Judaization' From Gaza to Galilee*

**"The primary purpose of the 'development' plan is... complete removal of the Arab population from the space."**

Overcrowded Nazareth, the largest Palestinian town remaining in the Galilee, is prevented from expanding to meet its population needs by the development and land confiscation of the surrounding Jewish town of Nazaret Illit [Upper Nazareth].

Anyone who thought Ariel Sharon's unilateral "disengagement plan" was about planning for the best way to leave Gaza should think again. The Israel lobby currently is working on getting as much as \$1.6 billion in aid from the US government as part of the "disengagement" aid package, to be specifically earmarked for "developing the Galilee and the Negev."

President George W. Bush vocalized his support for the project, and US sources have openly stated that “substantial” aid will be available for the Galilee/Negev component of the plan.

The Galilee and the Negev are regions within the area occupied by Israel in 1948, and are currently being targeted specifically because of their high density of Arab residents.

Plans to “Judaize” the Galilee and Negev are nothing new, and are aimed at the entire Israeli population, not just at creating housing to relocate the small number of Gaza settlers. In the 1950s Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, toured the country, expressing disgust at the number of Arab towns and villages he saw in the Galilee. His visit marked the start of a public policy of “Judaization” of the Galilee, the latest phase of which has been cleverly tacked on to Israel’s request for aid for the Gaza disengagement.

Dispossessing Bedouin of their land in the southern Negev desert has been an equally important item on the Israeli agenda. Since 1948, land confiscation, killer crop spraying, and home demolitions have forced Bedouin communities into overcrowded settlement towns with high unemployment and no access to the land, the traditional source of community life.

From the beginning, demographics within the areas occupied in 1948 have obsessed Israeli strategists, academics and politicians. With higher Arab than Jewish birthrates, the Zionist agenda of maintaining a state for one ethnic group only becomes increasingly difficult. In 1948 around 150,000 Palestinians managed to remain in their homes within the new borders of Israel. Today this Palestinian group numbers a million—or 20% of the Israeli population. The majority live in the Galilee and the Negev.

*“When they saw that large numbers of those who had put their names down  
[for the housing project] were Arabs they canceled it.”*

Throughout Israel’s history, land confiscation, housing demolition and underdevelopment of Arab towns and villages has been consistent government policy. While the current phase is just the latest in a long-running struggle, it represents Israel’s biggest push for “Judaization” of the Galilee since the building of a string of exclusively Jewish hilltop settlements in the 1970s. These settlements succeeded in boosting the Jewish population in Israel’s northernmost district, successfully breaking land contiguity between Arab villages and towns. Today not one Arab family lives in the 29 settlements of “Misgav,” the new Jewish municipality created in the Galilee.

As part of the new campaign to encourage Israeli Jews to move away from the coastal cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa to fight the demographic battle in the hinterland, the government announced on June 19 that, for the next two years, land in the Galilee will be sold for half price. But in the overcrowded streets and homes of Arab villages no one is jumping for joy.

“Technically they don’t say it is for Jews only,” said Waleed, an architect from Nazareth, “but we are excluded. For example, a while back they created a housing project in Nazaret Illit (the Jewish settlement built on confiscated land around Nazareth). But when they saw that large numbers of those who had put their names down were Arabs they canceled it. Next thing it reappeared as a housing project for those who had served in the police or army, which of course is not us. They always find a way around it.”

Nazareth is the largest Palestinian town to survive the 1948 *Nakba*, or catastrophe, but despite its 70,000-plus occupants it has the facilities and services of a village. In the late 1950s a large amount of land was confiscated on the edge of the city, supposedly to build government offices. Today this has expanded into Nazaret Illit, a Jewish town which encircles Arab Nazareth, preventing any new development for the rapidly expanding population.

While Israel continues to claim that it is a democracy, it finds ways to discriminate and implement an apartheid system—and no more so than in the allocation of land and town planning. While the state and high court system maintain the pretense of keeping opportunities open to all, independent private organizations have no obligation to do so.

“‘Development’ in the Israeli lexicon means racism expressed through policies designed to destroy the presence of the Palestinian Arab citizens,” reads the petition of Ittijah, the Union

of Arab Community Based Associations, appealing to the international community to deny funding for the Israeli initiative.

“The primary purpose of the ‘development’ plan is not development, in the literal sense of improving space for the benefit of those living in it, but the complete removal of the Arab population from the space.”

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## *Travel & Encounter in the Holy Land*

Holy Land Trust, in partnership with Middle East Fellowship, has four new opportunities to visit the Holy Land in 2005 and 2006.

### **IN THE STEPS OF THE MAGI**

*December 16-30*

A Christmas Pilgrimage to Bethlehem, **In the Steps of the Magi**. This trip takes pilgrims on a journey of compassion and mercy to the Holy Land, meeting with members of the local Christian community, visiting historical sites and participating in the first-ever International Nonviolence Conference to be held in Bethlehem, Palestine. Included in this pilgrimage are also day trips and some overnight excursions to various cities in the West Bank and Israeli, including, but not limited to: Hebron, Haifa, Nazareth, Ramallah, Jericho, and Jerusalem, as well as arranged meetings with various Palestinian and Israeli NGOs. Participants on the Steps of the Magi tour will also have the opportunity to take part in the International Nonviolence Conference in Bethlehem, which starts on December 27 and ends on December 30.

### **INTERNATIONAL NONVIOLENCE CONFERENCE IN BETHLEHEM**

*December 27-30*

Nonviolence International in conjunction with Holy Land Trust will be organizing an International Nonviolence Conference to be held in Bethlehem, December 27-30. The purpose of the conference is to bring together members of the global nonviolent community to discuss the past, present, and future of nonviolence. This will also be a unique opportunity for the global community to learn first hand about nonviolent activism in Palestine. Attendees will also have the ability to add tour options both before and after the conference to allow them to travel and see Palestine.

For more information and to register for the conference, see [www.celebratingnv.org](http://www.celebratingnv.org)

### **PALM SUNDAY PEACE PILGRIMAGE**

*Every Church a Peace Church Pilgrimage: March 31-April 11*

*Middle East Fellowship Pilgrimage: April 6-17*

Middle East Fellowship, Holy Land Trust, and Every Church a Peace Church are offering two pilgrimages to join. Every Church a Peace Church will be conducting its pilgrimage the week before Easter and Middle East Fellowship will be conducting their pilgrimage the week of Easter. Both trips will be coordinated through Holy Land Trust a Palestinian organization based in Bethlehem. The two trips overlap for Palm Sunday on April 9 and will jointly participate in the march for peace in Bethlehem on Palm Sunday.

### **PALESTINE SUMMER ENCOUNTER**

*May 27-August 20*

The 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Palestine Summer Encounter, an Arabic-training and volunteer program. The program is designed to enable participants to attend for one, two, or the entire three months of the program. Participants will learn Arabic with an intensive and competitive language-training program, partner with Palestinian non-profit organizations as a volunteer and have the opportunity to participate in weekend excursions to visit Hebron, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Haifa and Jericho, the Dead Sea, and other important sites throughout the region.

More information is available at [www.travel.holylandtrust.org](http://www.travel.holylandtrust.org), or contact Elias Ghareeb, Holy Land Trust, [encounter@holylandtrust.org](mailto:encounter@holylandtrust.org)

*Readers may know* about the first-century Nazareth Village project, bringing to life the environment and times of Jesus through the development of a reconstructed Jewish village. Our new e-zine publication, **The Word on the Street**, does stories about the biblical settings. Following is one from last month. We would love to have you on our mailing list for coming issues—November will be mailed next week. **Please write to me if I may include you too, and check us out at: [www.nazarethvillage.com](http://www.nazarethvillage.com).**

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Reprinted from the October issue of *The Word on the Street*.

***Take off your sandals, hold on to the pole, and step right in—ankle deep!***  
***Wine was a critical commodity for first-century Jews in Jesus' community.***

## ***It's Really a Matter of Taste***

The first time we took a tour group around the farm at Nazareth Village, the former director's wife Virginia Hostetler guided us along the Parable Walk, over to a curious excavated area of limestone gullies and depressions in the rock. "What's this?" Several guesses were attempted, prompted by Ginny's clues—"Look at these terraces on the hillside above us. And over there: What is that growth of green leaves and vines?"—until someone figured it out. *A wine press!*

Unbelievably, when the archaeology team from the University of the Holy Land were combing through grassy fields on this untouched site near the downtown section of modern Nazareth, they accidentally found the evidence they were hoping for right in front of them: a flat ridge-bordered area to heap the hampers of ripe grapes, a furrowed channel chipped into the rock to drain the juice of the trodden grapes to a collecting pit. The historical testing proved it to be from the first century—and it was located about a third of a mile from Mary and Joseph's house.

*How was it used?* At harvest time, people who shared the terraced vineyards gathered for an important bit of community work, soaked in a great deal of fun as well. Surrounding the flat stone area there could be poles with ropes or rods across the top to hold on to. Taking off their sandals, the peasants waded into the gooey mass of ripe grapes—sometimes up their ankles, holding onto a rope or pole so as not to slip and drop into the juicy purple bath [see web photo].

They could also stand side by side with arms across each others' shoulders for balance as the dancing started. Possibly someone would play music, but more likely some rousing singing broke out spontaneously. *Knees up, slap 'em down! Once again, go round and round!*

The juice flowed out; the fruit pulp got thicker—and the dancers' feet were stained. But why did they take off their sandals? Wouldn't tall boots have been even better in this mixture than dancing in bare feet? Ginny's eyes twinkled as she challenged us. "Why bare feet?" she tested us again. "Well, here's another clue...*It's a matter of taste!*" Full-bodied taste, she might have said! Eyes rolled, some faces scrunched in disbelief. *Taste? Yech!*

Ginny knew we wouldn't guess right. When you see a huge rolling stone crush olives with their seeds/pits to get the oil out, it's because there is a lot of oil inside the pit that you don't want to lose. But in the case of grapes, crushed seed is very bitter. "If that flavor got into the juice," Ginny reported, "it wouldn't be good to drink." So it really was a matter of taste.

Wine was a critical commodity for first-century Jews like Jesus and his community. With their drinking water from rare Galilee rainfalls collected and stored for months in cisterns, it often got a bad taste of its own, even becoming unsafe to drink. But by adding about one portion of wine for five or six portions of water, the alcoholic content killed dangerous bacteria, and also helped to mask the taste of the stagnant water.

*It was a matter of health, even more than a matter of taste.*

—Glenn Edward Witmer

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