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Eyeless in Gaza: Israel, Palestine, and the Limits of Power

Five years ago, Karen and I were part of a delegation to Israel and the Occupied Territories. The trip was sponsored by my seminary, Pacific School of Religion. Our host was Dr. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian, a Lutheran minister, and the founder of the International Center of Bethlehem. The Center promotes the preservation and betterment of Palestinian culture. At the time of our visit, Bethlehem was just recovering from a lengthy siege and lock-down by the IDF, the Israeli army. Although it was nothing like the recent incursion into Gaza, the damage was extensive, and it was clear that it would be a long time before Bethlehem and its citizens would recover. The situation in Israel and Palestine was extremely problematic then. The region was in the midst of what was known as the second *Intifada*, or resistance, which was a response to the Prime Minister's entry into Al Aqsa Mosque with some 200 armed Israeli troops. That incursion was in response to some Palestinian provocation, and so on, and so on. Ariel Sharon was still Prime Minister of Israel, and Yassir Arafat was still head of the PLO, under virtual house arrest in his compound in Ramallah. The situation looked pretty hopeless then.

But after we had talked with many Israelis and Palestinians, and when we heard Dr. Raheb's words about his dream for peace, we found a basis for hope. His words sounded so reasonable, as did the words of many others we met. So when we returned to this country, we offered to lead worship services and workshops on Israel and Palestine around the Pacific Central District of our UU movement. We visited congregations from Eureka to Fresno and from Reno to Honolulu. Karen had always been a very secular Jew. But our trip kindled a new interest for her in Judaism, in Hebrew language and scripture, and in the struggles for peace and justice in the Middle East. So we shared our stories from the pulpit and in workshops, but our message was one of hope for a peaceful resolution. And we always ended our presentation with the words of Dr. Raheb on his dream for peace in the Holy Land. Now I'm beginning with Dr. Raheb's words and asking whether any of it makes sense at all any more.

It's five years later. Since our visit, Arafat has died, and Sharon suffered an incapacitating stroke. Israel has constructed a massive separation barrier along and into the West Bank. Hamas and Fatah are struggling for power among the Palestinians, and no Israeli leader has had a strong mandate. Benyamin Netanyahu, a rightist hardliner is expected to win the Israeli election to be held this month. In short, the situation seems even more hopeless than before. Prospects for a viable two-state solution seem dim. And if there is no two-state solution, demographics will soon put Israel in an untenable position. Palestinians will outnumber Israeli Jews in the land between the Jordan and the sea, and Israel may be forced to abandon either its dream of being a Jewish state, or its dream of being a democracy.

Right now there is a cease-fire in place, but since the beginning of the new year, we have witnessed a shocking amount of carnage in the tiny enclave of Gaza. Gaza is a strip of land some 25 miles long and 7 miles wide, that contains a million and half Palestinians in what amounts to an open-air prison. More than 1,300 Palestinians died

from air raids, artillery bombardments, and a military incursion by the IDF, hundreds of them women and children. Israelis died as well; I believe 13 at last count. The causes of all this death and destruction will be debated for years, and they will depend on who is telling the story. As with so much in this troubled land, we are faced with narratives that are so conflicting that the two sides rarely speak the same language, and neither can hear the stories of the other.

Is it too late for Dr. Raheb's dream to become a reality? Has his dream of two people living side-by-side in peace proved to be so reasonable that it has lost its power to become a reality? That is the awful prospect we face right now. It is 60 years since Israel became a state, and not one of those years has been free of bloodshed. Is the land destined to see this bloodshed continue into the distant future? And what of the role of the United States? Pressured by a very powerful – but by means monolithic -- Jewish lobby, this country has tended to be an uncritical supporter of Israel, even as we have given Israel staggering amounts of aid. Can the United States, or can any country or group of countries, step into the situation to play the role of honest broker, to mediate and to bring about a solution that the parties can live with? And I emphasize the words "live with," because there simply cannot be a resolution that will satisfy all the demands of either party.

We must remember that this is holy ground we're talking about. It's the land where Jesus stood, and also the land of Abraham, and Moses. Jerusalem was the starting point of Muhammad's night journey, in which he traveled in a vision to heaven to meet Allah. And today, of course, Jerusalem is holy to each of these three monotheistic faiths. Formative events in the histories of each faith took place in Jerusalem and the land surrounding it.

So is Dr. Raheb simply a foolish dreamer? Is there any hope left that the children of Abraham can make peace and share Jerusalem? First of all, it's important to note just how intractable the two sides are at this moment in history. One side refuses to recognize the legitimacy of Israel's existence, and it continues to shoot its missiles into Israeli towns and cities. The other side refuses to recognize the legitimate grievances of the Palestinians and to see that its frequent use of its overwhelming military force has not brought it security and peace. Throughout the last 60 years, both sides have operated out of a worldview based on fear, fear of each other. And, as we have seen over the last eight years in this country, when nations, societies, and tribes act out of fear, they turn to force and violence in an attempt – somehow – to negate that fear. But our fear simply begets more fear as the other side responds. As long as we are locked into an agenda based on fear – fear of the other – we are locked into a futile reliance on military force to try to overcome our fear. And – our fear blinds us to the fact that force ultimately doesn't work. Both sides are truly "Eyeless in Gaza;" they are so locked into their narratives of fear that they can't see the way to escape their dilemma.

Acting out of its fear, Israel has made two huge mistakes that haunt it now. First of all, It acquired a nuclear weapons capability, which it tried to keep secret for a number of years. As America discovered quickly, having nuclear capability is an advantage with a short life-span. When one nation in a region is capable of the utter destruction of other nations, it follows – as night follows day – that other nations will try to acquire a countervailing nuclear capability, as we're perhaps seeing in Iran today. The second huge mistake Israel made was to encourage Israeli settlements in the West

Bank and Gaza, territory that it was occupying after the 1967 war. There now exists a settler population in the West Bank approaching 400,000. Many of those settlers would probably be willing to relocate in return for compensation, but many others are diehard fundamentalists who will not go willingly. We tend to think of “settlements” as tiny outposts of tents on trailers occupied by hardy pioneers, but many of these “settlements,” are now permanent, substantial cities and towns.

And of course, the Palestinians have made more than their share of tragic mistakes as well. One of the greatest was their refusal to accept the borders for Israeli and Palestinian states in 1948, which would have left about 48% of the land to the Palestinians. Now, the best possible solution – withdrawal of the settlements and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza – would leave the Palestinians with at best 22% of the land. And the Palestinian obsession with resisting Israel’s existence by force has to be seen as another tragic mistake; one that continually gives Israel justification for its refusal to recognize a Palestinian state and help to bring it into viability.

In an article in last Sunday’s New York Times, Ethan Bronner demonstrated why the situation in the Holy Land is so intractable. The language and the narratives of the two sides are so different that they really, truly are unable to hear each other. Bronner writes:

No place, no date or event in this troubled land is spoken of in a common language. The barrier snaking across and inside the West Bank is a wall to Palestinians, a fence to Israelis. The holiest site in Jerusalem is the Temple Mount to the Jews, the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims. The 1948 conflict that created Israel is one side’s War of Independence; the Naqba, or Catastrophe, for the other.

Bronner is writing about how hard it is for a reporter to narrate facts on the ground when each side faults him if his reporting doesn’t tell the story from the perspective of their narrative. And he points how difficult this makes any attempt to mediate the situation. He writes: “. . . both narration and mediation require common ground. But trying to tell the story so that both sides can hear it in the same way feels more and more to me like a Greek tragedy .”

Given the vast differences between Israelis and Palestinians, most observers believe that a third-party is needed to bring the two sides to some sort of workable compromise. And most observers also believe that the United States, the world’s superpower is best suited to play this role. Over the past eight years, the Bush administration largely abdicated this role, taking no active role in working for a peaceful resolution. Bill Clinton tried, bringing Arafat and Ehud Barak to Camp David, but it was too little too late; the effort was made in the waning days of his administration.

The window for working out a two-state solution is closing rapidly, if it has not closed already. Still, the election of a new American Administration provides a new basis for hope. President Obama has indicated that he intends to make Israel and Palestine a priority of his administration. One of his first calls after the inauguration was to Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian authority, in Ramallah. And he has appointed George Mitchell as his special envoy to the region. Mitchell was instrumental in negotiating a settlement over Northern Ireland.

So, there is reason to hope. If nothing else, it seems that this Middle East stalemate will receive the attention of the U.S. Administration from the outset. But, it will

be necessary for a new administration to move beyond the old myths and to confront some painful realities. Most importantly, the administration must recognize that it has not been in Israel's best interests for the U.S. to slavishly rubber-stamp every Israeli act of aggression. It is time for some serious "Tough Love" for Israel, which has one of the world's largest militaries, but is never going to be able to bring about a resolution solely through military action. It is also time to figure out how to bring Hamas to the table. On the one hand, Hamas, which rules Gaza, denies Israel's right to exist and continues to fire those damn rockets. On the other hand it is the elected representative of the people of Gaza, and ways need to be found to engage it in resolution of the situation.

Former President Jimmy Carter – bless his heart – continues to devote countless hours to working on the Israeli-Palestinian question. He has just written a new book, entitled *We can Have Peace in the Holy Land*. The book, which preceded the latest crisis in Gaza, is clearly aimed at the new administration. Carter has been criticized for not being sufficiently pro-Israeli, but he has a pretty clear-eyed view of the compromises and trade-offs that could lead to resolution. He has spent more time working in the region than any other American leader, and he estimates that 80% of both Israelis and Palestinians want peace and security above all, and would be willing to make compromises to reach that end. In his earlier book *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, Carter wrote these words:

Compromise is necessary from both sides, with clear distinctions made between what their dreams and ideology dictate and what is pragmatically possible. Although some extremists disagree, most Israelis have learned that they cannot reconstruct the Kingdom of David, which includes all of the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and parts of Lebanon and Jordan. At the same time, most Palestinians have been forced to accept the fact that the nation of Israel will never be erased from the map. Neither side can predict or impose on others the ultimate outcome of negotiations, and any final agreement has to be both voluntary and acceptable to both sides.

There was another fascinating article in last Sunday's New York Times. This one was entitled "How Words Could end a War," and it was co-written by an anthropologist and psychologist who have conducted extensive studies of the different positions in Israel and Palestine. They found that there is a moral logic, if not an intellectual one, to the seemingly intractable positions of the two sides. The needs of the conflicting parties can't simply be reduced to secular calculations of interest but must be dealt with on their own terms. Diplomats hope that peace and material progress can make people forget the more heartfelt underlying issues of pride and principle. But there will be no peace, the authors argue unless the value-laden issues are addressed, however "irrational" they might seem to outside observers. Absolutists on both sides who might reject offers of money or peace for what they consider to be sacred land, might be considerably more inclined to accept deals that involved their enemies making symbolic gestures. For example, they found in interviews that Palestinian hard-liners might be more willing to concede Israel's right to exist if Israel were to offer an apology for Palestinian suffering since 1948. And Israeli hard-liners indicated they would be more willing to consider sharing Jerusalem and going back to something like the 1967 borders if Palestinian groups were to give explicit recognition of Israel's right to exist.

The challenges to be faced in resolving the situation in the Holy Land are immense. And they certainly are not going to be solved only with words. However, a U.S. Administration that is truly willing to engage with all the parties – to listen as well as to preach – would have the best chance of reaching to the underlying values that keep the parties so far apart. And by recognizing each other, the parties might be able to see that areas of truth exist in each others narratives so that they could begin to share at some common language and common ground.

The time is short and the need is great if Mitri Raheb's dream of two peoples living side-by-side in peace is ever to be realized. And as he wrote, failure to achieve the dream will mean a nightmare – not just for Israelis and Palestinians – but for all of us.

The time has come for the bloodshed and the killing to stop.

The time has come for an end to policies based on fear of the other

The time has come to recognize that we