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# The 2023-2024 Israel-Hamas War: What Jewish Trauma and Genocide in Gaza Taught Me about Collective Liberation

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Drawing on personal experiences, theological reflections, and history, Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon re-imagines peacemaking, resolution to conflict and violence, and collective liberation. Following both the author's time spent in the Holy Land, and the events of October 7 and what followed, the author argues for a Christian response that gives witness to the suffering in Gaza and for all who suffer.<sup>1</sup> Cannon explores the idea that to seek justice and pursue peace it is essential to abhor evil and cling to what is good (Romans 12:9). Arguing that the Christian's call is one of collective liberation, Cannon considers new ways to respond to violence and affirms the Christian commitment to God's promise of peace.

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## The Gaza that I Knew and Loved

The first time I rode down the rolling urban streets of Gaza City, I felt both overwhelmed and surprised at the view of the minaret silhouetted in the distance overlooking the Mediterranean as the sun set in light pink and yellow hues on the horizon. If I hadn't known that I had just arrived in an enclave already blockaded for well over a decade, which had been virtually destroyed in the war of the summer of 2014, I could almost imagine I was on the Riviera of the Italian seaside town. While taking in the view, I also had to un-imagine what I knew to be true, that tens of thousands of gallons of raw sewage were being dumped into the water every minute (Cannon and Hill 2017). At the same time, I had to work hard to ignore the constant buzz like a loud gargantuan electronic fly hovering in the distance, sometimes very close and at other times higher up in the clouds—Israeli military drones constantly present. The incessant buzz makes one feel like they are going slightly crazy, for while electricity never stays on consistently, the constant knowledge of being enclosed, watched, and under surveillance remains always present.

I never felt unsafe with the people of Gaza. In fact, the hospitality I experienced there rivaled the warm welcome and warmth of rural communities in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East. It is impossible to

enter a household without having coffee, juice, and sweets offered in abundance, even in homes with little material wealth. In homes where people have nothing, Muslim and Christian alike, Palestinians in Gaza still give from what little they do possess.

When I visited in 2018, I attended a giving circle with a development agency in Khan Yunis. Every week, the women would meet and save only a few shekels (the equivalent of US\$0.50). Their savings eventually contributed to micro-loans so they could start their own businesses, and another bucket was kept for benevolence if one of the women's family members got sick or needed money for medicine or food. The women had skills in sewing, cooking, or other domestic skills that could be used to help support their families. These women were devout Muslims, dressed in black *niqabs* from head to toe, with only their eyes showing. I dressed conservatively, at least for an American, but did not cover my hair and was not wearing a *hijab*. My hair is dirty blond and long, so there was no mistaking that I was from the West and not Muslim. While my hosts were used to working with internationals and primarily men, these women were not. And yet, I interacted with the community and experienced a complete welcome, despite my abhorrent Arabic and the limitations in our direct communication. One of the most sumptuous weekly treats for the women includes a piece of

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: It is very difficult to publish updated information on current events in a timely manner. Please note that this piece was written in 2024 and last updated in early 2025. Important events have occurred since the time of writing.

chocolate that the development agency gives them—a special delicacy for women living in abject poverty. The women absolutely insisted that I take *their chocolate*, not the extras the agency had brought—for they each wanted me to give me something that was theirs to give and to be sure that when I left, I was not leaving empty-handed. Such is the hospitality of the Palestinians. Gaza is no exception.

I typically visit Gaza once a year as part of my work with Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP). The last time I entered Gaza was in May 2022. Permits were in progress, and I was scheduled to return in October 2023. Then Hamas committed the atrocities of October 7, 2023.

Now, after the horrors of October 7 and Israel's war to destroy Hamas, with its ghastly effects on the civilian population of Gaza, where to begin in the middle of stories of such trauma and horror? That's often the question when discussing the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Does one begin in 1948? Or does one begin with the biblical story of the children of Abraham—Isaac and Ishmael? I speak at churches across the United States and to Christian and religious communities worldwide. One of the fundamental things we discuss includes debunking the question of when the current conflict—war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, occupation, traumas, and divisions between Israelis and Palestinians—really began. It was *not* thousands of years ago. *Nor* was it when tragedy struck on October 7, 2023.

### **A Call for Collective Liberation**

This brief memoir includes some of the stories, encounters, thinking, theologies, history, and geopolitics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It describes a small glimpse of my life in leadership as the executive director of CMEP over the past year. This account includes a summary of more than 380 days (still ongoing) amid what the world has come to know as the Israel-Hamas War (or now the Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah War). Some identify the horrors in Gaza as genocide. Others recognize it only as Jewish trauma, seeing it as nothing short of resounding anti-Semitism toward Jewish people and the state of Israel that has echoes of the Holocaust. I, and the organization I lead, advocate for an end to violence by all parties—including terrorist organizations, militants, and state actors—the demilitarization of conflict, the end of the bombing of civilians and all people, the end of the holding of hostages of any kind, the release of people held in prison without the due process of law of civil protections, upholding human rights and international law, the recognition of the humanity and dignity of all people, while addressing the more than decades-long historic core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As a pastor and Christian leader, my call and leadership go even further, calling Christians in the United States and around the world to look within our hearts and root out the hatred that is within us, seeking to redefine not only who is our enemy, but also who is our neighbor. In the specific case of this conflict, being American and leading a US-based non-profit peacebuilding organization based in Washington, DC at the same time when the Biden Administration in recent months has sent billions of dollars of weaponry and arms that have been used to kill tens of thousands of people, my organization and I have an obligation to ask the question of what our culpability is and what our responsibility as American citizens is in contributing to this war and all the death it has caused.

Collective liberation in this context means the idea many attribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the context of the black struggle for liberation in the United States, an idea often heard from civil rights hero Fannie Lou Hamer; “Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free,” she said as she told the National Women’s Political Caucus in Washington, DC in 1971 that black and white women had to work together for the freedom of all (as cited in Parker Brooks and Houck 2011, 136). As the American Jewish World Service reminds us, the famous quote, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free,” was penned in 1883 by American Jewish poet Emma Lazarus in 1883 at a time when global Jewish anti-Semitism increased so rapidly, that in some ways a Jewish nationalist movement may have felt like the only hope for safety and preservation for a worldwide Jewish community that had yet to see the horrors of the Holocaust (Bank and Abelow 2021). Collective liberation in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict demands that justice not be only sought for some but for all. One cannot have liberation for Palestinians without security for Jewish people—in Israel and everywhere. One cannot have security for Jewish people without freedom, self-determination, and liberation for Palestinians. Democratic people in the United States will never be “free” while investing in wars in foreign lands and impinging upon the liberties of others. Our future together, in the Middle East and the world, is inextricably linked.

### **A Short History of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict**

For those who think God curses the descendants of Ishmael (Muslims), please consider Genesis 21 when Hagar cries out to God in the wilderness. God does not reject her. Quite the opposite. God reveals Himself to Hagar in the very first theophany (revelation of his presence) in the Hebrew Scriptures (Royo 2019, 8). Bible and Middle Eastern studies scholar at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Tony Maalouf, wrote an excellent book about this very

question called *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (2003), and if you don't want to read an entire book, I would point you to the chapter "The Holy Land and the Larger Family of Abraham" in the book I edited titled *A Land Full of God: Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land* (Cannon 2017).

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is a contemporary geopolitical conflict that began in the late 19th century as the Ottoman Empire was declining and primarily motivated by the Jewish Zionist movement, as Jewish immigration to the historic territory of Palestine increased. Conflicts between the immigrant Jewish population, the local Arab population, and the British Administration after World War I through 1947 ultimately escalated into unresolved disputes over land, borders, Jerusalem, security concerns, the Right of Return, prisoners, and settlements, which continue to be unresolved in large part until today.

## Terminology and the Israel– Hamas War Today

There are as many battles about what terminology to use regarding the situation happening on the ground now and historically in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) as there are about when it began in history. I will seek to use the relatively "neutral" terminology of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, while noting that the 2023-2024 hostilities between Israel and Hamas, which, as of late October 2024 has already killed 42 thousand people, is referred to by many as *genocide*.<sup>2</sup> Numerous individuals and groups in the activist space, like Jewish Voices for Peace and Palestinian Christians, consider using any term other than "genocide" offensive (Jewish Voice for Peace 2024). Others believe the state of Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, surrounded by militant groups and states like Hamas and Hezbollah who are determined to accomplish its destruction, and that thus the 2023-2024 hostilities are a legitimate and necessary self-defense for survival (Deloy 2021). However, on January 26, 2024, the International Criminal Court of Justice (ICC) ruled that "at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible", including 'the right of the

Palestinians in Gaza to be protected from acts of genocide and related prohibited acts" (2024).

Increasingly, the world's opinion seems to be that Israel's actions against Hamas have had a far too extreme and disproportionate response to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip. On May 24, the ICJ ruled by thirteen votes to two that: "The State of Israel shall, in conformity with its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and in view of the worsening conditions of life faced by civilians in the Rafah Governorate: Immediately halt its military offensive, and any other action in the Rafah Governorate, which may inflict on the Palestinian group in Gaza conditions of life that could bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part" (International Criminal Court 2024).

CMEP came to an apparent decision early on in October 2023; all of our more than 30 member communions and denominations may not agree on the specific terminology, but they do unanimously agree on the "prevention of genocide" as it relates to the atrocities in Gaza post-October 2023. In other words, regardless of what you call the situation in Gaza—ethnic cleansing, genocide, atrocities, mass slaughter, there are many descriptive terms—the most important thing is that the hundreds and thousands of deaths of men, women, and children happening in Gaza must be brought to an immediate end. Some people argue these deaths are justified because the population supports the militant group Hamas. Still, honestly, such thinking ignores that the vast majority of the population are children and youth, who are not guilty of the crimes of Hamas.

The top priority has been calling and advocating for a comprehensive and immediate ceasefire, which means an end to all violence, including that by Hamas and the Israeli military, and a return to the negotiating table. CMEP's other asks have included the demand for immediate and adequate humanitarian assistance into Gaza, the release of hostages being held by Hamas or other militant groups, the release of Palestinian prisoners who are being held in Israeli jails without due process, and that the core causes of the conflict be addressed, including but not limited to addressing human rights issues as a result of the decades-long occupation of the Palestinian people such as the expanding settlement expansion, forced displacement,

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<sup>2</sup> I am choosing to use the term "conflict" not to minimize the atrocities of current realities in Gaza, but to acknowledge that there have been multiple phases of historical engagement and hostilities and war between multiple parties residing on the current geographic land of the modern nation-state of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), including but not limited to: Indigenous Jewish and Arab populations; members of the Palestinian resistance movements; Palestinians who later became citizens of the state of Israel; Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territories of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza; Jewish citizens of Israel living on the Israeli side of the green line; Israeli settlers; Palestinian refugees from 1948, 1967, and other periods; diaspora communities; and others.

settler violence, and numerous other human rights concerns.

The past twelve-plus months have been the most difficult season of my professional life. My credentials include a doctorate of philosophy (on the history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict nonetheless) and a doctorate of ministry (focusing on the spiritually transformative process of learning to love your enemy), three master's degrees, more than fifteen years in international development experience, and more than twenty years in Christian ministry, yet they seem woefully inadequate for the demands of this moment.

I feel woefully inadequate daily, even though I've received numerous awards and acknowledgments in past months for my peacebuilding efforts, including Sojourners identification as one of the nine Christian women shaping the church (Schnaser 2024), One of the Top 50 Women of 2024 in the State of Maryland ("The Top Fifty..." 2024), the Armenian Apostolic Church's "Friend of the Year Award" (Diocese of the Armenian Church... 2024), and North Park Theological Seminary's "Alumni of the Year Award." All of that, and I've never felt like more of a failure—every day, more and more people continue to die.

In many ways, we are further away from peace in the Middle East than ever before.

### **October 7, 2023: Hamas Attacks on Southern Israel**

So, where do we begin? I will start on October 7, 2023. Not because that's where the Israeli/Palestinian conflict began, by any means, but because I think that is when many Christians around the world, especially Americans, perhaps for the first time, first really began paying attention.

On that day, October 7, 2023 (Martinez 2023), Israelis experienced, and Jews around the world witnessed, the most traumatic event since the Holocaust.

During the early morning of October 7, 2023, at 6:35 a.m., Israeli sirens began to warn residents of incoming rockets. Shortly after, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed that Hamas fighters had entered southern Israel. It quickly became clear that the scale of these attacks by Hamas and other militant groups would leave many Israeli citizens devastated for decades and generations to come. At 7:40 a.m., on a Sabbath morning, the IDF confirmed Hamas fighters had crossed into Southern Israel, and the military warned residents in the South to stay in their homes. By 11:35 a.m., Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel made his first statement to citizens, announcing that Israel was at war. As fighting continued throughout the day, Israel estimated that about 1,200 people were killed in Hamas's October 7 attack, including more than 300 soldiers (Bisset 2024). Israel also estimated

that more than 250 people were taken into Hamas territory as hostages, including Israeli citizens and internationals. By October 9, 2023, Israel had declared that "no food, no electricity, and no fuel" would be allowed into the Gaza Strip and that the enclave would be under a complete siege. No trucks. Nothing. Humanitarian assistance and any supplies needed for life were to be completely cut off. By the Fall of 2024, debates around the world existed about whether or not Israel was using the withholding of food and humanitarian assistance as a weapon of war. In the first weeks after the attacks, the government's policy under Prime Minister Netanyahu was absolutely nothing in or out of the enclave until all of the hostages would be returned home.

### **The Nova Music Festival**

One of the most devastating massacres occurred on October 7 at the Nova Music Festival, where many Israelis had gathered in the desert, which took place just 5 km from the Gaza border. The location was close enough for people in Gaza to hear the music themselves. In the early morning hours, as rockets were being fired into Israel, many people at the festival paid little attention to the sound. It was not uncommon to hear rocket fire from this territory, so attendees were unaware that they, too, would soon be under attack. Hamas fighters quickly cut off routes from the North and South to trap the crowd; concertgoers who attempted to escape in cars were shot at. Militants targeted shelters where people hid and continued to chase those who tried to flee into the desert. According to Israeli authorities, the death count at Nova was over 350 (Mackintosh et al. 2023).

### **Israel's Response to the October 7 Attacks**

After October 7, the majority of the Israeli population ardently supported not only the war against Hamas in Gaza but also the complete destruction and annihilation of the Gaza Strip, believing the war to be a "just war" that was thrust upon them and not their choice (Teibel 2023). Many Israelis not only supported the war, but they did not express reservations about the shutting off of all humanitarian aid, food, and water if it meant bringing home the hostages sooner. Revenge and despair, in addition to trauma, left little room for Israelis committed to making peace with Palestinians. In fact, during the first weeks and months after the war, attempts to protest the war and call for a comprehensive ceasefire were almost unilaterally shut down by the police and Israeli government (Sharon 2023). The Israeli government, the most right in the country's history, further emboldened extremists and settlers within Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories with statements like:

“We will avenge this black day,” Netanyahu said almost immediately after the attacks, promising to take wider action against Gaza and “turn it into a ruin” (Times of Israel Staff 2023).

“There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed... we are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly,” said Yoav Gallant, Israel Defense Minister on October 9, 2023 (Fabian 2023).

“Now there is only one goal: Nakba (expulsion of the Palestinians). A Nakba in Gaza that will dwarf the Nakba of 1948,” said Ariel Kallner, member of Parliament, October 13, 2023 (Kauss 2023).

“We are dropping hundreds of tons of bombs on Gaza, the focus is on destruction, not accuracy,” added Daniel Hagart, IDF Rear Admiral and Head of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Spokesperson’s Unit, on October 10, 2023 (McKernan and Kierszenbaum 2023).<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, after September 11, 2001, a common question became, “Where were you on September 11?” Many have said October 7, 2023, has become Israel’s September 11 in that it is a tragedy that will continue to define the future of the nation. In addition, the United States warned the Israeli government not to respond to the Hamas attacks the way that the United States did by entering into a long, drawn-out war that “cannot be won.” From the beginning, Israel declared their primary goal of “Operation Swords of Iron”—the complete and utter destruction of Hamas. Military leaders and the war cabinet declared the destruction of all infrastructure in Gaza a secondary goal of their engagement, but the destruction of Hamas has always been the primary goal over the past eight months (Nakhoul et al. 2023).

Still, analysts since the beginning, in addition to Arab leaders like the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Safadi, have said, “Hamas is an idea, and ideas do not die.” By June 2024, even the IDF spokesperson, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, seemed to come around to the belief that Hamas exists as an ideology and cannot be eradicated, saying, “This business of destroying Hamas, making Hamas disappear—it’s simply throwing sand in the eyes of the public... Hamas is an idea, Hamas is a [political] party. It’s rooted in the hearts of the people—anyone who thinks we can

eliminate Hamas is wrong” (Times of Israel Staff 2024). The adage often used in the Middle East is the idea that if you “cut off the head of the snake” or the leaders of the movement are killed, then more leaders will just rise up, having the opposite effect of what is desired. The movement will actually multiply and grow rather than be destroyed or diminished in its support or capacity. Regardless of whether or not the destruction of Hamas might have been achievable by May 2024, Netanyahu still did not waver from his commitment that their destruction remained his primary goal. By early June, the Prime Minister still insisted the destruction of Hamas was a critical part of the ceasefire deal, telling the parliament’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that in efforts to bring back hostages, “we have maintained the goals of the war, the first of them the destruction of Hamas” (Associated Press 2024).

By late June 2024, tens of thousands of Israelis had participated in protests throughout Israel against Netanyahu and his coalition (Peleg et al. 2024). For the duration of hostilities, many Israelis have been ardently critical of the government’s lack of focus on bringing the hostages home, one of the main critiques levied against the Netanyahu coalition during the now nine months of Israel’s war against Hamas (Rascoe 2024).

## **Where Were You on October 7, 2023?**

I was up late that Friday night. It was a Friday night for me in the Pacific Northwest of the United States when I started to hear the news that something was happening on the Gaza border. Saturday morning had already begun in Jerusalem. October 7, 2023. The world would never be the same again. For me and so many in Israel, Gaza, for so many around the world. We started to chat on our WhatsApp group with the few staff on our team based in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Were they safe? What was happening? No one knew. X (formerly Twitter) was one of the only places I could get news.

At first, it seemed like this was another “escalation between Israel and Hamas.” I had seen this before. I wasn’t directly involved in late 2008-2009. But by 2012, I was actively engaged, traveling back and forth to and from Israel and the oPt several times a year. In November 2012, I was leading a delegation in Israel and the oPt during the IDF’s “Operation Pillar of Defense” and Hamas’ “Operation Stones of Shale” from November 14-21. I had been leading the trip in Bethlehem when hostilities began. After evacuating the West Bank, the team slept on mattresses in Jerusalem, air sirens went off regularly, and the Tel Aviv Airport

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<sup>3</sup> Note: The Guardian published this quote on October 10, 2023, and it was corrected December 5, 2023 to say, “while balancing accuracy with the scope of damage, right now we are focused on what causes maximum damage” (McKernan and Kierszenbaum 2023).

remained closed during those days of war until the team could eventually be flown out safely.

A couple of years later, I worked diligently during the ~50 days of the 2014 war, Operation Protective Edge as Israel called it, which had such devastating effects, including the deaths of more than 500 children (UNWRA 2024). At that time I was working for World Vision, and the number of children killed during the 2014 war represented an appalling number of lives lost in a humanmade conflict. Jake Tapper interviewed me on CNN to talk about the devastation and how children had been “disproportionately affected” and always faced the worst consequences of war. I’ve worked through numerous other escalations and wars in the Middle East since 2010, but nothing prepared me for the aftermath of October 7 (Tapper 2024). By May 2024, the number of children killed in Gaza rose to more than 15,000—more than 20x the number that horrified us ten years ago. Children continue to pay the highest price (IMEMC News 2024).

That night, October 7, 2023, the fastest news came on X (formerly Twitter), and I lay there in bed in the early hours of the morning, waiting for news and the subsequent “tweets” to come through. Watching short clips, we learned that Hamas militants had taken over towns in Israel, not knowing yet what that meant. It was weeks and months before any comprehension of specifics became clear of what had transpired. In May 2024, I spent some time with survivors of the Hamas attacks. I visited some of the kibbutzim and the location of the October 7 massacres, including the Nova Music Festival site. I watched the almost hour-long compilation video of the attacks that was screened privately by the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., upon invitation to religious leaders. How can I call Israelis and Palestinians to make peace and reconciliation after such violence if I myself was not willing to witness such atrocities? I felt the very integrity of my ministry and efforts toward peace demanded that I not close my eyes but rather sit through every harrowing second.

I cannot imagine what the young people, the families, the parents, let alone the children, experienced as kibbutzim, the city of Sderot, and other Israeli towns became overrun by Hamas and other militants on that day (CBS News 2023). I have lost hours of sleep and have cried countless tears on behalf of the horror and terror imposed by those attacks. My heart is broken for the daily experiences of those held hostage from October 7 until the temporary agreement lasting from November 24 to December 1 that resulted in the release of 105 hostages, and also for the 250-plus days suffered for the very few hostages who may remain alive today. We have called daily for their release and will continue to advocate for their safe return home to their families.

News reported Israel was under attack. Sirens went off in Jerusalem. I asked different staff members if they had access to bomb shelters (if they were in Jerusalem). For staff persons located in the West Bank, we discussed evacuation plans and how they might be able to leave if things escalated further and departure became necessary. I stayed up through the night, preparing for a season of heightened and intense advocacy during war. However horrible I thought things might be, we never would have imagined how bad things would become over the next year-plus. Unfathomable.

The next day, October 7, in the United States, the CMEP board met. We put out our first statement, condemning all violence, especially that against civilians, calling for prayer, and calling on global leaders to address core causes of the conflict, including decades of military occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza and the more than 16 years long blockade of Gaza. The statement made explicit condemnations of the attack on Israel and called on Hamas to “stop all acts of aggression, the targeting of Israeli civilians, and the taking of civilian hostages” (CMEP 2024).

CMEP supports nonviolent engagement in peacebuilding and focuses on de-escalating violence and demilitarization. Professionals, far more experienced than I, suggest there is little debate in international law about the “right to resist” in terms of subjugated people living under military occupation and whether or not violence against the occupying power, not civilians, might be permissible. The October 7 attacks violated international law in that the majority of hostages were not combatants, and the majority of sites attacked were not military targets (Scheffer 2023). Attackers brutally killed women, children, and the elderly. As months progressed, more details about what happened that day were revealed. Still, many investigations are pending, including those conducted by Israel, the United States, the United Nations, and other international actors.

### **A Crisis Unlike Any in Modern Times**

For those within Israel, the penetration of Hamas militants was a violation of the agreement between the citizens and the State. The military had promised its civilians to keep them safe and protect them. On Monday, May 27, 2024, I visited what is known as Hostage Square in Tel Aviv and heard one of the volunteers there tell about how it took the military eight hours before reaching the victims of the Nova Site Massacre (Leatherby et al. 2023). This is unheard of in a state that has one of the most sophisticated “Red Alert” systems to warn its civilians of rocket attacks or other vulnerabilities. It ended up that the majority of the military that should have been defending the Gaza

enclave had been redeployed to other parts of Israel, such as central Israel or the West Bank. Thus, when hundreds of Israelis pled for the military to come and rescue them, there was no one on their way for several hours.

For us in the United States, within hours and indeed the first few days, it became clear that this attack and war between Israel and Hamas was different than those in the past. No one would have thought it was possible that Hamas could have, virtually without resistance, launched such a massive attack in so many geographic locations so successfully. The Israeli military did not regain control of the police station in Sderot, a city near the Gaza border that was penetrated by Hamas fighters, until the following morning (Margulies 2023). Over 350 members of the Sderot community were killed, and dozens were taken hostage (Bachner and Fabian 2023). It took 48 hours until Israel had wholly regained control of its territory and declared a “full siege” of Gaza (Both and Hill 2023).

### **Gaza Before October 2023**

The political situation and life's challenges before October 7 must be included as an essential backdrop in understanding this story. In 2006, Hamas was democratically elected, but Israel and the United States would not allow them to assume political power (Deeb 2023). Thus, they took power by force, having violent hostilities with Fatah members in Gaza, where 683 were killed in 2006, which resulted in Hamas becoming both the political authority and the military controlling body (B'Tselem 2006). Israel imposed a blockade by sea and by land beginning in June 2007 (UNICEF 2022).

Before October 2023, Gaza had been considered “de-developing” by international humanitarian actors. The enclave was already in a severe humanitarian crisis where more than 90-95 percent of the water was not potable (Tower 2024). Electricity supplied by Egypt and Israel often shut off or was unavailable because the main power plant was destroyed during the 2014 war and was never allowed to be repaired; thus, there was also an electricity crisis (Human Rights Watch 2014). In addition, food insecurity existed in Gaza long before October 7, and severe restrictions on the number of trucks and humanitarian aid allowed in caused health challenges even before the beginning of this devastating crisis (Lipkind 2024). It was documented in 2012 that Israel had calculated the number of calories needed per resident of Gaza to “maintain the basic fabric of life,” and that was what determined the number of trucks allowed per day (Reuters Staff 2012). According to humanitarian actors, the average amount of trucks carrying humanitarian aid, food, and assistance before October 7, 2023, averaged 500 trucks per day, primarily through the Karem Shalom or Erez crossings (United

Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs n.d.).

### **Christians Disappearing in Gaza**

Before the Hamas attacks and Israel's subsequent war on Gaza, there were between 800-1000 Christians in Gaza. This population has been gradually shrinking for several reasons over the past decades. The primary reason was almost always the “situation,” meaning the decades-long occupation of the Palestinian people and, most recently, the more than sixteen years blockade of the Gaza strip. A second reason for the decrease in the Christian population is because, in general, Muslims have more children than Christians. Thus, there is a natural demographic shift in the population. The third reason for the diminishing number of Christians includes emigration. Palestinian Christians receive international visas more readily than Arab Muslims and thus are able to leave more quickly than their Muslim neighbors. Many Christians in the occupied territories have left since October 2023. In May 2024, I heard of more than two dozen Christian families between Ramallah and Bethlehem who had already left and more who were considering leaving because of how desperate the political situation was on the ground.

In Gaza, there are two primary churches: the Holy Family Latin (Catholic Church) and St. Porphyrius Orthodox Church. Both churches very quickly became shelters for hundreds of refugees after the forced displacement where Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered the population to leave North Gaza, and more than 1.7 million people were living in internal displacement at the end of the year in the Gaza Strip (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2024).

After October 7, my team started to monitor the news and reports coming from Gaza, our Palestinian Christian partners and community, and our connections in Israel and the oPt. I started to create daily video summaries compiled from things I was reading, including Israeli and Arab news sources, readouts from the State Department and White House, reports from local NGOs, stories from peacebuilders, and especially first-hand accounts of people we know from all sides who are right in the middle of the situation. It was important for people to hear about the ways communities in Israel and Palestine were being affected. It was important for people in the United States to hear first-hand accounts from people in Gaza.

Often, I have texted daily with contacts in Gaza. On October 19, 2023, I received a WhatsApp message that said, “Air strike targets the Orthodox Church in Gaza. Casualties and injuries inside.” My contact is a dear friend who leads a large development agency responsible for distributing aid to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. He continued, “We have one staff member inside. He reported helping save

people from one part of the small compound. The number of injuries and casualties still unknown.”

Then, over the next few hours, the texts increasingly came in, stating “there are at least six martyrs” at the Orthodox Church. I think it’s important to note that “martyrs” can also be translated as “witnesses.” This word in Arabic means someone who died for a cause. It is an honoring term for those who have given their lives for something. Just as we in the Christian tradition would say that someone’s life was a “witness to Christ,” devout Muslims would use the term martyrs. In Jewish tradition, the idea might be that when someone passes, it is common to say, “May their memory be a blessing.” It is unfortunate that in the West, the term “martyr” has different associations with the word. After final reports, the death count at St. Porphyry church included 16 Palestinians, four of whom were children (Graham-Harrison 2023).

Many had died under the rubble. One of the things I was sent during those days was the coordinates of all the Christian churches and locations in Gaza. They had also been sent to the Israeli military at the beginning of the operations in early October. It was reported that the church was not a target, rather a militant’s home had been targeted next to the church, and the church’s annex was collateral damage. One of my closest friends in Bethlehem had two aunts who resided at that church, taking refuge. One of them was killed in the blast—not immediately, but she had suffered severe injuries and died from internal bleeding. The other aunt sustained severe injuries and had to have repair surgery on her hip without anesthetic. These are just two of the examples of the statistics one reads about related to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, with now more than 42 thousand killed and 100 thousand injured. There is fear that the longer the war goes on, the Christian community in Gaza might be eradicated entirely. In May 2024, in a meeting with the Foreign Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Her Excellency Varsen Aghabekian announced that three percent of the Christian population in Gaza had been killed as a result of the war (Umar 2024).

### **What is a Christian Response to the Crisis in Israel and Palestine?**

Above, I mentioned some of CMEP’s priorities. Another one of our priorities is the sustainability of the Christian community in the Middle East, and especially the Holy Land—Israel, the oPt, Egypt, Jordan, the very lands where Christianity first began. In large part, the Palestinian Christian community, based primarily, but not only in Bethlehem and in other Christian cities like Nazareth (in Israel) and small Christian villages throughout the West Bank, feels ignored and neglected by the Western Church. This was true long before the October War. And all the more after that, when leading

Christian periodicals such as *Christianity Today* published articles like Russel Moore’s editorial calling people to “Stand with Israel” if they wanted to stand on the side of God (2023). I wrote a response published by Religious News Service (RNS) entitled “God calls us to stand with people and not states” (Cannon 2023). These are just some of the battles that the Christian community in Israel and Palestine have been caught in the middle of because of the political crisis. Palestinian Christians are often not considered “Christian enough,” as the majority come from traditional Orthodox communities. In addition, if Arab Christians show any allegiances to their own people’s national aspiration for self-determination, they are viewed as essentially illegitimate by international conservative Christians, particularly evangelicals, many of whom have a theological allegiance to Israel and the Jewish people.

### **My Damascus Road Experience—An Introduction to the Nakba**

I first went to Israel in April 2009 on a spiritual pilgrimage. I had dreamt of traveling to the historic land of the Jewish people and seeing the holy places where Jesus had lived, breathed, and done ministry. On that trip, I had a sort of “Damascus Road” experience. I had come to “Israel” to learn about the history of the Bible and to be more connected to the Jewish people. I had grown up in a secular Zionist home (my family were not practicing Christians). I had read books like Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen* (1987) and Leon Uris’ *Exodus* (1958) as a backdrop to my expectations.

When I crossed the Allenby Bridge over the Jordan River into the West Bank, the border guard asked me: “Are you going to the West Bank?” I wasn’t sure what to say. “No,” I said hesitantly. Little did I know that I was standing in the West Bank. My first book, *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World* (2009), was about what the Bible says about global justice issues and was just about to be published. Throughout those few days, I felt the Holy Spirit provoking my heart. I saw signs that said “Free Palestine,” and, honestly, I thought Palestine was just a map in the back of my Bible.

Then we had a visit and lecture by Bishara Awad, the founder and then-President of Bethlehem Bible College, who told his family story as a Palestinian Christian. His father was killed by a sniper in 1948, and his entire family became refugees. If you ever visit our offices at CMEP in Washington, DC, above my desk there is a picture of me at that moment. You can still see the tears in my eyes—I wept for most of that talk. As tears streamed down my face, my heart broke as I learned the story of what Palestinians call the *Nakba* (The Great Catastrophe) of 1948, where more than three-quarters of a million Palestinians were forced out

of their homes or fled and became permanently displaced refugees.

I say this was a “Damascus Road” experience because I felt like the Apostle Paul, who, when traveling on the road to Damascus, had scales “[fall] from his eyes” (Acts 9:18). If we want to have a Christian response to the crisis in Israel/Palestine, or anywhere in the world, we must pray and ask God to open our eyes to the history and current realities of oppression and injustice.

### **Give Witness to Suffering and Oppression**

I believe one of the global church's unique roles is to witness suffering and oppression. Again, here I am referring specifically to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, but this principle applies to anywhere in the world. This has been one of the primary ways I have felt called by God to engage with Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East and the United States over the past eight months.

The African American theologian Howard Thurman wrote about spiritual liberation and said, “It is a strange freedom...to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds...” (as cited in Fluker and Tumber 1998, viii). Palestinian Christians, and Palestinians in general, have not felt “seen” for most of their modern history. By listening to their stories and, when appropriate, elevating their voices, we “give witness” and provide evidence that they are not ignored. Listening and seeing someone offers the opportunity to come alongside them in solidarity and validate that they are seen and not ignored. Thurman said that as a black man in the United States in the 1930s, being “unseen” was one of the most significant forms of oppression, and thus, liberation could be experienced when someone “saw him” and called him by his name. What might it look like for us to do that today, not only for Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters, but for Israeli siblings as well?

In South Africa, the Zulu word for saying hello in isiZulu, one of the most popular languages spoken in South Africa, is “Sawubona” (singular), which, when literally translated, means, “I see you.”<sup>4</sup> If nothing else, Christians around the world have the opportunity to say to those who are suffering, “We see you.” And to acknowledge that we see the suffering, pain, and loss of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Since October 7, Israelis and Palestinians, because of each person’s collective trauma, have less and less capacity to have empathy for one another. I believe entering into the pain and suffering of multiple experiences is one of the roles Christians can play at this critical moment.

I have sought to give witness to the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza by daily being in touch and telling the stories we hear from mothers and those who are suffering the consequences of daily bombings, inadequate water, and dwindling food supplies. Mothers in Gaza have taken to writing their children’s ID numbers on their limbs so that they might be able to be identified if they are killed in a bombing and their bodies are found underneath the rubble (Humaid and Ibrahim 2023). We must let parents in Gaza know that we hear their cries and see their suffering.

I also have sought to spend time with Jewish friends who know or have lost loved ones on October 7. There is no equivalency in pain and suffering. One horror does not negate another horror. I have felt it is essential for the integrity of Christian witness to listen to the stories of survivors of October 7 and to also give witness to their experiences. But seeing and witnessing suffering and oppression should just be the beginning of our journey.

### **Break Our Hearts, Increase Our Capacity to Love**

Bob Pierce, World Vision’s founder, used to often pray, “Break my heart for the things that break the heart of God” (World Vision n.d.). As we hear stories from those who have often lost dozens of family members in Gaza, and as the death toll increases day after day, it is hard to fully understand what is actually happening. Sometimes, statistics can just become numbers, and our hearts are hardened.

Often, these days, I do not know where to begin. I feel immobilized by grief. At the time of this writing, I feel immobilized by the fact that the bombing and war on Gaza has been going on for more than 380 days. It seems day by day, we continue to hear about bombs dropping and children dying. Global efforts that mobilize the world have not yet made a significant difference. For every mother who has just lost their child, we have failed. The church has failed. These are the moments when we should most pray, “Break our hearts for the things that break the heart of God.”

I quickly became overwhelmed as I continued praying that prayer throughout October (more than a year ago). My heart just is not big enough. There is too much brokenness, and the horrors are too horrific. My heart cannot contain the horrors we hear each and every day. A pregnant woman dies, and her child is delivered into the world after her death, only to become an orphan surrounded by rubble, bombing, and violence, with no end in sight (Sanchez 2024).

What kind of world do we live in such that we allow this to go on for one more day, let alone another week,

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<sup>4</sup>When greeting more than one person, the plural “Sanibonani” is used.

let alone another month, let alone an entire year, more? What kind of world do we live in that sweet and beautiful little Hind, the six-year-old Palestinian girl who was abandoned in her family's car in North Gaza, surrounded by her dead relatives for hours, must plead with rescue workers to come and save her (Democracy Now! 2024). How does the entire world not rush in and demand that she, as a child of God, be protected, and saved? How does the world hear the stories about the hostage attacks and not unilaterally demand their release and return home to their families safely?

I have often felt my heart is not big enough to carry the brokenness I have witnessed. Thus, I have also begun to pray, "God expand the capacity of my heart." If we pray those two things, "break our hearts for the things that break God's heart" and "expand the capacity of our hearts," I believe God will hear and honor our prayers. Otherwise, the devastation that has happened over the past decades, the death and violence of October 7, the destruction and massive killings in Gaza, honestly, it is too much for any human to bear. It is just too much.

These realities are too much to hear about, let alone live through. So, we must ask God to break our hearts for the things that break God's heart and expand our hearts so that we can carry more pain. But I'll be honest: God has been expanding my heart for both Palestinian and Israeli people alike. I'm not falsely equivocating. We must address systemic injustice and differentials of power. I am not ignoring the gross and distorted power differentials between Israelis and Palestinians who have been living under military occupation for decades. I am also not ignoring that the most critical thing at this moment is that the mass killings in Gaza must be brought to an immediate end, and hostages must be returned home.

The prayer asking God to expand our hearts returns us to the heart of the Gospel message that all we do would be compelled by love. We are told in Matthew 22:36-40 that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus also issues the profound challenge that we must also "love our enemies" in Matthew 5:44. As we seek peace, an end to all violence, justice, and liberation for Palestinians and all people, might the core motivation be that of love as modeled and commanded by Jesus in the Scriptures.

## **Abhor what is Evil, Cling to What is Good**

What does it mean to pursue peace and seek justice in the Middle East during these moments? Romans 12 has been a guiding passage for me the past several months. I began reflecting on the chapter throughout Lent. Sometimes, when the days seem particularly long or I'm not quite sure what direction to take, Romans 12:9 provides moral clarity and direction: "Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good." Those simple words have been so helpful over the past weeks and months.

Having just finished up weeks in the Middle East and more than a month of travel domestically and internationally, I know that there are thousands of opinions about what pursuing justice looks like. And there is so much anger, much of which I understand—I have never been angrier. And there is so much pain. And all of that intensity of rage, pain, and trauma comes out and is often directed at those who are in the line of fire. Peacemakers tend to be caught in the middle and sometimes pay the highest price. Innocents tend to be in the line of fire.

In some ways, "Abhor what is evil..." can be the clearest of commandments. Killing is evil. Murder is evil. The October 7 attacks were evil. Decades of occupation and military control over an entire people group are evil. Rape and the violation of a woman's body is evil.<sup>5</sup> When things are evil, it can feel easy to hate them—to abhor them. But then we must remember Jesus' commandment during His sermon on the mount, "In your anger do not sin." Personally, I would much rather stay angry. It would be a lot easier! Rather than allow my anger to be transformed into something constructive—an emotion, energy, or motivation that can be used for good. Such transformation requires arduous work and a lot of grace from others and God. I believe one of the unique roles the church and Christian agencies can play is to provide constructive processes for the legitimate anger that is experienced in response to evil to be transformed into energy and power invested toward positive solutions.

Sometimes, the instruction to "cling to what is good" can be particularly hard during such difficult times. When people are dying every day, I feel guilty if I experience any joy (or self-care, for that matter). These verses permitted me to "cling to joy" when I witness it or experience it in the community. One of the most beautiful things I've seen is videos from Gaza

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<sup>5</sup> There is clear evidence that incidents of rape and sexual violence occurred during the attacks on October 7, 2023. The UN Commission of Inquiry investigation "documented cases indicative of sexual violence perpetrated against women and men in and around the Nova festival site, as well as the Nahal Oz military outpost and several kibbutzim, including Kfar Aza, Re'im and Nir Oz," and "found indications that members of the military wing of Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups committed gender-based violence (GBV) in several locations in southern Israel on 7 October" (United Nations Human Rights Council 2024).

where people come together and share meals—even if the meal is just a salty soup of brackish water and grass with limited sustenance. Or watch the videos of Palestinians in Gaza dancing the traditional Palestinian dance, the *Dabka*—clinging to joy and not allowing their spirits to be broken. These scenes are inspiring to witness.

During my visit to hostage square, I met with members of different kibbutzim. I learned that almost all of the members (sometimes current and past) of the different communities will often come together to share Shabbat meals at the square. The sense of community and support was a beautiful thing to witness. I left their sharing thinking, “cling to what is good”—the community that comes alongside one another to lift one another in the most challenging times reflects the goodness of God.

### **Seek Justice, Pursue Peace**

Most of my work at CMEP takes place within the context of pursuing human rights and equality for all people within the Middle East. What does it mean to seek justice and pursue peace? How do we pursue collective liberation amid such death and violence? As it relates to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, Palestinians often say, “No peace without justice.” Meaning there shouldn’t be a peace agreement when the status quo and the military occupation continue and when daily there are human rights abuses and ongoing violations of the basic dignities of the Palestinian people. I fundamentally believe the military occupation of the Palestinian people must be brought to an end. The situation in the oPt not only causes daily humiliations and continual dehumanization of Palestinian people, but I also believe the occupation is one of the most significant security threats to Jews living in Israel. The 2012 documentary *The Gatekeepers* features former leaders of Israel’s security establishment who made the same argument (*The Gatekeepers* 2013).

For justice to be accomplished, it will not be absolute but rather proximate justice. Dr. Syd Hielema of Redeemer University Colleges says, “Proximate justice recognizes that perfection is not an option, and seeking the kingdom of God is not just an option but our deepest calling” (Hielema 2013, 13). This means that perfect and absolute justice cannot be obtained but can also be cruel and punishing to those on the other side. Every oppressed group, unless through the pursuit of some type of process of collective liberation, remains at risk of also becoming abusive and guilty of the very same crimes they once accused their oppressors of having perpetrated.

Proximate justice provides a pathway toward collective liberation. Practical theologian Peter Heltzel of Union Theological Seminary argued that Reinhold

Niebuhr, American philosopher and public intellectual, believes that “pragmatic realism argues for the implementation of proximate forms of justice” (Heltzel 2009). For example, it is an unrealistic expectation to expect that more than five million Palestinian refugees around the world will ever fully receive the right to return and be awarded back the lands confiscated from their families in 1948. But, I hope, through negotiated settlements among political leaders, religious actors, and civil society, there might be a solution that would allow for the injustices of history to at least be acknowledged, if not compensated, and somehow proximate justice might be achieved. Today, Palestinians in Gaza would benefit from steps toward proximate justice of being allowed to live daily without being bombed while continuing in the quest for an end to decades of military occupation. In contrast, the right to return seems a far and distant cry from the immediate and most acute injustices of the current moment.

Justice does demand that systems that abuse power differentials and control must be dismantled, such as the military control by the Israeli army in the West Bank. Occupation manifests differently in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. Specifically in the West Bank, Palestinian residents do not have the fundamental rights afforded to them by the protections of civil law. Many international human rights groups, including Amnesty International, identify what is happening in the West Bank as apartheid because of the two different legal systems that apply to residents living there. Israeli citizens living in West Bank settlements receive protections afforded by Israeli civil law, whereas Palestinians live under military control (Amnesty International n.d.). For example, an Israeli child who throws a stone has civil rights and goes to an Israeli civil court with rights for a lawyer, their parents to be present, and many other protections. A Palestinian child who throws a stone on that same geographical territory receives no civil rights or protections and instead will be arrested and prosecuted by the Israeli military courts according to military law (Baumgarten-Sharon 2011).

The immediate goal of peace must include ending all violence and that all combatant parties agree to a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire. This applies to Hamas and the Israeli military in Gaza and also to Hezbollah and the Israeli army on the southern border of Lebanon and the northern border of Israel. There are many different types of peace, including negotiated settlements and political peace. But many Israelis and Palestinians have increasingly come to realize that peace must move beyond just a lack of violence and a negotiated agreement.

Historically, the mechanism by which the State of Israel provides “peace” for its people has been by

military deterrence (Steinberg 2011). After Gaza lived under a military blockade for more than 16 years, the atrocities of October 7 happened, and the Israeli military failed to protect the Israeli public. Most Israelis see this as a failure of the state to live up to its promise (Steinberg 2023). If peace and security cannot be accomplished by military might, violence, physical domination, and military control, what other options exist?

### **Collective Liberation**

After spending the day at a kibbutz along the Gaza border in May 2024, the woman who hosted us began to say goodbye. In her closing comments, she shared very vulnerably how she has little affection or “like” for the Palestinian people of Gaza. As she spoke, we were standing next to rows of homes where the youth of the kibbutz had lived. Each of the small apartments had been almost completely destroyed or bombed out by grenades or bullet holes. Many of the residents had been killed or taken hostage. She did not speak of hatred. She said, almost struggling for words, “I do not like them very much, but I know what we have tried has not worked. And what they have tried has not worked. If we ever want to have peace, they will have to have peace. I know our futures are completely tied to one another.”

Mother Teresa said something similar: “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to one another” (Catholic Online n.d.). The Palestinian struggle for liberation and an end to occupation is not only a struggle for their own self-determination. Instead, as Nelson Mandela said, “We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians” (as cited in Davis 2016, 53). Collective liberation. The Palestinian situation is not just an issue for those who care about Palestinians and the Middle East. What is happening in Palestine is an issue that affects the future of the world—and the very soul of the church is at stake. Is the church going to bury its head and ignore what is happening in Gaza? Or will the church “choose sides” and make the situation more binary than it already is by causing more division and strife? Or is the church going to “see” and witness the stories of all the people in the land while calling and pursuing justice, freedom, self-determination, human rights, and equality for all people?

Pursuing peace will be the most demanding work ever done by individuals and communities. It requires searching deep within us to see what needs to be rooted out and transformed more into the image of God. What hatred or prejudices reside deep within our hearts that must be transformed? Such integrity and personal honesty take work. And I promise you, if you enter the work of pursuing peace, there will be critiques and opposition from all sides.

Please do not misunderstand; I am not talking about compromising on advocating for human rights and justice. I am discussing a multi-narrative approach that rejects the overly simplistic oppressor and oppression narrative as a universally true paradigm. From the perspective of international law, the metanarrative at this moment requires that the State of Israel face its legal obligations and bring an end to the illegal occupation of the Palestinian people that has existed since 1967. Israel not only has legal obligations according to international law, but inequalities and the privileges afforded to Jewish citizens of the state of Israel over Palestinians of all statuses, including citizens of Israel, Jerusalemites, and others in the occupied Palestinian territories, must be addressed. Similarly, militant groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and others must be held accountable for the atrocities they have committed.

Collective liberation means no one will be free until we are all free. We have much to learn from Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement. One of the powerful opportunities provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was the concept and idea that the oppressed are not liberated until the oppressor is also free. This is an example of collective liberation. The Commission was founded with the goal of telling the truth about past human rights violations, often in the public sphere, as a way to promote understanding. As the commission’s final report states,

The road to reconciliation...implies wide-ranging structural and institutional transformation and the healing of broken human relationships. It demands guarantees that the past will not be repeated. It requires restitution and the restoration of our humanity—as individuals, as communities, and as a nation... The Commission’s...purpose in attempting to uncover the past had nothing to do with vengeance; it had to do, instead, with helping victims to become more visible and more valuable citizens through the public recognition and official acknowledgment of their experiences... By bringing the darker side of the past to the fore, those responsible for human rights violations could also be held accountable for their actions. In the process, they were given the opportunity to acknowledge their responsibility to contribute to the creation of a new South African society (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa 1998, 110).

Our collective liberation is inextricably linked to the freedom of one another.

## Hard and Sacrificial Work

*“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship”* (Romans 12:1, New International Version [NIV]).

This is the most challenging work I’ve ever done. And I am not talking about the “external work,” working 380+ days in a row, the hours coordinating and collaborating, or the long hours, the extensive travel to more cities than I can count around the world, or the being away from home for 7-8+ weeks at a time. All of that is true. And it’s nothing compared to what so many others have lost and sacrificed. All of those things are hard, but that’s not the tough part. The most challenging part is being willing to see and witness the complex and multifaceted realities of pain, suffering, and trauma—to see clearly and give witness while not compromising on advocating for justice, human rights, and equality for all people in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. The hardest part is seeing the ugliness within that also needs to change and be transformed.

Palestinians have suffered under the oppression of occupation, unseen, for far too long. The erasure of Palestinian history and culture from the 1948 Nakba to today’s ethnic cleansing in Gaza includes decades of untold, ignored, buried, and intentionally delegitimized stories. Why is it so hard for people to see the Palestinian people and to hear their history? For Palestinians, the displacement of the 1948 Nakba, which included the death of about 15 thousand people, has continued through today in Gaza with the displacement of more than 1.7 million people, the majority of the population, and a death toll many times the magnitude of that in 1948.

In addition to that traumatic history, often Palestinian leadership has engaged in mechanisms of liberation that included violent resistance against civilians. Consider the suicide bombings during the second intifada, the hijackings of airplanes during the 1970s and 1980s, and the assassinations of the Israeli Olympic team at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Ignoring this history does no one any favors. This history must also be acknowledged and addressed.

At CMEP, we have been calling daily for an end to the military campaigns on Gaza because of the moral argument that so many civilians are being killed, including, as of May 2024, more than 15,000 children (MEMC News 2024). But if the moral argument can’t be won, a pragmatic argument must be made. Today, in late October 2024, every day that the bombing of Gaza continues, the State of Israel becomes increasingly isolated from countries around the world opposing its war against Hamas, which caused utter destruction and

devastation in Gaza. The result of Israel’s military campaign has been nothing less than a slaughter of civilian populations in various parts of Gaza. Antisemitism has been on the rise, and legitimate threats to Jewish people around the world have increased manifold since October 7 (AntiDefamation League 2024). In our advocacy for Palestinian human rights and justice, there must also be a stalwart commitment to stand up against antisemitism and any forms of hatred or bigotry.

The church should lead the way in sacrificial ministry, standing in the gap to advocate on behalf of Palestinians seeking justice, liberation, and self-determination and Israelis seeking security and peace.

## The Lord Promises to Be Faithful

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain* (1 Corinthians 15:58, NIV).

While we diligently work to end war, violence, and killing, we know that the world is not ours to save. We must do all that we can. We must work diligently and sacrificially. We must seek to root out everything within us that contains prejudices, hatred, or strife. We will remain steadfast and “give ourselves fully,” as the verses in 1 Corinthians discuss. Might God expand our hearts and the capacity of our hearts to both grieve and love and give witness to the stories we encounter and observe. For me, I hope my advocacy and solidarity and witnessing of the Palestinian cause is strengthened by the ability to be able to also give witness when Israelis and others experience grief or pain and trauma. That is my prayer. And the hope Christians profess is this, that he who promised is faithful. 2 Thessalonians 3 tells us, “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one” (3:3). We will maintain our confidence in God and hold onto hope, even amid war, death, and destruction (3:4). All the time asking that God might direct our hearts increasingly into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance” (3:5). May we pursue collective liberation together so that one day all might be free.

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