

REFLECTIONS ON WAR AND PEACE

ISRAEL/HAMAS

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AN IMPERFECT ESSAY

Imperfect?

Yes. It's not ready.

It is ready to be read. To be agreed with or argued against. To like or dismiss. To provoke thought, action, or boredom. For that it is ready.

It is not ready to be graded.

This essay is imperfect in two ways: structure and content.

By structure I refer to the actual writing, the lines and paragraphs, the breaks and order, even word selection. When I write a book it is typically a 2–3-year process. With my essays and “white papers” it can be a 2–6-month project. Each literary project includes many readings, lots of corrections, major revisions, and rigorous editing.

No time for that now. With the Israel/Hamas War morphing, spreading, escalating by the day, there is urgency with this writing. As a pastor I have a responsibility to provide a pastoral touch, a pastoral perspective on whatever we are facing as individuals, a nation, or the world. Sometimes I have had the luxury of time. With our Church's 300th Anniversary on the far horizon, I presented a preparatory White Paper seven years ahead; and it took root three years later. Oftentimes my writing was allowed to percolate, giving me time to wrestle, ponder, pray, refine, question. This is not to suggest that the finished product was any good. Only that it was finished properly.

Not this one.

The content is also imperfect. Shifting battlefields, changing dynamics, fresh brutalities and evidence provide new nuances, new details, and especially new topics that deserve attention. This essay began Sunday afternoon, October 15, and the last sentence was written early on November 3. What Hamas began as a Holocaust-adjacent massacre in Israel became an earth-shattering invasion of Gaza by Israel. What began as a way for Hamas to kill Jews, killed more than Jews. The resulting Israeli way to crush Hamas, crushed more than Hamas. Unholy alliances are already in play. One sentence says it all: Houthi rebels in

Yemen shot missiles toward Israel that were intercepted by US warships sent to the Mediterranean to guard US interests before Russia and Iran provide new weapons systems to Hezbollah.

No quick-response essay can do justice to the full spectrum of concerns. I admit it. I apologize but it is still right to write with urgency.

Even quick writing is a journey, with many stops along the way, some jarring, some inspiring. Two weeks into the war I visited the art gallery at Fairfield University, featuring the work of Arthur Szyk. Szyk was a Polish Jewish refugee, escaping the Nazis and the Holocaust, ending up in Connecticut. Combining words, mythic images, classical motifs, and political commentary, his art makes you sit up straight and take notice. One of his hardest, even harshest, paintings is “Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe.” Based on Ben Hecht’s poem which centers the painting, Szyk surrounds it with miniaturist painting in the margins similar to ancient medieval Bibles and texts. But the beating heart is Hecht’s deeply disturbing poem, dripping with sarcasm:

*Four Million Jews waiting for death
Oh hang and burn but - quiet, Jews!
Don't be bothersome; save you breath -
The world is busy with other news.*

*Four million murders are quite a smear
Even our State Department views
The slaughter with much disfavor here
But then - it's busy with other news.
You'll hang like a forest of broken trees
You'll burn in a thousand Nazi stews
And tell your G-d to forgive us please
For we were busy with other news.*

*Tell Him we hadn't quite the time
To stop the killing of all the Jews;
Tell Him we looked askance at the crime -
But we were busy with other news.*

*Oh World be patient - it will take
Some time before the murder crews
Are done. By Christmas you can make
Your Peace on Earth without the Jews.*

Yes, we can turn away. Yes, it is too much, in Israel and in Gaza. Yes, we are fatigued by constant calamity, injustice, and disaster.

No, we cannot afford to turn away.

Now, enter my world, or at least the most troubled corner of the world through my mind. By definition, opening one's mind leaves us open, including to uncomfortable facts, thoughts, and opinions. We have the right and responsibility, by virtue of our humanity and faith, to feel deeply, think critically, and love hopefully.

WE ARE ALL JEWS

That's how I was raised: We are all Jews. Not past tense. Present tense.

My father was ahead of his time. His close friendship with our local Rabbi extended to rigidly competitive handball and mutual sermon critiques. They studied the Bible and the Midrash together, delving deep into ancient stories and their present-day application.

I first heard a modern take on classic Biblical theology from that Rabbi. Until then, my 1950s religious world was divided into Christians who believed the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus. That was half our neighborhood. The other half, Jews, were still waiting for the promised Messiah. He would come one day and save the Jewish people from the slings and arrows of malicious, evil, anti-Semites; from future holocausts and everyday outrage.

But our Rabbi neighbor said that Israel was the Messiah. Israel was the Savior of the Jewish people. No more waiting for a Christmas type "unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given," as in Isaiah's Messianic prophecy. No more King David bloodline or Bethlehem birthplace. No more sort of superhero warrior to make the world think twice before coming after Jews, singularly or universally. Israel had their back. Israel was the Messiah.

This was around 1960, so the nation of Israel was barely a decade old. Emerging from a decade of Holocaust, itself the demon child of a thousand years of Jew-hatred across Europe, played out in little villages and whole national

policies, pogroms, and blame for anything that went wrong – against that backdrop of tortured history, Israel’s nationhood was a strong message to the world: We survived, we are here, get used to it.

Thus, the present and the presence of Israel was in my DNA along with a kind of mystical relationship with Judaism. We were raised with more than a tolerance for Jews and a respect for Judaism. We were more like family, which made for an intense interest in all things Jewish. Around the dining room table every year my father read aloud, and we discussed, the story of Judas Maccabee and the victory of the Maccabeans. After a remnant of ancient Greece conquered Israel, humiliated the people and defiled the holy Temple, the Maccabean rebels led an insurrection to push out the foreign army, regain freedom and restore the Temple. You know this story through the annual, near Christmastime, Jewish holiday of Hannukah. But in our Swedish-American, very Protestant home Judas Maccabee and the miracle of Hannukah were our story, too.

That was true of the whole Old Testament, come to think of it. In our church the Old Testament was not “old” in the sense of being passé or supplanted by the better “New” Testament. It was “old” only in the sense of being older, B.C., before Christ. But its stories, lessons, and truths were alive to us. Moses parting the Red Sea and leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, Joshua winning the battle of Jericho in dramatic fashion, David defeating Goliath, Ruth’s triumph of love, Samson’s strength, the Prophets’ clarion call to justice, Daniel standing up for his faith, that was our religion, too, our spiritual history, too.

As America matured in understanding, the first attempt at interfaith language was the hyphenated “Judeo-Christian,” often referring to ethics or values or foundational principles for America. The term suggested that Jews and Christians were co-equal partners in defining the virtues of America and how to do things right.

You know Jesus was Jewish, right? I write that a bit tongue in cheek, but for most Christians and most Americans that was not known, or understood. The 1970s and 80s changed that, with much greater emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus. If Jesus was Jewish, more people were open to learning more about Judaism and Israel. Suddenly, Jews and Christians were family, however extended or distant, or even dysfunctional. Theologically this got played out in unusual ways. Groups like “Jews for Jesus” and “Messianic Jews” became very

public about their still vibrant Jewishness now immersed in Christ. At the same time, other Christians started to accommodate the spiritual legitimacy of Judaism. Denominations gave up targeting Jews for conversion. Christian thinkers admitted that Jews had a unique relationship with God and therefore did not require Christianity to have salvation. Jews could stand on their own two feet. Israel did that for Jews as a nation. Judaism did that for Jews as a faith. My father was ahead of time on this, and I tagged along.

Well, that's my predisposition. Some would say prejudice. Like all words with "pre" at the front, it means I have a lot to learn, I don't have all the facts, there's more to know and grow.

Other awful tragedies have forged sayings similar to "we are all Jews." The terrorist bombing of the Boston Marathon, the synagogue murders in Pittsburgh, the mass killings at a concert in Paris, and the execution of staff at France's Charlie Hebdo Magazine, each created a sense of shared belonging through suffering. "Boston Strong" reflected the unity. Even clearer was the declaration after the Hebdo murders, "Je Suis Charlie" – we are all Charlie.

My statement, "we are all Jews," echoes that grief-driven bond while adding something more personal, steeped in shared faith. It may not be only my story, but it is also my story.

JEWIS IN ISRAEL

Extremism brings out the worst in every cause. So, it is not surprising that a few Palestinian, Arab, and/or Muslim voices declare that there is no proof of Jewish presence in Israel in ancient times. Having read that sentence, drop it – we can't argue at that level. The average Palestinian, Arab, and/or Muslim recognizes the history of the Jewish people. It is a fractured and complex history, no doubt. Even the Bible doesn't sugarcoat it.

Will you accept a Cliff Notes version of "Jews in Israel" if five points get us from "once upon a time" to today?

(1) When God chose Abraham in order to start God's grand experiment to develop a fresh relationship with humanity, there was no Judaism, no Israel; and

there were no Jews. Abraham was from Ur, in Chaldees, ancient Babylon, modern Iraq. In other words, God started with a family, an extended family, a clan. God and Abraham entered into a covenant in which God would create a great nation through Abraham and his descendants, and the Abraham bloodline would bless the whole world as a “light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6). Once Abraham agreed, the road to Jerusalem begins.

(2) The “wandering Jew” is a plant, so named for an antisemitic trope. The plant has been renamed, but it is true that there is a Jewish history of wandering. When God called Abraham with the words “Get thee to a far country,” it would be generations and centuries of wandering and waiting before they had a true home. The founding families of Judaism/Israel, the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were perpetually on the move. For several generations after Jacob, they were slaves in Egypt. Moses led the freedom march out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, toward the Promised Land. Intimidated by the people already living in the Promised Land, they were afraid to enter. God punished their failure with another forty years of wandering. Finally, under Joshua they quickly conquered “Canaan” and made it their home, their Promised Land. That permanence lasted 1300 years, interrupted by the conquering Assyrians and Babylonians who carried Jews off to exile. But they always turned to Israel as home. The major return to wandering came in 70 A.D. with the Roman destruction of Israel, scattering Jews to the four winds. What Jewish people refer to as “the diaspora” (dispersal), led to Jews in faraway places, such as Russia, India, South Africa, as well as across Europe and the Middle East. Even then, the incessant waves of antisemitism and violent pogroms kept Jews on the move, reinforcing the image of the wandering Jew.

(3) The Promised Land may have been promised to the Jews. However, they, perhaps, imagined it as a vast expanse of unpopulated, mostly empty land that they would populate, farm, and turn into a revival of Paradise. Instead, this place known as Canaan was filled with Canaanites, people gathered under various names and kings as tribes and kingdoms. The Bible doesn’t shy away from this sad fact. For Israel to become a stand-on-their-own-two-feet free people they had to tackle, defeat, subject, kill and keep at arm’s length lots of other people. The seeds of October 7 were planted a long time ago. President Jimmy Carter’s book about the Middle East uses the title “The Blood of Abraham,” a stark reminder

that everyone at each other's throat over there has the same spiritual and physical bloodline, all back to Abraham.

(4) While Jews ended up in unlikely places, verified by DNA, keeping aspects of faith and culture alive, we are more aware of European Jews and their history. By prejudice and custom, the Jews were kept out of the mainstream. Ghettos emerged wherever Jews congregated in numbers substantial enough to require a ghetto to keep them in place, literally. Never accepted, always suspected, Jews must have been forever waiting for the next plague or scourge, with the blame falling on them, necessitating yet another exodus, exile or worse. Sometimes from a village or a region, sometimes expelled from whole nations, it was rarely possible for a Jew to be fully oneself and to feel at home. Spending most of their existence looking over their shoulder, expecting the worst, some began to look outward, beyond, and elsewhere.

(5) There were always Jews in what was variously called Palestine, Israel, or the Holy Land. And there were Palestinians. Not many of either, more Palestinians to be sure. Remember, please, however you draw Israel/Palestine on a map and by whatever given name, it is a small, small place.

By the late 1800s, Jews in Europe knew that Europe would never be a truly safe and equitable home. A "Back to Israel," or at least a "Get out of Europe before it's too late" movement began. Far reaching locations like Uganda and Argentina were considered. But Palestine, the Biblical land of Israel, drew the heart and soul, and the bodies, of Jews. A trickle at first. By the early 1900s it may not have yet been a river but definitely a bubbling brook. By the 1930s the urgency was clear, and post-World War II brought a flooded river of surviving Jews.

How did it work out as Jews moved to Palestine? To continue my analogy, a trickle of Jews was met by a trickle of conflict. A flood of Jews was met by a flood of conflict. Initially, no doubt, a Jew from central Europe might move to Palestine, rent a living space from an Arab or Palestinian family, hire out as a worker, save money, buy some land, build a house, start an orchard. No real complaints. But when five Jewish families show up from Europe, buy 100 acres, start a business, soon a sleepy Arab Muslim village becomes a bustling mixed cacophony of language, tastes, smells, habits. Some could handle it, even welcome it. Some would not.

Meanwhile, World War II was looming, some Arabs cozy up to Hitler, the British “mandate” to rule Palestine has an expiration date, Palestinians are counting on being a free country at last. No more British. No more Ottoman Turks. No more outsiders.

With euphoria for Palestinians just around the corner, World War II ended, Europe’s surviving Jews filled displacement camps, the newly formed United Nations wrestled with what to do, and the Jewish people yearned for their own land. Soon, boats full of Jews, legal and illegal, defy Britain and offload in their used-to-be, soon-to-be Israel. Jews were no longer willing to cast their fate with European Christians, or Communists or secularists. They would never again trust the values or promises of old Europe. They were taking Jewish future, Jewish safety, Jewish security, Jewish identity into their own hands.

But like Moses so long ago, and Joshua a short while later, when they off-loaded onto the Promised Land they found folks already there – with homes and families and businesses and dreams of their own. And, as Caleb’s scouts reported to Moses after checking out ancient Canaan, those other people presented a daunting challenge (Numbers 13 and 14).

To Conclude

Well, the Jews stayed, endured, persevered. To the Jews of forever, and the 1880s, 1920s, pre-World War II, 1946-47, were added the émigrés from the Soviet Union, Ethiopian Jews plucked from ravages of civil war and famine, and Middle Eastern Jews escaping the tightening noose of rising despots, Islamism, and terrorism.

By our 21st Century, the Jews of Israel have a mostly bustling, mostly thriving, mostly civil, mostly democratic nation. Despite several wars, two Intifadas, daily terrorism, well-funded and well-armed enemies north and south, east and west, they no longer need to yearn, “next year in Jerusalem.” They are there.

YES, BUT...

Everybody hates “yes, but.” Whether the conversation is about something inconsequential and mundane, or deeply profound and even urgent, nobody likes it when someone interjects, “Yes, but.”

This has played out painfully since the October 7 terrorist attacks by Hamas. Scenes of carnage that many of us thought would never be seen again were seen, proudly videoed and happily shared by the murderers and their fans. Many, perhaps, forgot the Oklahoma City bombing, massacres at music festivals and dance clubs, killings at synagogues and churches and mosques, targeted civilians of babies and elderly from Sandy Hook to Myanmar. Have we become so numbed by evil’s evil, and the constancy of evil lurking, that when evil comes again our responses are numb ... or evil?

This time what struck many, infuriated many was the immediate defense of the murderers. Rationale and excuses for Hamas’ horror, celebration of Hamas’ show of stealth and strength, protests honoring the Hamas cause, condemnation of their Israeli and American victims and mourners. These and more were “yes, but” writ large.

Alida and I were extremely disappointed in the communiqués (or deafening silence) from so many organizations across America. Denominations, colleges, celebrities, political groups, students, and protesters were beyond tone-deaf in those awful hours after the October 7 slaughter.

Forgive me for putting it this way, but with bodies still burning, victims still dying, terrorists still shooting, hostages still unknown, executions and depravity still happening, “Yes, but ... on the other hand ... two sides to every story” thinking was pronounced. And disgusting.

However, the Bible may give permission for a “Yes, but,” even if uncomfortable, and if used judiciously. The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the Bible’s “books of wisdom,” hence the call to using what I’m about to recall from Ecclesiastes judiciously, not haphazardly. In Ecclesiastes’ most famous verses, you know them by heart, we find:

*“For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven.”*

It then goes on to offer a list of the *ying* and *yang* that come our way. Simply stated, we are assured that there is a time to be born, a time to love, a time to repair, a time for peace, a time for laughter and dance. “Yes, but,” each of those joys is paired with the pain of its opposite. This Book of Wisdom, a product of lived wisdom, this voice of experience, someone who has seen it all declares that there is a time for war, a time for death and mourning, a time for breaking things apart, even a time for hate. What serious Christian wants to hear that?! We may accept that such negatives happen. But the idea that there is actually a “time,” a right time, a place, an occasion for hatred and killing, that is a reality check.

Since the October 7 massacre by Hamas, I have spoken with lots of people and several groups. In these gatherings I said my piece. Admittedly no expert, I did my best to give a summary history of how modern Israel came out, the Palestinian story of loss and waiting, the fits and spurts of trying to find an equitable solution for two parties that both have right on their side – and wrong – and the strategic calculations that go into a Hamas terrorist campaign and an Israeli campaign to end Hamas completely. Lots of “yes, but.”

One person spoke up confidently, with no hint of sarcasm. “What if Israel did nothing? No response. No attack. No adding to the death toll,” they explained further. “The world would be stunned, and everyone would stand with Israel.”

I thought of Gandhi’s and King’s largely successful nonviolent campaigns for freedom. I thought of Rodney King’s poignant plea, “why can’t we all get along?” And I thought of Gandhi’s and King’s assassinations.

And I thought of this person’s earnest, Christlike plea, unspoken yet spoken loudly, to “turn the other cheek,” to “return no one evil for evil.”

Then I gave an equally earnest explanation for why Israel needed to go into Gaza with the full weight of righteous furor to rid us of those who would slaughter babies, massacre teenagers, kidnap old ladies, bomb villages, execute hostages, machine gun pets, and fuel the fires of worldwide terror. I am my own moral morass. Have you ever faithfully followed your GPS to a dead end? Alida and I once drove deep into the no-cars-allowed historic town of Cesky Krumlov, ignoring signs and warnings, trusting in our own misguided technology. That’s

what this feels like. I am my own “yes, but.” I am torn between Gandhi’s warning that “an eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind,” and the Holocaust images of October 7.

THE PALESTINIAN SIDE OF THINGS

Mitri Raheb is a Palestinian Christian Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem. After reading two of his books, *Alida* and *I* went up to the Redding Congregational Church to hear him speak. Between his books, speech, the Q and A, and a decade of newsletters, here’s my understanding of his viewpoint as someone who has lived the Palestinian side of things, within a framework familiar to my own: a mainline Protestant kindly disposed toward America, whose generosity and compassion feeds his extraordinary work. Check out his website.

Generally speaking, and historically speaking, Raheb’s view was “a pox on both their houses,” referring to Israeli and Palestinian governments and officials. That view is in line with most Palestinians I have spoken with, heard, or read. The overall view is that official Israel is cruel, myopic, and bigoted toward Palestinians. And Palestinian officialdom has been corrupt, corrupt, and corrupt. Lacking a vision or a plan, Palestinian leaders in Gaza and the West Bank have embraced power and its riches.

Admittedly, this is the view from the bottom toward the top. When dealing with the Middle East, it became popular to refer to the “street,” and I like that. What does the man, or woman, or teenager on the street think about (fill in the blank) _____ Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, the Palestinian Authority, the Two-State Solution, terrorism, peace, yes, fill in the blank. There’s lots I’d like to know from the “street” of Gaza, Haifa, Cairo, Tehran, Jerusalem, Beirut, Ramallah, settlements, and the myriad towns and cities along the way.

October, sadly, provides the perfect example. Using the horrors of the month, can we ask of a Palestinian on the street, “On October 7, Hamas sent many hundreds of Palestinians into Israel in a stunning attack that killed over 1400 people. To do that, they slaughtered babies, kidnapped old people, machine gunned teenagers, executed hostages. These were people who went to your mosque, or lived in your neighborhood, or shopped at your market, or married

into your family. These were Palestinians, born and bred. May I ask, then, what do you think?”

I would love to be in a café in Tel Aviv and find an Israeli not in uniform and engage that person the same way. I would offer my deepest sorrow, revulsion, at the evil of October 7 before turning sharply to my “street” question. “Now,” I might go on, “we have watched Israel’s response to Hamas unfold. Days and weeks of bombing, tailor-made for Hamas targets but always spreading death wider than the target. Children and women killed by the dozens, the scores, the hundreds. Yes, by the thousands, it seems, unimaginably. The ground invasion, tank bursts and door-to-door fighting, collateral damage so daunting we dare not say its name. The Israeli Defense Forces, they are your friends and family, old schoolmates and current co-workers, a shared history and culture and religion. They are Jews. May I ask, then, what do you think?”

The Unquotable Quote

“A land without a people for a people without a land.”

This flagrant untruism has a long, disputable history. Who said it, why, and about what land and people is up for grabs. In the context of the last 75 years, it seems obvious. It is easy to accept that some early Zionist said or wrote it, referring to Israel as the people without a land, and an empty or underutilized Palestine as a land ostensibly without a people.

The saying may be an urban myth that popped up, expressed a popular view, got embraced and then attributed to a leading Zionist or pro-Israel voice. For both sides it fits a useful narrative. The pro-Palestinian can say, “see, you don’t even acknowledge that we exist!” Not, it would seem, as an identifiable people with legitimate hopes for a homeland based on historical reality. “We were here once,” such a Palestinian might say, “we are here now, and we aim to stay. You cannot write us out of our own history.”

A pro-Israeli might well say “of course we know you exist, but not as a nation state. You were never a country. You are a population, living under various empires down through the ages. Now, you can live with us peacefully. Or you can

live under fire. Or you can become a people with a land next to our land with our people.”

“Acknowledge Palestine”

In the weeks after the Hamas terrorism in Israel, pro-Palestine protests emerged across the USA and around the world. This protest featured the usual denunciations of Israel as apartheid or fascist, the burning of Israeli flags, one smiling young man held aloft a Nazi swastika. The signage included “End of Occupation...End Colonialism...Israel is a Genocidal State.” Plus, the not-so-veiled threat “From the River to the Sea,” broadly hinting at the end of Jews in Israel by any means necessary. Many protests were menacing and ugly. Perhaps the most ubiquitous sign stated simply “Free Palestine.”

More recently, protests have grown more overtly antisemitic and threatening. Across the USA, Europe and the Muslim world synagogues are defaced, Jewish homes identified, and business targeted, chants of “Kill the Jews” and references to gas and ovens and beheading, warnings of rape and murder – all frighteningly redolent of Jew-hatred in general, and the lead up to the Holocaust in particular.

So, as I crossed the Smith College campus in Northampton, Massachusetts, this graffiti written in chalk on the sidewalks caught my eye: “Acknowledge Palestine.” This is a simple, straightforward, very human request – to be acknowledged. To be known for who you are, who you choose to be. It is truly your right, anyone’s right. Acknowledge me. Acknowledge Palestine. Acknowledge yourself.

I’ve been encouraging everyone to see the current movie “*Golda*.” It captures only a few monumental weeks late in the life of Israel’s Prime Minister, Golda Meir. Useful for several reasons, it is eerily parallel to the current war. She was the leader of Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War that caught Israel’s military and intelligence services totally off guard when Egypt, Syria and Jordan attacked during the High Holy Days. It was catastrophic for Israel in the first days of conflict. When the tide turns and Israel edges toward victory, Arab countries begin to seek a truce and a peace. But with whom? “Them?” The “enemy?” The

Jews? Golda would not be satisfied until the Arab nations uttered the word “Israel.” As if to say, “acknowledge me. Acknowledge Israel. Say my name like you know it. Like you mean it. We are Israel.”

The Smith College graffiti chalk writers offer a powerful, doable, life affirming, symbolic step. Acknowledge your neighbor. Know your neighbor.

This ought to appeal easily to Americans. After all, we are here, and most of us – historically – didn’t come from here. We were disparate people from disparate places, desperate people from desperate places. Our people fled shackles of various kinds (economic, religious, political, social) or came in shackles. We were not always a recognizable “people.” Even one of America’s popular mottos admits it: E Pluribus Unum. Out of Many, One.

Furthermore, Americans have had to face the uncomfortable reality that whenever and however and wherever we arrived, there were already people here. To even call them “Natives” is to declare that we knew full well that other people were “native” to this place, while we and our ilk were not. Native Americans may not have covered every square inch of this land, but they were definitely here. Palestinians did not cover every square inch of what they define as Palestine, but they were definitely there. Acknowledge it.

As we recognize throughout this essay, there are people at the extreme edge of all sides who say awful things. Most of those awful things could be dismissed as downright silly if, in their thinking and the actions that result, they weren’t so dangerous. Thus, the idea that the Palestinians are not a people deserving of a true homeland really is silly. Likewise, the idea that there is no actual proof that Jews were ever in Israel, or anything more than a wandering tribe, is plain silly.

A fictional college professor authored a theory that the plays of William Shakespeare were not written by William Shakespeare, but by another Englishman by the name of William Shakespeare. To state the obvious, either way William Shakespeare is the author. In the same silly vein, Israel has been around forever in one form or another, Palestine has been around forever by whatever name. Jews have been on that patch of land forever, however circumscribed by the geo-politics of the day. And Palestinians have been there on that patch of land, likewise, circumscribed by history.

NAKBA

When I was 10 years old... (*to be continued*)

“Nakba” is what Palestinians call their experience of 1948, when Israel was established by the United Nations as its own nation, recognized by most of the world. It has turned out to be an earth-shaking event, reverberating from the moment of its 1948 inception to the unending tears of October 7 to the ongoing sorrows since. As if stuck in a time warp, or Bill Murray’s “Ground Hog Day,” the Middle East in particular and the wider world along with it seem to be held hostage by that decisive day of Israel’s independence. We can’t seem to get beyond it.

The joy of Israelis and Jews at their independence is experienced by Palestinians as a catastrophe. That’s what “Nakba” means: the “catastrophe.” That sense of catastrophe comes from the displacement of some 700,000 Palestinians from their homes, businesses, and villages. Voluntary and involuntary. The immediate Arab response to Israel’s statehood was war, with Israel’s nascent army and nation attacked from all sides: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. Before, during and after the war, Palestinians emptied Palestine, expelled from hundreds of villages, fleeing wartime violence, seeking safety. By all accounts it was a bloody, frenzied couple of years as Israel sought to solidify its hold on its new country, Arab countries tried to end it or undermine it, Palestinians sought to survive it in one place or another. One place, their original homes and homeland, became unviable, too dangerous, plain oppressive or denied to them. The other place was the daily turmoil, suffering and injustice of refugee camps.

Voluntary *and* involuntary? Involuntary displacement refers to those forced or pressured to leave. Voluntary refers to Palestinians who left, believing that they would return soon. They assumed that the Arab armies would easily defeat Israel, and they would be back in their hometowns within days or weeks, running their market stall, tending their sheep, harvesting their olives, living their lives, sleeping in their own beds.

It didn’t happen. Throughout the years, the Arab armies were repeatedly defeated, Israel kept expanding, the Palestinian footprint shrank, alienation and

frustration grew. The language of the Nakba grew in ferocity, as Palestinians described their plight as expulsion, depopulation, destruction, ethnic cleansing, geographical erasure, genocide, apartheid. The language of their response also grew in ferocity: high jacking, terrorism, kidnapping, Intifada. And now October 7. Together, this is what Palestinians remember; or how they are remembered.

So here we are. All but the most fringe Palestinians or Arabs know that the Holocaust was real. The majority view it as “Germany and Europe created this problem for the Jews, why must the Palestinians pay for it? Send them back to Europe, give Israel back to Palestine. Problem solved.”

All but the most fringe Israelis would agree that the plight of Palestinians post World War II has been a catastrophe. Stateless, rootless, humiliated, threatened from without and within, a pawn in too many hands, justice delayed and denied. Yes, nakba.

What does that feel like?

So, as I was saying before interrupting myself: when I was 10 years old, I walked home one afternoon from P.S. 90, on another carefree day for a mostly oblivious pre-teen. When I arrived at my house, 104-22 89th Avenue in Richmond Hill, Queens, there was a man sitting on our stoop. Like he owned the place, as the saying goes.

What to do? This was before the era of “don’t talk to strangers,” so I said “hi” and bounded up the stoop.

“This is my house,” the man said confidently. “My house,” said again, a bit more emphatically. “But you can go in, for a minute.”

With my world unexpectedly uprooted, but I didn’t know why or how, I opened the unlocked front door, found my mother at her sewing machine. “Mom!” I said, “there’s a man on the stoop who says this is his house!!”

“No need to be concerned,” she said, not concerned enough to even stop sewing. “Your father will be home shortly,” as if that was all that was needed.

A dozen years later my parents moved to Flatbush, Brooklyn. One afternoon, mid-summer, I was headed home, walking up the sidewalk, when I saw three men exiting our house, carrying furniture, TV, whatnot. A little more

skeptical than my 10-year-old self, a little bolder, I challenged the bold thieves in my best Swedish-neutral way, “Hi, how you doing?”

“Hey,” said one, nonchalantly, “we’re the new owners, taking out some of the old stuff, the movers will be here soon.”

“But I live here,” I told them -- I think self-assuredly.

“Not anymore,” the older of the three said, with even more assurance.

Forgive my humble, true stories, simple allegories. In each instance, a person in their own home is told it is not their home. Told to get out. In one case, not so threatening. The other a bit so. Either way, I was not welcome in my own home. As a youngster it was puzzling. As a young adult it felt more like a challenge to my manhood. While writing these two vignettes I clearly recalled the four stages of my defense mechanism at work: Disconcerting, Infuriating, Scary, Angry.

My stories ended with my family’s rootedness vindicated and intact. The Palestinians? Not so much – not even close. Can we enter into the feelings of Palestinians? Can someone like me, who opens this essay with the personal statement, “we are all Jews,” find enough personal space to empathize with Palestinians? Especially a few weeks after the worst of the worst imaginable has happened, at least since the worst of the unimaginable worst happened in the 1940’s? Dare we place ourselves in any of the world’s distressing places and populations? And when we do, are we suddenly taking sides; and is that necessarily exclusionary to the other sides? Personally, I find hope in the Jewish and Israeli voices I have heard, read, and talked with who expressed profound concern for the lives and hopes of Palestinians. To have compassion for them, does that equal being anti-Israel, anti-Semite, anti-Jew, even anti-Zionism? Conversely, to all be Jews, must that translate to being anti-Palestine, anti-Muslim, anti-Two State Solution?

Of course not. To acknowledge the obvious is only, well, obvious.

Of course, the Holocaust – THE Holocaust – was real and Evil, with a capital “E.” Of course, October 7 was real and Evil, with a capital “E.” Of course, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and further encroachments and refugee settlement life is a Catastrophe, with a capital “C.” Of course, the massive invasion of Gaza is a Catastrophe with a capital “C.” And

since I'm on this riff, I'll add more to it. Of course, one can criticize Israel and not be antisemitic. Of course, one can root for the end of Hamas and not be anti-Palestine or Islamophobic. Of course, Holocausts are Holocausts and Catastrophes are Catastrophes, and to acknowledge that is not wishy-washy or "whataboutism." It can be a first step to somewhere. And somewhere has to be better than where we are now.

SOLUTIONS: AARON, RACHEL, AND DAVID

The way out.

Better yet, the way beyond.

Anything is better than the words we already use: Intractable, impossible, no way.

Life has given me the occasion to say, write or preach that as a pastor I am in the "Good News" business. It would be professional malpractice for me to be hopeless, negative, dismal in the face of anything. Realism and pragmatism are always cloaked in faith, and faith is informed by its commitment to Good News. That is why I love the Bible's definition of faith,

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1).

It is one thing to be hopeful, but quite another to be "sure of what we hope for." It is one thing to believe that there is something ahead to believe in, but quite another to be certain about it. It is in that spirit that we bring our Good News faith to bear on the worst of situations, at the worst of times. There is always a solution, or else; and the October events in Israel and Gaza make the "or else" untenable. We, they, can't go there.

I've never lived in a flood zone, but like any citizen I am concerned about flooding. It sure seems like flooding along shorelines and riverbanks is increasing in number and severity. With each flood comes a flurry of after-effects. Flood insurance goes up or is unavailable. The government adds requirements and restrictions for repairs or rebuilding. The cost of staying near the water becomes

prohibitive. Well, there is a rising tide of Palestinians confronting Israel. It shows itself in anger and violence, in dreams and hopes, in sheer numbers and international concern. Would you have believed that there would be larger crowds at pro-Palestine, anti-Israel, or even pro-Hamas rallies? In America? In New York City? On college campuses? Israel is at risk of being flooded beyond repair, near and far. To say that this is an existential crisis for Israel and for Palestine is not exaggeration.

This paragraph is purposefully stark, yet an accurate summary of my life's memories of Israel, Palestine, and "the Middle East crisis," as we used to call it. In my lifetime there have been significant, intermittent wars taking lives, fueling hatred, hurting the economy, diminishing tourism. More often have been individual events of horror. The wheelchair bound, elderly Mr. Leon Klinghoffer, murdered and tossed overboard from a terrorized cruise ship. Hijacked airplanes that ended in death. The Munich Olympics slaughter of Israeli athletes. Attacks on countless civilian targets, from kindergartens to commuter buses. The two "Intifadas," and the overwhelming response by Israel. Life behind security walls, life defined by checkpoints. The squalor and humiliations of daily life. Charges and countercharges of terrorism and apartheid. And then October 7, that I truly must hesitate to itemize. The flood may not just be coming, it may well be upon us and not yet at its peak.

A Two-State Solution

How can there not be a Two-State solution? As teenagers used to say, "*duh*" -- a response to what's obvious. Duh, indeed.

Israel was founded as a safe haven for Jews, forever separating them from a thousand years of European pogroms and a decade of Holocaust. Israel was literally their last stop. Not enacting a Two-State solution, not allowing an independent Palestine, assures Jewish Israel of being out birthed and outnumbered in their own land. Either they lose their safe haven as a majority Jewish nation, or they resort to the very apartheid procedures they energetically deny. A Jewish and Democratic Israel needs a Palestinian neighbor – not a tenant, not a sharecropper. A majority population will one day demand and take majority control. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't I?

Certainly, there are One-State advocates on the Palestine side and the Israel side. Those advocates are of two kinds, for the most part.

On the Israeli side there are those who want “Eretz Israel,” an Israel that encompasses all of Biblical Israel at its greatest height, as defined by various Bible-based boundaries. Strange as it seems, it is eerily similar to Hamas’ “from the river to the sea,” minus the implied threats inherent. It would be a Jewish state for Jews, and what exactly would be the status of non-Jews is unclear. You may remember the 1960’s challenge to anti-war protestors, “America: Love it or Leave it.” The invitation to non-Jews in Eretz Israel could be like that: if you decide to stay, you better love it even if you won’t ever own it. This would add to the popular but infuriating charge that Israel is an “apartheid state.” The result would be one land for two peoples, and one of the peoples isn’t that welcome.

Palestine also has its “no compromise, not one square inch” voices, popularized by the Hamas slogan, “from the river to the sea, Palestine shall be free.” Free not only to exercise their own rights and legitimacy, but also to all the properties and places where Israelis live and work. And also free of Jews. Hamas’ Palestine version of “love it or leave it” does not include the “love it” option for Jews. Interviews I have heard or read with Palestinians in Gaza, West Bank or America can be neatly summarized as “go back where you came from.” The Jew can be killed on the way from the river to the sea. Or the Jew can get to the river or the sea and jump in, and swim fast. Or they can get out sooner and return to the Polands, Russias, Ethiopias, Lithuanias from whence they came.

Leaving the extremes of each side aside, there is nothing I have read or heard in favor of One State that seems plausible. The most optimistic book I read is, itself, pessimistic: *The Two-State Delusion* by Pdraig O’Malley. After describing everything that has made Israel/Palestine a mess and citing “irreconcilable national narratives” with each as “victim, minority and dispossessed,” he suggests making them One State and allowing 99 years for things to get sorted out.

That sounds like a glorified version of what we have. We have One State, Israel, with a not very happy Arab population, plus two very unhappy semi-occupied territories straddling Israel, all waiting for things to get sorted out. October 7 is a “sorting out.” The war against Hamas now devastating Gaza is a “sorting out.” Why formalize this mess?

Palestine also needs a Two-State solution. If they hold out for one state, they end up taking it by force or by numbers, creating in their own backyard the very threat they are trying to escape. Israelis, having tasted freedom and national identity as a homeland, are not likely to go quietly. Whatever the Hebrew word for Intifada is, the world will hear it.

Somehow, according to recent polls, an equal portion of only one-third of Israelis and Palestinians support the two nations solution, side by side, in peace. What on earth the other two-thirds imagine for the future is beyond me. I don't have a Plan B. Jesus might (more about that in a page or two.). But I'm not Jesus. Two states, and figure it out as you go along. One state, and kill each other, now or later. Or now and later.

I am weighing in on this not out of some exaggerated sense of expertise. If you have cared enough to read this far then my guess is that we are much the same. We are interested, outside observers who have watched the unravelling of peace, peace accords, common humanity, simple civility, and baseline sanity, and we have watched it all our lives. You may have read deeply and widely, trying to comprehend, while being fair-minded and open minded. You recoil at antisemitism and Islamophobia. Our own "whataboutisms" and "on the other hands" are serious pauses on the march to dead certainty – pun intended.

I laid out my journey in the early section. Let me add that my father was occasionally more pro-Arab. He had several Egyptian Coptic Christian families in his Brooklyn church who insisted on taking him to Egypt and providing that legendary Middle Eastern hospitality. This made him more accepting of "whatboutisms" when it came to Israel and its neighbors. The adage reminds us that in many sides of a conflict the key question is "whose ox got gored?"

Immediately after October 7 many Harvard-affiliated student groups issued a harsh letter blaming Israel for the slaughter of all the innocents. Among the groups was one representing Muslim students from Nepal. A day or two later they withdrew from the letter after learning that some people from Nepal were among those murdered and kidnapped. Suddenly, it was their ox that got gored. And being a non-Jew, a non-Israeli, or an actual Muslim did not save them.

Oxen are being gored on all sides of all the borders. A Two-State solution cannot possibly be worse than the status quo.

My Son and Rachel

Aaron is wiser than his genes or upbringing through me should warrant. Years ago, I wrote a poem titled “The End of Race” based on a conversation I had with him while he was a teenager. Without a hint of doubt he declared, “there’s no such thing as race.” Contemporary scholarship has caught up with him, seriously questioning the whole construct of race. Some suggest it entered the field of science as a supposed real thing in order to legitimize colonialism, slavery, anything that elevated one group over another based on shades of skin tone and facial characteristics. But when it comes to people doing people things, is race defining, or even real? I’m going with Aaron.

His wisdom struck again, uncomfortably, in writing this essay. Talking with him in the kitchen before the actual writing process began, I listed all the subtexts I felt dutybound to address. I was rather impressed with myself for compiling such a thorough array of topics.

“And you’ll write about what Jesus would do, right?” Aaron said, more as an obvious fact than a question. WWJD. The century-old “gotcha,” just when you think you’ve got something figured out. You’ve done the research, applied your keen intellect, weighed all the options and “whataboutisms,” and now you are ready to take your stand. Then somebody, like your own son, asks “what would Jesus do?”

That rightfully seminal question comes from the massive best seller, *In His Steps*, from the late 1800’s that enjoyed a resurgence in the early 2000’s. T-shirts, coffee mugs and bracelets were stamped with “WWJD,” as people framed a broad range of issues around that thought: what would Jesus do?

In the novel a homeless man collapses in a pew of a prominent church during the Sunday worship service, and then dies. That such a thing could happen in their peaceful setting led the pastor to create an experiment and issue a challenge. He asked for volunteers who would live one year guided by the single question: What would Jesus do? The novel unfolds as people try to apply that thought to their lives.

Personal life is complicated enough for WWJD. But applying it to international strife would make any head spin.

It is unquestionable that Jesus would not hang-glide into Israel, kill teenagers at a music festival, commit unthinkable atrocities upon babies and elders, kidnap hostages, bomb Gaza, bulldoze buildings, devastate cities...or, for that matter, do the very things I might well do if I were on either side of the literal and figurative dividing walls between Israelis and Palestinians. Jesus is not that hard to read. He doesn't even settle for "Thou shalt not kill." He outlaws anger and insults. And adds in "turn the other cheek...love your enemies" and then does so from the cross. There's no wiggle room with Jesus. Equally germane is St. Paul, who challenges us with,

"(Jesus) himself is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, thus making peace." (Ephesians 2:14)

Is there any phrase in there that does not speak directly to now?

But I'll say again, I'm not Jesus.

In our church we emphasize "Christlikeness," being as much like Jesus as we can be in word and deed. When we inevitably fall short, we count on Christ's forgiveness and get up the next morning planning to come closer to Christlikeness. We readily admit that it is a day-long, life-long, arduous effort.

Imagining Jesus facing the Israel/Hamas war head-on leaves me well short of Christlikeness, but not with an excuse to bail on it. The daunting reality is that Jesus willingly chose to die for his beliefs, and the Roman government was happy to oblige. Lover of enemies that he was, those enemies crucified him where, from his perch on a cross, he forgave the executioners, saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." In one of my books I ask, snidely, what about those who damn well know what they are doing?

What would Jesus do? He would die trying not to do what most of us want to do when we are on the wrong side of injustice.

Do you know the story of Rachel Corrie? Rachel was an American college student doing an independent study project by volunteering with a pro-Palestinian group in Gaza. This was 2003. Israel's army was bulldozing

Palestinian homes in order to stop the flow of weapons to Hamas via tunnels under the houses. “There’s nothing new under the sun,” the Bible says correctly. Rachel chose to protest, standing in front of a bulldozer, and she was crushed. The driver didn’t see her, ruled the Israeli investigation. He willfully crushed her, say Rachel’s fellow protestors. Either way, she died for her non-violent ways. WWJD?

During the many Central American conflicts of the 1980’s, and elsewhere, Witness for Peace answered “What would Jesus do?” in a Rachel Corrie way. Volunteers, often young Christian idealists, would go to contested conflict zones and take up residence between warring factions. In effect, they dared soldiers and rebels to go through them or turn around. Their peace was their witness, and their witness was their peace.

Sadly, we live in a time when even Jesus is weaponized, and “muscular Christianity” is a popular theology. Instead of reshaping ourselves into Christlikeness, there is a fad of reshaping Christ into our favorite likenesses. A militant response to an existential crisis is understandable. A militancy wrapped in a flag is understandable. A militancy dressed up as Christlike is absurd. His standard is always higher. The idea is to aim for it so that even when we fall short, we will be better than if we aim low.

I reflect often on Martin Luther’s statement, “when you sin, sin boldly.” There are times, the saying suggests, when we may have to do things that we would never wish to do, that our faith opposes, that are definitely not Christlike or Godly. Yet the times and circumstances or evils aligned against us require us to “sin,” to miss the high standard set for us in Christ. Do it, then, with the boldness of faith, whether in forgiveness or understanding or exemption or guidance. And, may I add, do it humbly, not patting yourself on the back; do it boldly, leaning on God’s love.

To be blunt: What would Jesus do? He wouldn’t do what’s being done. But he died on the cross for our sins because we do “fall short of the glory of God.”

It is hard, isn’t it.

THE END: ARMAGEDDON

The End? As in “the end, end,” really? Depending upon your religious upbringing, your pop-fiction reading, your favorite televangelist or some Hollywood fantasy, the end of the world begins a bit like October 2023.

Armageddon. The final conflagration between the forces of evil (always the other guys) and the forces of good (that is always us.). In the religious language of old-time but still current Christian teaching, the Apocalypse, the “end times” ushering in the triumphant return of Jesus Christ – well, it all begins on the battlefields of Armageddon, in Israel. Look at today’s line-up of newsmakers: Hamas + Hezbollah + Iran + Putin’s Russia + behind the scenes Middle East kingdoms + the Communist Chinese silently hovering about. All focused on Israel, these all play into the archetypes, even stereotypes, of “end times” thinking, preaching and writing. In my lifetime communism, Russia, Islam, the United Nations have been labeled as The Anti-Christ, the arch foe at Armageddon.

On the good side in this stereotype are Christians in certain churches, aligned with the Chosen People of Israel, obeyers of the Law, in tune with the Prophets, kneeling before Christ as King of Kings and Lords of Lords.

There are plenty of Christians, Muslims and Jews who embrace an apocalyptic, end-times view of history, yearning for the day when God is proven right, Satan is defeated, the Messiah comes in triumph, and everybody gets their just rewards. If we, the “good guys,” have to go through trials and tribulations along the way, that’s fine. The ultimate rewards are worth every price. Jesus said so.

This means that there are a lot of people not that upset about the horrors unleashed upon Israel and Gaza.

I’m writing this final section at the Chapel on the campus of the Northfield Mount Hermon School, my home in those formative high school years 1960-64. The Chapel sits atop a hill as the spiritual centerpiece of a school founded by D.L. Moody, America’s foremost evangelist in the late 1800’s. Of formidable visage and a true visionary, Moody would have had something to say about “the end,” whether theological or pointed directly at Israel/Hamas.

Just outside the Chapel windows is Cottage J, where I lived as a freshman. Our dorm advisor was an esteemed Bible teacher, Judson Stent. Midway through that freshman year as unfortunate classmate proclaimed loud and often that “the end is coming; the end of the world is near.” Mental illness was not a public topic in those days, so our friend was quietly removed from campus. Soon thereafter, late one morning on a bright day, the sun inexplicable disappeared, the sky went pitch black, the wind howled, and I was sitting in Judson Stent’s Bible class, a little bit terrified. Dr. Stent climbed up on his desk, looked at a roomful of 13-year-old boys and declared, “the end of the world may come at this very hour. But this Bible Class will go on.” Calmly, he reclaimed his professorial seat, resumed teaching, we stopped quaking, and here I sit 63 years later contemplating Armageddon.

There is another option than everything going up in fire and brimstone. “If the Lord tarries,” as my grandfather put it, we should believe as if Christ will return at any minute and we should live as if Christ is not returning. Which is to say that we need to take responsibility for the world in this life.

When we are not feeling well, and we fear it might be serious, it is easy to imagine three outcomes. One, a long, slow agonizing death. Two, a mercifully quick death. As a perpetual hypochondriac and a personal pessimist, those are my usual options, sad to admit.

The third option is healing. A cure. Miracle or scientific or both, you get better. Praise God, Hallelujah, get on with your life.

What is the prognosis for Israel/Palestine? They’ve tried the long, slow, agonizing death for 75 years. The month of October has been a quick death for thousands, and for hope itself. Which leaves healing as an option.

Healing takes conviction. Prayer, effort, discipline, endurance, determination. That is conviction.

No one can doubt that the Hamas terrorists of October 7 acted with conviction. They killed happily, filmed and boasted proudly, died willingly. It was not only pro-Hamas demonstrations who praised them. I heard Israeli military officials and commentators describe their stealth, strength, planning and military precision as impressive. Nevertheless, Hamas could not be surprised that Israel more than matched their conviction with tireless and withering response attacks.

Is there another kind of conviction? Or is martyrdom and killing the only acceptable evidence of conviction? Could the Koran-loving, Mohammed-following, Allah-worshipping Muslims, and the Torah-loving, prophet-following, God-worshipping Jews, and the Gospels-loving, Jesus-following, Trinity-worshipping Christians find conviction enough to bring two neighbors together in peace? Is there not a point when the most engaged nations tire of funding intransigence, looking the other way at corruption, and having their own pots stirred by seething frustration within their borders? To turn off the spigot of funds and the flow of arms, and to stop coddling the most strident voices cannot put us worse off than we are this very day.

This endless mess has made a mockery of what three religions call The Holy Land. Really? The Holy Land? At what point is this mess more blasphemous than all the other blasphemies that have literally lit a fire under folks?

Since the 1980's Nicaragua has been another intractable, déjà vu problem, no different today than then. The Sandinista rebels had overthrown the dictatorship, only to be replaced by the US backed Contra rebels who wanted to overthrow the Sandinistas. What goes around, comes around.

As always, while the Contras and Sandinistas killed each other, it was innocent civilians who truly suffered and died, proving correct the African proverb that when elephants fight it is the grass that gets trampled. During that time, I participated in a fact-finding peace mission. We met with the influential Catholic Cardinal Obando y Bravo. He had cache with the Contras, so we begged him to convince them to come to the peace table. The Cardinal scoffed at our naivete. "When you have two children fighting, you don't grab one to stop the fighting. You wait until you can grab both at the same time."

Not too quietly I muttered, "spoken like someone with no kids." When you are a parent, coach, teacher or cop you grab the nearest one we can to stop the violence. In this Israel/Hamas War we each need to grab who we can. My point is that no Jew or Israeli is waiting to listen to a Palestinian explain why the October 7 martyrs are glorious, excusable, and heroic. No Palestinian, in Gaza or on an American university campus, wants to hear from a Jew the rationale for Israel and its war to end Hamas. We need to make our case for peace, each in our own backyard, with the people within our grasp, the folks we influence. It is Palestinians with a conviction for peace that can bring other Palestinians to

conviction for peace. It is Israelis and Jews, near and far, with a conviction for peace that can bring other Israelis and Jews to conviction for peace. That's a beginning.

On a recent evening in Northampton, I sat in the Roost Coffee House, next to a long table. The people at the table were having an animated conversation, yet not making a sound. They were all deaf. Thus, their conversation depended on signing and facial expressions. Even more, this meant they had to look at each other intently. No multi-tasking. No scrolling your iPhone. You were either fully present in the conversation, or not.

Bear with me. Two weeks after the October 7 terrorism we invited Rabbi Evan Schultz to speak at an after-worship gathering. Friends and colleagues for a long time, we knew we were in good hands. Yet he took it, took us, to a higher level. His own mournful and breaking heart is perfectly captured in a prose-poem he wrote, and that we sent out with our first post-slaughter "Pastoral Letter." He likened his emotions to "sitting shiva" endlessly. To sit shiva is to mourn with mourners, to be sad, to fully enter the sorrow of another, and another, and another, and another. Even if it is one thousand four hundred and something or others. And we mourn the thousands since, faces and names known and unknown, united in death as they never were in life.

At our church conversation with the Rabbi he was asked how his faith and the scriptures informed his thoughts not only about the war in the here and now, but about the long-term issues surrounding the war. He talked a bit about Job, and the Psalms. Then he took us back to the Genesis story of Noah and the horrific flood that destroyed much of the earth – the very scripture his congregation studied the previous Sabbath. As the story goes, the broad spectrum of humanity so disappointed God that the decision is made to wipe the earth clean, get rid of all life except Noah, his family, and two of every animal. That doesn't fully explain the deaths of so many that surely were not that evil. Nevertheless, how did such destructive evil come to pass? What went wrong?

The Rabbi's response took insight to a new level. "There was an exile of language," he told us. "People forgot how to speak with one another." How to be fully present, truly focused on one another, as in the example of the deaf students at the coffee house.

Will we, we children of Abraham, ever regain our language? Or have we grown so far apart that we simply cannot speak to each other, by words or signs? Shall we never be fully present with one another?

I struggled to find an ending for “The End,” something more optimistic than waiting for Armageddon. It came at the very end of our church’s Remembrance Sunday. The Sunday after the fun silliness of Halloween, our church resurrects the original purpose of “All Hallows Eve”: remembering our dead. This year we remembered by naming 97 loved ones of our church family: Moms, dads, children, spouses, neighbors, people we love still, miss terribly. Our music ministry always presents a sung Mass, this year Mozart’s Spatzenmesse (Sparrow Mass.). Brilliant in its imagining, stunning in its presentation, unusually alive for a medium devoted to death and sorrow, it was especially profound at the end. The “Agnus Dei” ends with a powerfully repetitive “Dona Nobis Pacem” (Give us Peace.)

Interestingly, we had sung Dona Nobis Pacem as a hymn the Sunday before. With the Israel/Hamas War raging, I thought a throwback to a 1960’s peacenik campfire song, often sung as a lilting round, would be a sweet reminder of peace. How nice.

But our choir’s Mozart “Agnus Dei”/” Done Nobis Pacem” was not nice, or sweet, or lilting. It was demanding. Bold. “Dona,” they fairly bellowed, “Give us”; “Nobis,” to us, us, we want, now; “Pacem,” Peace, with a capital “P,” Peace as our right. And again, and again, and again: DONA, not soft; NOBIS, emphatically loud; PACEM, a declaration, a demand.

Can PACEM/Peace be aggressive? We better hope so. Violence, slaughter, retribution, terrorism, tunnels, paragliding machine gunner, not so smart bombs have not worked. Passivity, as the noble side of apathy, has not worked. Why not try aggressive peace-making with conviction, minus hate and prejudice, as founding principles?

Or enjoy Armageddon.

It was late Thursday afternoon, November 2, when I took a break from writing, deciding to exercise while catching up on the news. At the top of the hour the news from Israel/Gaza was harsher; still. All the cable news shows had top anchors reporting, all veterans of war. The day’s aerial bombardments of Gaza

were, they all agreed, the most massive they have seen. To varying degrees, they described the horrors of life on the ground for those on whom hell was raining.

Upset, I switched to Netflix, selecting a movie that premiered that very day, “All the Light You Cannot See.” Based on a superb novel, the opening five minutes fully mirrored the recent days in Gaza. Set in France during World War ii, the Allied forces are bombing the town of Saint Malo to get rid of the Nazis and to save the local citizens. The Allies first drop leaflets to direct the citizens to get out of town, but the Nazis won’t let the innocent civilians leave. The aerial bombing destroys houses and infrastructure, kills innocent people, leaves the town buried under rubble. Being, myself, a child of the allies, rooting for the good guys, it all seemed so reasonable when it was “us” doing the bombing.

As the title suggests, the novel and movie are much about light and darkness. Surprisingly, it makes the point that it is darkness that is fragile and short-term. It is light that endures.

One of the most visual and important Christian scripture is what I refer to as St. John’s Christmas story. No shepherds, Wise Men, stable or manger. Just a wonderfully complex story simply told:

“In the beginning was the word and the word became flesh and dwelled among us ... in him was life, and the life was the light of all humanity. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

(John 1:1, 14, 4-5)

Light has such a role to play in so many religions. Hinduism’s Diwali is a festival of light. Tea lamps and votive candles are essential in all kinds of worship for Buddhists, Catholics, Hindus. Orthodox Christian churches are bathed in candlelight. Our little Prayer Candle Stand is an essential part of our church life. What would Christmas Eve be without each worshipper going out into the world carrying a candle? This deeply theological symbol of light has a bottom-line practical side: light drives darkness away.

Perhaps three days after the madness of October 7, I saw a newspaper photo of a young Jewish couple in Israel getting married. I was not only thrilled, it put an actual smile on my face. I remember so well the days after America’s 9/11 when young couples called to postpone weddings and cancel baptisms, believing that it was wrong to smile or be happy in the terror’s aftermath. “No,” we told

them with oomph, “the world needs your wedding, your baptism, your party, your soccer game, your happiness.” Your light.

For a couple of hours after the October 7 devastation, that Jewish couple, and their parents and friends and co-workers, and maybe caterers and the wedding band – they had light.

No wedding takes place in a vacuum. The most blasé couple can’t help but think down the road. Having a baby, who becomes a toddler, then a youngster, followed by a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and high school, sports, college, job – a whole life unfolding, immersed in light.

Across the divide, maybe a half hour away in some Palestinian town, a baby is being born. Amidst the rubble, with bombing raids and warning sirens accompanying that baby’s first cry, for a brief moment there is light all around. That family, too, scared and overjoyed, is plotting their tomorrow, and tomorrow’s tomorrow, trusting that there will be enough light to light their baby’s path.

Maybe Armageddon is that eternal battle between darkness and light.

The baby born in Gaza is not imaginary. Palestine, such as it is, is an incredibly young population. The law of averages is that a whole lot of babies have been born since October 7. The fruit of the young Israeli couple’s marriage is not imaginary. “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in a baby carriage” has been an indelible image of family life since forever.

The Israeli wedding couple’s someday baby, and the Palestinian newborn will grow up in a world of ...?

In the mid 1970s I was part of a mission exploration trip that began in the Congo and ended in Israel. I was a Baptist at the time, and our American Baptist denomination arranged a meeting in Jerusalem with peace activists, Israeli and Palestinian. Each man was a high-ranking military veteran in their respective armies, having fought in wars of independence and resistance. Both were proud of their service and their contributions to each nation’s independence – one achieved and to be safeguarded, the other a dream to be realized. Furthermore, their sons followed in their footsteps, serving and fighting each other, killings when need be and having friends killed. The men were proud of their sons.

But now their grandchildren were coming of age to fight, to kill or be killed. And they were no longer proud. “Enough is enough,” they said. “We are tired.”

My non-imaginary babies in Israel and Gaza are somebody’s grandchildren, great-grandchildren, the inheritors of decades and generations of violence. Will they grow up to seek the light, or embrace the darkness? Will each “sit under their own vine and their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid,” as the Bible promises (Micah 4:4)? Will they remember their common language, and choose to speak it in word or sign? Will they be neighbors, not enemies?

As this war took hold, a nearby synagogue invited us to share their Saturday morning worship. The entire worship was permeated by prayers for peace, written, spoken, spontaneous, universal and fervent. The following prayer was written by a Rabbi from Ukraine in the early 1800’s, not written for us and now but eternally true for us and now.

A Prayer for Peace

*May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease,
when a great peace will embrace the whole world.*

*Then nation will not threaten nation,
and the human family will not again know war.*

*For all who live on earth shall realize
we have not come into being to hate or to destroy.*

We have come into being to praise, to labor, and to love.

*Compassionate God, bless the leaders of all nations
with the power of compassion.*

Fulfill the promise conveyed in Scripture:

*I will bring peace to the land,
and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you.*

*I will rid the land of vicious beasts
and it shall not be ravaged by war.*

Let justice and righteousness flow like a mighty stream.

Let God’s peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

And let us say: Amen.

From our mouths to God’s ear, as the elders said in my old neighborhood.