

Voices from Palestine and Israel

When will there be peace?

In January, On Earth Peace and Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) sponsored a delegation of seventeen persons who traveled to Palestine and Israel to see the situation firsthand and learn from Israelis and Palestinians who are working for a better future. Three-fourths of the delegates were members of the Church of the Brethren, including On Earth Peace staff members Bob Gross and Susanna Farahat, and board member Lauree Hersch Meyer. Throughout this newsletter, we offer glimpses from that delegation through thoughtful reflections, journal entries, and photos, as well as personal voices of Palestinians and Israelis. To provide context, we have included an insert with facts, resources, and ideas. Susanna Farahat, On Earth Peace Coordinator for Peace Education, opens this issue with personal reflections from the delegation.

On Earth Peace co-sponsored its second Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation to the West Bank and Israel in January, and I was part of the group. We met a variety of people — local peace activists, community members, clergy, Israeli soldiers, those trying to live under occupation, citizens of an occupying country. We were privileged to witness an incredible amount of light shining through the lives of those we met, and to witness the pain that the occupation of Palestine directly and indirectly causes to people on both sides.



The delegation gathers on the Mount of Olives, at the site where Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

“Under occupation, your basic rights become privileges,” shares Husam, an articulate peacemaker who carries a Bethlehem identification card, because he lives and works there. His wife is from Jerusalem, and that’s where her job is, so she has to have a Jerusalem ID card. She can’t move to Bethlehem, because she would lose the ID that allows her to work. They have a daughter who was born in the U.S. Right now she’s an illegal immigrant, because her visa has expired and they haven’t been able to get her a new one. Husam can’t move or go to Jerusalem, so his wife and daughter spend a few nights a week with him in Bethlehem, and live in Jerusalem the rest of the time. They’ve tried to get special permission to accommodate their situation, but their case has been tied up in court for the past five years.

“Under occupation, your basic rights become privileges.” All Palestinians are punished for the actions of a small group who use violence, despite the

fact that collective punishment is specifically forbidden under international law (Geneva Convention article 33). These punishments range from military checkpoints to the construction of the separation wall, from home demolitions to home invasions.

Our delegation of seventeen and three of our hosts sat crowded into a modest living room. We had finished dinner, and a family friend came over. She laid out gorgeous embroidery work on the table and our group gathered close, excited for the opportunity to purchase gifts with stories attached. Our visitor stayed on to chat, and as we sat there in the unheated house, sipping sweet tea with sage and smiling at the children that drifted in and out of the living room (sometimes pausing on a parent’s lap only to squirm away in minutes), she told us her story.

In addition to her job as a nutritionist at the local hospital, she organizes a cooperative of local women who do the traditional Palestinian embroidery work. She has four children, and she stays awake with them every night, not going

continued on page 2

Voices from Palestine and Israel . . .

continued from page 1

to bed until the sun rises. She's not crazy, and she's not an insomniac. Her children are too afraid to go to sleep. They aren't little — they range in age from ten to seventeen, but they are too scared to fall asleep without protection; the Israeli army invades homes in the middle of the night.

I wish I could do her story justice — she spoke so passionately, a mother without options. Sometimes she and her husband try to distract the kids with play, other times telling stories, and other times just holding them. Can you picture this woman, shepherding over her children as they finally drift to sleep?

Their neighbor's home has been demolished and rebuilt three times. The Israeli government gives three reasons for home demolitions. The first is that the home belongs to the family of someone suspected of terrorist activities. The second reason is administrative: the home has been built or expanded without a permit. Since the Israeli government almost never grants a permit, growing families sometimes take the risk of adding to their homes. Third, some homes are demolished in order to build or expand Israeli settlements, access roads, or the separation wall.

There is a lot of activity on the rocky, newly plowed field today, as Palestinian villagers, the Israeli visitors, and the CPTers wander around. Some of us are all business — gently placing seedlings in the earth, covering the roots, and carrying water to each young tree. There are more

people than trees, and I feel extraneous. Awkwardly, I approach a young woman my age who wears a red fleece and a sunflower-colored scarf. "So, how did you get involved with Rabbis for Human Rights?" I ask her. "Are you a rabbi?" Her laugh is as bright as her clothing. "Me? A rabbi? No!" Her name is Smadar. She's an Israeli student, working towards her degree in community development. She read an announcement about the rabbis' olive tree-planting in At-Tuwani, and decided to join them.

In some ways, growing up American is like growing up Israeli. Americans live on land that was occupied and colonized in the name of freedom, security, and new ideals; so do Israelis. Like Americans, Israelis live with the awareness that their nation was built on land taken from another people — but for Israelis all of this has happened within one lifetime, and is still going on.

I have so much respect for Smadar, and for the rest of her group. Conversations about this occupation are complicated by the fact that the narratives of Judaism and Israel are often conflated. Unfortunately, this means that criticism of Israeli policy not only raises questions of anti-nationalism, but also raises questions of anti-Semitism.

Israel was created by the United



Members of Rabbis for Human Rights cooperate with villagers from At-Tuwani to plant olive trees.

Nations in 1947, largely in response to the problem of Jewish refugees from the Holocaust. An important part of the Jewish narrative is that they have repeatedly been targets of discrimination and persecution around the world. When this cultural insecurity was combined with a budding nationalist movement, establishing a

Jewish "homeland" in Palestine became an attractive option for many Jews.

All arguments aside about who the land belonged to sixty years ago or two thousand years ago, today there are many who have grown up Israeli. This is the only home they know, and for most of their lives, the government has functioned without much input from them.

Often the tragedy in Palestine is ignored or denied by Israelis, Americans, and the non-Arab world in general. As a nation, Israelis have learned to live in fear of sporadic suicide bombings and have erected a wall that divides and checkpoints which the government claims will make them more secure. But some Israelis are courageous enough to step across those government-built boundaries of concrete and propaganda, and to acknowledge the other side, to

continued on page 3

Life in At-Tuwani has a raw and simple beauty of its own. When I step outside to brush my teeth in the morning, I'm greeted by a vast landscape of rugged hills and scattered villages, and I remember all over again that I'm standing on sacred ground. When our neighbor brings us warm bread fresh from her taboon oven, or we sit in the sun drinking tea with a family, or our team finishes an evening card game by candlelight after the electricity has switched off — these moments remind me how sweet life can be.

~ Sarah MacDonald, a fulltime CPTer who joined the January delegation

continued from page 2

share stories through relationships with Palestinians, and to work for change.

Aziz and Rami stand arm in arm. One man is young, with jet black hair, thin-



Aziz and Rami are members of Bereaved Families for Peace.

framed in his flannel shirt and jeans, wearing glasses. The other man is middle-aged, heavysset, wearing a blue sweater that brings out the color of his eyes, set in a deeply wrinkled face. Though they look unlike, they share a similar smile for the camera. They have smiled this smile many times before, after making themselves vulnerable before many other groups.

These men came to speak to us from Bereaved Families for Peace and The Parents' Circle, organizations which provide support networks and a means of hopeful activism to surviving family

members. They have each lost a loved one to this conflict, one a teenage victim of a suicide bombing, the other a victim of unjust and harsh imprisonment in an Israeli jail. These men have traveled a long road, through forgiveness to friendship, past friendship to a place of shared mission. They've told their stories hundreds of times, and they hope that their example makes a lasting impression.

In a conversation back in the U.S., a friend asked me for one thing I saw which was hopeful, and I told her of these two men. If they managed to conquer their grief and their prejudices, maybe peace is still possible.

~ Susanna Farahat



A matriarch of At-tuwani, with her sons and grandchild. Their olive trees have been uprooted repeatedly by soldiers and settlers.

Palestinians and Israelis Work Together

One of the signs of hope in the ongoing tragedy of violence and occupation in the Middle East is the cooperation of Palestinians and Israelis who want to find a way forward together. There are many such partnerships, large and small. Here are three examples.

The Parents' Circle — The Families Forum www.theparentscircle.org

Palestinians and Israelis who have lost family members to the violence have come together to find ways to stop the bloodshed and end the occupation.

Combatants for Peace www.combatantsforpeace.org

Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters who know first-hand the futility and pain of the ongoing violence have come together to encourage dialogue, peace, and an end to conflict in the region.

Seeds of Peace www.seedsofpeace.org

Bringing together teenagers from different sides of deep and violent conflicts in the world, Seeds of Peace forges friendship, removes prejudice, and builds understanding.

Stones.

Stones are perhaps the most enduring image from my time in Palestine/Israel.

The rich soil covered with stones, brimming with stones mingled with fertile soil. Stone fences terracing hillsides into shelves of grape vines, olive trees, crops — terraces dating back thousands and thousands of years. Stones laid together with no mortar, rested upon another with such skill that old stone fences hold for generations. Stones calling forth human skill able to build or repair — raising fences and homes, roads and walls, wells and animal shelters.

But stones also in rubble heaps. Stone homes destroyed, stone walls demolished, stones pushed aside for cement fences, stones barring access to roads and fields. Stones whose stories break hearts.

Stones indeed. Stones calling my heart to sing, stones broken so my heart weeps. Stone beauty taking my breath away; stone anguish sucking away my breath.

Stones. Holy land stones.

~ Lauree Hersch Meyer,
a member of the delegation from
Rushville, New York

Straddling Both Worlds



Peg Lehman

When asked to write this article about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I found myself profoundly reluctant and filled with a jumble of conflicting thoughts and feelings. I am no expert. I'm not knowledgeable about the complex issues, or well versed in the region and its history, or up-to-date in the ever changing news stories and current reality. What I bring is a unique background of being both Jewish and Christian; I straddle both worlds.

My parents were Hungarian Jews who immigrated to America right before WWII. They chose to keep their Jewish heritage a secret from my brother and me and to raise us as Christians. It wasn't until we were teenagers that we discovered our grandparents had been killed in Auschwitz, and only after our father died did we learn that our mother had practiced her faith in secret while we were growing up.

The effect of keeping my family's Jewish heritage a secret left me with a feeling of shame and some paranoia. Whenever I revealed my family's Jewish past, I felt incredibly vulnerable. Would the person listening think less of me now that they knew I was Jewish? Had I somehow put myself in jeopardy? Had I betrayed my father? Learning about the Holocaust and the horrific things that were done to Jews and imagining what my grandparents and other relatives might have suffered was profoundly disturbing to me.

I felt keenly the injustice of the persecution my family had endured because they were Jews. Gradually I understood why my father tried to protect us from persecution by raising us as Christians and hiding our Judaism. I found meaningful ways to weave my Jewish heritage and identity with my Christian upbringing and beliefs. My brother and I began to observe Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, with our mother. As I sat in the temple singing Yom Kippur songs in Hebrew, I had the strangest feeling of coming home. It felt right to honor and remember our grandparents this way.

I think I can understand how fundamentally essential it is for Jews to have carved out a homeland in Israel where they can live freely without fear of persecution. I think I also understand how threatened, fearful, and defensive Israel must feel to be surrounded by so many countries who have vowed to wipe them off the face of the earth. What is so dis-

troubling now is to see how my people, the oppressed and former victims, have become the powerful oppressors, and what's even more terrible is how they're blind to what they're doing to the Palestinians. I am appalled at how Israel continues to displace, oppress, and tyrannize the Palestinians. My sympathy lies with the Palestinians because of the horrendous injustices being done to them. But my concern also extends to the Israelis. What toll is their cruelty taking on their souls?

My favorite aunt was a secular Jew from Poland who immigrated to America in the 1930's. She was an erudite, intelligent woman with broad sympathies and liberal/socialist leanings. She was the only one in my family who supported Viet Nam war protests. But whenever we talked about Israel, she lost all objectivity and became a Zionist. Her fear and sense of persecution ran too deep.

Both Israel and Palestine deserve to live in peace. They both have a right to a homeland. There must be a way, but I don't see how Israel can move beyond her paranoia and Palestine can move beyond her rage and despair.

~ Peg Lehman is a folk singer, recording artist, Chicago Public School artist-in-residence, and a member of the Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Illinois.

Always the woman takes all the issues on her shoulders, to solve the problems in her house. Maybe the man is busy thinking how he will find work, but maybe he didn't think how to find food for the children. But the women everywhere in the world are always thinking about that... Since maybe six years I haven't gone to another city outside Bethlehem because of the checkpoints. It's so hard for us to pass them, with many, many checkpoints in just two or three kilometers.

~ Palestinian refugee, Deheishe camp



The coordinator of the women's textile and craft cooperative in At-tuwani spoke of their struggle to find new sources of income for families whose farming is disrupted by the nearby Israeli settlement.

A Theological Reflection on the Palestine Experience

The word theology comes from the Greek *theos* (God) and *logos* (words). Theology: words that point to God, to the Divine. Words often learned as children, and often rooted in experience and lived reality. Sacred texts are words passed from generation to generation, later written and treasured as holy, even treasured as God's words.

In January I visited Palestine/Israel, the place that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam honor as holy. It's a root-place of our sacred story where living, God-drenched words turned memory into scripture. These three Abrahamic religions' legacies had been re-called and re-told, written and re-written until they became sacred texts. On this trip, these words lived anew for me. Sacred stories were enacted all around me that pointed to experiences, understandings, and images about life's source and end, and about meaning and hope. I saw and heard many scriptural stories that were a compass for people who suffered and struggled for freedom from occupation and/or violence.

Scriptural stories gave clues about how persons today, like their forebears, could engage life's struggles and challenges while giving thanks for life's abundance and joy. In fact, I saw very diverse theologies enacted. Israel's occupation policies in Palestine, like the U.S. occupation in Iraq, disclose a particular view of God. Likewise the policies of terrorists in those countries and other parts of the world project a view of what they understand is divine, of what is right and good and true. But I believe there is only one divine reality. Thus hostile dissent and war can only be justified as good,

right, and holy by identifying one's own action, position, and beliefs as part of the divine, and the "other" as apart from the divine. We are of course not surprised that the actions of people and nations serve the desires embodied in their/our political, economic, legal, military, moral, cultural, and other intents. Yet scriptures caution us against idolatry, against imaging the divine so as to justify our desires.

But amid war, hostility, occupation, and terror, how do we hold to divine abundance and grace amid brutal and conflicting desires, beliefs, hopes? When life swirls with ambiguity, confusion, fear, conflict, and suffering, can we meet "others" as God's beloved?

Picture this...

...a Jewish settler whose deep spirituality is confident that God gave the land of "greater Israel" to the Jewish people "in all generations."

...a Muslim woman whose deep spirituality kept her from becoming bitter as their land was confiscated and she and her husband lost their jobs when the wall went up, because "Allah is good, and I do not have to understand in order to trust."

...an Israeli man who lost his young daughter to a terrorist bomb and a Palestinian man who lost his brother to military beating who are committed to work for their fellow citizens to see and engage "other" as human, as persons created and cherished by the divine.

I need not agree with others to recognize that theology, how people envision and think about the divine, is particular. Looking at human behavior, theology relates to, arises from, and points toward



Delegation member Lauree Hersch Meyer visits with her host family in Hebron.

what people actually believe, know, and love. Lived theology relates to peoples' and nations' deepest-held values, hopes, longings, and beliefs. Reasoned theology makes statements that are often made in universal, all-encompassing terms. Yet lived theology is less inclined to make universal proclamations than to be expressed in peoples' specific, embodied, particular experiences.

This trip illumined for me how 'God became human' in Jesus, and remains forever human among people and experiences. This mystifies me today as much as God's behavior must have mystified Jesus' companions and disciples in his day. The Divine is One. By whatever name, the Divine/God/Allah *is* human in Christians, Jews, Muslims, settlers, soldiers, and refugees. Yet my understanding of God is not to be measured by their actions or beliefs, nor theirs by mine. Rather, as I believe the Divine is One, I am to engage each person I meet as my divinely-given brother or sister. In that sense, I am more interested in how people "incarnate" the divine than in their declared beliefs, faith confessions, or ethical codes. I intend to honor the presence of the divine in all who extend compassionate humanity and blessing to those with whom they come in contact.

~ Lauree Hersch Meyer, retired Professor of Biblical Theology at Colgate Rochester Theological Seminary and Bethany Theological Seminary, is a member of the Manassas (VA) Church of the Brethren, living in Rushville, New York.

Having family is a very big thing, you know. Believe me, people do not have any other choice than to be strong. Otherwise — there isn't even any "otherwise". What to do, to start crying in the street? No! You have to be strong. You only have to be strong. ~ Palestinian refugee, Deheishe camp

On Earth Peace Encourages Brethren Benefit Trust to Reconsider Investment in Caterpillar

At its fall board meetings, the On Earth Peace board of directors decided to send a letter to Brethren Benefit Trust to ask for reconsideration of Church of the Brethren investment in the Caterpillar Corporation. The appeal was based on the systematic use of armored D-9 bulldozers by the Israeli Defense Forces to destroy homes, farms, and communities in Palestine.

Also in the fall, the Pacific Southwest District Conference passed a resolution to be brought to the 2006 Annual Conference, calling on Brethren Benefit Trust to “divest itself from ownership of Caterpillar Corporation and any other

company that sells products which are used routinely as weapons of destruction or death in Israel and Palestine.”

Brethren Benefit Trust (BBT) has responded positively, choosing at this time to first engage Caterpillar in dialogue. If this is unproductive, the BBT board will reconsider divestment.

In a press release on December 8, 2005, BBT president Wil Nolen stated, “This is a human rights issue that needs to be addressed. BBT board members and staff look forward to addressing this issue with On Earth Peace and Annual Conference.” (See Annual Conference section below for more information.)

After two days of traveling, I arrived at At-tuwani to find a very sad sight: during the night before, settlers from the nearby Israeli settlement of Maon had hacked all the branches off a grove of more than 100 olive trees. The trees should survive, but won't bear again for about five years. It's amazing how stoic the Palestinian farmers are. “God is good,” they say.

~ Bob Gross

Israel/Palestine Focus at Annual Conference

On Earth Peace will present an insight session, “Working for Peace in the Middle East,” Sunday, July 2, at 12:30 p.m. David Waas, North Manchester, Indiana, and On Earth Peace staff Susanna Farahat, both of whom were members of the January delegation, will speak from their experience and their knowledge of the current situation and its historical context.

Brethren Benefit Trust will be facilitating a listening session on Sunday evening at 9:00 p.m., for discussion of the resolution being brought to Annual Conference from the Pacific Southwest district. The resolution calls for divestment from Caterpillar Corporation stock, due to the continuing use of Caterpillar equipment as weapons of war in Palestine.

New resources on Israel/Palestine will be available at the On Earth Peace exhibit booth.



January delegates enjoy a meal at a home in At-Tuwani.

I lost my childhood because of the first intifada; I had to be responsible when I was a child. And now, when I'm not young, we have the second intifada and I lost everything. I'm not saying that to say that I'm sad. I'm not sad, you know. I believe in fate. This is my fate, my family's fate. This is what we have and like it was once said, lighting a candle is better than cursing the darkness. We have to survive and hope the future will be better.

~ Palestinian refugee, Deheishe camp

Christians in Palestine

The Sabeel Center is a Palestinian Christian center for theology and social concerns, located in Jerusalem. Once, when visiting Sabeel, our speaker told of a question asked by an earlier delegation: "When did Christianity come to Palestine?"

The question brings a chuckle, but it raises a very sad question: "Will Christianity disappear from Palestine?"

Until the fifteenth century, Christians were the majority in Palestine. By the 1920's, they were still 52% of the population. During the period of Jewish immigration in the twentieth century, the partition of Palestine which created the state of Israel in 1947, and the wars of 1948 and 1967, this number has con-

tinued to decrease, as Christians left the area either voluntarily or as refugees. In Palestine, Christians tend to be a little better off educationally and economically, and to have international connections, so it is easier for them to leave the country.

Even through those times, Bethlehem, with its neighboring towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, continued to be predominately Christian. Now, under the Israeli occupation and with the separation wall beginning to wrap around them, these towns are also losing their Christian population. The Bethlehem district is now less than 40% Christian, and Palestine as a whole is about 2%.

~ Bob Gross

I think that people in my community are much more aware of how the wall affects them than anyone else. I think that it's a natural human characteristic to worry more about how you're going to be affected than the other side. And if Palestinians can't stop other Palestinians from being terrorists then it's just par for the course that there has to be a wall. I think it's one of those common syndrome things where I'm so busy with my own things that I don't necessarily know what's bad about it for the other person... I would hardly even be aware that it's a problem for the Palestinians if it weren't for some Arab fellows from the local village, that we're friendly with... and he mentions every time he's here that he doesn't know — I mean the wall's just a hop, skip, and a jump from us — but he really doesn't know how he's going to be supporting his family once it goes up.

~ Israeli settler, born in the US

2006 Calendar

May 10

Conflict Transformation for Congregational Leaders
Camp Inspiration Hills
Burbank, Ohio

May 19-20

Lancaster (PA) Church of the Brethren
Jr. High Retreat on Advocacy
Washington, DC

June 5-9

Youth Peace Travel Team Orientation at Ministry Summer Service
Richmond, Indiana

June 7-9

Youth Peace Travel Team Orientation
Camp Mack
Milford, Indiana

July 1-5

Annual Conference (see insert)
Des Moines, Iowa

July 5-11

Wild Rose Song & Story Fest (see p. 8)
Camp Pine Lake
Eldora, Iowa

July 22-27

National Youth Conference
Fort Collins, Colorado

September 4-8

National Older Adult Conference
Lake Junaluska, North Carolina

September 10

Civilian Public Service Reunion
New Windsor, Maryland

September 22-23

On Earth Peace Board of Directors Meeting
New Windsor, Maryland

November 16-18

Advanced Reconciliation Skills II: Systems Thinking, Anxiety & Conflict
Camp Mack
Milford, Indiana

November 17-19

Area 1 Shalom Teams Workshop
New Windsor, Maryland

More information available on these programs and much more at www.brethren.org/oepa

Wild Rose Song and Story Fest

Blossom Into Wholeness!



July 5 – July 11, 2006
Camp Pine Lake – Eldora, Iowa

A unique Family Camp (co-sponsored by On Earth Peace)
featuring Brethren musicians and storytellers
in the fertile fields and valleys of Iowa.

Gather with us to sing and share together, simply and peacefully,
and to continue our quest to Blossom Into Wholeness!

Featuring Storytellers, Workshop Leaders, and Musicians

The Button-Harrison Family Debbie Eisenbise Bob Gross Kathy Guisewite
Jonathan Hunter Bill Jolliff Brian Kruschwitz & LuAnne Harley Jim Lehman
Peg Lehman Sue Overman Barb Saylor Mike Stern

*For more information and to register, visit www.brethren.org/oepa/SongandStoryFest2006.html,
e-mail oepa_oepa@brethren.org or call 410-635-8704.*

When I look upon the Wall I have no thoughts and only muted emotions. The Wall has twisted itself around Bethlehem and Jerusalem communities with boa constrictor grip. [By cutting into Palestinian towns and olive groves] the Wall fatally squeezes the love and understanding out of ethnically different communities.

~ Glenna Drisko,
delegation member from
St. Louis, Missouri

Staff

Annie Clark, program coordinator –
Ministry of Reconciliation
260-982-8595
annieclark@mchsi.com

Bob Gross, co-executive director
260-982-7751
bgross@igc.org

Susanna Farahat, program
coordinator – Peace Education
410-635-8706
sfarahat_oepa@brethren.org

Darlene Johnson, office manager
410-635-8704
djohnson_oepa@brethren.org

Matt Guynn, program coordinator –
Peace Witness
765-962-6234
mattguynn@earthlink.net

Barbara Saylor, co-executive director
502-222-5886
bsaylor_oepa@brethren.org

Board of Directors

October 1, 2005 - September 30, 2006

Doris Abdullah (Treasurer)
Kim Chaffin
Ken Edwards
Ken Frantz (Vice-Chair)
Dena Gilbert
David Jehnsen
Verdena Lee (At-Large)
Sarah Quinter Malone
Lauree Hersch Meyer (Secretary)
Phil Miller
Robert Miller (At-Large)
Debbie Roberts
Bev Weaver (Chair)
Brenda Wilkinson