

In Search of Hope: An Interfaith Experience of Israel-Palestine

“We’ve come in search of hope. What can you offer us?”

That was the question I addressed to one of the leading academics in Israel at the start of a two-week interfaith experience of Israel and Palestine—my eighth trip to Israel and first to the Occupied Territories—from which I returned a few weeks ago with a group of twenty participants from all parts of the U.S., including Judith, Ann Macksoud and Lutie Saul.

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“Hope and I don’t live together,” he replied. “This country is doomed.”

He went on to explain that the threat comes not from without but from within: thugs running its government; its vaunted democracy sliding inexorably into an Orthodox-controlled theocracy; its impoverished educational system which no longer teaches democracy having become a political tool of the state; the unofficial

approval of extra-judicial executions of wounded terrorists; its army repurposed to maintain the oppressive Occupation of 2.7 million Palestinians; its press destroyed (with the exception of *Ha'aretz*—the Israeli equivalent of the *New York Times*—read by only 4% of the population) thanks to a free “newspaper” funded by American billionaire Sheldon Adelson, whose sole purpose is to keep Netanyahu in power; its continual confiscation of Palestinian land and demolition of Palestinian homes; its many walls designed to keep Israelis and Palestinians from getting to know each other; an income gap between rich and poor that exceeds even our own; its suppression of free speech; and the political clout of AIPAC and the Israel lobby that keeps American Congresspersons groveling before the Israeli Prime Minister and makes possible the illegal settlement program with some four billion dollars a year in U.S. foreign aid.

Clearly, our search for hope was not going to be easy.

We did find points of light in this otherwise bleak picture: in the *Bustan Yaffa* and other bilingual (Hebrew, Arabic) kindergartens in Jaffa and elsewhere; in the Physicians for Human Rights Open Clinic; in Haifa, where Jews and Muslims live peacefully together; in *Adalah*, the non-profit, non-sectarian Palestinian legal center in Haifa; in Nazareth, where local activists work to defuse Christian-Muslim and Arab-Jewish tensions; in the home of Ibrahim Ahmad Abu El-Hawa, one of the founders of the Jerusalem Peacemakers; in the Center for a Shared Society at *Giv'at Haviva*, which engages divided communities in collective action on behalf of Israeli democracy; in the Jerusalem neighborhood of *Sheikh Jarrah*, where *Rabbis for Human Rights* joins Palestinian residents to protest ongoing evictions from their homes; in Kids4Peace, a grassroots interfaith youth movement; in the Parents Circle-Families Forum, an organization of Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost loved ones to the conflict and who have come together to work for peace;

in the Roots Project, a joint Israeli-Palestinian initiative in the West Bank that seeks to bring together communities living side-by-side but separated by walls of fear and mistrust.

Our visit to Hebron—where the tension is palpable as some 700 Israeli settlers protected by twice that number of Israeli troops have made their homes among more than 200,000 Palestinians—was supposed to be accompanied by representatives of *Breaking the Silence*, an organization of Israeli veterans whose mission is to educate the Israeli public about the realities of everyday life in the Occupied Territories. But shortly before our visit, *Breaking the Silence* was silenced—barred by the Israeli government from entering Hebron, threatened with violence and now accused of treason for exposing the rotten underbelly of the Occupation.

We met many wonderful people along the way—Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Christians and Muslims and Druze and Bedouins—who genuinely wish to live in peace and who blame

their leaders for the deteriorating status quo. If there is to be any resolution of this intractable conflict, I believe that it will come about from either grassroots efforts on the part of both Israelis and Palestinians, or from a fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy, which effectively underwrites the disaster.

Our wonderful Palestinian guide had to leave his house in the Occupied Territories several hours before meeting us at 8:00 a.m. so as to allow enough time to get through the checkpoints. I asked him whether his children hate Israelis. "We teach them not to hate," he replied, "but when my wife is driving the kids somewhere and they're stopped at a checkpoint, and the children see how the Israeli soldiers treat their mother and hear how they speak to her, it's very hard for them not to feel hatred." We saw it for ourselves: Frightened eighteen-year-old Israeli soldiers fresh out of high school with automatic weapons at the ready and a license to kill.

Filled with the scenes and conversations of the preceding two weeks, I was unable to fall asleep on the last night of our trip, wondering whether my bringing such a group on such a troubling and in many ways depressing excursion made sense. So late at night, in the quiet lobby of our East Jerusalem Palestinian hotel, I approached the man at the front desk and said: “We came here seeking hope. I wanted Americans—and American Jews in particular—to get to know Palestinians as human beings like themselves, with the same needs, hopes, fears, dreams for themselves and their children. We have stayed in some Palestinian hotels and eaten in some Palestinian restaurants and have been accompanied by both an Israeli and a Palestinian guide in an effort to support the Palestinian economy in the service of peace and to hear competing narratives. And we have seen for ourselves the corrosive effects of the Occupation on both the occupied and the

occupiers.” I was in tears as I concluded, “Does it matter? Does it make a difference?”

He replied: “More than you can ever know. Most Israelis and Americans—and especially American Jews—are afraid to even come here to East Jerusalem. When you do, it gives us hope to know that there are good people everywhere who understand. Jews and Palestinians can live together in peace. We did so before the State of Israel was established and we can do so again.” Then he added, “My father owns this hotel. Please know that you are always welcome here.”

I returned home to a report in the March 16th edition of *Ha'aretz* that a recent survey by the American Pew Research Center found that 48% of Israeli Jews support the transfer of Arabs to other countries. And later that day I received an email from a member of our group who stayed on in Israel for a few more days. She wrote, “It seems even more hopeless now that I’ve spent some time with a

number of progressive Israelis who simply think that it's all gone past a point of no return....”

The next day, *Ha'aretz* reported that "Israel Ranks 11th in 2016 World Happiness Report" and that Israelis are "some of the happiest people in the world."

I will remember our visit to *Sheikh Jarrah*, where Reform Rabbi Arik Ascherman's remarks about the eviction of Palestinians from their homes by Israeli right-wing extremists was interrupted by an ultra-Orthodox settler who spat at us and said that Hitler should have killed us. But I will also remember the throngs of Israelis and Palestinians who come together for weekly demonstrations, holding signs that proclaim, "We refuse to be enemies." And I will never forget the expression of anger, fear, pain and despair on the face of the fifteen-year-old Palestinian boy who transfixed us with his gaze as our luxurious tour bus left the shuttered street of Hebron behind.

It gives me no pleasure to note that what I have been saying and writing for almost half a century is borne out by contemporary events, but my tradition teaches that despair is not an option, that despair is a cardinal sin. So I will continue to write and to speak and even to dare to hope.

Thank you for listening.

Rabbi Dov Taylor