

On the Anniversary of the Occupation

By Rabbi Steven B. Jacobs

Claire Luce Booth some time ago reported a frank conversation with a Jewish friend. Booth said, "I must admit being positively bored by all of this talk of the Holocaust and its constant repetition of Jewish suffering." The Jewish friend replied, "I know how you feel. I feel exactly the same way about the Crucifixion."

Each of them would have liked to see the other's story go away. But neither will. Golgotha and Auschwitz, the Crucifixion and the Holocaust, neither will go away. Nor will the occupation and Palestinians' fears, the occupation and the dreams and fears of Israelis – much as both sides might wish they would.

It is easy to damn the occupation, but each side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict brings to the table a very different narrative. Each story – including our own – must be confronted and understood if any progress is to be made.

The Land of Israel holds a sacred place in the words of the Torah, and for many in the Jewish community, these roots justify any act we may take in our Biblical homeland. For many Christians also, church doctrine gives Israel the right to occupy. Some of my evangelical friends say that because Israel was God's chosen nation, America should accept all of Israel's shortcomings. With the threat of Armageddon looming, fear is rampant. The dialogue here in America is more tense than at any other time in recent history.

But the truth is that Jewish roots, Christian doctrine and the fact of the actual occupation are getting in the way of peace in the Middle East.

I once traveled with Reverend Jesse Jackson on an interfaith mission to Jerusalem and the West Bank city of Ramallah where we met with the late PLO chairman Yasser Arafat. Subsequently, after the first war in Lebanon, we visited with the president of Syria, viewed the destruction of Lebanon and met with leaders in Beirut, Jerusalem, Jericho, and Ramallah again. We talked with ordinary citizens in each city. And the stories they told were vastly different.

Different, save for one unifying factor: The people of the Middle East desperately want peace – and they do not trust their leaders.

We can find hope in the Jewish peace activists here and in Israel, as well as the new Christian Covenant formulated among American churches. It offers love and forgiveness to all people regardless of politics or nationality.

When we can accept the narrative that all are God's chosen people, we might have a chance to end the occupation. We must penetrate the darkness with light.

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