

Sermon for October 15, 2023
The Reverend Arlin Roy

SPIRITUAL BALANCE

This is a very different service from the one that I planned to deliver. I am aware that the subject I will be speaking on today is the “third rail” of UU parish ministry, but you voted for me unanimously, so I know you love me, and I love you and I will proceed. As meetings and emails piled up on me, and I completed the sermon I had planned, I realized that there is no way I could constructively ignore—today—what had happened a few days ago. The brutal invasion of Israel from Gaza riveted everyone’s attention and stimulated fear, revulsion, rage, helplessness, sadness, and all the stages of grief in a kaleidoscope of pain. I am therefore doing a different sermon and a different kind of sermon, one largely composed of readings I have accumulated over the years with spontaneous explanations and connections.

First, war is a dirty, horrible business and nobody comes out of it with a pristine reputation. There are always mistakes, either of intention or inattention. There are mistakes of impulse and panic, fatigue, and rage. No group or nation is immune to violations of international law.

Second, the horror of this incursion by Hamas into Israel is calculated to provoke a massive, horrible response and occupation of Gaza that saps Israel and its allies of money and spirit. And yet how can Israel NOT respond?

Third, this may look like a new event, but is actually only new in terms of its scope and involvement by Iran. Where did 5,000 missiles come from to attack Israel? They could only have come from an interested third party. This is only the latest installment of war; the ongoing conflict has been intermittent but continuing.

This sermon will be in three sections: Background, The Struggle for a Spiritual Balance, and Moving Forward.

Background

BACKGROUND is history. Just to put last week's events in perspective--I will first read a piece from Judith Hertog entitled "An Israeli and A Palestinian Make the Case for Peace." ["The Sun," October 2016, pg.6]

It can be said that the conflict started at the end of the nineteenth century, when secular European Jews came up with the idea of creating a homeland for Jews fleeing persecution. They chose the area now known as Israel and called their new political ideology Zionism, after the region's biblical name: Zion. The local Arab population knew the land by a different name: Palestine.

After the British occupied the land in 1917, they encouraged Jewish immigration, a policy that brought about tension between Jews and Arabs. In November 1947 the United Nations voted to divide the land between Jews and Palestinians, and civil war broke out. Half a year later a coalition of Arab states—including Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—declared war on Israel. The fighting forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to abandon their homes and become refugees; the Israeli army later razed most of their villages. Palestinians refer to these events as Al Nakba or "the Catastrophe." Israelis refer to them as the War of Independence....

Of course, this summary is a gross simplification. The narrative of the conflict can be told from many points of view: the narrative of Palestinians who remained in the Jewish-controlled territory and became citizens of the State of Israel; the narrative of Palestinians who live as refugees all over the world; the narrative of the Middle Eastern Jews who were expelled from their Arab homelands and arrived in Israel after 1948; the narrative of ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist Jews who believe it is sacrilegious for Jews to create their own state without divine intervention; the narrative of Muslim Palestinians who want to create an Islamic state; the narrative of secular Palestinians who want to create a modern Palestinian democracy; the narrative of those who believe it is possible to reach a peaceful solution by dividing the land; and the narrative of those who believe the conflict can never be resolved peacefully because the "enemy" will not

compromise or honor any agreement. Ultimately, there may be as many narratives as there are people.

The Struggle for Spiritual Balance

SPIRITUAL BALANCE is about efforts to put this conflict in some perspective that honors the yearning of the many peoples involved in conflict. It is not about “which side are you on,” because there are many groups but--most important--no “side” is homogeneous. I have repeatedly heard people mourn the terrible carnage Hamas inflicted on innocent civilians but then add: “Israel’s hands are not clean either.”

This brings up the question of historical perspective. I will read you the central section of a statement prepared for the Pleasantville Clergy Association where one of the two co-presenters previously worked extensively in mediation at the United Nations. (He then became a Christian minister—WHAT was he thinking?) This statement will never be published, as it is impossible to satisfy all parties concerned and someone or other was not going to sign the letter because of historical perspective arguments. Historical perspective is always referenced, whether it be the Holocaust or the 1948 strife, and there is always a slant here in favor of somebody. [Pleasantville Interfaith Council Letter of Action, October 12, 2023, draft]

We, the representatives of the Pleasantville Interfaith Council and clerics of our respective worshiping bodies, on behalf of the assemblies we serve, call for an end to war in and around Israel.

Together, we abhor the violence of war and crimes against humanity that are harrowing the people of the Holy Land. We, of many different traditions, have family, friends, and colleagues living in Israel and Palestine. We are deeply grieved by news we have received from loved ones living there, what we have learned in conversation with each other, and by the images and reports that we have seen in the media.

Together, as people of faith and as global citizens, we recognize that the work of peace is sacred work. This work has been ongoing in meaningful and persistent ways in that region at the civilian level for decades through mutual forbearance, dialogue, education, and through vehicles of diplomacy. We recognize that not all voices have had equal weight; we declaim leadership that has worked to obstruct and frustrate peacebuilding efforts. We call for the resumption of productive conversation within and between our own communities.

One member of the council commented: *“My first addition to the letter would be to mention Hamas by name and call them out as a terrorist group who was responsible for the deplorable acts. As it stands right now it feels like it is implying that the acts of this terrorist group are somehow morally equivalent to Israel’s actions over the years.”*

The Unitarian Universalists have struggled for decades come up with a statement about the Mideast wars, and (in response to the current crisis) this is the best the leadership could come up with in communicating to UU clergy. [Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, October 13, 2023]

Let us begin with our profound gratitude for all you are doing to minister to and support our congregations and communities in these profoundly difficult times. We know the work of ministry lands right in the depths of our grief, heartbreak, or rage. Many of us are directly impacted by the violence that is shattering Israeli and Palestinian lives. We are, all of us, tending to collegial and communal relationships with partners who are divergent in their stances and perspectives on this conflict, and feel the acute challenge to communicate faithfully in what feels like impossible times....

Keep this in a different kind of perspective, one in which Israel, Judaism, Palestinians, Hezbollah, Hamas, PLO, etc., are not representative of—nor the identity of—individuals. We worked this through when America was bombing Vietnam—was it patriotic to support or oppose the war? Historical perspective was a key factor in the dialogue about that war. This war is no different in that respect, except that the personal pain and anguish cannot be ignored.

I am a longtime supporter of APN, Americans for Peace Now, a group of Americans and Israelis seeking a nonviolent two-state solution to the ongoing war. Over the years, I have noted a little optimism but mostly we mourn for opportunities squashed. Maybe that's why I support APN—I admire their persistent courage in seeking peace when the situation looks worse and worse. Here are two snippets from the "New York Times," in 2002: [*The New York Times*, Greenberg, Joel, "Amnesty Accuses Israeli Forces of War Crimes, November 4, 2002, and Bennet, James, "On Hebron Ambush Site, A New Settlement Rises" p. 1, November ??, 2002]

JERUSALEM, Nov. 3—A new report by Amnesty International contends that Israeli forces committed war crimes in Jenin and Nablus this spring during a large-scale offensive in the West bank, killing Palestinians unlawfully, blocking medical care, using people as human shields and bulldozing houses with residents inside.

The report was formally submitted to Israeli officials today.

"The information in this report suggests that the Israeli Defense Forces committed violation of international law during the course of military operations in Jenin and Nablus, including war crimes, for which they must be held accountable," the new report says in its conclusion.

A report issued by the group in July called attacks by Palestinian militants on Israeli civilians crimes against humanity.

A spokesman for the Israeli Foreign ministry called the report one-sided, asserting that it "ignores the fact that Israel is in the midst of an armed conflict that was imposed on it."....

HEBRON, West Bank, Nov. 17—It is because they believe that Abraham bought a cave to entomb himself and his family here 4,000 years ago that religious Jews feel they must live in Hebron now.

It was because 12 Israelis were killed in an ambush here on Friday night that Naaman Menachan, a 20-year-old yeshiva student, came to a recently bulldozed Palestinian orchard on Saturday evening with a submachine gun across his chest and a sleeping bag over his shoulder....

Moving Forward

MOVING FORWARD is not about a particular action so much as an attitude and a process of Nonviolent Communication. I give you the following dialogue, by Marshall Rosenberg in *Nonviolent Communication*, and while I would not have done it this way exactly—it is 25 years old and Nonviolent Communication has progressed since then—it is still a good example of compassionate communication. [Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, pgs. 13-14)

I was presenting Nonviolent Communication in a mosque at Deheisha Refugee Camp in Bethlehem to about 170 Palestinian Moslem men. Attitudes toward Americans at that time were not favorable. As I was speaking, I suddenly noticed a wave of muffled commotion fluttering through the audience. "They're whispering that you are American!" my translator alerted me, just as a gentleman in the audience leapt to his feet. Facing me squarely, he hollered at the top of his lungs, "Murderer!" Immediately a dozen other voices joined him in chorus: "Assassin!" "Child-killer!" "Murderer!"

Fortunately, I was able to focus my attention on what the man was feeling and needing. In this case, I had some clues. On the way into the refugee camp, I had seen several empty tear gas canisters that had been shot into the camp the night before. Clearly marked on each canister were the words "Made in U.S.A." I knew that the refugees harbored a lot of anger toward the U.S. for supplying tear gas and other weapons to Israel.

I addressed the man who had called me a murderer:

I: Are you angry because you would like my government to use its resources differently? (I didn't know whether my guess was correct, but what is critical is my sincere effort to connect with his feeling and need.)

He: Damn right I'm angry! You think we need tear gas? We need sewers, not your tear gas! We need housing! We need to have our own country!

I: So you're furious and would appreciate some support in improving your living conditions and gaining political independence?

He: Do you know what it's like to live here for twenty-seven years the way I have with my family—children and all? Have you got the faintest idea what that's been like for us?

I: Sounds like you're feeling very desperate and you're wondering whether I or anybody else can really understand what it's like to be living under these conditions.

He: You want to understand? Tell me, do you have children? Do they go to school? Do they have playgrounds? My son is sick! He plays in open sewage! His classroom has no books! Have you seen a school that has no books?

I: I hear how painful it is for you to raise your children here; you'd like me to know that what you want is what all parents want for their children—a good education, opportunity to play and grow in a healthy environment...

He: That's right, the basics! Human rights—isn't that what you Americans call it? Why don't more of you come here and see what kind of human rights you're bringing here!

I: You'd like more Americans to be aware of the enormity of the suffering here and to look more deeply at the consequences of our political actions?

Our dialogue continued, with him expressing his pain for nearly twenty more minutes, and I listening for the feeling and need behind each statement. I didn't agree or disagree. I received his words, not as attacks, but as gifts from a fellow human willing to share his soul and deep vulnerabilities with me.

Once the gentleman felt understood, he was able to hear me as I explained my purpose for being at the camp. An hour later, the same man who had called me a murderer was inviting me to his home for a Ramadan dinner.

Conclusion

CONCLUSION: Just as no one of us has the full answer to war in the Mideast, so no one of us, Israeli, Palestinian, Christian, Jew, English, Irish,

Cherokee, French, German, etc., has been untouched by armed conflict. We will struggle with our feelings that we have somehow been remiss, that there is something, anything, we should have done and should do right now. But this is also not about doing. It is about Being. So let us take a few moments to meditate on what we have heard and consider how we can meaningfully respond to the need for peace.

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