



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Doubts & Loves:
Israel/Palestine, Perspectives, & Peace**
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I am at the beginning of my tenth year serving as your minister, and over the past almost-decade we have explored a vast array of topics in our Sunday Services. But this is the first sermon I have preached here about the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. That decision was not for lack of interest; I’ve been following the developments in Israel/Palestine actively for more than twenty years. And it’s not because I don’t have anything to say on this subject; if anything I have too much to say. I sometimes feel that, to be able to say anything about Israel and Palestine, I need at least two hours to get started.

We also haven’t been actively avoiding the topic here at UUCF. In June 2015, Mike Morse preached an important sermon from this pulpit titled "Holy Land, Sacred Hope: Reflections on the Conflict in Israel," which is available in our [sermon archive](#). But in the past, I did have a sense that so much has been said about this topic that I wasn’t sure what I could add that would be of sufficient value and interest.

So what changed? In February 2020, I received an invitation to help lead a tour of Israel and Palestine through a company that has an explicit mission of using the travel to increase social justice, peace, and freedom. One of their primary tools for doing that is the practice of “dual narratives.” This approach means that at many points on the trip you have both a Jewish Israeli guide and a Palestinian Arab guide who are in conversation with one another out of a commitment to present different

perspectives, keep one another accountable, and be open to previously unforeseen points of connection.

This model really appealed to me, and I wasn't alone. Within a few weeks, we had the maximum of 30 people already signed-up for a trip. But unfortunately the trip, along with so much else, was delayed due to Covid-19.

Back then, when I was still unclear about how long this pandemic was going to last, I did a ton of research into Israel and Palestine as part of preparing to co-lead this trip. I also planned to preach a sermon about our travel experience after the pilgrimage was over—and we do still hope to go, hopefully in January 2023, two years after our initial date. But after the outbreak of violence in Israel and Palestine this past May, I went ahead and scheduled this sermon to share with you some of my evolving thoughts.

I say *evolving* thoughts because my mind has changed over time, and I anticipate that it will continue to do so as I learn more. I also acknowledge that this subject is so controversial that it is impossible for one sermon to even begin to cover all the competing concerns. What I *can* offer you is some of the core insights, experiences, and perspectives that shape my current view.

I have visited Israel on one previous occasion. In the Winter of 1999, as an undergraduate Religion Major, I had the opportunity to participate in a six-week travel/study program to Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Italy. We did not have a chance to enter Palestine on that trip, which is one of the reasons I am looking forward to this upcoming trip.

1999 was the year before the Second Intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israel. At that time—and for many years afterward—whenever the subject of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict came up, I found myself most sympathetic to the two-state solution, an approach which seeks to create an independent Palestine to coexist peacefully alongside Israel.

Now, some people have been enmeshed in this conflict far more deeply and for a far greater length of time than I have. However, it has now been twenty-two years since I was in Israel, and I will be honest that as years have passed, my hope in the realistic possibility of a two-state solution has diminished. Some of the world's greatest

diplomats have tried to make that approach work, and at this point, a part of me keeps hearing that old adage echoing in my head: “One definition of insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result.”

I’ll say more momentarily about some other possible ways forward, but first let me lay a few more cards on the table about where I’m coming from. I’ll limit myself to two particularly significant and representative influences. First, as most of you know, my wife Magin is Jewish. She has family members who were directly impacted by the Holocaust, and both she and many Jewish people we know have directly experienced the spikes in Anti-Semitism of recent years. Of course, it is possible to criticize specific, unjust policies of Israel without being anti-Semitic, but it is also true that some people and groups have cynically used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as motivation for cruel anti-semitic attacks on Jewish individuals and groups around the world.

A second significant influence that fewer of you may know about is that my primary meditation teacher for many years is Palestinian. In 1948, his grandparents became refugees from Palestine in the events that most Palestinians call the *Nakba* (which means “catastrophe”) and which most Jewish people call Israeli Independence Day. And here we find one of the many divergences within this conflict: what one side remembers as one of their greatest victories of independence, another side remembers as one of their greatest tragedies.

I could go on to list many more examples of divergent perspectives, which is how I’ve often taught and led discussions about Israel and Palestine in the past; I’ve begun with British colonialism, turned to what happened in 1948 and 1967, then to the Oslo Peace Accords and the fallout from that. If you are interested in digging into the details, the 4th edition of Alan Dowty’s book Israel / Palestine is one accessible entry point.

But I want to resist the temptation to take you on a whirlwind tour of all that history, as fascinating and important as those events are. I want to try something different because the more I have learned about the region’s history, the more convinced I am that the way forward will not be found in adjudicating the past, the history of which is all too convoluted at this point.

Instead, I find myself asking with Dr. King, “**Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community?**” Tragically, as in our own country, there are bad faith actors on both sides seeking to sow chaos; but there are also activists and everyday citizens on both sides who remain committed to the possibility of building a diverse, multicultural beloved community.

So as I have sought to construct this upcoming trip to Israel and Palestine, I laid out three core commitments for our group. And I invite you to consider that these same three commitments can aid our own individual and collective reflections on this ongoing conflict. These three commitments are: pilgrimage, perspectives, and peace. I’ll say more about each in turn.

First, **pilgrimage**. An old proverb tells us that “A *tourist* passes *through* a place, a *pilgrim* allows a place to pass through *them*.” I invite us to approach this conflict in that spirit. Let us not just pass through. May we be open to being changed—to having our hearts, minds, and spirits opened in unexpected ways—as we learn more about the people and places of Israel and Palestine.

Second, **perspectives**—*plural*. In the spirit of the “dual narratives” approach, we need to be listening to people on both sides—and everywhere in between. Along these lines, one of the things that makes me respect someone the most is when I hear them describe the perspective of the person they are in conflict with in the most charitable way possible.

Third, **peace**: how can we advocate for a transformation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict that is aligned with our UU Sixth Principle, “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice” not merely for some, but “for all”?

In addition to these three core commitments of pilgrimage, perspectives, and peace, there is a poem that is close to my heart that always comes to mind when I reflect on Israel and Palestine. It is titled “**The Place Where We Are Right**” by **Yehuda Amichai** (1924 - 2000). Amichai was born in Germany in 1924. In 1936, at the age of twelve, he immigrated to Palestine with his family. And in 1948, he was a soldier in the First Arab–Israeli War. As a result of his experiences, he became an advocate for peace

and reconciliation, and was often involved in dialogues with Palestinian poets and writers. His poem was born out that work for peace:

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

What would it mean to approach the Israel and Palestinian conflict with *doubts* and *loves* as our entry points?

This conflict has often been described as “Right vs. Right.” Both sides have legitimate claims and legitimate grievances. And if you are in the right, it is hard to let go. Why should you?! But if the other side also feels like they are in the right, it is also hard for them to let go. This dynamic can leave everyone trapped in entrenched, habitat patterns of fear and anger.

One of the most tragic examples of what can happen if you act only from “the place where you are right” is the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In 1995, because of his work for peace with the Palestinians, he was shot, not by a Palestinian, but by a right-wing Jewish Israeli who opposed the Oslo Peace Process ([Eilberg-Schwartz xi](#)). That right-wing Zealot could only see from the place where he was right.

And so it has gone, decade after decade, with both sides often becoming more entrenched in the ways that they are right. But what if we come to see that:

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What whispers might be heard of an as-yet-unimagined way forward—if we are honest and vulnerable about our doubts and allow our hearts to open to all in compassion and love?

I will start with the single most powerful example I know, of how doubts and loves might show us a way forward together. If you spend time listening to both Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones in this tragedy, it quickly becomes clear that both **“Israeli and Palestinian families use virtually the same words to describe their grief”** (Dowty 256). This shared language around loss can remind us of the common humanity that runs far deeper than any surface conflict.

Regarding this conflict, I also find myself having doubts whenever I encounter people or groups who are convinced that one side or the other is almost exclusively in the right. Don’t get me wrong. By all means, the current situation is untenable from a

human rights perspective for the Palestinians. But how to move forward in a way that is aligned with our UU Sixth Principle of “peace, liberty, and justice”—not just for one group or the other one, but for *all*? I want to share with you two examples of what that might look like, first from a Jewish perspective and then from a Palestinian perspective.

First, in May, during the outbreak in violence, I was moved by an [op-ed in The New York Times](#) by Senator Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish. I’ll read just one paragraph, although the whole article is worth reading in full:

Israel has the absolute right to live in peace and security, but so do the Palestinians. I strongly believe that the United States has a major role to play in helping Israelis and Palestinians to build that future. But if the United States is going to be a credible voice on human rights on the global stage, **we must uphold international standards of human rights consistently, even when it’s politically difficult. We must recognize that Palestinian rights matter. Palestinian lives matter.**

Amidst this entrenched conflict, I am grateful to see Senator Sanders advocating for the human rights of all.

From a Palestinian perspective, I appreciated a book published just a few months ago by our own Beacon Press titled [In This Place Together: A Palestinian’s Journey to Collective Liberation](#) co-written by the American Jewish activist Penina Eilberg-Schwartz, and the Palestinian peace activist Sulaiman Khatib. A way toward *collective* liberation—in which everyone gets more peace, liberty, and justice—is what we are listening for with our doubts and loves.

Similar to the “dual narratives” approach we explored earlier, Khatib confesses that as a younger man, he thought that it was weak equivocation to attempt to address both Israeli and Palestinian sides. For many years, he thought that the hardest and most important way forward was to fight “by any means necessary” for Palestinian rights and dignity. But he has come to believe that **it is more hopeful, if also much more difficult, to “hold multiple narratives” and to “carry contradictions in your soul.** It is much easier to see one side of the story, to blame the other, to live in victimhood. To feel that all the world is against you, that everyone wants to kill you”

(Eilberg-Schwartz xxii). Over time, he has found his heart opening in compassion and love—always with a fierce love for the Palestinian people, but also with a growing love for the Israeli people who feel deeply tied to the same land.

And that has become his starting point—not the strong grievance of the past that both sides still feel deeply, but the difficult truth, in his words, that, “**Our two peoples belong to the same place**” (Eilberg-Schwartz 202). And it is from this starting point that both Palestinian and Jewish activists have convinced me that—in addition to the two-state solution, serious consideration should also be made to the democratic one-state solution “in which each person living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea would get one vote”—with constitutional protections built in to ensure the human rights and basic protections of all. Similarly, there are important proposals for a “Middle Way”—often called a confederation of “Two States, One Homeland.” In this model “each government would be accountable for the safety and civil rights of its citizens, but the borders would be porous. People would live where they wanted” (209).

There is admittedly so much more to say. As I shared at the beginning, I feel like I need at least two hours to get started on this topic, and this sermon is only twenty minutes long. But the important point is this—both for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for any entrenched conflicts in our own lives: Where do we feel that only we are right? And are we willing to take the risk of asking the vulnerable questions Yehuda Amichai pointed us to in his poem. If I’m being honest, are there places where I have *doubts*? And if I open my heart, are there ways I might *love* more fully and freely in this moment?:

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But doubts and loves
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And a whisper will be heard in the place
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House once stood.

In that spirit, let us open our hearts so as to be more honest and vulnerable about our *doubts*, and even more open with our *love*. May we listen together for as yet unforeseen ways forward that might make peace, liberty, and justice possible—not merely for some—but for all.