

**Middle East Mosaic (2): Seeking Understanding**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall and Rabbi Alan Lettovsky**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**11 June 2006**  
**Text: Psalm 133**

LOUISE: A priest, a Presbyterian minister, and a rabbi were playing poker when the place got raided. The policeman first asked the priest, "Father Murphy, were you gambling?" And Father Murphy answers immediately: "No, sir!" The policeman asks the Presbyterian, "Rev. Witherspoon, were you gambling?" And Rev. Witherspoon answers decently and in order: "No, sir!" The policeman is a little exasperated as he puts the question to the rabbi: "Rabbi Goldman, were *you* gambling?" And the rabbi shrugs his shoulders and responds, "With whom?"

Sometimes interfaith relations go the way of this story. We gamble on getting along, but then when challenged, we disavow all knowledge of each other. It becomes all too easy to pull back and stick to the texts, the traditions, the perspectives of our own religion. When the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to consider selective, phased divestment from multinational companies whose products or services are used by Israel in ways deemed to contribute to Palestinian oppression, the reaction from the Jewish community was understandably shocked and deeply hurt. Fortunately, here in Cleveland neither the Jewish nor the Christian communities were content to simply accept this breach in our relationship. For the past two years, Presbyterians and Jews have been holding regular dialog about this action and more broadly, on peacemaking efforts in Israel/Palestine. Our conversations have been rich, sometimes painful as we had to confront realities we'd rather ignore, always respectful, and generated not only new understandings but new friendships as well. The Jewish Community Federation and the Presbytery of the Western Reserve co-sponsored the Joint Jewish/Christian clergy mission to Israel for the purpose of listening to and conversing with persons "on the ground": government officials, religious leaders, professors and academicians, teachers, social workers, and parents, Jewish and Palestinians, Christians, Jews and Muslims. The subtitle of our trip—Seeking Understanding—suggests that the way to peace is an on-going, intentionally chosen process of getting to know each other, encountering and learning from people on all sides of the conflict. This kind of process, I am convinced, can lead to transformation. Before our February visit, the group met for a series of orientation sessions and at the very first one, I happened to be seated next to a rabbi who warmly introduced himself and oh-so-gently corrected my rendition of the assignment we were given—to draw, freehand, and without consulting a

map, the State of Israel---in which I had reversed the location of the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. He became the elder statesman on the trip—and that’s not so much a reference to his age as it is to the wisdom he shared through stories and anecdotes, and teachings and insight. Though he denies it, I’ll never believe that he doesn’t know everyone in Israel, because wherever we went, people would introduce themselves and tell of some connection. So it is my great privilege and pleasure to introduce Rabbi Alan Lettovsky, and to offer today’s sermon in dialogue format with him. Alan, we are grateful and humbled by your presence, and thank you for being here today. What was your interest in the trip, and why --when you travel to Israel regularly-- did you make a point to participate in this one?

[ALAN]

LOUISE: Yesterday’s NY Times had a front-page photograph that hurt to look at—an anguished woman wailing with all her heart over the bodies of seven people—five of them members of a family---killed by an air strike. The seven enjoying a picnic at a beach were Palestinian civilians, and the Israeli government quickly responded that the missile had been misfired. Hamas, the ruling Palestinian political party, declared that it would resume attacks on Israel. And so it goes, a seemingly endless circle of violence and retaliation. This time it was Palestinians who were killed, but it could just have easily been Israelis. Suicide bombings are far too common. Hamas not only has yet to recognize Israel’s right to statehood, it has committed itself to Israel’s destruction.

This latest incident reflects the essential volatility of the regional political landscape. There were reports late last week of the establishment of a new Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas has announced a July 31<sup>st</sup> referendum on a political program and two-state solution with Israel that Hamas opposes, with the hope that the West will resume aid to the Palestinian Authority – aid it has withheld since Hamas came to power. These developments offer further testimony to the impasse in the roadmap to peace...and what too often feels like contradicting realities: Israeli security v. Palestinian rights. Alan, how do you read things?

[ALAN]

LOUISE: The image of the security barrier or wall is one of the dominant images for me. On the one hand, a wall is a symbol of protection, the “mighty fortress” that provides security and enables those within the walls to live without fear. “Good fences make good neighbors,” American poet Robert Frost famously wrote. And yet in the same poem he notes,

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” Walls mark boundaries; prevent the going out and the coming in that characterizes a healthy organism. The security barrier in Israel is acknowledged by all as less than desirable; and yet it is seen by many Israelis as a necessity born of violence and radical insecurity.

The Biblical vision of peace is a poignant reminder of the distance still to travel before this vision becomes reality. The morning scripture lesson is a Psalm celebrating the wonder of an extended family living together in harmony and unity. It’s not too hard to imagine this vision rooted in Israel’s history, and not too much of a stretch to see it as a worthy goal not only for Israel, not simply in the Middle East, but wherever families are divided and broken, which is to say, it can be a word to the whole human family. [PSALM 133]

[ALAN]

LOUISE: Many biblical scholars believe the oldest extant manuscript of the Bible is a fragment of Exodus 15, following the glorious deliverance of God’s people from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea. We read it every year at the Easter Vigil as we celebrate God’s saving acts throughout human history. *Then the prophet Miriam...took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.* [EXODUS 15:20-21] A rabbi friend in Michigan told me there is a midrash [commentary] of this text that has the angels rejoicing as the sounds of the celebratory song reach them. “Isn’t it wonderful—a miracle!” they exclaim to one another. But then they notice one heavenly being who is not rejoicing; who is in fact weeping. When they inquire, he replies, “The death of even one of these, God’s children, makes sad the heart of God.” Just as religion has been the cause of so much division in the human family, so at its best it holds out the best hope for reconciliation and peace in that family. On our visit we saw some of both. We worshiped together on Sunday at an Anglican Church of Jerusalem, chosen because their website indicated “open communion”—that all who wished to receive the bread and the cup would be welcome at the table. After a week of rich learning and worship in primarily Jewish settings, we Christians were eager to share our faith tradition with our friends. Our high hopes were quickly dashed however. The priest’s sermon included a number of blatant references to the spiritual superiority of Christianity; prayers of intercession were offered for the salvation of the Jews; and the final hymn – remember, we were in the destination city of the Crusades—was “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

A most telling experience for me came on our last day in Israel. While some were finishing shopping in the Old City, a few of us went to say prayers at the Western Wall. I had heard of the custom of writing intercessions on tiny slips of paper and placing them in between the stones, and had prepared my list. I was unprepared for the powerful experience of standing among hundreds of women facing the wall, many of whom were chanting their prayers. Slowly I worked my way through the crowd to get close enough to place my piece of paper. When I reached out I thought it was wedged in well enough, but as soon as I took my hand away, the folded paper fell to the ground. I was disappointed because there was nothing I could do. But then I saw a woman in front of me wordlessly bend down, and in a graceful gesture scoop up my fallen prayers and secured them in the wall. For me her gesture became a symbol of interfaith relations that offer the hope of peace. Sometimes our efforts, no matter how well-intentioned, fall short. We need one another – one another's perspectives, cooperation, wisdom, caring. Listen to each other. Peace will become possible, said one of our Palestinian speakers, when all know each other the way each wants to be known, not the way each side THINKS they know the others.

[ALAN]

LOUISE: This week the General Assembly of our Church will meet for its biannual meeting. Two years have passed since the divestment overtures...and hundreds of hours of dialogue and discussion and debate. Perhaps the value of those overtures ultimately will come from the strengthened interfaith understanding they began. On the agenda in Birmingham will be a number of overtures; some calling for a re-commitment to divestment, but many others calling the church instead to a strategy of INVESTMENT instead. While in Israel, we asked everyone – Palestinians and Israelis alike—about the effectiveness of divestment to influence social and political change. The response was nearly unanimous: INVESTMENT in companies doing business with the Palestinian Authority, in organizations that provide economic assistance, and in peacemaking initiatives, will do far more to promote justice and advance the cause of peace. Our presbytery has sent one such overture: *In continuity with many past resolutions of prior General Assemblies, this overture re-affirms that Palestinians have a right to freedom...and self-governance within their own state and further that such a state must be established within safe, just and secure borders and be economically viable. LIKEWISE, this overture re-affirms that Israelis have a right to safe and secure borders. Israel not only has a right to exist but also has a right to protect its citizens against terrorism and acts of violence that threaten their security. Since a large majority of Israelis and Palestinians prefer peace with their neighbors, rather than violence and war, and are*

*ready to make sacrifices to achieve it, the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly should instruct the Church to promote a peacemaking strategy of selective INVESTMENT of time, talent, and financial resources...that support a just and lasting peace in the region.* I'm grateful for the strong Christian/Jewish relationships fostered locally through the Jewish Community Federation and the American Jewish Committee, and for the strong interfaith witness of InterAct Cleveland, the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope, and our presbytery. Someone asked me upon my return what difference our visit made. To me it's not too little to simply say that this experience helped us in the never-ending search for understanding. One final story from the rabbinic tradition. Two disputing brothers went to their rabbi to see if he would judge the worth of their competing claims. One brother put forth his case, and the rabbi responded, "You're right." The other brother then made his case, and the rabbi responded, "You're right." The rabbi's wife, overhearing the conversation then scoffed, "He's right and he's right. How can they both be right?" To which the rabbi responded, "And you're right." The truth so often lies somewhere in between. May God grant us the grace of humility, never to cease from pursuit of truth; but never to imagine we hold exclusive claim to it.

[ALAN]

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