

The American Churches and the Role of Fear in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

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Sixty three years after the founding of the State of Israel, forty four years after the beginning of the Israeli occupation, and eighteen years after the start of the hope-filled years of the Oslo Accords, Palestinians and Israelis find themselves still unable to come to a negotiated agreement. Locked in an on-going conflict which regularly spills into violence and bloodshed, we are led to ask, what is it that is keeping the Palestinians and Israelis from finding their way to a peaceful solution?

For sure, each side may have a different notion of what a “solution” should look like and each seems at times locked into their own formula for what the parties must be willing to give up. But this is the case at least initially in all conflicts, including those that ultimately prove to be resolvable. What then explains the failure to embrace what it appears both sides long for – a two-state solution where Israelis and Palestinians live and prosper side by side in peace and their children know war no more?

Perhaps it is, even more than a gap in the practical terms of an agreement on “core issues” such as borders, security arrangements, Jerusalem and refugees, the simple, human problem of fear. The fear that both Israelis and Palestinians face when they look at their own lives and then one another across the negotiating table.

What are the fears of the Palestinian people? After sixty years of not being in control of their lives, of occupation, first under Jordanian rule and then under Israeli military rule, perhaps for Palestinians the fear is as deep and as fundamental as the fear of death. Fear of annihilation. Fear of disappearing. Fear of not counting for anything at all in the eyes of the world. This may be especially true for Palestinian Christians who live with the additional attendant pressures that come with being a minority amongst their own Palestinian brothers and sisters. Time and again, when we visit the Palestinian Christian community we hear, “your visit means so much, just to have you know we are here. Please tell others about us, so that we are not forgotten.” Are they thinking – “visit us, remember us, so we do not disappear, so we are not annihilated, either rhetorically or symbolically or in reality”?

And what about the Palestinian leadership? What are their fears, so deeply embedded that they have twice failed to make the compromises and take the bold actions needed to negotiate their territory and statehood? When the Palestinian leadership sits down to negotiate with the Israelis, is there an almost paralyzing fear of the other? One can readily understand their inability to trust and their fear that the Israelis may be trying to take advantage of them, tricking them perhaps into signing an agreement that after the fact will turn out to be a bad deal, and leave their people with less land, less autonomy, fewer resources than they should have negotiated for them.

After all, who, the Palestinian leadership may wonder, has their back? Who is looking out for their interests? The United States? Their Arab neighbors? Who can they trust as they sit down to try to negotiate with the Israelis, whom they see as stronger than they are, and in whom, after sixty years of conflict and forty years of occupation, they surely have no trust.

And we cannot fail to recognize another reality: that same fear of the other and that same fear of

death haunts the Israelis. They too live in mortal fear. Sixty years of Arab aggression, the continuing state of war with most of the Arab world, the public vilification of Israel in official state media and textbooks around the region, Iranian nuclear (and hence, existential) threats and funding of Hezbollah and Hamas. Current events, where the popular uprising threatens a possible end to even the “cold” peace Israel has with Egypt, underscores the tenuous nature of Israel’s existence in a region where it is surrounded by unfriendly countries and people. And as Palestinian militants in Gaza fired grad rockets into the Israeli town of Ofakim, one resident said, “We’re dying of fear that another wave of Grads and Qassams will begin.”

And we look also at the Israeli leaders – charged, just like their Palestinian counterparts, with finding a way to bring peace to their people through a negotiated two-state solution. They must be feeling fears very similar to the fears their Palestinian counterparts feel. Whom can they trust? Who has their back? How do they know an agreement won’t be just a trap leading to more suicide bombing, more Qassam rockets, or a step closer to their complete annihilation in all-out war?

There are those in some of the more conservative American Churches who do not resist pointing the finger of blame and accusing the Palestinians of not really wanting or seeking peace. But is this the truth? And does this sort of accusation serve the cause of peace? The answer to both of those questions is most emphatically “no.” And people that level this accusation serve only to increase the fears and the sense of isolation that may be keeping the Palestinian leadership from taking the risks they need to take for peace.

And accusations from some of the mainstream American Churches that Israel alone is to blame for perpetuation of the conflict, language like “Zionism is racism” and “Israeli apartheid” and threats to isolate Israel morally and economically, only serve to increase the deepest existential fears that Israelis live with daily. As Israelis hear rising voices, including church voices, as threatening their right to self-defense, to their nation’s fundamental character, and to their very existence, it is difficult simply to set aside the fear of death.

Both the Palestinians and the Israelis are dying of fear. We in the Church cannot fail to recognize this. We must take seriously both of their fears and ask what we as church can offer. Perhaps, more than anything, we can offer a respite from the fear.

In our Christian experience, we too, just like the Palestinians and the Israelis, have our dark moments of fear and despair. In those moments, and in our clearest moments of creaturely awareness, we know that God is the one with power to bring our existence to an end, absolutely, irrevocably, in an instant. The biblical writers knew that in their testimony to the fear of God, in their description of God as the one in whom “we live and move and have our being.”¹ Theologians and preachers have known it and proclaimed it throughout the church.

We find our peace when we hear God speak the word of life to us. We understand that there is one power in heaven and on earth that we are to recognize and respect – God. That God is the one who has given us life and who is the lord of life and death.

So what is a legitimate role for the church in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict? We are a community of peace, led by the Prince of Peace, called always to be peace-makers. So the role of the church in any conflict must be one of peace-making. Since we understand that the main obstacle to peace in the Middle East may be the Israeli and Palestinian fear of death, and since we ourselves find peace when we hear the voice of God say to us “I want you to live,” we must find a way to bring that same good news – that God wants all of His children to live – to the Palestinians and Israelis.

The witness of the Church must never be one that serves to increase the fear of either of these people, making peace less likely. Nor can it be to impose our own political solutions on them. Our most legitimate and authentic role must be to help free both parties from their fear, so that in freedom they can work toward the resolution only they can fashion and make real.

Perhaps then, the time has come for the American Church to tell both the Palestinians and the Israelis that we will no longer seek to take sides and level blame that only increases one or the other’s fear of death. Instead we will be both of their friends. We will tell them both – “we have your back,” “you can trust us.” We will share God’s good news – that He wants them both to live, and we will from now forward support them both in their quest for peace.

1. Acts 17:28 (NRSV).