

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? POLITICAL COURAGE THEN AND NOW

On a rainy night in early March, Palestinian American Representative Rashida Tlaib walked to the lectern at the historic Calvary Baptist Church in Washington DC and did something extraordinary. Tlaib was there to address a gathering of about 100 people, including 23 church leaders who had just returned from a week in the West Bank. They had travelled there to meet with leaders of Palestinian civil society -- women and men from the churches, universities, NGOs and organizations devoted to preserving Palestinian life in the face of Israel's ongoing program to erase it. Named the "Stones Cry Out" delegation, the 23 were joined in Washington by colleagues from the U.S. church movement for Palestine and their Jewish and Muslim allies from across the country. We had just spent two days meeting with members of Congress and their staff to bring these messages from Palestine: Stop the genocide of the Palestinians of Gaza. Stop the strangulation of the West Bank. Stop funding Israel's 75-year-long project of dispossession and colonization that has led to the current crisis.

"When I speak in Congress or in public," Tlaib began, I bring stories from my district -- about people's struggles with poverty, housing, income inequality" -- issues that have driven her mission as a public servant. Tonight, Tlaib continued, she would say the names of the children of Gaza. She proceeded to tell one impossible, heart-shattering story after another of children who have died, been injured and mutilated, lost their families, been driven from their homes. One story after another, until we felt that it would never stop -- as indeed it has not. There was no relief from the horror and the heartbreak -- even as it seemed that Tlaib's tears might make it impossible for her to continue.

In this act Tlaib unlocked the meaning of the Stones Cry Out delegation. We had heard the cry of the Palestinians to stop the killing and the savage, uncontrolled destruction of all that makes life possible in that crowded strip of land. We let flow our outrage not only at the genocide in Gaza, but also what one Christian leader in Jerusalem described as Israel's "slow moving death machine" bearing down on the cities, villages, grazing fields and olive groves of the West Bank. We appealed to members of Congress to use the leverage of our country's financial and diplomatic support for Israel to press for an immediate ceasefire and for humanitarian relief. *This is the what the staffers had expected to hear from us.* What they did not expect -- what was the bigger reach, even for the most progressive among them -- was our message that the U.S. was responsible for the conditions that led up to the October 7th attack: the 17-year-long blockade and slow starvation of Gaza and the systematic colonization and ethnic cleansing of the West Bank, all made possible by our money, arms, and diplomatic protection.

The delegates were on fire. They argued, they appealed, they bore witness. They countered the hollow arguments, the false facts and twisted history, the inexcusably hollow excuses for standing aside as the carnage continued and the supply of weapons of destruction and killing flowed. As we sat in these meetings it dawned on us that we were fighting, not only for the oppressed Palestinians, but for the integrity of our country and for the survival of our democracy.

As we sat in those meetings, I could not help but feel compassion for those staffers. They were -- you could read it in their eyes and see it in their body language -- in the impossible position of having to defend the indefensible positions of their bosses. Confronting the lumbering, faltering, blind machinery of our democracy, we were asking for a display of the political courage that has produced the rare moments in our nation's history when we've done the right thing. Like Tlaib and the handful of her colleagues in Congress who have spoken up for the Palestinians, we were defending not only the Palestinians but the ideals of equality and compassion we claim to uphold. We were asking the question: can we overcome our settler colonial DNA?

With only two exceptions, Senators and members of the House did not meet with us themselves -- they assigned their staffers to hear our reports and receive our asks. Rashida Tlaib went one better -- she came to us, accepting the invitation to join in our service of testimony and prayer.

She came to the church that night because she had to be there.

It was an extraordinary evening. Tlaib was preceded by readings and reflections from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. In the Christian reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus put it clearly to his followers: when you feed the hungry, when you heal their wounds and release them from the prison of their oppression, you are coworkers with me in bringing the Kingdom of God here on earth. In his reflections, Rev Graylan Hagler, an African American pastor well known to the Washington DC social justice community, spoke of the faith and persistence of Palestinian resistance, and he lifted up the Black liberation struggle in America. That struggle was, and continues to be, Rev. Hagler pointed out, about the soul of America -- and about the heart of Christianity. The Palestinian struggle has brought home once again to the churches the challenge, in every historical era, to be faithful to the core of the gospel. To know that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, that we are part of the inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

Palestinian American Imam Tarif Shraim, the Muslim chaplain at the University of Maryland, spoke passionately about his pain at the loss of family and friends in the ongoing slaughter. Imam Shraim reached for solace and hope in the vision of the Prophet Muhammad for a world reflecting the will of the Creator: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."

Lamentation

The text from the Jewish tradition, read by Rabbi Lizz Goldstein, was a rendering of the Book of Lamentations written by Rabbi Brant Rosen of Congregation Tzedek Chicago. I was asked to offer a reflection. As I approached the lectern, I was struck dumb. What words does a Jew say at a moment like this? Lamentations provided the answer. I was taken back to a night in Jerusalem almost two decades ago, as a member of a delegation to the West Bank organized by

the Fellowship of Reconciliation. My last night in Palestine that summer fell on the ninth of Av, observed in the Jewish liturgical calendar as the traditional date of the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in 70 CE. It is a day of fasting and mourning beginning at sundown the previous day with the chanting of Lamentations. Attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, the book it is a harrowing description of a people fallen and traumatized, a cry of pain from the heart of a genocide:

*Jerusalem has greatly sinned
Therefore has she been made a mockery.
All who admired her despise her
For they have seen her disgraced.*

*Panic and pitfall are our lot,
Death and destruction.
My eyes shed streams of water
Over the brokenness of my people.*

Representing the end of Jewish autonomy and rule in Palestine (until today, of course), the 9th of Av commemoration serves as the prototype for Jewish suffering and slaughter through the ages. Running through the litany of desolation and ruin is grief and humiliation over the loss of status and pride: “How the city sits alone and isolated, she who was great among nations!” It is also mourning for the loss of safety and security: “He has cut down in fierce anger all the strength of Israel; He has withdrawn His right hand that shielded Israel from the enemy, laid waste her citadels, destroyed her fortress walls.”

That night I chanted the words of Lamentations, but this time sitting on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, in the company of congregations of praying Jews, mostly American emigres worshiping, I felt, at the shrine of their Jerusalem—a Jerusalem “reclaimed” at the expense of the Palestinian people; a Jerusalem that for Palestinians is also a spiritual and political center; a Jerusalem taken from them street by street, a homeland stolen farm by farm, village by village, city by city. I stood on that hill and chanted the words as I had every year as Jew growing up in the synagogue, descriptions of starvation, slaughter and banishment, and, for the life of me, could apply the words only to the Palestinians. My tears this time were for them.

Lamentations concludes with this entreaty: “Restore us to You, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old!” What Lamentations imparted to me growing up as a Jew in the second half of the 20th century was how I was to relate to the loss of our own supremacy, our own autonomy and control over our destiny. *Our Nakba, our Holocaust.* Instead of opening to the universality of suffering and our responsibility to relieve it, we turned our suffering into a yearning to regain our lost power, to put those fortress walls back up. The disciples expressed the same yearning when they asked the risen Jesus “Lord, is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” It was King, Temple, armies and fortress walls they were envisioning. They had had Jesus’ answer, only a week earlier, standing with him in the Temple courtyard on Palm Sunday: “Destroy this Temple!” cried Jesus. Turn away from this embodiment of greed, exceptionalism, and perversion of the principals of Torah! Jesus wept for

the calamity that was 40 years away but that had already happened: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! The things that make for peace are hidden from your eyes.” And even now, after his death and resurrection, his followers were blind to the evil that Jesus had exposed through his own sacrifice as a political dissident.

Hearing again the words of Lamentations, like that Jew of 2000 years ago I shed tears for the brokenness of my own people. That night in Washington, I asked the question: “What do we do with our suffering?”

Here is what you don’t do: you don’t cling to a past of suffering and victimization, to a worldview of “us and them,” build a wall around yourselves, station soldiers along it, and say to the people, trust no one, we will protect you.

Here is what you don’t do: cling to your insularity, your defensiveness, your identity as a victim that grants you the right to do anything to protect yourself against an eternal, implacable enemy.

Instead, you ask the right questions. Walking along the road, privileged, powerful and free, seeing the naked, beaten person lying by the side of the road, you ask “who is my neighbor?”

You follow the instructions of Aaron Bushnell, who before he set himself on fire in front of the Israeli Embassy bid us ask ourselves, “What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?”

You do what Rabbi Brant Rosen did in his [“Lamentation for Gaza,”](#) renouncing the identity of entitlement and exceptionalism and rejecting the idolatry of power that has brought us to this pass.

*We have lost all
that once was precious to us.
This fatal attachment to our own might
has become our downfall.
This idolatrous veneration of the land
has sent us wandering into
a wilderness of our own making...
imprisoned inside behind walls we have built
with our own fear and dread.*

Our story today is not what was done to us, it is what we are now doing to others. And this is not just a Jewish story. It is beyond urgent for us as Americans to look at ourselves in the mirror.

A spark of hope

We felt a spark of hope that night at Calvary Baptist. We joined together in saying yes to compassion, to the prophetic cry to feed the hungry, set free the prisoners, and open the eyes of the blind.

We returned from Palestine to give this message to our own nation -- this is about us, our own falling into the pit of fear, of us and them, of greed and grasping. We came to call for vision, for an end to our blindness, as did Rabbi Brant Rosen, witnessing the destruction of Gaza with our bombs and our willful blindness. We came to call not only on our elected representatives, but on our churches, by and large silent as this horror had unfolded.

Another, unexpected and astonishing thing happened that evening in Washington. As Tlaib stepped down from the lectern, Graylan Hagler approached, motioning for her come to him. He put his arm around her shoulder and asked us all to stand and stretch out our arms to her in the manner of the Black churches as he blessed her. I don't remember the blessing, perhaps he spoke it only to her, but it was a blessing for all of us, a healing for all of us. It was an affirmation of the power of the spirit: of the Palestinians who refuse to give up, of our faith traditions that persistently, defying the odds, sustain the spirit of prophecy in the face of the institutions, religious and governmental alike, that act to subvert foundational values of compassion, equality and love. All those Temples, all the forms that they take: Zionism, Christian Nationalism, America's original sin of land theft and genocide, the sad history of the church's complicity with colonialism and the evils it brings. Can we overcome our settler colonial DNA? This is the fight of our lives. Not only for Palestine, not only for our country, but for humankind.

As I left the church, I passed Rashida Tlaib and Graylan Hagler standing just outside the entrance to the sanctuary, deep in conversation. I wanted to go up to them, to thank them for the extraordinary gift they had given us. But it felt right to leave them be and to simply receive the gift, to take it with me as I walked out of the church and into the night. It was the gift of hope.

Mark Braverman
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