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Beth Emet The Free Synagogue

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When I first became an Israeli-Palestinian peace activist more than 30 years ago, I thought the conflict in Israel was between Jews and Palestinians. Over the years I've come to realize that the conflict is actually between those who believe that both peoples can find a way to live peacefully together and respect the rights and dignity of the other and those who do not. That there are Jews and Palestinians who will exploit the basest fears of their people to dehumanize the other and those who are willing to hear the stories and empathize with others. That there are those who realize that they can't have their maximalist claims to all the land and those who idolize the land at the expense of the well-being of the next generation that will surely experience more bloodshed because of the inability of their elders to prioritize people over land.

Recently, I received a request to disseminate a petition condemning Palestinian textbooks for teaching hatred of Jews. I responded that the last time scholars examined Palestinian and Israeli textbooks, they found that the hatred of the other presented in these books was about equal. I refused to share the petition because I'm not interested in demonizing Palestinians while giving my own people a pass on its racism. What will that accomplish? We criticize Palestinians so we don't have to confront the rot within our own people? We think if "they" would just change, then peace will come, but Jews are free to dehumanize Palestinians without any ramifications? This latest conflagration is the result of that delusional thinking.

In addition to this petition, I'm often sent videos, articles, books, etc. and asked my opinion about the veracity of them. I often find that there are kernels of truth, but that what's represented is incomplete. And what's omitted is as important to understanding the issue as what is included. A picture may paint a thousand words, but which pictures we look at determine what we understand and don't understand about the conflict.

As Donniel Hartman, the director of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, summed it up this way: "I am angry because over and over again we choose narratives that contribute to our moral mediocrity and elevate a bad and unsustainable status quo."

(<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/i-am-angry-and-i-cannot-put-my-anger-aside-until-things-are-quiet/>)

In this current crisis, there are people and organizations, especially in the Jewish community, who only woke up to what's happening in Israel when Hamas started lobbing rockets from Gaza. Where were these organizations for the last several weeks when Israel was trying to forcibly evict Palestinians from their homes in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah? Crickets. Or claiming, if they said anything at all, that the issue is not political, but legal and that the Israeli courts were dealing with it. But that's only part of the picture. There are Jews trying to evict Palestinians from their homes by claiming that because Jews owned property there before 1948, they should be allowed to return and reclaim property there.

Do you know where these Palestinians who are threatened with eviction in Sheikh Jarrah lived in 1948 when the war broke out? They were living in Talbīyah—a neighborhood in the heart of

West Jerusalem. Should they be allowed to return there? Nope. Israel would never allow Palestinians to reclaim land they had once owned. This is not merely a property dispute; protestors are challenging a discriminatory law. Moreover, the Israeli government is complicit in the expulsions because they send in the police to evacuate homes, and they are asked by the courts their opinion as to whether or not these homes should be confiscated. This is political.

The confrontation in Sheikh Jarrah, of course, is just the latest match thrown into a volatile situation. If you ever spend any time in Israel or watch closely what's happening there, you know that the question is never "if" there will be another round of violence, but "when". The injustice, hatred, and persecution is always simmering just below the surface and can erupt at any moment. The last war was in 2014. Before that it was 2008 and then there were the intifadas—Palestinian uprisings—of 2000 and 1987, Yitchak Rabin's assassination in 1995 and all the smaller skirmishes in between.

In 1987 in the months leading up to the first intifada, I was working as a waitress at the café at Cinematheque in Jerusalem. One day I showed up to work the dinner shift when I found the kitchen staff, all of whom were Palestinian, being dragged to jail because they had gotten into a skirmish with the Israeli Border Guards. The border guards were trying to arrest a Palestinian bread seller who didn't have the proper permits. He had run across the street from the Old City with his bread cart which had overturned on the steps leading to the café. Bread was strewn across the steps and everyone was yelling as the kitchen staff was hauled off to jail. The waitresses, all of whom were Jewish Israeli women, said, "You can't blame the Palestinians for fighting with the border guards. They get harassed all the time." This is exactly what I had been hearing nightly from the Palestinian kitchen staff when I would hang out with them in the kitchen when there was a lull in the restaurant. They would tell me stories about their negative interactions with soldiers, and the injustices they faced trying to get to work in West Jerusalem or get building permits to build in their villages, etc. Shortly after I left that job and returned to the States, the first intifada broke out. American Jews were surprised because they were unaware of Palestinian life in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. And this was before checkpoints and border walls. Because I had had a front seat to the conflict, I felt obligated to share the stories I had heard and to educate my community. This is how my activism began.

From this experience, I developed the conviction that hearing each other's stories and creating alliances across ethnic backgrounds is the only way to develop true empathy for each other and, ultimately, to resolve this conflict. The two sides in this conflict are not Israeli and Palestinian but those who believe in justice and peace for both peoples and those who don't.

In addition to the bombing now happening in Israel, there has been an explosion of violence in many cities in Israel as Palestinian and Jewish mobs beat people up and destroy property. Although there has been violence on both sides, the Israeli police turn a blind eye when it's Jews attacking Palestinians.

This morning I received a heart wrenching call from Rawy Khatib who is our family's adopted Palestinian son. We met Rawy in 2010 when he came to live with us while he and my son, Yonah, attended a program called Hands of Peace that brings together Americans, Palestinians and Jewish Israelis to discuss the conflict in Israel. Over the years we have spent time with his family who live in a town outside of Haifa, and he has stayed at our house in Evanston many times.

Rawy now lives in Haifa and painted a pretty grim picture of what is happening there. Well-armed Jews from outside of Haifa, possibly settlers from the West Bank, have arrived in Haifa and are harassing Palestinians. They are part of a movement called Lehava which is linked to far-right wing members of Knesset Ben G'vir and Smotrich. The Haifa police have not been protecting Palestinians and have been arresting Palestinians who have been trying to protect their homes. He doesn't feel safe leaving his apartment. I told him that I had seen pictures of Jewish Israelis standing in solidarity with Palestinians in Haifa and asked if they've been helpful. He replied that they are gathering in protest on the Carmel—a predominantly Jewish neighborhood—and not in the Palestinians neighborhoods where the violence is occurring. He's feeling desperate to get the Palestinian story out and for the US to intervene and protect Palestinians.

(play video of Jews attacking a Palestinian car in Haifa)

Why has fighting broken out in the streets in this round of fighting?

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, executive director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights:

“The shocking violence in the streets is the result of years and years of provocation by Prime Minister Netanyahu and others, who cast Palestinian citizens as a fifth column; passed the Nation-State Law, which enshrines legal inequality; and neglected Palestinian communities, who spent much of the past year protesting against the indifference by the Israeli government and police to intracommunal violence. In the past few days, Israeli Jewish extremist groups have organized on Telegram and WhatsApp to travel to mixed cities in order to carry out violent and destructive attacks against Palestinian citizens, their homes, and their businesses. In these same towns, Palestinian citizens have torched synagogues, seriously wounded Jews, and attacked Jewish homes and businesses. There is no justification for such violence, by either party. But it is not random — it is the direct effect of years of government policies and incitement.”

Why worry about textbooks when the rhetoric from the government and actions of people on the ground are hateful and discriminatory?

Rabbi Jacobs continues, “Part of the background is also Netanyahu's desperate attempt to hold onto power, during a week when a potential new governing coalition came close to ousting him. Hamas, too, is playing a power game with their rivals in the Palestinian Authority, after President Abbas canceled planned Palestinian elections.”

The burning question today is not if you are pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian: that's not the correct binary. Rather, are you willing to join forces so that Palestinians and Jews can live in peace and security and with equal rights to live freely and determine their own destiny? We can yell and scream until we are blue in the face about Israel's right to defend itself and post pictures of ourselves with a “we stand with Israel” logo, but what will this get us? Of course Israel has the right to defend itself. Of course Hamas' indiscriminate shooting of rockets into Israeli population centers is abhorrent and should be condemned. But we still must ask the question as to whether bombing Gaza to smithereens and letting hoards of violent Jews terrorize Palestinians—who are citizens of Israel—are going to protect Israel? I think not.

The violence we are seeing now is just a symptom of the disease which cannot be eliminated until we cure the disease itself. As Gershom Gorenberg put it brilliantly in an article in the

Washington Post entitled, “Israelis and Palestinians Can’t Go on Like This. Weep For Us,” we have ignored the underlying conditions at our own peril.

He writes:

“We could go on forever this way, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cheering squad wanted us to think. The intifada was long past. We were secure.

We were supposed to believe Gaza could suffer quietly under blockade. The conflict, if not over, was under control. We could make peace with far-off kingdoms, without giving anything up or seeing the people living next to us.”

He continues, “The police used familiar aggressive tactics against protests at the al-Aqsa Mosque, ignoring the effect of clashes on sacred ground. Because nothing had blown up, the government acted as if nothing would blow up.”

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/13/israelis-palestinians-cant-go-like-this-weep-us/>)

Israelis don’t see what’s happening in Gaza or in the West Bank. They are literally walled off from it and don’t have to pay attention to the persecution of Palestinians there. When groups like Breaking the Silence—former IDF soldiers who share their stories about their army service in the West Bank—tell Israelis about the reality of the occupation they are often silenced or shunned. Gorenberg pointedly shows how this willful ignorance by the Israeli public combined with the complicity of the Israeli government is dangerous to Israel’s security.

Add to this that Palestinian elections never happen and Israeli elections happen all too often, leaving a leadership void. We cannot possibly be surprised by the violence when it erupts.

I know it’s no surprise to anyone at Beth Emet that I am involved with J Street. For the last 5 years, I’ve been a co-chair of the national rabbinic and cantorial cabinet. I’m involved with J Street because I believe that J Street has done more to change the conversation in DC about Israel, making room for new, creative thinking that considers the rights of both Palestinians and Jews which I believe will help Israel extricate itself from this morass and reach a just and lasting peace with the Palestinians. Strong American intervention and mediation will be needed to bring peace.

It’s also important to support Israeli and Palestinian peace and justice organizations that are doing important work on the ground, but who are perennially underfunded and overlooked. I will mention a few with which I am personally familiar to give you a sense of what’s out there.

[Standing Together](#)—Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel working to build a shared society. They have been protesting in large number throughout the country under the banner, “Jews and Arabs Refuse to be Enemies.”

Other Voice—Jews and Bedouins who live in the south of Israel near the Gaza border who are working to develop relationships with each other and with Gazans.

[The Parents Circle—Families Forum](#)—Jews and Palestinians who have lost loved ones in the conflict. They gather to support each other and share their stories of shared grief with the world.

[Combatants for Peace](#)—Jews and Palestinians who have been engaged as combatants and now are committed to work together for peace.

[Torat Tzedek](#)—Rabbi Arik Ascherman’s organization that works with individual Palestinians to access their grazing lands and navigate the Israeli administration that governs the Palestinians living in the West Bank.

[ALLMEP](#)—The Alliance for Middle East Peace—a network of Israeli and Palestinian peace builders.

There is also a petition being circulated encouraging the Biden administration to intervene. Sign it. Bekki is putting it in the chat. Just today, Jewish members of congress, including Jan Schakowsky, wrote a letter to Pres. Biden today urging him to become more actively involved.

On Sunday night we arrive at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah on the holiday of Shavuot.

What can we learn from Torah to guide our way at this difficult time?

There’s a concept within our tradition “Mipnei Darkhei Shalom—on account of the ways of peace” that I find particularly applicable at this moment in time. We learn that we must treat non-Jews who live among us the same as we treat Jews if we want to create a peaceful and harmonious society.

The Talmud teaches:

“We do not prevent the non-Jewish poor from gleaning from the corners of the field (the portion of one’s harvest that is meant for the poor) on account of the “ways of peace.” In a city in which both Jews and non-Jews reside, people from both communities should be appointed to leadership roles, and basic necessities should be given to non-Jews as well as Jews on account of the “ways of peace.” (Talmud Yerushalmi Gittin 33 summarized)

Rambam adds the proof texts for this concept:

Psalm 145 “Tov Adonai lakol, v’rachamav al kol ma’asav—God is good to all, God’s mercy is upon all God’s works.”

And this verse from Proverbs that we sing as we put the Torah back in the ark: D’racheha darkhei noam, v’chol n’tivoteha shalom—The Torah’s ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths of peace. (Proverbs 3:17)

I pray at this dark and precarious time in our people’s history, we can see beyond the binary of Jew and Palestinian and instead be united by God’s mercy and pursue the path of peace together.

As Gorenberg concludes his article:

“Somehow this will stop... We will see each other’s faces, each other’s pain. It is what can come after anger and grief, what must come. I have to believe.”

Palestinians and Israelis must see the humanity of each other and realize that the enemy is not the other, but those who refuse to believe that Jews and Palestinians can live in peace, dignity and security.