

The Israel – Palestine Problem: The perspective of a New Zealand Progressive Jew

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Whenever Muslims and Jews meet there is a proverbial “elephant in the room” – a big issue that occupies a tremendous amount of mental space that everyone is too scared to mention. Although we frequently discuss this issue internally with members of our own group, it is so divisive and seemingly intractable that we are afraid to bring it out into the open.

I believe that no progress will be made on the Israel – Palestine problem, and Jewish – Muslim dialogue will remain superficial until we are ready to confront the issues openly, respect each other as we are, and work to understand each others' perspectives. Most importantly, the key players in the conflict must commit to negotiating a long term settlement.

Peace will not exist between Palestine and Israel, and Jews and Muslims will never feel completely at ease together, until everyone involved in the conflict wants peace badly enough to make painful concessions.

In New Zealand, we can analyse and discuss the situation with the benefit and comfort of distance and peaceful surroundings. We know that we can speak openly and honestly without the fear of physical harm coming to us.

Before going into how we can make progress on solving the problem, I would like to explain a bit about New Zealand Jewry, and the Progressive Jewish perspective.

In New Zealand, 6,636 people ticked the 'Jewish' box on Census Night 2001⁶. Of those 6,636, approximately 1,200 are affiliated to the Orthodox or

more traditional stream, and approximately 800 are affiliated to the Progressive or more liberal stream, which leaves 4,636 or 70% unaffiliated, secular, mostly areligious Jews in the country. Judaism as an ethnicity is very difficult to disentangle from Judaism as a religion and I would venture to say that someone who bothered to tick the Jewish box on the census identified enough as being Jewish to feel a need to maintain their ethnic and cultural values, and feel a connection to the Jewish People even if they have no belief in God or desire to go to a synagogue.

Jews don't normally tout Judaism, and it has not been a proselytising religion since the destruction of the Second Temple in 73 AD. We don't rely on converting others to maintain our numbers.

Judaism is a religion of strong ethical values. Peace is so important to us that many of the key prayers in our liturgy are devoted to peace, and we use the Hebrew word “shalom”, literally “peace” as our salutation on both greeting and parting. We are not really a “religion of love”, although when our great sage Rabbi Akiba was asked to summarise Jewish knowledge, he repeated the words of Leviticus 19:18, “Love thy neighbour as thyself”. We are certainly a “religion of justice”, in that we are commanded in the Torah (the five books of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament) to pursue

⁶ www.stats.govt.nz

justice⁷, along with 612 other specific commandments which define our legal, social, cultural, and spiritual norms. To tie these things together, the Talmud or interpretation of the Torah says that “the world rests on three things: on justice, on truth, and on peace. And all three are one, for where there is justice, there is also truth, and there is peace.”⁸

We are also a religion of struggle. The name Israel means “struggles with God”. This name was given to Jacob after his struggle with an angel⁹, and refers to the Jewish people as well as the country.

The land of Israel is central to Jewish existence. Since the destruction of the Second Temple and dispersion of the Jews by the Romans two thousand years ago until the establishment of the State of Israel, we have been a people without our own country, facing conquests, crusades, expulsions, inquisitions, pogroms, purges, and ultimately a Holocaust, yet always longing to return to the Holy Land. Particularly in modern times, Israel and the Jewish People are highly interdependent – one could not exist in a meaningful way or for long without the other. There has been a continuous Jewish presence in Israel for the last 3,700 years, and most Jews even of minimal observance will want to make at least one journey to Israel during their lifetime.

We believe that Israel has a clear right to exist as a sovereign state.

Unfortunately, since Israel declared independence in 1948 in accordance with United Nations resolutions, her neighbours, for the most part, have been hostile. Despite the fact that Jews and Muslims had lived together in peace for centuries in many parts of the world, many leaders of Israel’s neighbouring countries began to cast the struggle as one between Muslim and Jew. Statements by the Arab League General Secretary General Azzam Pasha in 1948, urging Jihad to begin “a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades”¹⁰, and Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser’s 1955 statement that “... the sons of Islam will cleanse the land of Palestine... there will be no peace on Israel’s

border because we demand vengeance, and vengeance is Israel’s death”¹¹ was not helpful to generating a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

This attitude has prevailed in many forms since then. Even today, the Covenant of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement which was recently elected into power in Palestine, states that “The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said: ‘The Day of Judgement will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews, when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Muslims, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him’”¹² It comes as no surprise that Hamas has proudly claimed responsibility for over fifty suicide bombings.

Casting the conflict as Muslim versus Jew does a great disservice to both. Taking an essentially political conflict and casting it in religious terms seems to have been done by some political and religious leaders for political reasons.

To make matters worse, Palestinian children are being systematically taught through pseudo-educational material and children’s television programming to hate Jews and Israelis. Organisations like the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)¹³ and Palestine Media Watch¹⁴ have thoroughly documented a large number of such cases. Hamas has reportedly run summer camps for children where they are taught songs urging them to “kill Zionists wherever they are, in the name of God”¹⁵. We are all familiar with television images of Palestinian families expressing satisfaction when their children have killed themselves and others in terrorist attacks.

On the other side, there is no doubt that Israeli military tactics have often been heavy-handed, and that Israeli army forces have killed many innocent people along with combatants, as well as assassinating a number of political leaders. The problem has gone from bad to much worse in the last five decades. A quick glance at a map of the West Bank¹⁶ shows a pattern of Israeli settlement since

⁷ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁸ Ta’anit 4:2

⁹ Genesis 32:28

¹⁰ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_Arab-Israeli_War

¹¹ Seale, Patrick. 1965. *The Struggle for Syria - A study in Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958*. p 194.

¹² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamas#The_Covenant_of_Hamas

¹³ www.memri.org

¹⁴ www.pmw.org.il

¹⁵ San Francisco Chronicle, 31 July 2005

¹⁶ Eg www.btselem.org/Download/Settlements_Map_Eng.pdf

1967 that is at odds with creating a long-term peace – numerous Israeli settlements, military bases and roads have been established in a patchwork pattern within the West Bank, interrupting the contiguity of the land and making many ordinary activities that Israelis or any other free citizens would take for granted inconvenient at best. And while the recently security fence has been effective in reducing the number of suicide bombings¹⁷, it has cut into significant sections of land outside of Israel's 1967 borders, particularly around Ariel, Alfei Menashe, and Maale Adomim¹⁸, resulting in perhaps temporary but nevertheless *de facto* annexation of this land. Calls by small ultra-right-wing Israeli political parties to “transfer” Arabs from Israel and the Occupied Territories¹⁹ are indicative of a significant disillusionment with the prospects for peace, as well as an undercurrent of racism in some quarters of Israeli society.

It's also true that there is a great disparity in the standard of living between Palestine and Israel. The UN Development Programme's Human Development Indicators²⁰ for Palestine are consistent with its Arab neighbours, with Palestine performing slightly worse than Lebanon and Jordan, and slightly better than Syria and Egypt.

But enough of the past, and the present. As stated at the top of this article, things won't change until people on both sides of the conflict are ready to make painful concessions for peace.

Taken at face value, the recent elections in Palestine and Israel were no great cause for hope. The direction of the new Israeli government seems to be “more of the same”. The Palestinians replaced a regime noteworthy for its corruption with a party run by religious extremists whose charter specifically denies Israel's right to exist and who have an unashamed history of terror attacks. If there is a silver lining in this cloud, it is that the political pack of cards has been well reshuffled in these elections. And often it is just such a reconfiguration which results in progress in peace negotiations. Who would have believed in 1978 that it would be Menachem Begin that would negotiate peace with Egypt? This

was the same Menachem Begin that Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion branded a terrorist.

But the prevailing political conditions at that time favoured such an exchange. Both Egypt and Israel knew that removing the threat of attack from their largest and most powerful neighbour was a strategically sensible thing to do. The situation in Palestine now would appear to be less hopeful, in that Hamas would appear to have no political appetite for peace, and Israel claims that there is no one to negotiate with.

Peace would bring huge opportunities and benefits to the region. The human cost of the conflict has been tremendous, not only in terms of lives lost and damaged, but also in terms of the psychological pressure on those living in the conflict. The economic cost has also been huge. However the opportunity cost is arguably much greater – if Palestine's and Israel's economies were working together rather than against each other, it would result in significant rise in the standard of living in the region. The more tightly integrated, the better – France and Germany, once entrenched bitter enemies for generations, wouldn't think of attacking each other now, as it would be economic suicide.

So what are the key sticking points? Both the Palestinian Authority (under Fatah) and Israel agreed to UN Resolution 242, which basically dictates a return to secure and recognised borders based on those of 1967. Israel has already completely withdrawn from Sinai and Gaza, and has stated that it is prepared to withdraw from large sections of the West Bank. Such concessions must, however, recognise the need for a Palestinian state to have contiguous blocks of land rather than disjointed cantons with obstacles to travel and effective infrastructure. One would think that there is room for negotiation here. Final borders should not be seen as a sticking point, and interpreting the text can be resolved through international mediation. The Geneva Accords²¹ offer a formula for such negotiation.

The status of Jerusalem is a sensitive issue for both sides. The city contains sites holy to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and it is natural that both Israel and a Palestinian state would want to hold Jerusalem as their capital. When Jordan captured

¹⁷ securityfence.mfa.gov.il/mfm/Data/48152.doc

¹⁸ www.securityfence.mod.gov.il/Pages/ENG/route.htm

¹⁹ www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?temNo=142930

²⁰ www.hnr.undp.org

²¹ www.geneva-accord.org

East Jerusalem in the 1948 war, all Jews were expelled, the Jewish Quarter was bulldozed, and Jews were not allowed access to their holy places. Under Israeli rule since 1967, people of all religions are allowed access to their holy sites, with the Muslim Waqf maintaining control of the Temple Mount. In a December 2005 poll²², 49% of Israelis said they were willing to pass control of Jerusalem's Arab neighbourhoods to the Palestinians. So it would appear that there is an appetite for restitution and negotiation. A long term solution will depend on long term cooperation between both sides.

The "Right of Return" is much more problematic. UN Resolution 194²³, says that "refugees wishing to

abroad. If all four million were to return to the area that is now Israel, it would cease to exist as a Jewish state.

The situation as it stands is clearly unjust to those who fled Israel in 1948, and their descendants have been hard done by the Arab countries as well as Israel. Once again though, it should be possible to find a compromise through negotiation, but only if all parties are willing to sit down and negotiate.

None of these issues is going to be easy to resolve, and all of them will require painful compromises to be made. These problems are political, not simply religious. Muslims and Jews have lived and worked

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return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible". In 1950 the UN estimated that there were approximately 711,000 people who fled the area captured by Israel in the 1948 war²⁴. UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) defines a Palestinian refugee to include the descendents of people living in Palestine between 1946 and 1948²⁵. This is an interesting contrast to the standard definition used in the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees²⁶ which defines a refugee as a person who "is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." In 2002, UNRWA had over four million Palestinian refugees registered on its books, and many more people of Palestinian descent living

together in peace before, over periods of centuries, and we can do it again. We stand to lose everything if we fail, and we stand to gain long term prosperity and security if we succeed. It would appear that the only people benefiting from the status quo are politicians who peddle hatred, fear, and terror in their quest for power and the armaments and related industries. It's high time for both sides to sit down and talk to negotiate a brighter future for everyone. While it's difficult to have peace without justice, it's equally difficult to have justice without peace. Justice at the end of a gun, or in fear of being a suicide bombing victim is no justice at all. Let's work to break the cycle of violence.

With the Palestine and Israel governments seemingly deadlocked, it is up to the grassroots to make progress and cut through the rhetoric through civic engagement and joint projects. Fortunately, there are a small number of organisations doing just this. The Israel-Palestine Centre for Research and Information²⁷ (ICPRI) is a joint Israeli-Palestinian public policy think tank, focused on ways of achieving a two-state solution. They issue, among other things, weekly news summaries from Palestinian and Israeli perspectives that are irreverent to the mainstream propaganda, and refreshing in their outlook. They have also produced a number of papers that challenge conventional thinking.

²² www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3185313,00.html

²³ domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/1ce874ab1832a53e852570bb006dfaf6/c758572b78d1cd0085256bcf0077e51a1?OpenDocument

²⁴ domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/9a798adb322aff38525617b006d88d7/93037e3b939746de85256102005678831?OpenDocument

²⁵ www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/whois.html

²⁶ www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect/openssl.pdf?tbl=PROTECTION&id=3b66c2aa10

²⁷ www.icpri.org

The Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture²⁸ describes itself as “the only independent, non-profit quarterly publication co-published and produced by Israelis and Palestinians, as an explicitly joint venture promoting dialogue, in the search for peaceful relations. It serves as a unique venture that testifies to the fact that it is possible to work together in a spirit of mutual respect, cooperation and recognition, even on most conflicting issues.” The articles have attitude – I see this as a good thing, as neutered views avoid the important questions.

The Centre for Jewish-Arab Economic Development²⁹ promotes economic cooperation between Jews and Arabs on the premise that such development is critical for long-term political cooperation and peace. In my experience, common business interests are a great way to get people with little else in common talking to each other. The Palestinian Peace Coalition³⁰ is a Palestinian voice for peace, based on the Geneva Accord. All For Peace Radio 107.2³¹ is a radio station that broadcasts in Arabic and Hebrew, and strives to “bring about a slow but steady change in the way Israelis and Palestinians consume their media and educate the public to be more critical and careful towards the news and information it gets, and to set a model of cooperation between the two nations and give voice to individuals and organizations in Palestine and Israel who promote peace and social justice and are rarely heard in the regular media”. For an excellent list of further resources, The Buddhist Peace Fellowship website³² provides a recent comprehensive list.

What can we do as New Zealanders to help improve the situation? Get to know both sides of the story. Much of the news we receive is sensational and packaged to sell media. Make it your business to learn as much as possible from as many sources as possible. Acknowledge different points of view. Clearly, it is not the case that one side is “right” and the other “wrong”. Both sides have a valid story to tell, and both world-views will need to be taken into account if long-term peace is ever to be achieved.

Challenge your own stereotypes. Do you think all Israelis are “colonisers” or all Palestinians are

“terrorists”? Think again. Most Palestinians and Israelis just want to get on with their lives, feed their families, practice their religion and culture and have a turangawaewae, a place stand, and mana whenua, recognition of their ties to the land and resource rights. Extremism and death are part of a bigger, evil industry driven by power, politics and greed. Urge both sides to negotiate. If people are killing each other rather than talking to each other, the situation will not improve. We can reinforce this by lobbying our politicians to encourage this in all contacts with both sides. Support coexistence, peace and non-violence. Donate your time and money to organisations that you believe act even-handedly, and are truly pursuing peace.

New Zealand Jews and Muslims should get to know each other better. We have plenty in common, and there is much we can achieve together. This process has been underway at a person-to-person level for many years, and has recently become more official thanks to initiatives supported by the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand and B’nai B’rith. Now that we’ve identified the elephant in the room, we can acknowledge it, put it in its place, and talk more freely about all of the other issues that are important to us. If Anjum Rahman and I can do it (we’re both taking significant reputational risk in being so publicly honest and open), anyone can.

Finally, if you are religious, pray for peace. From our *siddur*³³, or prayerbook, we say: “You have given us the power, [Adonai], to bring peace and justice into the world. May we always love peace and pursue it, and love our fellow creatures. Fill Your children with kindness, wisdom, and love. Then shall they learn to live at peace. Blessed is [Adonai], Teacher of peace. As it is written: “And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”³⁴

Dave Moskovitz is the immediate past President of Wellington’s Temple Sinai. He is involved in a number of key intra- and inter-faith initiatives, including building bridges between the Jewish and Muslim communities.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and not necessarily those of any organisation.

²⁸ www.pil.org

²⁹ www.cjaed.org.il

³⁰ www.ppc.org.ps

³¹ www.allforpeace.org

³² www.bpf.org/html/whats_now/2006/israel_peace.html

³³ Stern, Chaim, Gates of Prayer (ed). New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis/London: Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 1975. (14th printing, 1991.)

³⁴ Isaiah 2:4