

“Oh, Jerusalem”

Reflections on the Middle East

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This sermon is a response to a call for sermons by Unitarian Universalists for Justice in the Middle East. Specifically, the call is for sermons relating Unitarian Universalist commitment to social justice and human rights to the quest for a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

In August of 2003, I was invited to join a group of young people from Bloomington on fact-finding trip to Israel and Palestine. The bulk of our time was spent travelling in the occupied territory of the West Bank. Gaza was completely sealed off and inaccessible. We did spend several days in Israel and met with Israelis representing a wide range of political perspectives.

On the evening of my arrival in Tel Aviv, a tenuous ceasefire was broken with the assassination of a Palestinian in Nablus by the Israeli Defense Forces. The next morning a suicide bomber struck in Tel Aviv, and within a week there had been retaliations by the Israelis in several refugee camps and another suicide bombing on a bus just a ten minute walk from the hostel in which I slept in Old City sector of Jerusalem. I watched the emergency crews removing the dead and wounded from the bus, and feeling the justified anger and fear that permeated the gathered crowd, I knew that peace and justice were a long way off. Nearly seven years

have passed, and we are farther away from a settlement of the conflict than we were then. In my opinion, that is not by happenstance, but rather by design. I invite you to read Elsa Marston Harik's guest column in the Sunday February 2, 2010 Bloomington Herald Times entitled "A Visit to Palestine: Two homes offer two views." Her experience in the West Bank this past October reads like my own travelogue from 2003.

I want to begin this morning with an affirmation of the first Principle of Unitarian Universalism. I do so because I have chosen to be a Unitarian Universalist minister not simply in order to serve this congregation. Indeed, I could have done so without seeking standing with the UUA or becoming a member of the UU Ministers Association. I chose fellowship with the UUA because I believe in the principles which we affirm when we become members.

The first Principle: **We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.** Notice it does not say, we affirm the relative worth and dignity of every person. It does not say that we affirm that some persons are inherently of more worth and dignity than others. Now the reason I begin with that principle in addressing the issues of the Middle East Peace and justice, is that there is an assumption, or rather a presumption, which must be challenged before we can take the first step toward justice in the

resolution of that conflict. This presumption, I believe, underlies much of the United States' unquestioning support of the nation of Israel. I also believe it underlies much of the blind patriotism that ignores the injustices inherent in the policies our own nation.

What is that presumption? It is the opposite of our first principle in that it presumes that almighty God has determined some to be chosen and others not. The idea that a particular piece of land belongs, by divine right, to an exclusive religious identity is, I believe, contrary to the first principle of Unitarian Universalism.

I hereby attest that no nation has a "Divine" right to exist. Any nation's right to exist, including that of our own, derives solely from the righteousness of its institutions with regard to justice, that is, by its "right relationship" with all of life. There is no nation of "chosen people," no "manifest destiny" by which any nation can place itself outside the judgment of history with regard to human rights, and further, with regard to this entire interconnected web of life of which we are a part, and only a part. All nation-states have a conditional right of existence. In fact, that conditionality is clearly expressed in our own history in such documents such as the Declaration of Independence.

Now, please do not think that I am going to suggest this morning that we should work for the destruction of Israel and the United States. I am simply pointing to the connection between the

legitimacy of the state and its actions, vis-à-vis human rights. I don't mind saying that I long for the day when we shall all be global citizens and nationalism will have gone the way of tribalism, of which it is simply a larger expression.

With regard to the Middle East conflict, more correctly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there are some myths that have to be dispelled. First, there is the myth of the empty land. I encountered it in the first few hours after arriving in Israel. Upon landing in Tel Aviv in August of 2003, I boarded a small taxi van for the trip to Jerusalem where I would meet with the other members of our group. As the van travelled toward Jerusalem, a couple of tourists began asking questions of a young Israeli who was returning home from a trip abroad. We learned that he had an MBA and had been on a business trip. I judged him to be about thirty years of age. He began giving a history lesson of the area and stated that when the Jews came to Israel in 1948 there was no one living there with the exception of a few nomadic tribes. It was evidently a land without a people for a people without a land.

When I pointed to the ruins of structures dotting the landscape that obviously predated 1948, his quick reply was that everyone had left. In fact, long before the establishment of the nation of Israel in the spring of 1948, there was a large Arab population that had occupied the land since the seventh century. There were also

Jewish inhabitants long before the 20th century. In 1931, the Jewish population of Palestine was 174,606 against a total population of 1,033,314.

There is another myth that seems prevalent among Americans. I often hear it said, “Those people have been fighting for centuries, they can never live in peace together.” The historical fact is that during the Middle Ages, North Africa and the Arab Middle East was a place of refuge for the persecuted Jews of Europe. They lived together in relative harmony until the late 19th and early 20th century when Zionist settlers arrived and began to claim that the land was the rightful possession of the Jewish people based on supposed promises of their God dating back more than 2,500 years.

I actually had the wonderful experience of seeing the harmonious co-habitation of Jews, Muslims and Christians in Israel in 2003. One particular man who aided us in many ways as we went back and forth from Israel to the West Bank was named Ibrahim. I judged him to be about 60 years of age. He owned a three story house on the Mount of Olives. He also ran a fleet of taxis, driven by his many nephews, and he would rescue us when we found ourselves stranded at a particular checkpoint, or in need of transportation. His family had lived on the Mount of Olives since the days before the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century.

He spent much of his money feeding Bedouin orphans in the deserts south of Jerusalem. His house was open to anyone in need. I never saw his doors locked, and one night when he had invited some of us to dinner, there in his home were Christians, Muslims and Jews all sharing a meal together. I actually thought Ibrahim was a Palestinian Christian, but during the discussion I learned that he was Muslim. A young American convert to Islam had also come to dinner that evening. As with most recent converts, he was rather zealous about sharing his faith. I sometimes wish UUs would be a little more so, but that is for another time.

During our conversation Ibrahim informed me that he was a Muslim. “Well,” inquired the young American Muslim, “Have you made a Hadj to Mecca?” “No,” replied Ibrahim, “I have never been to Mecca.”

The young convert was indignant, “How can you claim to be a good Muslim at your age if you have yet to make a Hadj to Mecca.” Ibrahim smiled and said, “When all the children on the Mount of Olives have enough to eat, then perhaps I will make a Hadj to Mecca.” Ibrahim also taught me the true meaning of Jihad. He said, “Jihad simply means ‘service to God.’ What greater service is there to God than love?”

The myth that people of other cultures cannot live together in peace is simply not true. I have found that most people in the places I have travelled can live in peace with one another and want nothing more than to do so. It is usually the policies of the state that make peace impossible, and I believe that Israel's policy of occupation is the primary obstacle of peace. It is not the only obstacle, but it is the primary one, and it is built upon the foundation of a supposed Divine right to the land.

It should be noted that there were those among the early Jewish immigrants to Palestine who called for Arab-Jewish cooperation. In fact many of them were socialists who called for a bi-national state and envisioned a secular, non-exclusive government that would provide health, education and welfare to all persons regardless of religious identity. Sadly, their voices did not carry the day.

Historically, it was not the promise of God, but rather the promise and intervention of the British Government that led to the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 stated:

"His Majesty's government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of

existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country." (Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*)

“Nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine,...” That promise would prove to be an empty one as would a subsequent promise made to the Arabs of the former Ottoman Empire that their lands would be protected as a reward for supporting the Allied forces World War I.

Balfour would write in 1919:

The Four Great Powers [Britain, France, Italy and the United States] are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, and future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land. In my opinion that is right.....

I do not think that Zionism will hurt the Arabs, but they will never say they want it. Whatever be the future of Palestine it is not now an 'independent nation', nor is it yet on the way to become one. Whatever deference should be paid to the views of those living there, the Powers in their selection of a mandatory do not propose, as I understand the matter, to consult them. In short, so far as Palestine is concerned, the Powers have made no statement of fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in the letter, they have not always intended to violate. (Edward Said, "The Question of Palestine")

It is quite obvious that there is some other principle at work in such undertakings than the principle of the inherent worth and

dignity of all persons; or Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; or the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

The principle at work was actually a presumption of the greater worth of one people over another based on religious prejudice, and as such it was much akin to the principle at work in the land grabs by which we expanded our own empire in North America against the indigenous people who inhabited this land. We had God on our side, and ethnic cleansing was the method of expansion.

The war in 1948 resulted in more than 700,000 Palestinian refugees dispossessed from the land that became the new State of Israel. The deliberate destruction of villages and orchards was intended to prevent the return of those refugees, the vast majority of whom were non-combatants who expected to return to their homes at the end of the war. The right of return is a recognized principle of international law, and in fact Israel agreed to the principle of repatriation of the Arab refugees and the internationalization of Jerusalem as a condition for its admission into the United Nations in 1949. It was an agreement that was never meant to be honored.

Things were only to get worse. In the 1967 War Israel occupied the West Bank, seized the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. That occupation has continued for more than forty years resulting in a state of constant violence and the impoverishment of the Palestinian people, while at the same time increasing the insecurity of the nation of Israel. Ironically, Israel, the self-proclaimed Jewish homeland has become the most dangerous nation on earth for Jews.

The occupation has supported a settlement policy that is nothing more than the illegal confiscation of the Palestinian lands, a confiscation that has been condemned by numerous resolutions by both the General Assembly and the Security Council of the United Nations. Israel has ignored more UN resolutions than any nation in history.

Try to imagine how you would react to the presence of hundreds of military checkpoints in an area the size of the southern third of Indiana. How would you feel about immigrant Russian speaking troops detaining you for two, four, or six hours on a trip from Bloomington to Ellettsville (approximately 6 miles) to visit your grandparents who had lived there from the day they were born? What would you do if your wife and her expected child died at one of those checkpoints after being detained for hours in the

summer sun? This is not an imaginary happening in the West Bank.

Is it possible that you might turn to violence? There are other reasons that violence continually escalates. One is the practice of collective punishment. During my visit to the West Bank we visited the city of Jenin where there is a large Palestinian refugee camp. It was a long arduous trip the length of which would have required about two hours in Indiana, but required a day and a half in the West Bank as we skirted Israeli military roadblocks and waited in long lines at checkpoints. Once being allowed through checkpoints we would often have to walk another half mile in the searing heat in hopes of finding another taxi driver willing to take us on toward Jenin.

Upon reaching Jenin, we learned that the Israeli military had just entered the refugee camp we were planning to visit. Because of the possibility of violence most of our delegation stayed with some Palestinian hosts at a local community college. Two members and I decided to go to the camp, which is a permanent village of three and four story closely packed concrete buildings with an extremely high population of people per square mile. The military had come to retaliate for a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. The bomber, a young man, was born and raised in the Jenin camp.

As we entered the gates of the camp, we could see the cloud of smoke rising near its center, and our taxi driver drove insanely to get us as close as possible. We came upon the rubble of what was once a four-story building housing twelve families. As we climbed upon the rubble and spoke with the adults and children who were sorting through dust and rebar to recover any items of their lives that remained, we were constantly asked to give voice to the suffering of their families. "Please tell the people in America what is happening to us!"

After about thirty minutes of chaotic digging through rubble, we heard a large explosion in the not too distant neighborhood adjacent to the refugee camp. It took us about thirty minutes to get to the site of the bombing. The house was a two-story structure about three blocks from the border of the refugee camp. We were told that this house was the home of the father and mother of the suicide bomber. The structure inside the camp had been the homes of cousins and other relatives.

The Israeli military had arrived at the house where the family had gathered to mourn the death of their son. The family had been ordered out of the house and given ten minutes to grab what they could grab, after which the military launched a missile into the house, collapsing one complete exterior wall, so that the house looked like a dollhouse that had been opened with a can opener. By

the time we arrived the military had left and the family members had gathered again amid the rubble to continue to mourn the young man. The women were downstairs and the men had climbed the precarious stairs that clung to the walls to find a room in which to continue their prayers.

As we entered the upper rooms, with a full view of the refugee camp through the “picture window” of a non-existent wall, I was introduced to the father of the suicide bomber. He could speak some English, and I learned that he was a doctor. As we stood in the ruins of his life savings, I held him in my arms, expressing my sorrow at his loss. He looked me in the eyes and asked, “Do you have any children?” I replied that I had two children now grown to adulthood. “Did you raise them to be murderers?” He asked. “Of course not,” I replied. “I did not raise my son to be a murder either,” he said. “He was going to be a lawyer and was attending classes at the university. The Israelis closed the university and he fell in with some others. I had not seen him for more than a year, and now he has done this terrible thing. He was my son, and I loved him.”

“I am sure you did,” I said, “I cannot begin to imagine the pain you are feeling, but being a father, I know it must be great.”

“Yes,” he replied, “but now look around you at all the children here. How many of them will grow up to be murderers because of what they have witnessed this day?”

What answer could I give? Collective punishment breeds violence, and threatens generations to come. I do not justify suicide bombing, but I understand why it happens, and I pray for the families, both Israeli and Palestinian, who continue to pay the horrible price of unjust policies beyond their control.

I do not think that any person of moderate to liberal values and democratic ideals can visit the occupied territories of Palestine and come away believing that such conditions can be justified. If the nation of Israel seeks only security, then why did it not accept the 1970 proposal of a formal treaty with the United States of America, guaranteeing their sovereignty and security in an arrangement also guaranteed by the UN Security Council and with the compliance of the Soviet Union?

The plan included the placement of a UN peacekeeping force along the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Israel only had to agree to withdraw to the 1967 borders which were, and still are recognized by the entire international community. Israel rejected the proposal and many others like it, prompting Senator J. William Fulbright to remark, “The Israelis were not even willing to

act in their own self-interest.” (Allan Brownfield in “Issues of the American Council for Judaism.” Fall 1997)

The fact is that the entire world is threatened by the occupation of the Palestine by the State of Israel. Americans are held hostage by a policy of occupation in more ways than one. Our present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are directly related to our hypocritical foreign policy as exhibited in our support for what is becoming known as, in the words of President Jimmy Carter, an “Apartheid State.”

I invite you to read a recent article in the *Nation* dated January 7, 2010. The article, “Imposing Middle East Peace” is written by Henry Siegman, director of the U.S./Middle East Project in New York. He is former national director of the American Jewish Congress and of the Synagogue Council of America.

“Israel’s relentless drive to establish ‘facts on the ground’ in the occupied West Bank, a drive that continues in violation of even the limited settlement freeze to which Prime Minister committed himself, seems finally to have succeeded in locking in the irreversibility of its colonial project. As a result of that achievement, one that successive Israeli governments have long sought in order to preclude the possibility of a two-state solution,

Israel has crossed the threshold from ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’ to the only apartheid regime in the Western world.”

Siegman continues, “The inevitability of such a transformation has been held out not by ‘Israel bashers’ but by the country’s own leaders. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon referred to that danger, as did Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who warned that Israel could not escape turning into an apartheid state if it did not relinquish ‘almost all the territories, if not all,’ including the Arab parts of East Jerusalem.”

“Olmert ridiculed Israeli defense strategists who, he said had learned nothing from past experiences and were stuck in the mindset of the 1948 War of Independence. ‘With them, it is all about tanks and land and controlling territories and controlled territories and this hilltop and that hilltop,’ he (Olmert) said. ‘All these things are worthless. Who thinks seriously that if we sit on another hilltop, on another hundred meters, that this is what will make the difference for the State of Israel’s basic security?’” (The Nation, January 7, 2010, Siegman)

Siegman believes that a negotiated two state solution is now virtually impossible and that in fact, that impossibility has been the clear objective of successive Israeli government policies. The only path to a two-state solution, which has been the stated objective of

every American Administration since 1948, is international intervention.

What does that mean? I believe that first and foremost it means a halt to the \$7 million a day in American aid which supports the Apartheid conditions in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel cannot maintain the occupation without our dollars and our military aid.

The time has come for the United States to draw a line in the sand along the 1967 border, and insist that any deviation from that border cannot be made unilaterally. Furthermore, the United States should impose an embargo on all arms sales to the Middle East. Surely there are enough weapons there already. Aid should be in the form of development and should be directly linked to Israel's conforming to all pertinent UN Resolutions. From such a position of integrity the United States might well become a respected mediator in the Middle East, and be able to empower moderate Palestinians to take control of their interests. UN Peacekeeping forces could enforce a ceasefire for the interim, and maybe, just maybe we could find a new democratic partner to counter the fundamentalists on both sides of the divide.

I believe our UU principles point to just such a course, and I hope moderate voices will speak so that the intolerant voices of fundamentalism will find fewer listeners.