



# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

Vol. VI, No. 7, September 2007

*A Middle East View by Glenn Edward Witmer  
MennoJerusalem, Israel*

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**“...in the ultimate balance of values,  
peace with our neighbors outweighs peace with our past.”**

—Gershon Baskin, *The Jerusalem Post*

***“Israel will be judged by the peoples of the world  
by how Israel treats its Arab citizens.”***

—Chaim Weitzman, former Israeli president

~ *MY VOICE* ...

BY Glenn Edward Witmer

## ***Apartheid by Any Other Name Smells Just as Foul***

**“More tightening of the noose produced  
even greater determination to break free!”**

**H**aving just returned from a week of Bat Kol activities in Johannesburg, South Africa, I cannot put aside the stories from that beautiful country which I last visited 25 years ago—where two races had lived in a sophisticated system of government and social interaction designed to keep their peoples apart. Harsher and harsher it became, and with each new burdensome oppression, the reactionary violence grew. More tightening of the noose produced even greater determination to break free! And freedom did prevail!

It takes no social scientist to see the comparisons with what is happening in here in Israel/Palestine! The parallels are amazing, and increasingly blatant! So pervasive are the schemes to keep Palestinians and Israelis apart that one cannot help but recall the images of vicious social responses—both sides against the other—that filled our TV screens from black Soweto 20 years ago. Two Sundays ago it was in that same Soweto that I was in a Catholic church whose 500 worshippers overflowed the pews. My host and I were the only whites in the crowd, surrounded in the glorious and rhythmic praise music of a gently swaying choir.

The once oppressed black underdog, mistreated by a violent ruling master, has now been released. One can only dream that the same result can happen here. The word “apartheid” to describe Israel’s violent oppression of Palestinians can hardly be spoken without one being attacked by people and press. They know how terrible a word it is—even without having experienced the reality of it personally. But that same reality has found us.

This issue of *MennoLetter* includes several first-hand reports from people who are living the insidious and outright in-your-face demonstration of it by the powerful over the weak.

I hear frequent counter-arguments about the differences between the present Middle East situation and South African apartheid. I have no other answer than to say that, if what we are seeing develop is not quite the same as “South African apartheid,” it is still a forced and unjust separation of blood brothers that is simply *apartheid* by another name. —GEW

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

Gershon Baskin, *The Jerusalem Post*

### ***Why I Am a Neo-Zionist!***

**It is impossible to comprehend, certainly from the Palestinian side of the table, how one can speak about territorial compromise and withdrawal while settlements are being built and expanded.**

With the very real possibility of a renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process comes a revival of the possibility of polemic politics in Israel. If the peace process does advance, the divisions between the so-called 'left' and the 'right' which have been watered down into Israeli centrism, mainly since the beginning of the second intifada in 2000, will become re-exposed and resurface as an existential debate probing matters of our *raison d'être* as the nation state of the Jewish people.

A renewed peace process will force Israel to finally deal with the question of its borders, its relationship to Jewish history and heritage, and to the very identity of the State vis-à-vis its Jewishness and its democratic values. The debate will come down to a divide between those whose minds are focused on the past, roots and traditions versus those who are searching for a new future which uses the past, roots and traditions as a link to the future but not as shackles to it.

I am a neo-Zionist. I adhere to my right, my responsibility, and my vision of the State of Israel as the State of the Jewish people. I also am a democrat whose values for fairness, equality, dignity, tolerance, and mutual respect are deeply imbedded in Jewish traditions, texts, heritage and learning. As a neo-Zionist I genuinely understand that the Land of Israel found within our sacred texts is not Tel Aviv, but in the hills and valleys of the West Bank. But I also comprehend that Jewish survival in the Land of Israel is only possible if we give up that part of the Land of Israel so that our Palestinian neighbors can have a state of their own and live in peace with us.

There is no other way. As a neo-Zionist I am more concerned with the Jewish future than the Jewish past, and as such I recognize that we must come forth from the passages of Torah into the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Middle East and make the necessary concessions now so that our neighbors can live with the same collective and national dignity that we demand for ourselves.

***“...settling the hilltops surrounding Palestinian towns, villages, and cities turns the lives of the Palestinians into a daily hell. This is not what Zionism was supposed to be about.”***

In the Jewish fight over the Land of Israel it is the battle for Jewish survival between the so-called Zionists—the settlers and their supporters—and those like me, the *neo-Zionists*, the majority of Israelis, who are not blinded by a messianic dream and believe that in the ultimate balance of values, peace with our neighbors outweighs peace with our past. Those among us who continue to advocate the Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel beyond the areas of green line are in fact guilty of leading the Zionist enterprise towards its end. The settlement project in the West Bank is nothing less than an act of national suicide.

The most significant and dangerous obstacle in our ability to reconcile peace with our neighbors is the continuing adherence to the archaic modes of yearning for Zion expressed by settling the hilltops surrounding Palestinian towns, villages, and cities that turn the lives of the Palestinians into a daily hell. This is not what Zionism was supposed to be about. This is not the national liberation movement of the Jewish people that sought freedom and dignity, prophetic Jewish expression in daily life, and safety and security for Jews all over.

Like the Zealots of bygone days, the settlers are dragging us to our own destruction. There can be no peace with settlements. This is a fact that the history of the peace process should have taught us. Even Ehud Barak, who went further than any Israeli leader before him in negotiations with the Palestinians, destroyed the very process that he wanted to conclude by his misguided continuation of an accelerated settlement program. It is impossible to comprehend, certainly from the Palestinian side of the table, how one can speak about territorial compromise and withdrawal while settlements are being built and expanded. The network of settlements, by-pass roads, and other systems of control and protection necessary to allow the settlers to live on their hill-tops throughout the West Bank can produce no reality other than an Israeli form of apartheid; and this is as far away from Prophetic justice as day is from night.

When the peace process gets underway and we will once again be forced to deal with the territorial issue, we will have to choose between settlements and peace. The only decision, for those of us more concerned with our future than our past, will be for peace. The settlers themselves will ultimately have to ask themselves where they reside, in the pages of the past or in the remaking and rebuilding of the State of Israel which will have to go beyond occupation and war.

***“Neo-Zionism must concern itself now...with a new definition of Israeliness that works overtime to be inclusive of the Palestinian citizens of Israel.”***

We must find and invigorate the Jewishness of the State of Israel that takes us beyond the synagogue, prayer, and halacha as interpreted by Orthodox Judaism. Yet this too is one of the major challenges of modern day Israel and a focal point for neo-Zionism.

Neo-Zionism must concern itself now, and certainly in a post-peace period even more intensively, with a new definition of Israeliness that works overtime to be inclusive of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. President Chaim Weitzman once said that Israel would be judged by the peoples of the world by how Israel treats its Arab citizens. That could explain one of the reasons why the world is so critical of Israel. But more important than how the world judges Israel is the question of what we do to make Israel into a country where all of its citizens are proud to live, desire to take part in the building of the State, view their present with pride and their future with hope.

I cannot call myself a Zionist because those who use that term are following in the footsteps of the Zealots of Masada. I am not a post-Zionist because I do believe that the Jewish people have a right to have a national homeland in the Land of Israel. I am a neo-Zionist, a proud member of the Jewish people; an Israeli patriot committed to a prophetic vision of embodied within our Declaration of Independence a believer in our future.

—The writer is co-CEO of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information. [www.ipcri.org](http://www.ipcri.org)

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***“Israel’s future rests in places like the Galilee and in the Negev, the occupation of the West Bank will have to end and a Palestinian State will need to be established.”***

## ***Condoleezza Rice: Israel Must End Occupation***

Speaking with Arabic-language Radio Sawa, based in Washington and Dubai, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went much further in her demands on Israel than President Bush did in his speech on Israel last month. On the eve of her departure for the Middle East to lay the groundwork for meetings with regional leaders, Rice declared, very clearly, that “Israel’s future rests in places like the Galilee and in the Negev—and the occupation of the West Bank will have to end and a Palestinian State will need to be established.”

The President in his speech did not impose this as a demand upon Israel, but rather cited Prime Minister Olmert as having “made clear that Israel’s future lies in developing areas like the Negev and Galilee, not in continuing occupation of the West Bank. This is a reality that Prime Minister Sharon recognized, as well. So unauthorized outposts should be removed and settlement expansion ended.” That statement is much less demanding than Rice’s declaration.

President Bush also stopped short of saying Israel must withdraw from all of biblical Judea and Samaria. Bush said rather that future Israel-Palestinian negotiations must “lead to a territorial settlement, with mutually agreed borders reflecting previous lines and current realities, and mutually agreed adjustments.”

Secretary Rice did not deal with the question of what to do with the 240,000 Jews living in the non-annexed areas of the West Bank (nor another 240,000 or so living in the outlying neighborhoods of Jerusalem beyond Israel’s pre-1967 borders).

Israel still has not yet been able to solve the problems of less than 10,000 Jews it evicted from Gaza two years ago; many of those Jews are still living in transient camps of temporary prefab houses, with no long-term housing or employment solutions in sight.

—*excerpted from The Lekarev Report*

**BY Seán O’Neill, *Christian Peacemaker Team***

## ***“Terrorism 101” at Hebrew University!***

When I went to the orientation for international students at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I expected the ethos to be pro-Israeli. However, I was taken aback by the level of anti-Palestinian propaganda and fear-mongering.

The first part of the orientation was about the history of Hebrew University, including how despite being “liberated” in 1967, the campus is still surrounded by three hostile Arab villages. Then the director of the program turned to security. He implored us all to be vigilant looking for abandoned bags both on and off campus. He said that in the evenings students should stay in big groups, reminding them of the three nearby Arab villages.

Next was transportation. “How many of you promised your parents before you came not to use public buses (for fear of a suicide bomber)?” he asked. Twenty to thirty hands, out of the two hundred people, went up. “Keep that promise,” he said. He continued, “Never get on the Arab bus. It doesn’t go anywhere you want to go.” He warned against going anywhere in the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, recounting vague horror stories about Israeli children being kidnapped and taken into the West Bank. He qualified this however by saying that it should be all right to visit Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Curious students cautiously raised their hands. “What kind of bags should we be looking for that might be bombs?” one asked. “Any bag could be a bomb,” he replied. “Even if you can see through the bag and see that it is just a loaf of bread. There could be a bomb inside the bread. Arab terrorists have been known to do that.” Another queried, “What if we want to go to Eilat (a Red Sea resort)? Doesn’t the Israeli highway to Eilat go through the West Bank?” He reassured her, “Yes, but you’ll be OK as long as you stick to good Jewish transportation.”

A third student wanted to know about Jerusalem itself. “Where is it safe to go in East Jerusalem?” (East Jerusalem is the older, Palestinian part of the city, as opposed to the newer Jewish city to the west.) “As for the Old City, you’ll be all right in the Jewish quarter,” he explained. “The Christian and Muslim quarters however are iffy, and at night they’re not safe. As for the rest of East Jerusalem, stay away. There’s just nothing for you to see there.”

***“If this type of misinformation and outright racism is being disseminated by Israeli universities, then they are indeed complicit in the growing apartheid regime taking hold here.”***

At this point I’d heard enough. I took my bag and left. If students follow his advice, they will never see most of the fascinating historic parts of Jerusalem or get a sense of its unique

character, shaped by thousands of years of history and culture. They'll never see the Holy Sepulcher, where Jesus is said to have been crucified, or walk the grounds of the Al Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. They will never hear the live Middle-Eastern music at the Jerusalem Hotel on a Friday night. They'll never see the sun set behind the golden Dome of the Rock from the Mount of Olives. They may as well not have come to Jerusalem at all.

If this type of misinformation and outright racism is being disseminated by Israeli universities, then they are indeed complicit in the growing apartheid regime taking hold here, making it harder for Palestinian society, thousands of years in the making, to survive.

The human ability not to see what one doesn't want to see is phenomenal, especially when you have been told not to look.

## *Israeli PM Pushes Plan for Two-State Solution*

*Plans and announcements are so frequent—and often later abandoned in tirades of finger-pointing—that one does not know what importance to give continuing reports of government efforts now to find a solution to the present morass...*

**D**r. Guy Bechor, an expert on Arab Affairs, reported recently, Prime Minister Olmert has given a written agreement to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that is causing some Israelis concern: Olmert has agreed to hand over 6,250 square kilometers of land to the Palestinians.

The agreement apparently calls for: [1] a state named Palestine to be established alongside Israel, to have a territory of 6,250 square kilometers: the equivalent of all of the West Bank and Gaza. [2] Palestine will be demilitarized. [3] Most of the Jewish communities built in the West Bank over the past 40 years are to be demolished and their inhabitants moved out, according to the report. [4] A passage of some sort will connect Gaza and the West Bank, under Jewish sovereignty and Palestinian administration. [5] Israel agrees to redivide Jerusalem—Arab neighborhoods will be under Arab sovereignty and Jewish ones under Jewish sovereignty. Mention is made of “religious areas,” but further details are not known as of yet. Each side will recognize the other's spiritual needs.

The only issue not covered in this agreement is refugee question. Bechor reports that this is the main sticking point. Abbas is insisting that Arabs descended from those who fled Israel before the advancing Israelis in 1948 must be allowed to return.

In a recent interview with PA TV, Abbas said that “declarations of principles are a waste of time—useless.” What the PA wants, he said, is a clear timetable for establishing Palestine, as well as an Israeli pullback, demolition of Jewish communities and “return of refugees.” The Palestinians are hoping Israel will become “more pliable” in November, when an international diplomatic conference, sponsored by the US, is to be held in an attempt to hammer out an accord.

*—excerpted from a news report in The Lekarev Report*

**BY Steven Erlanger**

## *A Segregated Road in a Land Divided*

**I**srael is constructing a road through the West Bank, east of Jerusalem, that will allow both Israelis and Palestinians to travel along it—but separately. There are two pairs of lanes, one for each tribe, separated by a tall wall of concrete patterned to look like Jerusalem stones, an effort at beautification indicating that the road is meant to be permanent. The Israeli side has various exits; the Palestinian side has few.

The point of the road is to permit Israel to build more settlements around East Jerusalem, cutting the city off from the West Bank, but allowing Palestinians to travel unimpeded north and south through Israeli-held land, but unable to access it.

“The Americans demanded from Sharon contiguity for a Palestinian state,” said Shaul Arieli, a reserve colonel in the army who participated in the 2000 Camp David negotiations and specializes in maps. “This road was Sharon’s answer, to build a road for Palestinians between Ramallah and Bethlehem...but not to Jerusalem. This was how to connect the West Bank while keeping Jerusalem united, and not giving Palestinians any blanket permission to enter East Jerusalem.” The vast majority of Palestinians, unlike Israeli settlers, will not be able to exit in areas surrounded by the barrier or travel into Jerusalem, even into the eastern part of the city which Israel took over in 1967.

The road does that by having Palestinian traffic continue through underpasses and over bridges, while Israeli traffic will have interchanges allowing turns onto access roads. Palestinians with Israeli identity cards or special permits for Jerusalem will be able to use the Israeli side of the road.

The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has recently made conciliatory gestures to the Palestinians and says it wants to do what it can to ease the creation of a Palestinian state. But Mr. Olmert has said that Israel intends to keep the land to the east of Jerusalem. In a final settlement, Israel is expected to offer the Palestinians land swaps elsewhere to compensate.

**BY Wolfgang Kraus, German Mennonite Peace Committee**

## *Palestinian Family Receives Peace Prize*

The 2007 Michael Sattler Peace Prize has been awarded to the “Tent of Nations: People Building Bridges” project in Palestine. The German Mennonite Peace Committee gave the prize in recognition of the creative and non-violent solutions the Christian Palestinian Nassar family uses in their struggle against encroaching illegal colonization.

In the Middle East conflict, land and ownership requirements have important roles. Who owns the land? The Nassars’ right to their farmland on a hill south of Bethlehem is confirmed by British, Jordanian, Israeli, and Ottoman papers, some 100 years old. Nevertheless, Israeli settlers today lay claim to the land.

The Nassar family operates the farm themselves, always keeping at least one family member present. In the last few years they have also operated a Christian retreat and meeting center, while continuing their 15-year struggle in Israeli courts for their possession rights.

Jewish settlements already occupy the surrounding hills but, despite the difficult circumstances, the Nassar family continues to live a Christian witness. They combine the rightful claim to their land with the active hope the conflict in the Middle East can be peacefully overcome and justice can become possible.

With the prize, the German Mennonite Peace Committee, together with its ecumenical partners, remembers the Anabaptist Michael Sattler, who was burned May 20, 1527, in Rottenburg for his Christian witness and non-violent stance. Besides Sattler, three other Anabaptists were executed that day, and his wife Margarethe was drowned a few days later in the Neckar River.

The award was presented at a ceremony at the Kirchgasse Protestant church in Rottenburg followed by a worship service at the site of Sattler’s execution. The award is supported by the Evangelical and Catholic churches of Rottenburg, the Catholic Peace organization *Pax Christi*, and the City of Rottenburg.

—For more information, visit [www.tentofnations.org](http://www.tentofnations.org)

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