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Pilgrimage, Perspective(s), & Peace: Reflections on 10 Days in Israel & Palestine

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I started making plans to lead a group pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine in January 2020 with the intention of traveling that summer. I could not foresee that three months later, the covid pandemic would end up delaying our trip three years. I'm grateful to the intrepid group of twenty participants from UUCF who made our 10-day trip possible this past June. In preparation for the trip, and in the six months since our return, I've read thousands of pages — and listened to hundreds of hours of audio — about Israel and Palestine.

If you are interested in my recommended resources for learning more, there is a link to my list of books, podcasts, and films posted at the top of frederickuu.org/pilgrimage. Since even that curated three-page list can be overwhelming, if I had to limit myself to only one source, I would recommend the [Ezra Klein Show](#). This podcast is free on all the major podcast platforms, and transcripts are available on *The New York Times*' website if you prefer to read instead of listen. The ten podcast episodes so far since October 7th that have focused on Israel and Palestine have consistently covered many of the major issues at the heart of this conflict.

Although I could talk for many hours about each day of our ten-day trip this summer, I'm going to do my best to distill it down to sharing a few major highlights with you.

We booked our trip through a tour company that specialized in dual-narratives, so we had both an Israeli and a Palestinian tour guide in dialogue with us throughout the trip. Upon our return home, most of us were understandably freshly invested in the future of both Israelis and Palestinians. Most of the rest of the world, however, remained far too complacent about Israel's more than 50-year occupation of the West Bank and its 16-year blockade of the Gaza Strip. (Yes, I know it's complicated, and we'll get to that.) My point at the moment is that after October 7th, the world's attention focused on this highly-contested land, and it's become clear that the previous *status quo* is unsustainable.

To begin to orient ourselves, if you overlay a map of Israel on a map of New Jersey, you'll see that Israel and New Jersey are roughly the same size. It's important to keep in mind just how small an area these two peoples are fighting over. There is not a lot of land to go around.

And speaking of the land, as much as I love reading books and watching films, there's nothing compared to the immersive experience of visiting a place in person. After an 11-hour redeye flight and a relatively short taxi ride, we checked in to our hotel in Jerusalem.

There was a sign in the lobby encouraging guests to be sure to see the view from the roof. So after eating the first among many incredible meals, we boarded the elevator to check out the view. They weren't kidding! It wasn't clear from street level, but just a few floors up, suddenly you could see just how close we were to the Dome of the Rock, one of the most iconic landmarks in the world. I couldn't help thinking: *we're in the thick of it now* — because this particular central site has long been fiercely contested.

For Muslims, the large rock around which the Dome of the Rock is built is traditionally believed to be the location from which Muhammad began his Night Journey, a mystical experience of feeling himself ascending into heaven.

It would be difficult to overemphasize how important this site is for many Muslims. It's the third holiest site in Islam. If you are curious, the single holiest site in Islam is the *Kaaba* (literally "the cube") in Mecca, famous for pilgrims circumambulating

it during the Hajj. And the silver medalist is the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

The golden-roofed Dome of the Rock is only one part of the much larger *Al-Aqsa* Mosque compound. But here's the thing: this mosque was built on top of the site of the ancient Jewish Temple destroyed by the Romans in the first century CE. That means the *third holiest site* in Islam is on top of the *number one holiest site* in Judaism.

Some of you will recall that Hamas named the October 7th terrorist attacks "Operation *Al-Aqsa Flood*," which added yet more layer of complexity onto this combustibly controversial piece of land.

We were allowed to visit the Dome of the Rock, and to get as close as we'd like to the outside. Only Muslims are allowed *inside* the mosque. In person, you get a much better appreciation of the expansive plazas that make up the *Al-Aqsa* compound as whole. The large plaza allows you space to fully walk around the Dome of the Rock.

If you zoom out, you can see how close the Dome of the Rock is to the Western Wall, the only remaining part of the ancient Jewish Temple. The Western Wall, also known as the Kotel, is well known for visitors writing prayers and placing them into the cracks of the wall.

To clear up one common confusion, the Western Wall is *not* a wall of the ancient Jewish Temple itself. The Western Wall is a remnant of the *retaining* wall that surrounded the ancient Court of the Gentiles, the large plaza outside the Temple.

I'll be weaving together both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives throughout this sermon. For now, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that for many Jews, the Western Wall is one of their most iconic symbols of their feelings of ancient connection to this land, which stretch back for millennia.

For some of you, various caveats may be springing to mind. Here, and as we continue, I'll invite you to consider the challenge that our Israeli and Palestinian tour guides gave us: Try to listen, understand, and appreciate how *both sides* understand *their side* of the story. Weaving both those narratives together may be the only hope for finding a way forward for all.

I wanted to start at the Temple Mount / Al-aqsa Mosque not only because it is where our trip began this summer, but also because it is a microcosm of the larger conflict: two groups with competing claims to the same small piece of land.

I will have to limit myself to showing you just one more Israeli site, Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Museum, before shifting to Palestine. If you have been to the U.S. Holocaust Museum in D.C., you know what a powerful experience it is, and I highly recommend visiting it. Yad Vashem is also incredibly powerful — but with strikingly different in architecture, pedagogical frameworks, and experiences from D.C.'s museum. If you haven't yet been to Yad Vashem, or if you visited before 2005, you'll now find a completely redone and expanded version which opened that year. It's very different than the Yad Vashem I visited in 1999 when I was in Israel and Palestine on one previous trip.

There's a lot to say, but to me, the single most memorable feature of Yad Vashem came at the very end of the museum's harrowing journey through remembering the Holocaust. We emerged onto an elevated deck with a spectacular view of *the land of Israel*.

For many Jews, one of the most tragic lessons of the Holocaust, which ended fewer than a hundred years ago, is that the nations of the world cannot be counted on to stop antisemitism at its worst. After the slaughter of one-third of world Jewry, returning to the land of Israel was an attempt to create a country in which Jews could defend themselves.

Now we all know there's more to the story: the Zionist slogan of "A land without a people for a people without a land" tragically failed to account for the Palestinian's own deep ties to this same land.

From a dual-perspective narrative of having journeyed with both an Israeli and Palestinian tour guide, I need to add one more important point. Only a mile from the Israeli Holocaust Museum is the site of the Deir Yassin massacre of 1948.

During the first Arab-Israeli war, the Jewish military destroyed this Palestinian-Arab village killing more than a hundred of its residents; hundreds of other Palestinian towns and villages were likewise destroyed. The graves of the Palestinians who died at

Deir Yassin remain unknown and unmarked to this day (Abdo and Maslha, *An Oral History of The Palestinian Nakba*, 20).

This is only one story among so many others from the *Nakba* (literally, “the catastrophe”), which led to the violent expulsion and flight of approximately 700,000 Palestinians from their homes — during the same year that the modern state of Israel celebrated its independence.

As I hold in my heart both Yad Vashem (the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Center) and Deir Yassin (one of many sites of Palestinian dispossession), I want to be clear that by no means am I calling for less Holocaust education. Indeed, in the face of Holocaust denial in Palestine and other parts of the world, there are many ways in which we need *more* Holocaust education. But in Israel and around the world, we also need much more education about the historic and ongoing *Nakba* for Palestinians.

If I had to select the single most iconic image I saw during the half of the trip we spent in Palestine, it was a giant key over an arch in the Aida Palestinian refugee camp, located only a mile north of the historic center of Bethlehem in Palestine’s West Bank. This key represents the *physical keys* to the homes of Palestinian families, homes from which they were forced to flee during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Many Palestinian families still have those keys to their front doors, even though a tragic number of their homes have since been destroyed.

Metaphorically, this giant key symbolizes the Palestinian right of return: the political position that Palestinian refugees and their descendants have a legal and human right to the property they were forced to leave behind during the 1948 *Nakba*, which led to the displacement of a majority of Palestinian Arabs.

There is presently a shocking amount of trash piled up within the Aida Refugee Camp we visited, as well as in many other parts of the West Bank. The trash is not there because the Palestine residents don’t care; it’s due both to the ongoing Israeli Occupation and to the corrupt and dysfunctional Palestinian Authority. The lack of regular trash pickup is only one among many daily indignities Palestinians face — from restrictions of their movements to unreliable access to basic services, and other violations of their human rights. Their trash-burning caused a noxious odor we smelled when we were there, and creates an ongoing health hazard for residents.

We also saw the gigantic 26-foot high Separation Wall built by the Israeli military, which continues in other areas of the West Bank. In total, it is 439 miles long.

The refugee camp we visited is terrible enough in isolation. But it presented an even more devastating contrast when we traveled only a mile away and viewed the gleaming the gold-embossed interior of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, a traditional site associated with the birth of Jesus.

For this Christmas season, to reflect the devastation in Gaza, the nearby Lutheran Church located in the city of Bethlehem took their traditional manger scene and set it amongst rubble, to serve as a reminder that Jesus was born in what is today's occupied Palestine. (According to most religion scholars the historical Jesus was born in Nazareth, located within present-day Israel. But that's a sermon for another day.)

Personally, one of my takeaways from visiting Palestine is that there was *no* peace this summer. There was no peace on October 6th, the day before the October 7th Hamas terrorist attack. In fact, there has been no peace there for decades.

Yes, it's important to learn about and acknowledge all the historical contexts, including the horrific suicide bombings within Israel during the Second Intifada, as well as the many Israeli missile attacks — all major factors behind the building of the Separation Wall. But we also need to be aware that on October 5th (two days before the heinous October 7th attacks), the United Nations reported that 2023 was *already* “the deadliest year for Palestinians since it began recording deaths in 2006” ([Jewish Voices for Peace](#)).

The so-called Netanyahu doctrine is named after Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been the Israeli Prime Minister since 2009 with only one brief exception. The Netanyahu doctrine held that he could provide Israel security through maintaining an indefinite military blockage of Gaza and military occupation of the West Bank — an occupation which allows Israeli settlers to incrementally take over more and more Palestinian land.

Don't get me wrong: Hamas' brutal attack on civilians on October 7th — “the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust” — is one of the worst imaginable ways to focus the world's attention on Palestine. And the Israeli military's collective punishment

— killing more than 17,000 Gazans, including more than 7,000 children — is one of the worst imaginable ways for Israel to respond. Targeted counter-terrorism is one major alternative that could have had far fewer civilian casualties.

It would be difficult to come up with a more classic example of a hopelessly *vicious* cycle, a negative feedback loop that includes:

- a *Jewish* fundamentalist assassinating the *Jewish* prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, undermining the Oslo Peace Process,
- Palestinian suicide bombers in the Second Intifada in the early 2000s, undermining hope on the Jewish left that any peace process could ever be successful,
- Hamas spending billions of dollars building underground tunnels (instead of investing that money in its people),
- Hamas cynically using its civilian population as human shields,
- the daily humiliations (and too-often violent assaults) that characterize Palestinian life in the West Bank under Israeli military occupation,
- the humanitarian crisis of the blockaded Gaza Strip.

I could go on with many more examples of this descending spiral for all concerned.

The opposite of a vicious cycle is a *virtuous* cycle, a positive feedback loop that creates trust. To quote Dr. Sarah Kendzior, an incisive contemporary political commentators on resisting systems of oppression: “**Truth and compassion are the only way out**” (@SarahKendzior). But for too long, both Israelis and Palestinians have been fed too much disinformation and half-truths — leading to a hardening of hearts all around.

I’m acutely aware that *today*, December 10th, is the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the same day in 1948. Nevertheless, the current trajectory continues to entrench a horrifying cycle of violence, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (The New York Times). Even *beginning* to reverse course — to plant seeds of “truth and compassion” — feels terribly difficult.

In recent weeks, I’ve been re-visiting the writings of Edward Said, a Palestinian-American professor of literature at Columbia University who was one of the founders of postcolonial studies. Said died more than two decades ago in 2003. His essays from

many years ago read like they could have been written yesterday. The same fearful, violent patterns have just continued to repeat themselves.

Way back in 1999, Said observed trenchantly that, “The conflict appears intractable because it is a contest over the same land by two peoples who always believed they had valid title to it and who **hoped that the other side would in time give up or go away**” (The New York Times).

Fast-forwarding more than two decades to today, it has long been clear that neither side is going anywhere. Palestinians have repeatedly shown a fierce dedication to holding the land. And Israel, through the support of the U.S. and other Western governments, is a major military force, indeed, a *nuclear power*. So it seems equally unlikely that the Jews are going anywhere either.

But after October 7th, it is increasingly difficult for the Israeli far right to plausibly claim that a neverending occupation and blockade will provide enough physical and existential security for Israelis. So, how do we move closer toward a way forward that our UU Sixth Principle calls “peace, liberty, and justice for *all*.”

I want to invite us to spend a few minutes reflecting on where we go from here in light of our UU values, with *love* at the center. To begin to do so, I invite you to hear a profound spoken word poem written recently by the therapist, somatics teacher, and political organizer Prentis Hemphill:

Love has told me lately

that I have to let my heart break

without seeking its repair too soon and

that I have to speak

before the words have formed fully in my mouth

I have to risk being misunderstood

to show you who I am

I have to pray for the children

that others refuse to

all of them victim to our delusions

I will never confine my heart

It will run wild and borderless and
never join with the energy of war
I asked my ancestors what to do
when it felt like people had so lost the way
breathe they said
at the end of the exhale
is what we avoid but need
our grief
our vulnerability
our rage
gravity can help you tell the truth
that there was never a human life
worth more than another
though many of us have soothed ourselves
with that lie
the worst of what we do to each other
is done in terror, apathy, and despair
this is reason enough to feel and
to make sure everyone has the room to feel
and be at home
our safety is quilted like a tapestry
never erected like a wall
(from [Instagram](#)).

There's so much to say about that poem, but I want to build, in particular, on that last line: **“our safety is quilted like a tapestry / never erected like a wall.”**

The level of carnage and violence from both the October 7th terrorist attacks and the catastrophic civilian casualties in Gaza are only possible through *dehumanization* of “the other.” And we desperately need re-connection and *re-humanization* because “our safety is quilted like a tapestry.”

When I think what this might look like, I'm reminded of the poetic story I shared with you a few weeks ago, "**Gate A-4**" by Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. It's too long for me to read again in full, but some of you will remember this beautiful and moving story about comforting a crying and confused Palestinian woman, a story that ended with everyone at the airport gate sharing cookies and apple juice. To quote just the final stanza:

I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. **The shared world.** Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

What does a "shared world" look like for two peoples so long divided by violence, resentment, and competition? How do we begin to quilt safety like a tapestry between the two sides, when both believe they have a right to the whole cloth and keep hoping the other side will just go away?

Here's one particularly blunt answer from Daniel Kurtzer, a professor at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs and a former U.S. ambassador to Egypt and to Israel. He said recently that, "If Palestinians expect ... reverting to 1948 (either the entirety of the land or the original U.N. Partition plan with a much larger Gaza Strip and West Bank) they're going to be sorely disappointed. And if Israelis believe that they can achieve an agreement on something less than 1967 (a smaller Gaza Strip and West Bank after the "The Six-Day War or Third Arab-Israeli War"), they're going to be sorely disappointed" ([The New York Times](#)).

Focusing on the West Bank: that name is a little confusing because it seems like East if you look at it on a map. But it's called the West Bank because it's on the *west bank* of the Jordan River. The reality of the Palestinian West Bank today under occupation is a partition into three Areas — A, B, and C — each under different levels of Israeli and Palestinian control. A map of the West Bank today looks like swiss cheese. Here and there are tiny splotches of Palestinian cities and villages scattered within a much larger area of Israeli settlements, military areas, roads, and state lands.

This present state of affairs has prompted many analysts to say that the hypothetical “Two-State Solution” is no longer possible, that we have a “one state reality” that everyone needs to come to terms with.

If that is an accurate assessment, the best alternative I have heard to the Two State Solution is a *confederacy*, a variation of a European Union model.

The motto for a confederation-based peace process is “Two States, One Homeland”: both the Israeli and Palestinian governments would be accountable for the safety and civil rights of its citizens, but their borders would be porous. People would live where they wanted. This option may be the only sane and humane way for both sides to get what they want: access to the whole land. But it requires that everyone share it. The shared world: *“our safety is quilted like a tapestry / never erected like a wall.”* More details are available from A Land for All at alandforall.org/english.

If this sounds like a pipe dream, it’s important to underscore that even after the Nakba, approximately 150,000 Palestinians remained inside Israel’s current borders. “Today, there are approximately 1.6 million Palestinian citizens of Israel, comprising about 20% of the total Israeli population” ([Institute for Middle East Understanding](http://www.instituteforjewishstudies.org)). Millions of Palestinians are walking around Israel every day. It’s not perfect. There are ongoing issues of discrimination that need to be resolved, but it’s just not true that Israelis and Palestinians are unable to live together. They have done so in the past, they do so in the present, and they can in the future if all sides commit to addressing the root causes of the ongoing violence.

We remain a long way from making any such dream a reality, but when I think about what it would take to plant the seeds of a shared future, the image that keeps coming to mind is a sign we saw in the Aida Refugee Camp that said, **“Make Hummus Not Walls.”** As Elad, our Israeli tour guide shared with us when he preached from this pulpit back in September: **“An enemy is someone whose story you haven't heard.”**

We need a massive scaling up of opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to regularly hear one another’s stories — facilitated by some variation on a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Both sides need to break bread together, hear one another’s truths, and allow their hearts to break in compassion for all the pain experienced by both themselves and “the other.”

One of the most powerful ways to do that would be for as many people as possible on both sides to learn both Arabic and Hebrew, so that listening can happen in each person's native tongue. That could set the stage for *both* Arabic and Hebrew to be the official languages of a confederated Israel and Palestine.

Our UU values call us to advocate for more justice, interdependence, equity, generosity, pluralism, transformation — and most centrally, love. On our trip we saw firsthand that connections between Israelis and Palestinians happen all the time when they are given a chance.

I'll give you one last poignant example that's been much on my heart. Some of you will recognize the name Mahmoud Darwish, who prior to his death in 2008 was known as Palestine's national poet.

As a side note, one of today's best known Palestinian poets is Mosab Abu Toha. I recommend his powerful book, published last year, titled *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear*. Some of you may have heard his terrifying story of recently being illegally detained by the Israeli military.

Returning our attention to Darwish, I was fascinated to learn that this most famous poet of the *Palestinian* resistance dated a *Jewish* woman for two years. When we give humans a chance to meet, they make connections. They can even fall in love. "*Our safety is quilted like a tapestry.*"

I invite you to hear one of Darwish's poems about the travails of his star-crossed romance with his Jewish lover, amidst a military occupation:

Between Rita and my eyes
There is a rifle
And whoever knows Rita
Kneels and prays
To the divinity in those honey-colored eyes.
And I kissed Rita
When she was young
And I remember how she approached
And how my arm covered the loveliest of braids.

And I remember Rita
The way a sparrow remembers its stream
Ah, Rita
Between us there are a million sparrows and images
And many a rendezvous
Fired at by a rifle.
Rita's name was a feast in my mouth
Rita's body was a wedding in my blood
And I was lost in Rita for two years
And for two years she slept on my arm
And we made promises
Over the most beautiful of cups
And we burned in the wine of our lips
And we were born again
Ah, Rita!
What before this rifle could have turned my eyes from yours
Except a nap or two or honey-colored clouds?
Once upon a time
Oh, the silence of dusk
In the morning my moon migrated to a far place
Towards those honey-colored eyes
And the city swept away all the singers
And Rita.
Between Rita and my eyes—
A rifle.

Right now, the incentives of the leaders on both sides continue on their perverse paths, further locking themselves into a vicious cycle. It will take ongoing pressure from the international community if there is to be a possibility of incentivizing both sides differently to co-create a future in which Jewish lives matter *and* Palestinian lives matter.

In that spirit, I will end for now by inviting you to hear once more that poem by Prentis Hemphill:

Love has told me lately

that I have to let my heart break

without seeking its repair too soon and

that I have to speak

before the words have formed fully in my mouth

I have to risk being misunderstood

to show you who I am

I have to pray for the children

that others refuse to

all of them victim to our delusions

I will never confine my heart

It will run wild and borderless and

never join with the energy of war

I asked my ancestors what to do

when it felt like people had so lost the way

breathe they said

at the end of the exhale

is what we avoid but need

our grief

our vulnerability

our rage

gravity can help you tell the truth

that there was never a human life

worth more than another

though many of us have soothed ourselves

with that lie

the worst of what we do to each other

is done in terror, apathy, and despair

this is reason enough to feel and
to make sure everyone has the room
to feel and be at home
our safety is quilted like a tapestry
never erected like a wall.

For Further Study

- Rev. Carl's Recommended "**Top Books, Podcasts, Films on Israel & Palestine**" are available in a link available at the top of frederickuu.org/pilgrimage.
- This sermon from December 12, 2023 is "part 2" on this topic. **The first sermon titled, "Antidotes & Poisons: Imagining a Future for Israel & Palestine,"** from November 5, 2023 is available in the following forms:
 - Text: frederickuu.org/sermons/231105AntidotesPoisonsIP.pdf
 - Video: youtube.com/watch?v=R_5k1h8gO3Q
 - Podcast: links available at top of frederickuu.org/sermons