

What We've Learned from Each Other:

A Report on a Jewish-Protestant Conversation About the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

I. Preface

Given the complexity of the Middle East situation, understanding depends more than ever on conversation. More than four years of violence in the Middle East have been accompanied by an eruption of antisemitic rhetoric and behavior, which has created a real sense of siege among the Jewish people. In the United States, there have been a variety of governmental, religious, and political responses to the Middle East conflict. Among the American responses, one that especially concerns the Jewish community has come from some of the mainline Protestant Churches. Working from their deep commitment to social justice, such leaders have expressed their religious sense of justice on behalf of the Palestinians. Observing the ways this has been expressed through programming at many Protestant Churches and in statements issued by various denominations, many in the American Jewish community have come to regard some mainline Protestant Churches, their spokespersons, and their publications as biased against Israel. Indeed the relations between the two communities are strained. This is a problem. In the past, the American Jewish community and the mainline Protestant Churches have enjoyed a common sense of purpose and collaboration about a number of basic social justice issues within American society, and the strained relations are thus especially troubling.

To address this circumstance, a small group of Jews and mainline Protestants came together nearly three years ago under the auspices of the Dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. Since then, the group has met many times. It has discussed this topic, as well as a number of scholarly and philosophical issues, such as the origins of Zionist thought, the different ways in which each faith community reads and uses biblical texts, and the place of the Land both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

All involved in these conversations honor the fundamental distinction between criticism of the political practices of the government of Israel and the rejection of the right of Israel to exist. Yet the Jewish colleagues who welcome the principle worry that in practice the criticism, most acutely on the Palestinian question, can itself quickly compromise this distinction. Jewish colleagues hear some criticism as echoing a denial of Israel's right to exist. For their part, the Protestant colleagues worry that any political criticism of Israeli policy immediately becomes an audit on the critic's support of Israel's right to exist.

Based on its sense that better understandings had been achieved, this group began to draft a statement of common principles, not about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but about the way in which American Jews and Protestants ought to be talking about this, with each other and with others. Since we began these conversations, tensions between mainline Protestant churches and the Jewish community have increased significantly. At the same time, hopes for peace between Israelis and Palestinians have been re-awakened. Both of these circumstances make this work all the more imperative.

We hope that these principles will contribute to the necessary and important conversation among Jews and Protestants in the United States, and that the statement will inspire further conversation in the same spirit.

II. Common Principles

1. Both parties to our talks recognize the pain of all peoples in the Middle East. As professing Jews and Christians, we must give expression to all who are suffering. Common to our traditions is the inextricable link between love of God and love of fellow human beings, all of whom are created in the image of God.
2. It is in the best traditions of Judaism and Christianity, as set forth both in the Torah and the New Testament, to give voice to all who are suffering. The Jewish partners to this conversation respect the religious commitment of mainline Protestants to give voice to the suffering of the Palestinian people.
3. The government of the State of Israel, like all other governments, is the creation of human beings, who, as they practice democracy, make mistakes. It is thus open to criticism. The criticisms of any one policy or practice of the government of Israel is not necessarily antisemitic.
4. Though not all criticism of Israel is antisemitic, many expressions of anti-Israel opinion in today's world do contain antisemitic components. It is therefore good to know the borders of appropriate criticism given the particular climate in the world today, which has witnessed a significant increase in antisemitic behavior and rhetoric. Those who criticize Israeli policies should take care to ensure that such criticism not threaten Judaism, the Jewish people, or the legitimacy of the State of Israel.
5. To distinguish between bias and legitimate criticism, one should note the following historic tendencies in discussions of the Jewish people and Judaism, which must be avoided when discussing Israel:
 - i. Critiques that partake of classic Christian medieval anti-Jewish motifs and stereotypes;
 - ii. Critiques of Israel that partake of 19th and early 20th century secular antisemitic notions concerning the Jewish people, e.g. those that fantasize about Jewish international conspiracies effected through control of banking and/or the media (as reflected in such publications as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion);
6. There are some instances in which criticism of Israel for certain practices ignores similar practices by others. To Jewish colleagues this creates the specter of a double standard. Similarly, the failure to acknowledge instances in which the State of Israel engages in peace making, takes risks with the very lives of its citizens for the sake of peace, and makes concessions for the sake of peace, is experienced by Jews as bias and as a double standard.
7. Protestant participants acknowledge that Israel is held to a higher standard. Protestants say that they hold Israel to the same standards that they believe Americans ought to hold themselves. Protestant participants in the dialogue rejoice in the establishment of Israel as a democratic polity with universal suffrage, a free press, and an independent judiciary. They are concerned that their appreciation for Israel is often not understood by the American Jewish community, and that they are sometimes accused of holding a double standard for criticizing Israel for something

- for which they do not criticize Israel's neighbors. In their mind, by holding Israel to a higher standard than the nation-states that do not value democracy and human rights, they are demonstrating their respect and gratitude for Israel's alliance, democracy, and concern for human rights, and their higher hope for Israel.
8. The Christian participants respect the Jewish self-understanding, in which Jewishness is an indivisible amalgam of faith, Torah, history, land, and peoplehood. As such, they celebrate the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and regard as an act of justice the establishment of a Jewish state after two thousand years of Jewish exile, wandering, and homelessness.
 9. It is important for mainline Protestants to understand that the majority of Jewish people have never attributed theological or religious significance to Zionism or, to its successful outcome, the State of Israel. This is not only true for those Jews who have a secular outlook on life and human affairs. It is also true for many of the faithful. The classic Jewish faith position says that only a biblical prophet can know God's intent for a given event in history and that prophecy ceased in the sixth century B.C.E. Therefore, one cannot know with biblical certitude God's intent regarding any contemporary event. Many Christians may not recognize this because a small minority in Israel that does view the establishment of the State in theological categories gains a great deal of media attention.
 10. Important differences in the rendering of Protestant Christianity have emerged in the United States between mainline Protestants and certain groups of Evangelicals. These two groups sometimes disagree about the theological meaning of the establishment of the State of Israel. While their ongoing conversation is important to them, the participants in our dialogue have concluded that it should be conducted in a way that ensures that the State of Israel and the Jewish people do not bear the burden of the conflict over these Protestant differences.
 11. In general, Christian conversations about Israel, the Covenant, and the relations of Jews and Christians are complex. When the State of Israel becomes the locus through which Christians meet and debate their theological differences, Jews experience negative consequences for Israel. In internal Christian debates, Israel, Judaism, and the Jewish people come out losing in the eyes of one or the other Christian group. Jews and Israelis cannot be understood in exclusively Christian terms. Nor are Jews willing to be put at odds with one or the other Christian group for failing to meet the test of its faith affirmation.
 12. Jewish and Christian traditions are deeply intertwined. We share, and indeed cherish, many of the same texts. However, arguments based on citations from the Bible usually lead to a flurry of proof-texts that do not encourage conversation. Arguments based on "master narratives," whether in the service of Christian triumphalism or Jewish steadfastness, do not encourage conversation. A master narrative is a national, communal, or personal statement of self-understanding, which sometimes includes a characterization of others which is not acceptable to those very others.

III. What We Have Learned

The Protestant and Jewish partners to this conversation have each grown to understand and respect certain ideas held by the other. During these conversations, the Jewish members of the group have learned that the Protestant members love Israel and want to see a secure and safe Israel. They are good friends of the Jewish people. While they may have critiques of certain practices and policies of the government of Israel, the Jewish participants were awakened to the integrity of their Christian partners' concerns for justice and the suffering of the Palestinian people and to their respect for Israel's democratic ideals. The Jewish colleagues acknowledge that when these friends of the Jewish people and Israel express their critiques, they sometimes bear the burden of being questioned about their very friendship, loyalty, and commitment to the Jewish people and to a secure Israel.

The Protestant partners to this conversation respect the fragility of Jewish existence, especially in light of the events of the 20th Century. They know that criticism of Israel is all-too often antisemitic in nature and motivation. Thus, the Protestant participants to the group were awakened to the crucial need to attend closely to the ways in which public expression of a call for political justice can, in this case, imply adverse, though often unintended, positions towards Israel.

We who have participated in this Protestant-Jewish conversation have come to appreciate how very vital it is for us to talk with each other. This is so because as Americans we share the same public space. We share responsibility for the quality of decency and justice in that public space and in American society at large. And it is so because conversation and good relations might have some beneficial consequences for Jews and Christians in Israel and in the Palestinian territories.

We both believe in the One God. We both believe that sacred history and revelation of the One God begin with the election of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs on the soil of the Jewish people's ancient homeland, the Exodus from Egypt, and the revelation at Sinai.

We have met, and we will continue to do so. We have talked and engaged in at times difficult conversation and dialogue, and we will continue to do so. We urge you who find yourselves in the leadership of churches and synagogues to do much the same and to reach out to one another and begin similar important conversations.

Signatories: (Institutional References for Purpose of Identification Only)

- Reverend John Buchanan – Fourth Presbyterian Church
- Mr. John Colman – Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago
- Mr. Michael Kotzin – Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago
- Dr. Cynthia Linder – Divinity School at the University of Chicago
- Professor Martin Marty – Divinity School at the University of Chicago
- Rabbi Yehiel Poupko – Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago
- Professor Benjamin Sommer – Northwestern University