

# Face to Face with Palestinians

## Spiritual Activism for a Reparations Allyship

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### Why Should We Be Involved?

Why should we members of Kehilla care about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict? And why ought we to frame our work in this area as a form of reparations? After all, the wrongs being done to Palestinians are being carried out by Israelis, and we are *American* Jews. What do we have to do with that struggle going on half a world away?

I could say that every human being is created in the image of God, and therefore we have obligations to support the Palestinians, just as we have obligations toward all people who are oppressed. But that argument, which is true, is only partial, for it is our fellow Jews in Israel who are engaged in this dreadful oppression, and that puts a special onus on us as Jews to stand up for the Palestinians. Let me explain.

On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, and Jews in synagogues all over the world are reciting the Vidui confessional. The Vidui is framed in the plural. “*We* have done this that is bad; *we* have done that that is bad.” As individuals we have certainly not committed all the wrongdoings that are enumerated in the confessional. Yet the prayers are couched in the plural because the authors of the Vidui believed that all Jews were part of the organism of the Jewish people. Today, of course, we can extend that kinship to all people on the earth. But I want to argue that as Jews we have a special connection with all other Jews. As the Talmud puts it: *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh ba'zeh*. “Every Jew is responsible for every other Jew.” We are part of the large family of the Jewish people, pledged to care for one another. And what Jews do in one place on earth, whether for good or for bad, involves and implicates Jews in other parts of the world.

When our brothers and sisters in Israel occupy Palestinian land for over 50 years, attempting to get rid of a people they consider vile, we too are bound up in that occupation. When Israeli Jews tear down the homes of Palestinians, we also need to make amends, to help rebuild those homes. When an Israeli tow truck runs over and kills a Palestinian elder while he is attempting to stop a house demolition in a non-violent way, we as Jews are involved in that terrible act.

When I initiated Kehilla Community Synagogue one of my main motivations had to do with creating a spiritual community that would stand up for the full equality of

Israelis and Palestinians, and an end to the occupation. No synagogue in the world dared take that position in 1984.

This past year our committee, Face-to-Face, has succeeded in connecting with the Palestinian village of Umm al-Khair in the South Hebron hills. We reached out to the people of the village as Jews in an effort to take positive action to contribute in a small way to the healing of a great injustice, and we have begun to forge a personal relationship with the people of that village. We do this because the Torah teaches that Palestinians too are our sisters and brothers, for we are all made in the image of God, and we are all part of the human family.

## A Spiritual Activist's Primer

Face-to-Face is actually a rather simple idea. Readers may be wondering then why this paper is so extensive. There are a number of reasons. Here are just a few.

- Even though political activism is absolutely crucial to dealing with this issue, the essence of the approach described in this essay is only peripherally political. What is being offered here is what I call *spiritual activism*, a way for American Jews to ally with and support Palestinians in a face-to-face interpersonal way. In the course of the paper readers will come to understand why *both* spiritual and political activism are necessary.
- What is spiritual activism? The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that the real significance of the biblical teaching, "*And you shall love your neighbor as yourself*," hinges on the true meaning of the Hebrew word, "*k'mo'khah*." Usually *k'mo'khah* has been translated "as yourself," but the Ba'al Shem renders it "exactly like yourself." In other words, even though we have distinct bodies, minds, and personalities, all human beings share a single spiritual essence. This obligates us to care for one another in a proactive way because we are all one. Before the modern era Jews had little if any possibility to engage in political activism, because they were never considered citizens of the countries in which they lived. Yet, Jews knew their obligations to one another and continually involved themselves in spiritual activism. Over the years Kehilla has been involved in numerous forms of spiritual activism. Kehilla's Chevra Kadisha and Hesed Committee stems from the Jewish past. Our congregation's current forms of spiritual activism are more universal in their embrace of people outside the Jewish community. Currently, these include the Faith Trio, the Building and Allyship Racial Justice Project, and the Immigration Committee's Sanctuary work. Face-to-Face was introduced into Kehilla through our longtime Middle East Peace Committee.
- There are many progressive Jews who are unaware of what the Torah teaches about the ways in which Jews during the biblical period were required to treat

non-Jews living in Palestine. Examining these teachings reveals that the Torah fundamentally contradicts the policies of the Israeli government toward Palestinians.

- There is a need for hope in this dark time. The horrific headlines tend to frighten us into imagining that there is no way to change the tragic scenario that prevails between our two peoples. It seemed to me that if I merely presented Face-to-Face as a particular social justice project of a single American synagogue, readers would get the impression that such a modest humanitarian undertaking could not possibly have any overall long-term impact. As readers will discover, however, Face-to-Face is part of a much larger and growing movement of Israelis and Palestinians on the ground that hopefully will one day overcome the hatred and oppression that currently exists, bringing peace to the two peoples.
- Other issues and topics treated in the paper include Kehilla's long-term dedication to justice for Palestinians, and our recent allyship with the village of Umm al-Khair in the West Bank. At the heart of the paper is a blueprint for activists involved with the Face-to-Face committee. And at the end of the paper, I offer my personal reflections on how I believe that we, as a spiritual community, should relate to Israel.
- Finally, as American Jews, we recognize that our tax dollars are going to support a right-wing Israeli government that is severely oppressing the Palestinians. And Israel's irresponsible actions have increased the level of antisemitism in the U.S. and around the world, which will inevitably affect our lives in this country.

My thinking over the years has also been affected and altered by increasing knowledge of the events that brought about the tragedy, as well as by my immersion in the sources of Hasidism that foster compassion and love. A regular practice of Lovingkindness meditation has enabled me to deepen my concern for both peoples. Because of these factors I have framed the paper as a personal testimony rather than an ideological statement.

Of course, readers do not have to agree with my perspective, in whole or in part, in order to be involved in Face to Face. I welcome all criticism and suggestions for improving future versions of the paper. I can be reached via email at [rabburt@icloud.com](mailto:rabburt@icloud.com).

## An Outline of the Paper

My hope is that readers will want to study the entire paper. I know that there will be some readers who will wish to read only the fundamentals. For this reason, I offer the outline below, which lays out all of the questions that I attempt to respond to and clarify in the paper. I reiterate that readers do not have to agree with all of my thinking in order to participate in Face-to-Face.

1. Why is the Occupation Immoral? A Personal Awakening
2. What is Zionism and Why Did it Develop?
3. Why Were Arabs So Opposed to a Jewish Presence in Palestine?
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5. What is at the Heart of the Problem Spiritually?
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## 1. Why is the Occupation Immoral? A Personal Awakening

It was 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of the occupation, and I was deeply concerned. I had been opposed to Israeli policies toward the Palestinians since 1971, and it seemed to me as if nothing that we activists had done in half a century to end the Israeli oppression of this beleaguered people had had any real effect. There were days when I felt that the occupation would simply continue and never end.

My last trip to Israel had taken place during the summer of 1969, soon after the end of the Six Day War. I knew nothing at all at that time about the actual history of the conflict. I took pride in the existence of Israel as an affirmation of Jewish existence after the horrors of the Holocaust, and I thought that maybe I could only live a full Jewish life as a citizen of Israel. The primary purpose of my visit, then, had to do with my desire to make aliyah and live in the land of my forbears. But if I were to reside in Israel, what would I take up as a profession? Where would I live? Perhaps on that trip I would find out.

That plan, however, came to nothing, for it was during that trip that I unexpectedly began to learn the gruesome truth about the founding of Israel. It was an encounter that I will never forget. A good friend took me to visit Aryeh Lova Eliav, a member of Prime Minister Golda Meir's cabinet. And even though we had just met, Eliav was so agonized

and frustrated that he was willing to tell a visiting American rabbi about the tragedy in the making that he was living through.

Aryeh Lova Eliav was an important personage in Israel, a prominent member of the Labor party. During the Second World War he had been the captain of one of the ships that had illegally brought Jews from Europe to Palestine, and he had also been in charge of the Aliyah of Iranian Jews to Israel following the War for Independence. He was so respected that at one point he was even nominated to become President of the State of Israel.

Eliav told us that just recently, following the conclusion of the Six Day War, Golda Meir had sent him on a secret mission into the “liberated” territories. The Prime Minister wanted a report on the conditions of the Arab population living there. Eliav was shocked. The squalor that he saw, the immense suffering of the people was heartbreaking. He knew this simply couldn’t continue, and he contacted King Hussein of Jordan, who told him that he was willing to take back the territories with its Palestinian population.

Eliav told us that when he met with Golda Meir, she refused to do anything at all about the situation in the territories. She also threatened Eliav, telling him that if he made any of this information public, she would destroy his political career. Following that meeting Eliav had a heart attack. At the time that we met him in his home he had just returned from the hospital and was attempting to recuperate—except that he was quite obviously both anxious and depressed.

I must say that I was totally flustered by what I was hearing. Despite three previous trips to Israel—one for an entire academic year—I knew nothing about the Palestinians except that they were cruel, inhospitable enemies of the Jews. Listening to Eliav I felt confused. And what I learned in my subsequent readings about the history of the conflict set me against Israel. Eliav himself wrote a book, *The Land of the Hart*, in which he gave a history of the conflict, admitted that the Zionists had made grave errors, and proposed a two-state solution. Coming from Eliav, the book sent shock waves through Israel. Aryeh Lova Eliav was a man who embodied compassion, vision, and courage. His deeds still provide me with a sense of hope.

What is the situation in the occupied territories? For over fifty years hundreds of thousands of Jews have lived in proximity to millions of Palestinians in the occupied territories. Jews enjoy citizenship, free movement, due process, and the right to vote for the government that controls their lives. The Palestinians have none of these rights. Those of us who have worked for decades in opposition to the occupation have been stymied by the intransigence of the Israeli government’s refusal to allow the people of Palestine to live as a free people in the land of their ancestors. We have watched in astonishment as our fellow Jews, whose forebears were persecuted and annihilated in Europe, have themselves become persecutors.

The occupied Palestinian territories, housing some 5.1 million Palestinians, remain under Israeli military control under the pretext of security. The lives of the Palestinians

are hemmed in by hundreds of military checkpoints, a color-coded permit system, and a Separation Wall that has divided families. Israeli violations include unlawful killings, abusive detention, blockade of the Gaza Strip and restrictions on Palestinian movement, the development of settlements, and discriminatory policies that disadvantage Palestinians. Whether it's a child imprisoned by a military court or shot unjustifiably, or a house demolished for lack of an elusive permit, or checkpoints where only settlers are allowed to pass, few Palestinians have escaped serious rights abuses during this 50-year occupation.

All the while, Israel has proceeded with illegally building homes and transferring its Jewish citizens into the West Bank and East Jerusalem on stolen Palestinian land. Today, at least 600,000 Israelis live in Jewish-only settlements scattered across the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Settlements, which are accompanied by roads and infrastructure built especially for the settlers, control at least 40 percent of the West Bank's surface area. As such, Israel has created an apartheid-like reality in the Palestinian territories whereby Israelis and Palestinians live under a system that privileges Jews over non-Jews. And radical settlers from those settlements continue to harangue Palestinians without mercy.

The hopes that some of us held for Palestinian liberation now seem all but illusory, with Israel's government in the hands of right-wing chauvinists whose concerns revolve around security and rights for Jews alone. These political leaders seem to be ignorant of the highest spiritual and moral ideals found in our ancient tradition as well as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the canon of International Law.

Of course, Israel is not an anomaly in its enactment of appalling inhumane policies toward the Palestinians. Nation states all around the globe engage in reprehensible actions toward those who they see as aliens. Our own United States is historically guilty of the genocide of the Native Americans, as well as the enslavement of millions of African Americans. The remnants of those tragic policies continue to haunt our nation today.

Somehow, however, we expected more from the leaders of the State of Israel. Haven't Jews traditionally understood the supreme place of justice in public affairs? Sadly, we have learned that our expectations of the Israelis were overly idealistic. We have come to understand that in situations of conflict Jews can and do act in ways identical to other human beings.

I want to be clear that I am not at all opposed to the existence of the State of Israel. But as a concerned member of the Jewish people, I am motivated by the injunction in the Mishnah: *Kol Yisrael areyvim zeh b'zeh*, "All Jews are responsible for one another." I am appalled to witness our brothers and sisters in Israel acting in such an unjust manner. What is more, Israeli policy and actions have led to the growth of anti-Semitism in the U.S. and in the world. For all these reasons I feel that as a religious Jew I

am responsible to do whatever I can to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians, and to support those Israelis who are courageously standing up for Palestinian rights.

## 2. What is Zionism and Why Did it Develop?

During the years that followed my time in Israel I read a great deal about the history of the conflict. What I learned reinforced my disillusionment and my rage.

Where did it all start? What is the origin of Zionism? In the 19<sup>th</sup> century most of the world's Jews lived in Eastern Europe, and especially in the parts of the Russian Empire called the Pale of Settlement. Like all the Jews of Eastern Europe, from time immemorial they had no political power and were subject to periodic pogroms. Hope came, however, with the inauguration of Tzar Alexander II in 1856. He began his reign with a series of liberal reforms, and it seemed like the era of progress was at last to prevail in benighted Russia. Jewish intellectuals were excited, and large numbers of young Jews left their yeshivot and study houses, flocking to Russian gymnasia and universities. Newly secular, they welcomed both enlightenment and emancipation. For these young men the Torah and religion were provincial, authoritarian, and outmoded. Of course, the Orthodox Jews bitterly opposed this sort of enlightenment, fearing assimilation and conversion to Christianity.

In 1881, however, Tzar Alexander II was assassinated. The new Tzar, Alexander III, immediately ended his predecessor's reforms. And he proclaimed that one-third of Russian Jewry were to be converted to Christianity, one-third forced to emigrate, and the final third slaughtered. The city of Odessa had been particularly subject to pogroms. But now, under Alexander III, there were major pogroms not only in Odessa, but also in Kiev, Warsaw, and Yelizavetgrad. At the same time pogroms broke out in at least one hundred different localities in Russia and spread to Ukraine. Jews were murdered and Jewish women raped.

This spurred a major movement of emigration of Jews to the United States. The secular "enlightened" Jews who had assumed that a new universalist culture was going to radically change the condition of Jews in Eastern Europe were shocked by the pogroms and by the new government policies. Greater economic restrictions spurred the growth of Socialism among Jews and some of them abandoned their Jewish identities. Most of the intellectuals, however, looked for a way they could still remain Jews, without having to subject themselves to the restrictions of religious orthodoxy. Yet it now appeared to them that antisemitism would never disappear, and they were no longer willing to live in fear of anti-Jewish violence. What was the solution? A consensus began to build among these young people: Get out of Europe and return to the ancient Jewish homeland of Palestine, where Jews would be able to live in freedom and govern themselves in their own land. This, then, was the real birth of what later became the Zionist movement. In 1882, just after the devastating pogroms, seven thousand young Jews emigrated to Palestine.

What form should this new movement take? Nationalism was the order of the day. So many European countries were exhibiting a new national pride in their cultures and standing up for their national rights. Why shouldn't Jews become a people like all other peoples, replacing religion with nationalism? This decision, though fully comprehensible from a historical point of view was, in my view, a tragic error of major proportions, for the kind tribal nationalism that was developing in Europe tended to glorify the achievements of particular nations while at the same time denigrating other nations. It was this bellicose tribalism that made World Wars I and II inevitable.

Although there were moral idealists among the early Zionists, the movement finally turned out to be no different than other national movements. Young secular nationalists had grown up in traditionally observant homes and had grown up with the ancient belief in Jewish chosenness. Throughout the two thousand years of the diaspora this attitude had acted as a compensatory mechanism, as if to declare that even though Christians and Muslims treated them as inferiors, Jews themselves knew that they were in fact superior to their oppressors. Of course, the Zionists no longer believed that God had chosen the Jewish people, but given the antisemitism they were experiencing, the old chauvinistic attitude of chosenness was easily secularized and became a part of the new Jewish nationalism.

From the 1880s on wave after wave of Jews immigrated to Palestine, mostly following the periodic pogroms in Europe. Having experienced militant antisemitism, these immigrants had little or no regard for their impact on the Arab population that had been rooted in the land for centuries. Without considering the possible consequences Zionist organizations bought land from the Turkish Ottomans and the wealthy Arab landowners, who were exploiting their peasant vassal sharecroppers, the poor *fellahin*. Throughout this tragic history Jewish nationalists were either indifferent to the fate of the indigenous population, or they simply wanted the Arabs to leave the country on their own volition. And, of course, this misguided attitude contributed decisively to the inevitability of conflict. It must be said, though, that for the most part the early Zionists did not champion violence.

### 3. Why Were Arabs So Opposed to a Jewish Presence in Palestine?

There were some Arabs in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who welcomed Jews to Palestine, or at least accepted their presence. But in those same years young Arab intellectuals in the Middle East were beginning to develop a new nationalist Arab ideal. Like the Zionists, in trying to chart a new path for the Arab people, they borrowed their ideas from Europe. And like Jewish nationalists, the attitudes of Arab nationalists were tragically colored by their history. Throughout the centuries Islam had considered Jews and Christians living in Muslim lands to be *dhimmi*s, second-class citizens whose religions were inferior to Islam. Unlike Christian Europe, however, where Jews were



subject to pogroms, *dhimmis* had been protected by Muslims as “a people of the Book.” Nonetheless, Judaism was always seen as being inferior to Islam, and Jews living in Muslim countries were looked down upon and had fewer legal rights than Muslims.

Throughout the Middle Ages Muslims had considered Palestine to be a Muslim country and sought to keep Palestine in Arab hands. In the 1930s, when Hitler and his Nazi party came to power in Germany with the aim of a “final solution”—the destruction of all Jews—large numbers of Jews sought to escape from Europe. Most of the countries in the world, however, refused to accept Jewish refugees. Only small numbers found entry into certain countries. Even the U.S. set a limit on the number of Jews that could be admitted and fewer than 100,000 Jews were allowed to enter. Great Britain held the mandate over Palestine from the League of Nations, and the British would not allow Jews from Europe into the country. Nonetheless, the Zionists found ways to smuggle Jews into Palestine illegally. At the same time, however, the Labor Zionists in Palestine agreed with the British to limit Jewish emigration because they knew that allowing more Jews into the country would anger the Arabs. And it was true, Palestinian Arabs were certainly infuriated by the influx of Jews, for this land was their home, and the home of their ancestors, and it was being inundated by foreigners who wanted to take it for themselves. They saw the Zionist enterprise as a form of settler colonialism.

#### 4. Is Israel Guilty of Ethnic Cleansing?

There were a few powerful Arab leaders in Palestine who bonded with the Nazis and were planning on implementing the “final solution,” slaughtering all the Jews in Palestine. Jewish fear of the Arabs deepened Zionist determination to stand their ground in opposition to what they imagined could be Jewish annihilation. In 1948, after the United Nations recognized Israel, six Arab nations attacked the new state. The Israelis believed that they were battling for their very existence and they not only fought against the Arab armies, they also engaged in a policy of ethnic cleansing to rid the country of its Arab inhabitants. We now have evidence that David Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders not only anticipated this war, they also planned to ethnically cleanse the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea in order to rid the land of as many Arabs as possible.

During the war, some 750,000 Palestinian Arabs were displaced from their homes and villages, and more than 400 Arab villages were depopulated. Displaced Palestinian Arabs were settled in Palestinian refugee camps throughout the Arab world. The United Nations established UNRWA as a relief and human development agency tasked with providing humanitarian assistance to the refugees. Arab nations refused to absorb Palestinian refugees, instead keeping them in refugee camps while insisting that they be allowed to return to their homes. Israel took no responsibility at all for dealing with the refugee situation. Despite the ethnic cleansing, around 156,000 Arabs remained in Israel after the war and became Israeli citizens.

As I pondered this tragic history in the 1970s, I was flabbergasted. Such tragedy, much of it unavoidable. During these past few years, however, I have begun to see things somewhat differently. What made Zionism and Israel inevitable? Antisemitism—the ancient hatred of Jews by Christians, now lethal and unstoppable, culminating in the genocidal policies of the Third Reich. And the Jewish response? “Non-Jews don’t care about us, so why should we care about them? We will do whatever we have to do to survive.” This attitude continues to dominate Israeli policy.

## 5. What is at the Heart of the Problem Spiritually?

The most cogent and hopeful perspective that I came upon in my reading about Zionism and the Jewish/Arab conflict in the 1970s was that of Martin Buber. This religious philosopher became well-known largely because of his book, *I and Thou*, which was concerned with the spiritual ways in which individuals should relate to and treat one another. Buber writes that in an authentic I and Thou encounter something quite remarkable occurs: as each person listens and responds, a space opens to the presence of what Buber called “the Eternal Thou,” which was his name for God. In other words, the Divine appears in and through genuine relationships. Buber also applied this view to adversarial relationships. For when openhearted I-Thou dialogue takes place between enemies, he wrote, the polarities soften through mutual recognition and understanding.

Buber was a Zionist of a different persuasion. On the eve of the publication of *I and Thou*, he spoke to the delegates at the World Zionist Organization, telling them that Jews returning to the land of their forebears ought to behave in a just and moral way toward those who had been living on the land for centuries. This meant that Jews would need to form ties of partnership and cooperation with the Arabs. He opposed the establishment of a Jewish-privileged political state and believed that Jews and Arabs should together form a single egalitarian society. In this way the Jews of Palestine would “take part in the redemption of the world” by being “a nation which establishes truth and justice in its institutions and activities.” Although Buber had been opposed to a Jewish political state, he accepted the inevitable in 1948, following the establishment of Israel. Unfortunately, however, he failed to convince David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, to deal humanely with the Arab refugees following the War for Independence.

Buber was both a religious humanist and a communitarian socialist. He opposed the kind of secular nationalism that focused on merely preserving and championing what he referred to as the “national egoism” of the Jewish people. Over a forty-year period Buber devoted much of his time to the search for practical Jewish-Arab understanding and cooperation. In 1925 he joined with Hugo Bergmann, Hans Kohn, Gershom Scholem, Henrietta Szold, and Israel Jacob Kligler to form Brit Shalom, an organization that sought peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews through the creation of a bi-national society where Jews and Arabs would have equal rights. Albert Einstein also expressed his support for this endeavor. The members of Brit Shalom proposed the

formation of a federation of Middle Eastern countries that would link Jewish society economically with its Arab neighbors.

Buber was not opposed to involvement in politics. In fact, he believed that it was his responsibility to elevate politics spiritually, by bringing moral considerations to every political decision. Most of the Zionist leaders saw Buber's views as being impossibly utopian, but nevertheless, there were some thoughtful Zionists who were won over by his outlook. In 1942 he co-founded Ichud, a pro-peace and reconciliation organization. The leaders of Ichud included Rabbi Judah Magnus, Henrietta Szold, and Ernst Simon. Buber attempted to convince David Ben-Gurion to help the Arabs who had been tragically displaced by the War for Independence, but the new Prime Minister refused to listen to Buber's entreaties. As an activist Buber involved himself in Jewish-Arab dialogue throughout the rest of his life. Until the year of his death in 1964, Buber continued to press for a massive Israeli initiative to solve the Arab refugee problem and he continued to protest the military rule that denied Israel's Arabs their basic rights as free citizens.

As a religious Jew, I believe that we need to be guided by more than our political convictions or even our moral principles. We must, I am convinced, have a spiritual vision for our *tikkun olam* work in the world, and I believe that Buber offers this. His vision for Israeli and Palestinian reconciliation was as powerful as that of Gandhi or Mandela or Bishop Tutu. It is heart-rending that even though Buber was well-known all over the world, his own people did not take his insights seriously. Given the subsequent history of Jewish-Arab relations, Buber's views turned out to be prophetic.

## 5. What Hope Now Exists for Peaceful Coexistence?

Buber and his colleagues in Brit Shalom and later in Ichud were not alone. There were left-wing Zionists whose views were similar to his. But beyond this there was a remarkable phenomenon that began to happen in the 1920s. Jews and Arabs were seeking one another out. In her eye-opening book, *Connecting with the Enemy: A Century of Palestinian-Israeli Joint Nonviolence*, Sheila H. Katz documents over 1500 Jewish-Arab peace and justice initiatives during this century of violence! This is quite amazing and a cause for hope. As Katz writes: "*Each time Israelis took risks to advocate against injustices to Palestinians, and each time Palestinians defended Israelis' right to live in peace, they strengthened this foundation. Their history of joint action will remain a testament to an anomalous tale of two enemies who bucked the imperatives of their respective societies to risk becoming allies.*"

I can immediately think of four organizations of this kind that that I truly admire:

- *Neve Shalom*, also known as Wāhat as-Salām is a cooperative village in Israel, founded jointly by Israeli Jews and Arabs in an attempt to show that the two peoples can live side by side peacefully, as well as conducting educational work for peace, equality and understanding between the two peoples.

- *The Parents Circle–Families Forum* is a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization of over 600 families, all of whom have lost an immediate family member to the ongoing conflict. Moreover, the PCFF has concluded that the process of reconciliation between nations is a prerequisite to achieving a sustainable peace. The organization thus utilizes all resources available in education, public meetings and the media, to spread these ideas.
- *Combatants for Peace*, an Israeli-Palestinian NGO and an egalitarian, bi-national, grassroots movement committed to non-violent action against the Israeli occupation and all forms of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories.
- *Roots*, A unique network of local Palestinians and Israelis who have come to see each other as the partners both peoples need to make changes to end the conflict. Based on a mutual recognition of each people's connection to the Land, Roots is developing understanding and solidarity despite the ideological differences of the participants. Their work is aimed at challenging the assumptions that their communities hold about one another, building trust and creating a new discourse around the conflict in their respective societies. This is a grassroots and local model for making change — from the bottom up.

There are also a sizable number of smaller organizations of Israeli and Palestinian activists working together to support the Palestinians under occupation. Just to name a few: Ta'ayush, the Center for Jewish Non-Violence, All That's Left, the Hebron International Resource Network, and the South Hebron Hills Watch.

Of especial note is the Alliance for Middle East Peace, a coalition of 150 organizations, and tens of thousands of Palestinian and Israelis who are building people-to-people cooperation, coexistence, equality, shared society, mutual understanding, and peace among their communities. The Alliance advocates for stability in times of crisis, and fosters cooperation that increases its impact, building an environment conducive to long-term peace.

Could the non-violent accomplishments of initiatives like these be laying the groundwork for a just and compassionate peace? Katz's findings do seem to offer more than just a glimmer of hope. Toward the end of her book, she writes, "*As conflict continues to trump contact, students of history have observed that when a revolution happens on a certain date, the changes attributed to that revolution have been in the making for dozens if not hundreds of years. It is thus possible that these joint nonviolent initiatives throughout a century of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict were not in fact missing peace but were the missing peace of the revolution in the making. Perhaps our descendants will observe in retrospect that joint nonviolence hastened the cessation of hostilities, began to address inequalities, and helped usher in a just peace.*"

Of course, there is no way of knowing now whether Katz is right or not, but the ideals and initiatives that she has documented in her book can perhaps fuel our

hope that someday things will change for the better. Katz ends her book with the following quotation from Howard Zinn: *“And if we do act, in however small way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”*

## 6. What Does the Torah Teach Regarding How Jews Should Treat Non-Jews?

Martin Buber’s vision drew directly from the Bible. What does the Torah teach about coexistence? In the first chapter of the book of Genesis we read a passage that declares that all human beings are equal and that they are, at their very core, divine: *“And God created the human being in Its image. In the image of God the human being was created. Male and female God created them.”* Notice that this teaching says nothing about tribes, religions, nations, social hierarchies, masters or slaves, Israelites or Canaanites.

My teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel commented on this passage: *“The symbol of God is the human being, every human being. God created human beings in God’s very own image and likeness . . . This is a conception of far-reaching importance to Biblical piety. Reverence for God is shown in our reverence for human beings. The fear you must feel of offending or hurting a human being must be as ultimate as your fear of God. An act of violence is an act of desecration. To be arrogant toward a human being is to be blasphemous toward God.”*

The same value was applied by ancient Israel’s lawmakers to the question of how the Israelites were to treat strangers. Again and again we read in the Torah—57 times, in fact—that Israelites must treat non-Israelites as full equals. No other moral principle is enunciated as many times as this in the Torah. Here are four of these instances:

*“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt.”* (Exodus 22:20).

*“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt”* (23:9).

*“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Mitzrayim: I, the EverPresent, am your God* (Leviticus 19:33-34).

*“For the EverPresent your God... upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”*

But why is this imperative repeated so many times in the Torah—57 times in fact? It certainly looks like our ancestors were acting badly toward the native peoples.

It was this biblical perspective that motivated Martin Buber’s views about Jews and Arabs. He believed that Jews returning to the land of their forbears should behave toward the people already living in the land according to the precepts of the Bible. In 1929 Martin Buber addressed the fifteenth Zionist Congress in Basel and said that we need *“the ability to put ourselves in the place of the other man, the stranger, and to make his soul ours. I must confess that I am horrified of how little we know of the Arabs . . .”* That same year Buber stated publicly, *“It is unthinkable that those who hold dear the values cherished by the people of Israel will start their road by acting unjustly. He who does this commits not only a moral, but a political sin . . . Every immoral policy is a bad policy.”*

Readers may be aware that the Torah also contains a number of vile imperatives supposedly coming from the mouth of God that required the Israelites to slaughter all the Canaanites. One decree in the book of Deuteronomy (13:18) specifies that if an entire city becomes idolaters, Israelites are required to annihilate all of its inhabitants, men, women and children, and even the livestock! Clearly, the Talmudic rabbis found this decree repugnant, reaching the conclusion that such a city never existed and never will exist (Sanhedrin 71a). Still, I believe that this particularly narrow Biblical mindset accounts, at least in part, for the regnant attitude of so many Israelis toward the Palestinians.

The book of Joshua describes the genocide of the Canaanites in a rather graphic and systematic manner. Modern biblical scholars, however, have told us that there is absolutely no archeological evidence whatsoever that such a massive extermination ever took place. The evidence points to a rather different theory—that the supposed conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua was actually a later fiction invented by xenophobic Israelites during the period of the monarchy. Why did the ancient Israelite leadership detest the Canaanites? As extreme monotheists they wanted to eradicate the polytheism that was being practiced by the Canaanites living in ancient Judah and even by the Israelite people themselves.

Who then did the legislators in the Torah have in mind when they wrote about the responsibilities of Israelites to the stranger? Some of these strangers may have been foreigners making their home in Israel or Judah. But I believe that we must ask the following pertinent question: if the supposed genocide of Canaanites never took place, what happened to the indigenous people of the land? I cannot prove this, but it seems to

me that the biblical lawmakers were attempting to protect the large number of native Canaanites, declaring that they were fully equal to the Israelites and deserved love, compassion, and justice, whatever their religious beliefs and practices.

## 7. What Has Kehilla Community Synagogue Done About the Plight of Palestinians in the Past?

During the 1960s and early 1970s I was involved as an activist in the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, in the Anti-War movement, and in the Anti-Nuclear movement. I was also fully supportive of the Woman's Movement and Gay rights. My work as an educator in several different congregations, however, had left me completely exasperated with the spiritual and political conventionality and moral timidity of the American synagogue, and during the 1970s I took a respite from the synagogue rabbinate for a number of years. It was during that time that I spent time at various intentional communities in the counterculture.

I joined the Aquarian Minyan of Berkeley soon after it began, applying my rabbinic skills in innovative ways, and by the end of the decade I felt ready to resume my role as a congregational rabbi. I knew, however, that no synagogue would hire me with the views I held about Israel and Palestine, and I was unwilling to hide my position regarding that issue. This became one of my chief motivations for starting Kehilla Community Synagogue in Berkeley, California in 1984.

My overall vision for the congregation was inspired by the teachings of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. The founder of Hasidism emphasized the virtues of love, joy, community, and spirituality. I felt that these Hasidic values needed to be fused with the demands of the biblical prophets for social justice and compassion. At the time no synagogue or existing Jewish religious denomination or institution had anything to say about the wrongs being done by Israelis to Palestinians. I thus made it clear in the founding vision for Kehilla that the congregation would stand for a two-state solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Because Kehilla also stood for the equality of LGBT people, we were seen in the larger Bay area Jewish community as radicals—which in many ways we were. Since that time members of Kehilla Community Synagogue have always held diverse and divergent attitudes toward Zionism and Israel. Kehilla members are Zionists, anti-Zionists, non-Zionists, and post-Zionists. Whatever people's individual orientations to Israel and Palestine, however, our common pain and grief rises out of our sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians and our anguish over the appalling and inhuman policies enacted by Israel in its subjugation of the Palestinians.

One of our original members, Joel Brody, started a Middle East Study Group, which later morphed into the Middle East Peace Committee (MEPC). Over the years the committee has sponsored activities that have educated our congregants about the history of the conflict and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. We also sponsored a valuable program to teach congregants the process of Compassionate Listening, to enable people

to hear and be present with one another, even those whose views opposed their own. Rabbi David Cooper and I worked with the MEPC over many years, generating a number of statements that defined the congregation's stand on Israel and Palestine, including the *Brit Shalom*, and the more recent *Statement of Kehilla's Values on Israel/Palestine*. Interested readers can find the latter document at: <https://kehillasynagogue.org/kehilla-statement-of-values-on-israel-palestine/> I believe that the educational work of the MEPC is and will remain extremely important, especially because of the influx of new members into the congregation, many of whom know little about the conflict.

## 8. Where Did the Idea for Face-to-Face Come From?

Kehilla is part of the movement for Jewish Renewal, which is one form taken by neo-Hasidism, a modern approach to the vision and teachings of Hasidism. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, lived in 18<sup>th</sup> century Ukraine at a time when the Jewish community was segregated from and dominated by the Christian hegemony, and subject to antisemitism. Because of this the Ba'al Shem's sense of love and compassion likely did not extend beyond his own people.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, neo-Hasidic teachers like Martin Buber, Hillel Zeitlin, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi all taught the importance of extending our love outward to include non-Jews. Furthermore, these modern teachers all affirmed that there is much that we can learn from those who practice religions other than Judaism.

After September 11<sup>th</sup> and the events that happened in its wake, I began to wonder whether Kehilla could find a mosque and church to partner with during this perilous time of increasing polarity among our three faiths. Rabbi David found that Montclair Presbyterian Church and the Northern California Islamic Cultural Center were forming a bond. He helped Kehilla join with these other congregations to form the Faith Trio, which continues to function.

In 2018, I began my search for a model that we at Kehilla could use for spiritual activism on behalf of Palestinians. I discovered a marvelous project being carried on by a Buena Vista United Methodist Church in Alameda. The Palestinian village of Wadi Foquin is located in Area "C" of the occupied territories, which is under Israeli control. Much of the villagers' land has been annexed by Israel. An illegal settlement, Betar Illit, located near the village, sends its runoff raw sewage to Wadi Foquin, contaminating the village's agricultural land. And settlers from Betar Illit have invaded the village, attempting again and again to destroy it.

In the early 2000's a member of Buena Vista Church was visiting Palestine. During his trip he visited the Church of the Nativity, a basilica located in Bethlehem, the purported birthplace of Jesus. There he had an epiphany: his church was to aid and support a Palestinian village. When he returned to California, this man went to the Justice Committee of Buena Vista, saying that as devoted Christians they had to do something



for the Palestinians. After many discussions, the church's liaison to the West Bank recommended that the church partner with the village of Wadi Foquin. In 2006, Reverend Michael Yoshii, then pastor of the church, first visited Wadi Foquin.

Since that time the church has developed a powerful relationship with the village. They have worked to provide financial assistance for projects supporting the economic survival of the village. This began with modest fundraising for beehives to help offset damage inflicted on agricultural life by Betar Illit. The church is also providing young adults in the village with job skills. It has organized home-based activities for women, and it has repaired a community center. Members of the church have also made annual visits to the village. Another church-supported project has been the construction of a soccer field, built on land threatened for confiscation by the Israeli authorities. The field serves as a playground for children and youth, while sending the message to the world that life will not be denied to the people of this village.

Although the Wadi Foquin project began as a form of spiritual activism, it morphed into political activism as well. As the village has come under increasing threat from settlement expansion, the church brought the case to the Human Rights Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives. Through this project, Buena Vista Church has awakened members of the entire Methodist denomination in the U. S. to the plight of the Palestinians. The church-village allyship is now sponsored by the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries through a group calling itself the Friends of Wadi Foquin. Other United Methodist congregations have joined in the endeavor, including the Cal-Nevada Israel-Palestine Task Force of the United Methodist Church. As a result, each year a new project in behalf of the village has been funded.

Rev. Yoshii told me that early on, the committee tasked with partnering with Wadi Foquin developed a new model of spiritual activism that they felt was appropriate to their work, called the "Circle of Concern." When I asked him for details he emailed the following to me:

*The 'Circle of Concern and Response' (CCR) was designed by our previous UMC liaison to the West Bank as a way for congregations to organize their ministry with Palestinians. The five parts of the circle are: 1. Prayer; 2. Giving; 3. Engagement; 4. Study/Education; and 5. Advocacy. The principle of the Circle is to allow people to participate wherever they feel comfortable and drawn without everyone needing to engage in all of them per se. The idea of it being circular rather than linear means all parts can be going on at the same time, both independently, but also dynamically influencing each other (eg. those drawn to fundraising can participate in the giving circle, while those drawn to advocacy can be part of that circle, etc.)*

When I discovered what Buena Vista Church was doing, I immediately thought that the Wadi Foquin partnership could become a model for activists at Kehilla, if we had enough people in the congregation who were willing to become involved in such a project.

Kehilla's senior rabbi, Dev Noily, suggested that this project be framed as a *reparations allyship*. We Jews owe reparations to the Palestinians for everything that was done by our fellow Jews in Israel to drive them from their land, and for all the suffering they have had to endure through the years. Because of this we originally called the project "*Brit Shi'lu'mim*, a Reparations Allyship." More recently we changed the name to the more accessible "Face-to-Face: A Jewish-Palestinian Reparations Alliance."

## 10. What Do Palestinians Want from American Jews?

The people of Wadi Foquin have welcomed a partnership with American Christians. Would Palestinians also welcome Jews who wished to support their endeavors? During the past several years three members of the Middle East Peace Committee had been part of delegations to the West Bank sponsored by the Center for Jewish Non-Violence, working directly on projects that supported Palestinians, and their answer to my question was positive.

What do Palestinians want from us? Certainly, working politically in behalf of the Palestinians to end the occupation is crucial. The political engagement of organizations like J Street, Americans for Peace Now, and a Jewish Voice for Peace is vital. I also believe that the work of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement is essential, even though it's not at all clear that this strategy will work in the way that it did to end apartheid in South Africa. Contributing to activist organizations in Israel/Palestine is also imperative.

Yet, I have felt that all of this is not enough. Since 1967 when the occupation began, there have certainly been Palestinians who have used violent tactics against the Israelis. Though terrorist attacks garner headlines and serve to disrupt Israeli life and keep people off balance, the basic protest strategy employed by most Palestinians has been a nonviolent tactic they term *sumud*, which means anchoring their lives in steadfastness and perseverance as a form of resistance toward and defiance of Israeli policies and militarism. *Sumud* takes two forms. The first is staying on their land no matter how they are being treated. The second is building alternative institutions to resist the occupation. Let me cite the words of two Palestinians speaking about *sumud*:

Fadi Zatar writes, "*Sumud is when the Israeli regime destroys your house and you stand up on the rubble of the house and say that this is my homeland, and it will be so forever. Sumud is also when the Israeli settlers burn the olive trees and then the Palestinians plant new one. The more the Zionists destroy, the more the Palestinians people rebuild. Sumud is a very organized action, which reflects a common sense of standing against all kinds of the Israeli injustice and discrimination.*"

At the conclusion of the 2021 Israel-Palestine crisis, a woman doctor in Gaza told Israeli journalist Amira Hass: *“Now we're back home. I was so happy to return to the garden and our doves. They didn't die, although we hadn't fed them for four days. Like us, they also know the meaning of sumud . . . . Generation after generation, the Nakba continues. Wherever we go, the Jews persecute us. But they won't eliminate us, that's impossible. They must understand that. We aren't (American) Indians. We'll stay and we will multiply. Nor will we forget... We don't believe in parties, in Hamas or Fatah. They can go to hell. But we have faith in God, in our people, in our land, in our homeland.”*

When you think about it, something like *sumud* operated in Jewish communities all over the Diaspora from the fall of the second Temple in 67 C.E., until the nineteenth century. Jews adopted nonviolent resistance as their strategic response to antisemitism for almost 2000 years! Jews learned to live as a persecuted community in both the Christian and Muslim worlds, where they were seen as infidels, and they had faith that one day the messiah would come and take them back to Eretz Yisrael. And they never gave up hope. Resilience and tenacity in the face of persecution is an experience we share with our Palestinian cousins.

## 11. What Has Face-to-Face Accomplished So Far?

The project we're now calling Face-to-Face: A Jewish Palestinian Reparations Alliance was launched on Yom Kippur afternoon of 5782 (2021) with a well-attended online workshop on allying with Palestinians. Following the workshop, a group of us formed a Kehilla committee.

What does it mean to be an ally? To me this means

- taking on the struggle of Palestinians and Israeli activists as our own.
- standing up for the Palestinians, even when we feel scared.
- using the benefits of our privilege as American Jews to aid Palestinians.
- acknowledging that while we, too, feel pain, the conversation is not about us; nonetheless, our work in behalf of the Palestinians can be healing for us as well.
- being guided by the Palestinian villagers who will be engaged on the ground in the actual work of implementing the alliance, and by our Jewish activist partners from Israel.

Since that time, with the special help of Kehilla congregant and activist Phil Weintraub, we have accomplished the following:

- Meeting with Rev. Yoshii of Buena Vista Church and getting the benefit of his experience for our own work.
- Speaking with Israeli organizations like the Center for Jewish Non-Violence and Ta'ayush, to find out if they would work with us in partnership and be willing to help implement the allyship on the ground.

- Locating a particular village with which to ally. At Rabbi David’s suggestion we have connected with the village of Umm Al Khair (Um Al-Kher) in the South Hebron Hills.
- Learning about the history of the village.
- Getting to know two of the activists of Umm al-Khair via Zoom. We’ve had a number of important conversations with them and have learned a great deal about the people of the village and the immense difficulties they suffered at the hands of the Israeli military. We’ve also listened to their needs which, at the present time, are financial. A member of Face-to-Face has contributed \$15,000 to our work, which has thus far funded two different projects.

We will need a great deal more money to continue our work, and we have located several possible funding sources. One strong possibility: *The Lowey Fund*, which was established in 2020 by the U.S. Congress. This new fund will deliver \$250 million over five years to projects that support peacebuilding and Palestinian economic development, and represents the largest investment *ever* in the region’s peacebuilders. Other possibilities: *The New Israel Fund*, which helps Israel live up to its founders’ vision of a society that ensures complete equality to all its inhabitants, and the *Jewish Liberation Fund* which targets progressive causes that traditional Jewish funding has failed to support, including the Palestinian cause.

## 12. What is Umm al-Khair, Kehilla’s Palestinian Ally?

Umm al-Khair is located in the South Hebron hills, slightly north of the area called Massefer Yatta, in the West Bank. The villagers were originally nomadic Bedouins, but in 1948 Israel expelled them from the Arad desert. The people then purchased the land for their village from residents in the Palestinian village of Yatta. In the wake of the 1948 War, and after the 1949 Armistice Agreements, the village came under Jordanian rule. During the Six-Day War in 1967, Umm al-Khair came under Israeli occupation. According to Israeli activist, David Shulman, the nearby settlement, Carmel, lies on lands confiscated from the Bedouin of the village.

Carmel is a lovely green oasis that looks like an American suburb. It has lush gardens, kids riding bikes and air-conditioned homes. It also has a gleaming, electrified poultry barn that it runs as a business. Beyond its barbed wire fencing, the Bedouins of Umm al-Khair live in shanties and are denied connection to the electricity grid, have no barns for their livestock and no toilets. All attempts to build permanent dwellings are demolished. Elad Orian, an Israeli human rights activist, noted that “the chickens of Carmel’s poultry farm get more electricity and water than the Palestinian Bedouin nearby.”

Right next to the stately country homes—complete with air-conditioning, drip-irrigation gardens and goldfish ponds—a few extended families including old men, old

women and infants live in dwellings made of tin, cloth and plastic siding. There are a few cinder-block structures, too. They tread on broken, barren ground. They have no running water. They are not connected to the power grid that lights up every settlement and outpost in this remote region. They have no access road. This is Umm al-Khair.

David Shulman interviewed one of the villagers, a young man named ‘Id al-Hajalin who, after enumerating their difficulties, showed him two documents, a receipt for taxes he paid on his land, and another, an order from the Military Authorities to demolish his home. He commented: “Why do they want to destroy my house? Where can I go? Can I go to America? I have nothing, and they want to take that nothing from me. Can you help me? Where am I supposed to go?”

The first contact that Face-to-Face had with Umm al-Khair took place via Zoom, with two of its activists, Eid Hathaleen and Awdah Hathaleen. Awdah’s uncle, Haj Sulieman, had just been killed by Israelis. The following account is an excerpt from the article about Haj Sulieman that appeared in Al Jazeera:

*Suleiman al-Hathaleen, 73, never backed down from an opportunity to confront Israeli forces . . . With a white scarf covering his long, grey hair and nothing more than a wooden staff in one hand, Suleiman was often seen fiercely attempting to block Israeli bulldozers from demolishing Palestinian homes, or tractors from razing Palestinian land. Although he could neither read nor write nor use the internet, the late Suleiman, known locally as “Sheikh” or “Hajj” Suleiman, was well-connected.*

*On January 17, some 15,000 Palestinians attended his funeral in his hometown of Umm al-Khair . . . two weeks after he was—allegedly deliberately—run over by an Israeli tow truck.*

*Suleiman’s 60-year-old brother, Ibrahim, said the turnout at the funeral was unprecedented for Masafer Yatta. “The communities of southern Hebron have never witnessed anything like this,” Ibrahim told Al Jazeera. “He [Suleiman] would stand at the forefront with the young men behind him,” Ibrahim recalled, describing him as an influential icon and a mobiliser of the Palestinian street. “He would lie on the ground to prevent military vehicles from moving to demolish Palestinian homes.”*

*Suleiman was fatally injured on January 5 when an Israeli tow truck ran him over in Umm al-Khair during a raid by dozens of Israeli army jeeps on the village to seize unregistered Palestinian vehicles. The truck “drove over him and dragged his body for several metres without stopping”, according to a statement by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).*

*Israeli forces fired shots in the air to disperse the crowd that was protesting the raid, and quickly withdrew from the village, leaving his bleeding body on the ground. Due to the lack of ambulance services in the village, he was taken in a private car to the nearest medical clinic, some 15km (9 miles) away. He died after 12 days in hospital in Hebron.*

Awdah Hathaleen, Haj Sulieman's nephew, with whom we have had extensive contact wrote a piece about his uncle that appeared in +972 Magazine. Here are a few excerpts:

*His martyrdom has left a great emotional void here in our small village, and indeed throughout Masafer Yatta, where eight of our neighboring communities are facing imminent demolition after the Israeli High Court approved their expulsion earlier this month. Particularly in this dangerous moment, his death represents the loss of a defender of our people who brought his characteristic nonviolent resistance to all spheres of our life. In truth, we are finding it hard to maintain our resistance: we have not found another person who can do what Haj Suleiman did for us, and I do not think that we will. We have lost a core source of hope for a better future.*

*We in Umm al-Khair were so accustomed to Haj Suleiman's presence and the way he cared about each of us and our problems. He taught us to be courageous and unafraid. But right now, we are very afraid. Hardly any of us have been able to sleep properly since he was killed, but it has been even worse since the High Court's ruling. I am scared every time I hear news of another raid by Israeli soldiers, or another assault by Israeli settlers — I'm afraid of losing someone else.*

*When he was older, Haj Suleiman became a father, leader, brother, and friend of each of the residents of Umm al-Khair, the person to whom the whole village turned for guidance and direction. He cared about the issues of the Palestinian people as a whole, especially when it came to protecting women and children, and he was particularly loyal to the cause of prisoners. But his mercy extended out to the whole world, and I remember him praying for everyone to overcome the coronavirus.*

*Umm al-Khair has lost the man who stood up for everyone, and who solved all of our problems with his great advice. But we will keep Haj Suleiman in our hearts and in our struggle, and we will not forget the sacrifices he made in fighting for our rights — until he sacrificed his very life for us.*

### 13. What Are Our Plans for Face-to-Face in the Future?

If we follow in the footsteps of the Wadi Foqoin Project there is a great deal that we can do for the people of Umm al-Khair. Here is an inventory of possible activities that we are contemplating.

#### ***Possible Adult Activities at Kehilla***

- Sharing our work with Kehilla's Board of Trustees in order to gain its support for the project.
- Connecting with Palestinians and Israelis living in the Bay Area and getting their participation in the project.

- Speaking with Kehilla’s partners in the Faith Trio—Montclair Presbyterian Church and the Northern California Islamic Cultural Center—and inviting them to join us in the project.
- Connecting with the following progressive Jewish communities across the country that share our perspective on Israel and Palestine, and inviting them to co-sponsor the allyship: Tzedek Chicago, Hineinu in Baltimore, New Synagogue Project in Washington, D.C., Techiyah in Detroit, Kolot Chayenu in Brooklyn, and Kadima in Seattle.
- Purchasing more computers for the village and setting up Zoom connections between Kehilla members and villagers.
- Developing a fundraising plan in behalf of the projects we take on.
- Importing and selling products produced in the village via our website.
- Collecting books and other items from congregants to send to the village.
- Setting up a comparative religion class at Kehilla devoted to exploring the similarities and differences between Jewish and Islamic religion and culture.
- Developing an online project in which psychotherapists from Kehilla could work with traumatized adults and children in Umm al-Khair.
- Working to get the city of Piedmont to adopt the village as a “sister-community.”

#### ***Possible Activities for Kehilla School***

- Teaching about Umm al-Khair as part of the Israeli-Palestinian narrative.
- Setting up Zoom connections between students in Kehilla School and kids in Umm al-Khair.
- Showing videos of children in the village and sending videos of Kehilla students to be shown in the village.
- Making Kehilla School’s annual *Yom Shalom* (i.e., *Yom Ha’Atz’ma’ut/Nakba*) commemoration into a Kehilla community-wide observance involving adults as well as youngsters.
- Displaying a photography exhibit of the village and its inhabitants at Kehilla on Yom Shalom and/or the High Holy Days.

#### ***Further Activities***

- Sending delegations of Kehilla folks to Umm al-Khair each year to meet and work with villagers on particular projects, such as repairing buildings, etc.—perhaps in tandem with our work with the annual Center for Jewish Non-Violence delegation.
- Meeting with facilitators of Compassionate Listening, Non-Violent Communication, and/or the Parents’ Circle-Families Forum to discuss how it might be possible to develop a dialogue circle made up of the Palestinian villagers

and Israelis living in nearby settlements. The aim of forming such an ongoing group would be reconciliation and envisioning a shared future together.

- Bringing articulate villagers to Kehilla and arranging for them to speak at different Jewish venues.

## 14. How Should We Look at Israel?

*I have placed this section at the end of the paper, in large part because I know that for some readers it will be the most controversial. Once again, I need to stress that participation in Face-to-Face does not depend upon agreement with the views of the author. The desire to work on behalf of our Palestinian allies is enough of a motivation.*

It was 2019, and I had been carrying my anger toward Israel for almost 50 years. And then the Covid pandemic broke out and, like many others, my wife, Diane, and I found ourselves immured in our home for months. Cut off from the world in this way, I began to reflect more deeply about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than I had in a very long time.

Martin Buber's views about Jews and Arabs living in peace in a single society derived, in large part, from his immersion in Hasidism, the 18<sup>th</sup> century movement in Ukraine and Poland for Jewish spiritual renewal. Buber was the first scholar to bring the teachings of Hasidism to the world, and those teachings have a great deal to say about love and compassion. The Ba'al Shem Tov, who founded the Hasidic movement, was a teacher of love, and most especially the love of the Jewish people. He refused to hold back his love from anyone in his community, even those who were scoundrels. The Ba'al Shem has been my primary spiritual teacher for over 40 years. How, then, would he direct me to relate to Israelis today, especially those who actively harass Palestinians and think of them as less than human?

Let me begin with a question: Why is there is so much hostility among Israelis toward the Palestinians? Certainly, the ongoing struggle between the two peoples has been a major factor, with so much wounding over the decades. But there is more.

I have come to believe that a great deal of the brokenness that we see among Jews today has psycho-historical origins. It derives, at least in part, from almost 2000 years of living as pariahs among hostile Christians and Muslims. In Europe, especially, Jews suffered from pogrom after pogrom, and these carnages were finally capped by the Holocaust. Six million Jews slaughtered. This most certainly left a great deal of unprocessed trauma among the masses of those who managed to escape, as well as those who survived the death camps. Many of these survivors settled in Israel.

We know that Israeli adults and children have a very high rate of ADHD. And researchers have shown that the exposure to stressful life events, and—more specifically—childhood trauma, has been shown to predict ADHD onset, as well as persistence of the disorder into adulthood. How much of Zionist and Israeli hostility toward Arabs comes from unprocessed trauma that is projected onto Palestinians?



My family comes from the broad area in Eastern Europe that gave rise to Zionism. My grandparents, however, immigrated to the U.S. rather than to Palestine, both to escape the persistent antisemitism in Europe, and to find new opportunities in a democratic society. I consider myself lucky. And yet, were not Jews living in the United States also affected, though much less directly than the European escapees and survivors, by the horrors of the Holocaust?

One manifestation of the Jewish cultural struggle to survive against all odds was the message I received from my family as I was growing up—that Jews were intellectually and morally superior to Gentiles. This meant, in part, that Jewish children were supposed to be perfect at home and superior in school. At the same time, though, I noticed that members of my family certainly did not consistently act in a morally upright manner. In both my nuclear and my extended family my relatives reacted with a great deal of hostility and anger, most often over trivialities. Though I hated this poisonous atmosphere, I came to accept it as normal. Now I wonder how much of my own anger and outrage toward the Israelis replayed the very trauma responses modeled in my family of origin and embedded in my own genetic makeup.

I am not justifying Israeli behavior toward Palestinians. What I am saying is that there is a massive communal blindness in Israel regarding the role of historical trauma in bringing about and maintaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Frankly, I don't see how this can change anytime soon on a national or societal level. So what, then, should be our attitude toward the Israelis who are maintaining the cruel apartheid-like regime? For the longest time I felt both anger and alienation. But over the last few years my attitude has changed.

In the Talmud, Beruriah, the wise wife of Rabbi Meir, taught her husband a fundamental truth: Hate the sin, not the sinner. But how to do this? I had been regularly practicing a Jewish form of Lovingkindness Meditation for decades, and that ritual was deeply affecting my attitudes toward people. I had been including the Palestinians in my practice for decades, but I began to wonder about the Israelis. Should I also practice lovingkindness toward them? I found the answer to my question in a teaching that Martin Buber cites in three of his books.

*Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsberg was once asked by a disciple, "We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. How can I do this if my neighbor has wronged me?"*

*The rebbe replied, "You must understand these words rightly. Love your neighbor as someone who you yourself are. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is inherent in all souls, just as your own soul is inherent in all of the parts of your body. Now it may happen that by mistake you may strike yourself with your hand. But would you then take a stick and beat your hand because it lacked understanding? Such an action would only increase your pain.*

*It is the same with your neighbor, with whom you share your soul. If he wrongs you because of a lack of understanding, and you punish him, you only hurt yourself.”*

*The disciple replied to the rebbe: “But if I see a person who is wicked before God, how is it possible to love him?”*

*“Don’t you know,” replied the rebbe, “that the primordial human soul came out of the essence of God, and that every human soul is part of God? And will you have no compassion when you see that one of God’s holy sparks has been lost in a maze and is almost stifled?”*

As I reflected over time on this teaching, I came to understand that I needed to transform my attitude toward the Israelis, including them in my Lovingkindness Meditation, while at the same time finding some way to ally myself more directly with Palestinians to help repair the damage that my fellow Jews in Israel were doing.

Rebbe Shmelke’s teaching calls to mind an anecdote I read recently about the great Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. It appeared in a recent issue of *Spirituality and Health Magazine*. Its author was Karen Bouris.

*Twenty years ago, the Rodney King riots had just exploded in Los Angeles, and the image of a fallen man being beaten by police replayed itself over and over on television sets everywhere. That same week, I went to a talk at the Berkeley Community Theatre featuring Thich Nhat Hanh.*

*The auditorium filled with thousands of people as this small man in robes, little known to me at the time, took the stage. He immediately started talking about the news—the beating, the riots, the events in Los Angeles that were triggering anger around the world. He spoke about his sadness for the beaten man. And then he spoke about his even greater sadness for the men doing the beating—the rage they must have had inside and the deep suffering that would cause them to act out in this way. You could hear a pin drop as the audience took in his words, his understanding, and his compassion for every person in this struggle.*

One final story. Nelson Mandela began his political career in South Africa as a militant socialist struggling against apartheid. During his twenty-seven years in prison, his entire way of looking at the white supremacists who controlled South Africa changed. His years in prison brought Mandela to the recognition of the futility of hatred and violence. He came to understand that to avoid bloodshed and guarantee a viable future for his country he would need to reject violence. In part under the influence of Bishop Tutu, he came to believe that reconciling with one’s enemy and showing them magnanimity would be a necessary precondition for achieving the goal of peace, and eventually justice as well. Even though he did not at all see himself as a religious person, Nelson Mandela

did in fact find the root of love lying somewhere within or perhaps beneath the harshness of his revolutionary socialist ideology. In doing so, he was able to prevent the race war that had seemed inevitable.

Let me end with two short teachings about peacebuilding, one from a Jewish source, the other from a Muslim source:

*Hillel the Elder would say: Be like the students of Aaron: Love peace, and pursue peace, and bring peace between one person and another . . . And who is the greatest hero of all? There are those who say it is one who is able to turn an enemy into a friend.*

Avot D'Rabbi Natan 23

*And the prophet Muhammed said: "Do you want me to tell you what is better than the practices of fasting, prayer and charity?" The Companions said, "Yes, O Messenger of Allah." He said, "Making peace between people among whom there is discord, for the evil of discord is the destroyer."*

Sunam Abi Dawud 4919

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