

A New Holocaust

Mike Deeb OP

From 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009 the whole world stood aghast at the horrifying images of the Israeli army bombarding and destroying the people and infrastructure of Gaza in Palestine. Under a state of siege by Israel, especially since 2006, the 1.5 million people of Gaza could not even run away. They were forced to endure the rapid onset of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis that brought untold suffering to all living there. Three weeks later, two days before the inauguration of Barack Obama as the new president of the USA, the Israelis declared a ceasefire and began to withdraw their troops, claiming to have achieved their objectives. They left over 1300 people dead, a third of them children, and a country in ruins.

This was the latest and most deadly of Israeli attacks on the Palestinians in a conflict that seems to know no end. After 60 years of stalemate, this conflict has become a major cause of the polarization and insecurity that scourge our world today.

Disproportionate Justification

Israel justified its bombardment and invasion of Gaza as necessary to safeguard its own security, since Hamas, the militant Palestinian ruling party which controls Gaza, had been firing rockets into Southern Israel which killed five people in the previous weeks. These rocket attacks were futile acts of anger which had no possibility of helping the Palestinians to realize their freedom, and which only gave the Israelis an excuse to unleash their military might to destroy Hamas. However, the exceedingly disproportionate Israeli response, showing no concern for the huge loss of life, and the massive destruction of the Palestinian nation, cries out to God for vengeance.

Failure of the International Community

Once again, the international community failed to find a way to stop this war and to facilitate a just peace. History will judge very severely the unconditional support given to the Israeli aggression by the USA and the tolerance for it displayed by the European Union. The fact that these countries are generally identified with Christianity places a huge burden on followers of the Christian gospel to distance themselves from their actions and reactions. Their responses are based on *myths* that they have created and which, through their powerful control of the mass media, they have persuaded millions of people to see as reality.

First Myth: "Resistance" equals "Terrorism"

The first myth that they have successfully propagated is the demonising of all enemies of Israel, the USA and the West as "terrorists". They never dare to define the characteristics that make one a terrorist, as these would all point directly back to themselves! Nevertheless this clever tactic has managed to inspire fear and hatred in millions of people in the world towards those countries and organizations listed as "terrorist" under the "axis of evil", including Hamas. These "terrorists" are thus dehumanized which justifies any war to eliminate them.

Exactly the same tactic was used to justify the destruction of Lebanon in 2006 in order to destroy Hezbollah. We in South Africa have suffered the same fate when our own liberation movements were labeled as “terrorists” requiring a “total onslaught” in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Even the great Nelson Mandela was listed as a “terrorist” in the USA until a few months ago! This tactic has also provided a justification for these “model western democracies” to abandon their democratic principles and to disregard the democratic election of Hamas in Palestine, thus displaying, once again, absolute disrespect for the Palestinian people.

Second Myth: “Legitimate Self-Defence”

The second myth that Israel and the USA have successfully propagated is the portrayal of the wars they wage as “legitimate self-defence”. Thus the rockets fired by Hamas that killed five Israelis justified the destruction of the entire Gaza territory, the killing of over 1300 people, and the imprisonment and starvation of the entire population within their closed borders. Similarly the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah in 2006 justified the destruction of half of Lebanon. While several European countries criticized the disproportionate Israeli military response, they betrayed their prejudices against the Palestinians and softened their criticism by buying into this myth and acknowledging Israel’s “right to self-defence”.

But, just as we know that the decision to invade Lebanon and destroy Hezbollah in 2006 was taken long before the kidnapped soldiers provided the excuse, the rockets fired by Hamas similarly provided the excuse for the Israelis to do what they had been planning to do for a long time – to destroy Hamas! And better to do it before Barack Obama becomes US President, since he may not be as sympathetic as George Bush; better to do it, too, a month before an Israeli general election, to show that the outgoing government is serious about ensuring the security of Israelis against the Palestinians!

The wanton destruction of Gaza that ensued with not a shred of respect for human life was a violation of every human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as of every religious value professed by Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It had nothing to do with “self-defence”! It was a crime against humanity!

Third Myth: “Both sides are Equally to Blame”

The third myth that has been successfully propagated is that both the Israelis and Hamas are equally to blame for what happened. Thus so many statements emanating especially from European governments went no further than criticizing both sides equally and calling for a ceasefire. This myth masks the whole history of the conflict and ignores the fact that it was the Palestinians who were dispossessed of their land 60 years ago; that it is Israel that has ignored every UN resolution designed to offer peace and security to all the people of the region, which call for Israel to return to its 1967 borders and for the creation of a separate Palestinian state (which, in itself, is a huge compromise!); that the Palestinians have been and still are treated as non-citizens or, at best, second-class citizens in the land of their birth; that it is Israel that has besieged the Gaza Strip and kept its 1.5 million inhabitants prisoner there for years with hopelessly inadequate resources because it doesn’t agree with the party that the people have democratically elected. In this context, is it any wonder that those “prisoners” would become furious and start trying to break out of their prison walls?

It is the Palestinians who are the victims and the oppressed, and even though the oppressed are not necessarily saints, it is with such as these that the God of the Torah and the Prophets, of the New Testament and of the Qur'an takes sides! The imbalance of power between the Israelis and the Palestinians is huge. Much more than simply condemning both sides, the international community should be demanding justice for the Palestinians and forcing Israel to implement the UN resolutions as well as the commitments that it itself has made.

Fourth Myth: "Military Action can eliminate the 'terrorists'"

The fourth myth that has been successfully propagated is the belief that military action can eliminate the "terrorists". The terrible tragedy is that the Israelis, the Americans and all those who support them really believe in this myth themselves. They fail to see that the destruction of the military capacity of the enemy does not result in a change of heart. If the causes of the conflict are not addressed through a process of dialogue, the anger of the vanquished will only grow, and new forms of resistance will be devised – even if they take years to achieve their goals. This myth has been exploded in Afghanistan and Iraq, and yet the belief in military solutions persists! When Israel and the PLO began to talk about peace, hostilities diminished. However, the longer no progress was made, the angrier and more militant the Palestinian resistance became, leading to the formation and growth of Hamas. Even if Hamas' military capacity is totally destroyed, with every new attack, every new death in the daily conflict, a deeper rage and a deeper hatred is growing, along with a deep anti-Semitism, in the hearts of hundreds more Palestinians. If not given the space for expression, this hatred will manifest itself before too long in some new extremist way.

So, far from ensuring the security of the people of Israel, the Israeli military strategy is leading them into a much more dangerous future full of fear and conflict. The only solution is to attempt to step into the shoes of the enemy, and with compassion to find a compromise that both parties will be able to live with – a compromise that was worked out many years ago, but which Israel has refused to accept.

Ways Forward

So, now that the dust has settled for the moment, what do we need to do as Church in order to promote peace in Israel and Palestine?

We need to express our solidarity with the people of Israel in their yearning for security and peace. After centuries of discrimination and suffering, and especially after the trauma of the Holocaust, we hope that they will find peace and acceptance within the community of nations. However, in order to achieve this, we need to press them to abandon their reliance on military might, and to stop inflicting on the Palestinian people the same discrimination and suffering, the same holocaust that they once experienced. Rather, we should appeal to them to enter into an honest dialogue with the Palestinians with an open heart and with a concern to address the deep frustration, hurt and anger virtually all of them live with. We should particularly press them to lift the siege of Gaza immediately, to withdraw all troops, and speedily to implement, at least, the UN Resolution calling for a return to the 1967 borders to enable the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian state.

We need to express our deep solidarity with all the people of Palestine, and especially the people of Gaza who have undergone such meaningless suffering for too long. We pray that they will not lose hope, and that they will not allow their anger to lead them to rash actions that will invite even greater suffering on their people. We pray too that, through their suffering, they will discover a new unity among themselves which will enable them to overcome their divisions and to fight for the justice that they deserve.

We need to call on the people of the USA and especially President Obama to listen to the cry of the people of Palestine, to recognize their legitimate demands, and to stop providing unconditional support for the aggressive policies of the Israeli government. If Israel refuses to stop the oppression of the Palestinians, and to implement the long-standing UN resolutions, we should call on the USA to withdraw all military and financial support to Israel, which will force it to enter into serious negotiations.

We need to call on the South African government and all members of the United Nations to display moral and practical solidarity with the people of Gaza at this dark time in their lives. We should call for the imposition of comprehensive sanctions against Israel with immediate effect until Israel agrees to implement the UN Resolutions.

We need to pray that the God of love, compassion, harmony and peace, revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, will fill us all with that same spirit so that we can all become bearers of peace in our war-torn world!

22 January 2009