



# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

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*A Middle East View by Glenn Edward Witmer  
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“The Zionist movement was born because  
Europe was becoming a hell for the Jews.”

—Uri Avnery, Israeli columnist

“The Arabs will have to go, but  
one needs an opportune moment for making it happen,  
such as a war.”

—Israeli prime-minister-to-be, David Ben-Gurion, to his son, 1937

“History is a set of agreed-upon lies.”

—Napoleon Bonaparte

~ *MY VOICE* ...

“*The End is my Beginning!*” —*T. S. Eliot*

*How can I begin...or in this case, end?* Since coming to live in Jerusalem in 1999—and especially during these past six years of preparing this monthly summary of the key issues affecting Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians—one realization has become very clear for me: “The more things change, the more they stay the same!” Said a colleague who spent a number of years in this region before I arrived, “Glenn, you have been writing and reporting on the same issues I was dealing with here years ago!”

It’s true! The cycle of events does seem to be never-ending. That realization led to my decision this month to reprint selected editorials from the last two years’ releases of *MennoLetter!* Each one you read could be today’s lead article. The bad news is that, it often seems, *Everything old is new again!*

The headlines are recycled regularly—new words and new players, but the same problems and same promises. Power struggles, political confrontations, religious intolerance, and age-old traditions intermingle and are woven into a fabric that is unique to this ancient land and its peoples.

These past six years have taught me something important: *What one reads and hears is not always the truth.* “Truth” is too easily managed and contrived. People in the media and politics have agendas, and it behooves us first to understand more about who is writing or reporting than what the story is itself. It simply is not possible to be completely “unbiased.”

I have occasionally been accused of being pro-Zionist, but more often readers have chastised me for taking positions too favorable to the Palestinian side. That in itself has encouraged me to continue to present a range of voices. It has been a deliberate editorial policy to give space to ideas from a variety of stances. We soon recognized that there is rarely a clear *right* or *wrong* side (in spite of what we may want to believe about that), but only different interpretations of biased perceptions... from Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

“*Balanced reporting is reporting for balance.*” It is easier to listen to people with whom we agree, but it takes a mature intellectual discipline to hear those with a different point of view. With old habits and biases, it is a hard choice for us, but we must make a beginning! ~

**Following are editorials** *selected from the last two years, addressing matters which have become fundamental in the peace and justice discussions in Israel and Palestine, recurring at regular intervals. Some refer to other articles in that month's newsletter...*

The 2006-2007 newsletters are archived at [www.mennojersusalem.org](http://www.mennojersusalem.org) for further reading.

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**“It is inconceivable that any Palestinian...  
could accept this illegal [confiscation of land] as a  
permanent solution to the continuing altercation in the Middle East.”**  
—President Jimmy Carter

*From January 2006*

## ***Don't Look, and Don't Ask!***

***“Common sense and fairness seem  
to have drained out of the debate about Palestine/Israel.”***

**O**ne theory for handling a problem works on a simple principle: *If you don't see it, it's not there!* Which then begs the operational method, *So don't look!* It must work since it is so frequently used. The Israeli government has discovered its effectiveness too, and incorporates it into a number of its most difficult diplomatic undertakings. Case in point: It regularly refers to the separation *fence* it is building from north to south in this country to keep Palestinians and Israelis apart. [It is actually illegal for Israeli citizens to cross into West Bank territory.]

But in the built up areas of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, as examples, the “fence” becomes a 30-foot/nine-meter solid wall of concrete. It is amazing to discover that great numbers of Israelis have never been close to the wall, never to a checkpoint, and of course never to places where Palestinians live. But they often dispute your description of circumstances—not believing that it could possibly be as you are describing things: *Cruelty, inhuman treatment.*

“If that's true,” one taxi driver told me, “it's because they deserve it. They're all animals.” But he had never gone to see for himself. Nor is the problem only with locals. The international community often betrays its lack of personal knowledge, depending only on what they are fed by the propaganda machines from both sides when they speak.

***“In America they even fight for the rights of animals.  
But here we are less than animals....”***

“I've had my picture taken with Arafat, Abu Mazen, Kofi Annan, and even President Clinton himself,” said Palestinian mother, Um Ibrahim, trying to tell her story to the outside world. “But it's made a dime's worth of difference. The whole world enjoys human rights except the Palestinian people. In America they even fight for the rights of animals. But here we are less than animals.... And you reporters—when we hold a vigil, or go on hunger strike, you ignore us and only show up when the big shots come by to have their picture taken with us. Even when you do interviews with us you never broadcast what we say.”

European Union foreign ministers recently decided to shelve a negative report about the separation wall slicing through Jerusalem, over fears that it might hurt Israeli sensitivities... another example of how all common sense and fairness seems to have drained out of the debate about Palestine/Israel. Instead of getting people together, they are being walled off.

This issue focuses again on the efforts being made to have people meet, look at each other, converse, ask questions.... There are some very creative efforts to *look and see.* ~

**“Israeli signs placed on the Wall at the entrance to Bethlehem  
greet Palestinians with the blessing, PEACE BE UNTO YOU.”**  
—Dr. Jeff Halper

From July 2006

## *Lies, Darned Lies, and History*

*“History is written by the victors.”*

Washington, as a boy, is reported as never having told a lie. Maybe the tale has something to do with cutting down that cherry tree! It probably doesn't really matter anymore, except as an interesting anecdote of history. A biographer once even admitted to fictionalizing the account to demonstrate the moral standing of the lad who would become America's first president.

Washington and other history creators don't *tell lies*, but the historical record does create some interesting versions of the stories—many with strong moral implications. Repetition is also very important; what gets said often enough is more likely to acquire an aura of truthfulness. When enough people agree to the explanation of events, writing them down in columns or books, repeating them on the electronic media, these versions of the story become the 'truth' of history. So much of the reporting from this region illustrates the true problem.

When Napoleon said that “History is a set of agreed-upon lies,” he was more profound than he probably realized. “History is written by the victors,” is another maxim to be heeded by the readers of it. In other words, “My version of what happened, and why, is more important than the opposing sets of evidence that might be composed of the facts.”

The complications begin in earnest when these accounts contain some elements of truth, making the lie harder to detect. Speaking partial truth is often the most effective way to lie convincingly. “The Wall built by Israel is for security purposes.” *True!* The rest of the truth is that very little security actually results, but the land-grab of Palestinian territory is the real goal in the first place. Or, “The military incursions into Gaza are to rescue a kidnapped Israeli soldier.” *True!* But the wanton destruction of property, the collective punishments of tens of thousands of people who lose electricity, water, and basic rights send a more honest message about the military's goals. The political pundits and spin doctors begin to create a story their way, hoping for broad repetition, to convince as many people as possible of their version.

Napoleon was right—agreed-upon lies continue to be recorded as history. Now I suppose all we really have to agree on is who gets to tell them.

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### *The Madness of War*

*The pain! I can't bear the pain!  
My heart! My heart is beating wildly!*

*I can't keep quiet; I hear the trumpets and the shouts of battle.  
One disaster follows another; the whole country is left in ruins.*

*Suddenly our tents are destroyed; their curtains are torn to pieces.  
How long must I see the battle raging and hear the blasts of trumpets?*

*The LORD says, “My people are stupid; they don't know me.  
They are like foolish children; they have no understanding.  
They are experts at doing what is evil, but failures at doing what is good.”*

—Jeremiah 4:19-23 TEV

**“Israel's actions towards the Palestinians  
cannot be justified morally, legally, or even politically.”**

—World Council of Churches

“We will follow the teaching of the Torah that says ‘Love the stranger’  
and of Jesus that says ‘Turn the other cheek’  
and we will stop this madness forever.”  
—Rabbi Michael Lerner

*From February 2007*

**“Doing Unto Others as They Did Unto Us.”**  
**A crisis of dishonesty and double-standards**  
**is spreading through the body politic.**

One of the things that international workers and volunteers can never really do well is to *think* like a native in their country of activity. So it is that locals often object to our criticisms of them and their policies. “How do you know how we feel? Who from abroad can know what it is like? If you were one of us you would understand.” Internationals usually try to be careful in offering analyses that touch on basic the psyche and inner spark of another culture.

Then how can we—perhaps, how DARE we—reveal our honest feelings, express outrage, show indignation of what is going on in Israel and Palestine without having our opponents lay the charge, “You’re wrong. You don’t know what you’re talking about—you’re not even [Israeli/Arab/Jewish]!”

There is no shortage of international outrage about what is happening—the video shown around the world in recent weeks about an Israeli settler abusing a Palestinian in Hebron in a disgusting manner brought a deluge of anger against the Israeli army and government. The treatment of Palestinians at army-controlled barriers is an embarrassment to any sensible human being. The practice of clear apartheid-style regulations throughout the West Bank—and to Arab Israelis within Israel proper—cannot be explained away “for security reasons” as is so often tried. The rights abuse cancer all around us must be surgically removed. But by whom? An international who isn’t an [Israeli/Palestinian/Jewish/Muslim/ Arab Christian]?

This issue of *MennoLetter* includes an essay by a member of the Israeli Knesset /parliament, a Rabbi who lives both here and in Canada, an Israeli reporter for the liberal-leaning *Ha’aretz* newspaper, another one for the more conservative *Jerusalem Post*, and a professor from the University of the Negev. Their voices are more valid than mine. They are pointing to themselves, from inside, and identifying the spreading disease within this society. They are doing so as knowledgeable citizens in their own country.

One of the harshest self-criticisms often heard here is, “We are doing to others what we decried happening to us as Jews in the pogroms and the separation treatment we experienced in Europe and North America. Surely we, more than anyone, should know better.”

We internationals agree, and must report that too.

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“The problem is not the Koran or the Torah or the Bible.  
The problem is never *the faith*;  
it is *the faithful*, and how they behave towards each other.”  
—Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations

“[Muslims do not] blame Christianity *per se* for the crimes committed  
by the Church-sanctioned medieval Crusades.”  
—Mohammed Al Masry, Waterloo, Ontario

From June 2006

## *What is Said, What is Not Said, and What is Meant*

We used to call it ‘Reading between the lines.’ Now we must continue to check for *nuances* and translate *special word usage* when we listen to politicians or read news reports. Dr. Jeff Halper reminds us [next article] of George Orwell’s invention of the term *Newspeak* in his novel *1984*—words can mean what we want them to mean! The fact that others hear them differently—to their own comfort and satisfaction—is a goal of the modern word industry.

When then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon assured us that the Wall was for security purposes and not to grab more Palestinian territory, many believed him. Others *heard* what he was really saying—*reading between the lines*—and didn’t accept a word of it as stated. Shortly after, his chief of staff admitted that part of the government’s goal was indeed to gain more land from the west Bank side, for Israel’s benefit. The new prime minister agrees.

Oh...I slipped! I shouldn’t have said, *the Wall!* That term bothers the government, which prefers to use the phrase, *security fence*. That concept sells better in the international press. Who wouldn’t support the idea of protecting oneself—from *terrorists*, no less! But as I write this I am looking out my window toward the south, overlooking Bethlehem. Between me and the birthplace of Jesus is an eight-meter/28-foot solid concrete *Wall!* Nothing subtle about it, and it cannot be hidden. There it is, soaring into the sky almost three times higher than the Berlin *wall*. [Which no one ever called a fence!] And it’s a mile inside the 1967 Green Line!

Oops! I see I made another linguistic slip: *terrorist!* The BBC was roundly criticized and threatened with the cancellation of their cable news channel in this country because they opted for more neutral terminology when referring to the activists on both sides. *One side’s terrorist is the other side’s freedom fighter*. Since news commentators are supposed to offer views from both sides and not promote one agenda, they needed to decide whether to speak of terrorists, militants, freedom fighters, combatants, occupiers or liberators. To their peril!

The news message being distributed is heard differently by those who listen, many of whom often hear only one side—sometimes because they don’t want to hear the other side.

To get the real story, however, you just may have to read between the lines.

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“Since Judas sounds like Jews in many languages,  
the betrayal is associated...with Jews in general.”

—Uri Avnery

From June 2007

## *It’s Time to Count the Horse’s Teeth*

“Hard experiences have taught me that any time we criticize Israel,  
we receive horrendous, angry responses.”

There is a story about some medieval philosophers arguing over the number of upper teeth there are in a horse’s mouth. As the debate became more heated in their disagreements, one of them suggested that they should just go out to the horse stable, open an animal’s mouth, and count the teeth. His colleagues were astonished at this abuse of the fine art of philosophic discourse, and refused to go along with such absurdity.

Last month a high-level delegation of officials representing a broad swath of Mennonite Church agencies in the United States, spent 10 days on a Learning Tour around Israel and Palestine, meeting with Muslims and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, listening to all sides

about their stories, hopes, and fears. Local Christians also had their say. It was an intensive, painful, instructive—yet somehow uplifting—experience for many of them.

In the search for signs of hope among the despairing refugees and West Bank residents, faint glimmers of a positive future were often just barely shaded beneath the present burdens. Among Israeli Jews, there are many who long for—even predict—a future society of peaceful coexistence with Palestinians “the way it used to be.” But shadows of real fears still cloud their faces. Hard decisions must be made by leaders to help overcome the history of distrust.

The proposed draft of the delegation’s observations and recommendations intended for their American constituents has frank, specific, and honest comments—both positive and negative issues being noted for all sides. A discussion about “How much should we say?” produced the concern, “How much *dare* we say!” One major recommendation made by the delegates stands out—*that our pastors, leaders, and congregants go and see for themselves!*

An experienced colleague, on hearing about the proposals, cautioned, “Hard experiences have taught me that any time we criticize Israel, we receive horrendous, angry responses.” Very regrettably, that’s not new! There is no shortage of people with personal opinions, wishes, and suppositions. Most of them have never come here to see the heart-wrenching and truly evil reality of an apartheid-like system being imposed across this ancient Land.

Yet the angriest, shrillest critics will still refuse to go and count the horse’s teeth.

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“Nazism has its roots in Christianity [but] it would be wrong to say that Nazism is Christian. The same may be true of radical Islam; it has roots in Islam but it’s not really Islam.”

—Professor Bernard Lewis

*From April 2006*

## ***All’s Fair in Love... But Not War***

**“The rules that apply on one side must apply to the other  
[or] they won’t take it anymore.”**

*Love your Neighbor as Yourself*, read the two bumper stickers on a pickup truck of a settler. But the problem still seems to be, *Who is my neighbor?* If it’s a Palestinian family in a zone an Israeli wants to occupy, not much love is lost between them. In this case the truck belonged to a contractor whose army of some 20 workers loaded the belongings of the 29 members of the Gozlan family onto trucks and carted them away from the family home. The now homeless family will need to go to a warehouse somewhere just to get fresh clothes.

After an 18-year court battle, the Gozlan family, who risked their lives to save Jews in 1929, were expelled from their Silwan [East Jerusalem] home by an army of private guards. While the press was focused on the election results, the Israeli expellers arrived with a letter from a lawyer who didn’t answer any phone calls, and threw the family out of their home.

As the last truck rolled away, Riad Gozlan sat in front of the home. The stunned family urged him to leave with them, for there was nothing left to do. He waved them away as tears rolled down his face, and continued to stare at the home he could no longer enter.

It’s just one more story—among hundreds—of people who experience the constant frustration of legal helplessness in the face of unbridled theft of land, property, and rights across this country. The seething hate that is building beneath the surface of so many Palestinians soon lashes out in the most unacceptable ways. But one begins to understand why they are so incredulous about a world which pats itself on the back for human rights and the rule of law elsewhere, but simply turns a blind eye when it happens in Israel/Palestine.

The new Prime Minister of Palestine has been given the first word in our news issue this month [next page], commenting on the Israeli election results. This quiet-spoken highly educated man—and leader of the Hamas government that many Western countries call

*terrorist*—first asks for simple fairness. The rules that apply to one side must apply to the other—otherwise it’s simply not fair, and not right. He says they won’t take it anymore.

We can never accept the terror of suicide bombers...but nor the terror of unlawful and dishonest usurpation of what is your weaker neighbor’s. He is right. It’s just not fair.

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**“Even those in power piously say they pray for Jerusalem,  
yet refuse to think about it realistically.”**

—Rabbi Dow Marmur, on the division of Jerusalem

*From March 2006*

## ***Looking Into Their Eyes***

**“...as long as soldiers are blocking the entrance to our city,  
I will not return their greetings.”**

An Israeli soldier once explained to his colleagues that he didn’t have very much trouble with “shoot to kill” orders. “I just don’t look into their eyes,” he explained, “and then it’s no problem.” It’s a mentality that affects many of us, albeit in less obvious or violent ways.

When we get to know someone, it’s harder to demonize—or marginalize—them. We begin to care about them, we share their feelings and respond to their needs. Even those whom we feel justified in ‘hating’ or opposing may become more ‘human’ and likeable when we look into their faces, and begin a conversation. Art Gish’s experience [article on page 5] is a classic example—even the objectionable soldiers of Hebron started to bring out a compassionate side. That doesn’t mean that one needs to accept their manners and methods, but it does serve to remind us that even a violent soldier is made in the image and likeness of God.

I recently questioned the statement of a Palestinian who made a point of stating publicly that she refused to acknowledge what she herself described as “an unusually well-behaved” soldier at a checkpoint when he wished her a good day. When she refused to speak to him he tried again and added more intentionally, “Have a *splendid* day!”

“With a heavy heart,” she wrote in defense, “I had decided that as long as soldiers are blocking the entrance to our city, I will not return their greetings.” Knowingly or not, she had done to them what they are accused of doing to others: lumping everyone together and assigning collective guilt. I wonder what positive impact she might have made on him if she had instead engaged him in a brief conversation, demonstrating personal interest even while deploring the national policies beyond that soldier’s control. The way Jesus used to do it.

Jesus regularly dealt with people whose individual behavior he could never have accepted, but he still looked for the ‘human’ aspect within. Some articles in this issue pick up on that theme. Rabbis for Human Rights, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and others are struggling against one’s natural instincts of hating, and classifying, and generalizing... by trying to personalize people, and celebrate their humanity. Surely their efforts will, in the end, prove much more effective in breaking down barriers than will any damning or dismissive reactions.

There’s no doubt that it is the harder way, but it is the one that seems to replicate best the model that Jesus demonstrated for us: by looking into their eyes, he saw their soul. ~

**“Power at its best is *love* implementing the demands of *justice*.  
*Justice*, at its best, is love correcting everything that stands *against* love.”**

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

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