

*Based on Psalm 98. All Creation Sings with Praise*

I wanted to have a hymn sing today. You and I lifting our voices in grateful song with the psalmist and the earth, the rivers and the hills, the world and those who dwell in it. Then came Tuesday, with its escalation of student campus protests against the war in Gaza. And I am compelled to speak in response.

It turns out our Psalm provides an ideal platform for that speaking. In its original Hebrew context - and not the beloved translation from Nan Merrill that we have used in our worship - Psalm 98 draws on ancient Judean combat myth and its narrative of victory for the underdog in the wake of imperial onslaught.

That narrative goes something like this: God liberated the ancient Hebrews oppressed by ancient Egypt and brought them to a land of promise and plenty, with a covenant to live in such a way that oppression would cease to exist. Instead, two ancient empires - the Assyrians and the Babylonians - drove the people of ancient Israel into exile. A third ancient empire - the Persians - overthrew the Babylonians and returned the people to the land 500 years before the time of Jesus.

Psalm 98, from within its Jewish context, celebrates this return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple, reclaiming that ancient covenant of land and people, while insisting the fruits of this covenant will cause such blessing to all of creation that every nation of the world, as well as creation itself, will sing in joyous gratitude.

Christians who claim Psalm 98 as our own Scripture, even as we emphatically affirm it remains central to the Jewish Bible and the Jewish people *as Jews*, wrestle with whether and how to universalize this message of liberation and celebration to include all of God's beloved children. Does the God to whom the Psalmist sings seek and celebrate victory for *any* underdog in the wake of imperial onslaught, as Christian liberation theology insists? Or is that broadening of scriptural support declaring God's concern for any of the oppressed, including the Palestinian, a well-intentioned but actually harmful *writing the Jews out of their own narrative*, as Jewish Old Testament scholar Jon Levenson warns?

This may seem like an esoteric academic question ... right up until we hold it alongside the context of how to protest the current war in Gaza without becoming anti-semitic. Israel, unlike any other modern nation-state of which I am aware, exists in the collective conscious and unconscious psyche of the three Abrahamic religions as much more than the average modern nation-state with all of its corresponding geopolitical realities.

*Israel*, and its corollary *Zion*, has become, over literally millennia, a biblical, historical, theological, spiritual, religious, ethnic, political, and *military* construct for Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the world, with multiple layers of engagement. Put simply, Israel really is different, as much as those of us who simply want to be able to criticize its governmental policies the same way we would if they were being enacted by any other nation-state wish it were not.

Complicating our response to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is western Christian complicity in the Holocaust. Put simply, we feel guilty. And we should! Anti-semitism is horrific in all of its forms, and it rears its ugly head

in ways we supposedly progressive Christians do not always recognize. For example, when we declare the God of the Old Testament to be *the God of Vengeance* and the God of the New Testament to be *the God of Grace*, we inadvertently perpetuate an anti-semitic trope of Jews as inherently violent and Christians as inherently peaceful. (Not to mention we completely mis-read both Old and New Testaments.) When we label religious legalism as *Pharisaic*, we denounce the sect of first century Judaism that evolved into the Rabbinic Judaism of today. Much good biblical and theological work has been done to correct these anti-semitic tropes within historic and contemporary Christianity, although much work remains.

Those of us seeking to correct centuries of Christian anti-semitism may struggle to criticize the modern state of Israel because of this history. Even the Palestinian Christian liberation theologian Naim Ateek, recognizes this reality. *If the Jews driven out of Europe and the Holocaust survivors saw a fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of land in their own immigration to Palestine*, he concedes, *this should be honored and respected as a testimony and expression of their faith*.

Where it becomes problematic—for Jews, Christians, and Muslims—is when this expression of faith renders the land's longer-term occupants powerless and oppressed. *To put it in the simplest way possible*, Harvard Professor of Jewish and Israeli Law Noah Feldman writes, *the nature of Israel's existence is mired - inextricably mired - in its conflict with the Palestinian national cause and in the particular way that conflict has developed*.

It is not possible for us to avoid taking sides, as much as we might wish we could. Not taking sides supports an untenable status quo, with devastating consequences. As a twenty-first century nation-state, supported by our own government, Israel functions as Palestinian Christians' (as well as Muslims' and Druze's) political oppressor, denying them the right to return to their ancestral homes, limiting their movement under occupation and siege, confiscating additional land through increasing settlement activity, and subjecting them to collective punishment for the violence of a few. In order for the state of Israel to remain majority Jewish, Palestinians are relegated to the remnants of land they once held with a 90% majority with no compensation for their loss. The state of Israel is recognized internationally. The state of Palestine is not.

While we debate in this country whether or not the student protestors and outside agitators chanting *from the river to the sea* are anti-semitic or even calling for genocide, it is in fact the state of Israel that now controls the river to the sea, as a nuclear power, with an unparalleled military funded by your tax dollars and mine. Water, electricity, fuel, internet, mobility ... all is controlled by the state of Israel, with a political party in power that has expressed in its own founding documents that it is, in fact, *Palestine* that has no right to exist. In 2018, Israel passed a nation-state law, which declares the distinction between Jews and non-Jews fundamental and legitimate, and permits institutional discrimination in land management and development, housing, citizenship, language and culture. When it comes to power on the global stage, the state of Israel has it. The state of Palestine does not.

Let me be clear. *None* of that excuses the heinous attacks in October by Hamas. Nor does it condemn the genuine struggle of Israeli Jews - or American Jews for that matter - to live in peace in a land they also call holy.

It does, however, put the attacks and their aftermath in context. If we truly want to subvert these violent movements, we must re-double our efforts to support non-violent movements to pressure the United States and Israeli governments to negotiate a permanent, just, and lasting peace with the Palestinians, up to and including Palestinian statehood.

The Presbyterian Church as a denomination, including yours truly, has been active in these movements for decades. Ten years ago, our General Assembly divested our holdings from three corporations that profit from the occupation of the Palestinian territories. We did so after a decade of shareholder resolutions urging these corporations to change their business practices failed. Two years ago, our General Assembly named the policies and practices of the state of Israel as constituting a system of *apartheid*. You may remember I was a commissioner to that Assembly. Yes, I voted for the resolution. Just last week the United Methodist General Conference voted to divest from Israel bonds because of its ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories. All of these actions were condemned as anti-semitic by the Anti Defamation League. We took them anyway.

Which brings us back to the students and their escalating protests this week. Yes, we can and should criticize destruction of property and truly hateful rhetoric and the legitimate fear Jewish students feel as they navigate their own journey through reconciling the generational trauma of the Holocaust, the justice-oriented tenets of Judaism, and the unjust policies and practices of a nation-state so central to their collective identity. There is a deep and painful conflict within American Judaism right now - many argue there is a generational conflict (although not exclusively so), and we must pray for their healing and wholeness as much as we pray for Palestinian liberation.

At the same time, we can and should thank the student protest movement for elevating the cause of Palestine to our collective conscience in a time where even yours truly just wanted to have a hymn sing. The truth is, at their core the demands of the students are not that different than those of our denomination: ceasefire now!; divest from corporations that profit from the occupation of Palestine; reinstate funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency; and halt the transfer of weapons not used in accordance with international law. The church may not agree with all of the tactics of the student protestors, but at least our denomination agrees with their goals.

The bottom line is that 13,000 children have been killed since October 7. 13,000 children!

Entire generations of families have been wiped off the face of the earth. Parts of Gaza are now in full-blown famine. One million Gazans remain sitting ducks in Rafah while the Israeli government insists they will invade any day now. Our government continues to fund it.

There is no moral universe in which this can be okay. Not a Jewish moral universe. Not a Christian moral universe. Not a Muslim moral universe.

The Psalmist is clear, whether we receive this song as a uniquely Jewish celebration of liberation or a universal prayer for peace. The Psalmist insists that when the people of God return to the land, living in covenant with God and one another, the fruits of that covenant will cause such blessing to all of creation that every nation of the world, as well as creation itself, will sing in joyous gratitude. The Psalmist insists that when the people of God return to the land, living in covenant with God and one another, the world will become a just and hospitable place for the entire human race.

*This* is the world for which we must sing and pray and work and, yes, even prayerfully and peacefully protest.

For further study, I recommend:

Feldman, Noah. *To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024.

Isaac, Munther. *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope*. Dowers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020.