

MEWG's perspective on the Israel/Palestine situation

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Our perspective was most sensitively expressed by Ruth Matson, the convenor of the MEWG, in her introduction to Jean Zaru at the 11/8/03 MEWG conference. The title of this conference was "Israel/Palestine-Palestine/Israel: Friend, What Canst Thou Do?" Her introduction follows.

"Good morning Friends.

My name is Ruth Matson, I'm a member of Lansdowne Friends Meeting, and I am here today to welcome you on behalf of the Middle East Working Group of PYM and of our co-sponsor, the Middle East Peacebuilding program of the American Friends Service Committee. I know we will have an inspiring time this morning with Jean Zaru as our keynote speaker, and I trust that we will also find the workshops this afternoon helpful in defining our own Quaker voice and finding our calling to work for peace in relation to the current situation in Israel and Palestine.

A word is in order regarding the structure of this program. We are bringing you only one keynote speaker. The workshops offer a mixture of approaches, but some may ask: "Where is the other side?" That is a legitimate question. Friends have learned through long experience that resolving deep and intractable conflict does not emerge from "taking sides". Indeed, in June 2002, when this working group organized an informational conference to enrich our factual understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict, we brought you both Palestinian and Jewish speakers.

Today, however, our focus is different. We want to see how we, as people of faith, can work through our faith in creative and constructive ways among the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. In that context, it seems appropriate to seek counsel with our fellow Quaker, Jean Zaru.

Jean Zaru is the clerk of Ramallah Friends Meeting and a long time worker in the vineyard of Palestinian-Israeli peace. Those who know Jean can tell you that she is a very special person – bringing with her a rare grace to see "that of God" in all people, including those who have done her harm. We can all learn by her example.

The commitment to "seek that of God in everyone" is embodied in our Testimonies. In our Testimony of Equality, we are called to care deeply about and deal equitably with all people. In our Testimony of Integrity, we acknowledge our obligation to seek and speak truth, both the universal Truth we receive through the Light of the Spirit and the truths we perceive through the tools of the mind. Through our Peace Testimony we affirm that no person is our enemy. Since violence begets violence, we are led to foster reconciliation in situations of conflict - for without reconciliation there can be no peace.

Looking at the Palestinian-Israeli situation that we are here to discuss, we are deeply challenged to know how to address the situation creatively while remaining faithful to our Testimonies.

It is a situation of great inequality, with that asymmetry of power that is inherent in any occupation regime – and this occupation has continued for three generations. We would be remiss if we did not speak of this reality, for not addressing it is to omit a key element for achieving a just resolution of conflict. Yet we must avoid demonizing either party. That is a trap, and also untruthful. While the power inequity reflects differences of scale, both sides have done violence to the other, resulting in a breakdown of trust. And both sides have people of good will who have continued to work - separately and together, through the worst days of conflict, sometimes at risk of their own lives - to find common ground.

Integrity, and the requirement to speak truth, leaves us with a dilemma. There is some element of truth in all parties - just as we believe there is a Divine spark in every person. Truth always lies between the two extremes, yet as Aristotle tells us, it is rarely to be found in the exact middle. In the case of Israel-Palestine, we have to sort through multiple, conflicting narratives of the same history. Our even bigger problem is to know when and how much of the truth we discern we should communicate, and how to speak that truth without engaging in destructive blame games.

To work for reconciliation under our Peace Testimony, we must be able to listen to - and be listened to by - all the parties. Yet sometimes people are in too much pain to listen, and their inability to hear closes their ears and hearts to those who offer contrasting opinions; it makes them deaf to the pain of the other. In such cases, our task as Friends is to be open, to value each person, and to deeply hear their pain. We may sometimes have to be reticent about offering our own perceptions, for to speak our minds may foreclose our opportunity to be peacemakers.

All of this leads me to ask two questions: When is it legitimate to withhold truths that people are unready to hear? And when does withholding truth become a treason toward our commitment to integrity?

Those are questions, Friends, with which I myself have struggled for most of my adult life - ever since I went to Jerusalem as a young graduate student nearly 40 years ago and along the way learned some very uncomfortable truths. In all these years I have never found a satisfactory answer to these questions. I have only learned - I hope - to speak no untruth, to try to deal tenderly with all, and to seek above all to do no harm.

I know - because I have heard her speak several times - that Jean Zaru will both challenge us and help us with these questions. I, for one, stand in awe of Jean's spirit. I have followed events closely since my own years of sojourn in the Middle East, so I know at least a little about the traumas Jean has lived through. Yet she comes to us in a spirit of forgiveness and humility that is, in the idiom of our young people, awesome!

Jean has spoken to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in the past. In March 2002 she addressed PYM at its annual session. The members at that gathering were so inspired by what they heard that they decided to fund a significant portion of the cost to restore the damaged meetinghouse in Ramallah. Restoration of the meetinghouse proper is now essentially complete, but the Annex, which contains the restrooms and the small meeting rooms so essential for dialogue, is yet to be repaired.

Many of you may have been here for the June 2002 conference I mentioned earlier. We hope you will bring the knowledge you acquired then to inform our discussions today. Along the way, some of the members of PYM have traveled in Israel and Palestine, and have later come as speakers to many of your Monthly Meetings to share their experiences. Those understandings, also, provide a base for our deliberations.

Finally, I would like to extend a special welcome to any here who are not Quakers. Although our query for the day is directed to Friends, you should know that Quakers are an inclusive - not an exclusive - congregation. Since you are here, you are part of our community, and part of our discernment on the question: "Israel/Palestine-Palestine/Israel: Friend, What Canst Thou Do?"

And so, it is my pleasure to introduce Jean Zaru, who will speak to us on the topic: "A Quaker Life in Palestine: Faith and Struggle."

Jean will speak from the silence.

Posted by: mideast info admin |