

**Going too Far**  
**Straight Talk about on the Plight of the Palestinians**  
**By**  
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A couple years ago, while he was still host of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart began an episode saying, "We'll start tonight in the Middle East where Israel..." whereupon he's immediately interrupted by a throng of people shouting things like, "What? Israel isn't supposed to defend itself?" "If Mexico bombed Texas would we exercise restraint?" "What other country is held to the same standard as Israel?" "Why are you picking on Israel when there's injustice everywhere?" Then it becomes a cacophony of indiscernible yelling until one last person accuses Stewart of being a "Self-hating Jew!"

After it becomes clear he's not allowed to criticize Israel, Stewart says, "Obviously there are many strong opinions on this issue, but just merely mentioning Israel or questioning in anyway the effectiveness or humanity of Israel's policies is not the same thing as being pro Hamas," when, again, he is seized by the same crowd now shouting things like, "So you're against murdered children?" "Free Gaza! Free Gaza!" and the same fellow who previously called him a self-hating Jews now says he's a, "Zionist pig!" Stewart finally gives up. "Why don't we just talk about something lighter, like Ukraine?"

I saw this bit just a couple weeks after I participated in an "End These Endless Wars" rally organized by PJALS, the Peace Justice Action League of Spokane. The rally was in response to all the violence going on in the world at that time, in the Ukraine, in Iraq, and, yes, in Israel, where more than 1,400 Palestinians, mostly civilians, many of them children, were killed in an Israeli ground offensive.

The day before the rally was to take place, I got a call from a local Rabbi expressing concern about my participation, telling me that some in our Jewish community consider PJALS an "anti-Semitic" organization, and believed the event was just its excuse to bash Israel. I told the Rabbi this was not my understanding but I would double-check with PJALS to make certain I hadn't been misinformed. After being reassured by PJALS director that it was, indeed, a demonstration against violence everywhere, I let the Rabbi know that I was comfortable fulfilling my commitment. The Rabbi let me know my decision might cause some problems and create hard feelings between our two communities. I was certainly troubled by this dilemma, but wasn't going to let a few extremists prevent me from baring public witness to the high value our church and our faith places on peace and nonviolence. Plus, I'm also a huge supporter of PJALS and find the accusation that it's anti-Semitic absurd.

The next day, however, as I approached the Riverfront Park rally, the first thing I noticed was several young men dressed in Palestinian garb, carrying Palestinian flags, shouting, "Israel is

a terrorist state!” There were others present as well, carrying signs protesting Israel and the Israeli lobby. It was, indeed, beginning to look like an anti-Israel event and not a rally for world peace. I had already decided to leave when PJALS Director, Liz Moore began speaking and asked the young Palestinian men who they were. It became clear to me their presence was unplanned, and, as far as I was concerned, they were as free to attend as anyone else, and also had every right to bare their flags and express themselves, so long as they remained peaceful.

I also noticed a few members of the local Jewish community taking pictures of everyone attending, including of me. One of them tilted his sunglasses down so I could see his eyes and gazed at me from afar. I didn’t appreciate the intimidation tactic and was more inclined to participate than ever. Eventually, everyone marched to another location where it so happened an old fashioned car show was also going on. As participants began speaking at the new location, some of the auto owners started blowing their horns in an attempt to drown us out, and some of those present from the Jewish community began marching past us carrying anti-Hamas signs.

I was already wondering what kind of a pile I had stepped into when I noticed the young Palestinian men angrily confronting the Jewish demonstrators. It looked to me like things were going to escalate, so I stepped between them and told the Palestinian men, “This isn’t just about Palestine. This is about ending violence and war everywhere, including here. You need to rejoin our demonstration or I’m going to do my best to shut this whole thing down,” which they agreed to without hesitation or further incident.

When it came my time to speak, I began by saying, “I am not here in support of any one nation, but in support of all nations. I am not here in opposition to any single nation, but in opposition to all wars. The Buddha said, ‘Every Murder is a Suicide.’ Everyone is harmed by war, both its victims and its perpetrators, and we must all find a better way.” I then quoted a litany of peace statements from various religious traditions, lamenting, as I said, that we still “have little faith in the ways of those we merely honor with rhetoric and monuments, in the blessed peacemakers like Jesus, and Gandhi, and King, and Mandela, and millions of anonymous men and women throughout history who have used peace and nonviolence to change the world.”

The next day, as the saga continues, I received a call from a Jewish couple wishing to meet with me about my participation in the rally. To my surprise, they had been informed that, in addition to attending an anti-Semitic rally, I had defended Mohammed as a man of peace. I was astonished given that I hadn’t even mentioned Mohammed. I couldn’t imagine that a Jewish person would intentionally violate the Ten Commandments by baring false witness against me, so I presumed whoever it was must have mistook the word *Mahatma* for Mohammed, which I had used in reference to Gandhi.

After meeting with the couple, I agreed to write a letter to the Jewish community explaining what happened from my perspective, accompanied by a transcript of the speech I'd given. In the letter I said that, "during the past few months I have been accused of setting my church up to adopt a pro-Israeli resolution by Palestinian supporters and of being anti-Semitic by supporters of Israel." Although the couple and I left as friends, I do believe all of this has caused a small schism between our two communities, mostly because of a couple of extremists now claiming our church is also anti-Semitic because we support PJALS, which they consider anti-Semitic because it calls for Israel to "end the occupation" and for the U.S. to stop funding it's military.

There's more to the story, like the authorities contacting me in an effort to identify the Palestinian men present at the rally, and to verify reports they had assaulted the Jewish demonstrators, which, of course, I didn't, since it wasn't true. I've also had people in our own church community call me a coward for not speaking up for the Palestinians, and I've had others charge me with racism for doing just that. So when I saw Jon Stewart's bit on *The Daily Show* I could definitely relate. When it comes to this particular issue, those concerned have two options, either keep quiet and worry about other things, or choose a side. There's no middle ground. There's not talking about it and trying to bring the two sides together. Straddling the fence, trying to be a peacemaker, trying to open the conversation up only upsets everyone.

In fact, just prior to all of this, I attended a Friends of Sabeel Conference in Portland, OR, whereupon I heard and met Miko Peled. Sabeel is an ecumenical organization, begun by Palestinian Christians, seeking peace in the Middle East. Miko Peled, is the grandson of Avraham Katsnelson, a Zionist leader and original signer of Israel's Declaration of Independence, and the son of Matti Peled, an officer in the 1948 war, which resulted in the removal of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their ancient homelands, and who became the leading General in the War of 1967, in which Israel took control of the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and Golan Heights.

But tripling the size of his country in the Six Day War against Egypt wasn't part of the plan, and General Peled was concerned about the potential negative consequences. Instead of celebrating the victory with the other officers, he told them, "For the first time in Israel's history, we are face to face with the Palestinians, without other Arab countries dividing us. Now we have the chance to offer the Palestinians a state of their own."<sup>1</sup> His son says his father also warned them that keeping the West Bank would only lead to ongoing hostilities that would "turn the Jewish state into an increasingly brutal occupying power and eventually into a bi-national state."<sup>2</sup> The General then retired, became an elected member of Israel's Parliament, and a vocal advocate for Palestinian Rights.

Miko Peled also writes about his mother who, as an officer's wife in the 1948 war, was offered a house that once belonged to Palestinians who were driven out. "I knew the Palestinian

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<sup>1</sup> Peled, Miko, *The General's Son*, Just World Books, Charlottesville, VA, 2012, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

families as a child growing up in Jerusalem,” she told him, “On Saturdays I would walk through the neighborhood and see the families sitting on their balconies. There was usually a lemon tree in the front and a garden with fruit trees in the back.”<sup>3</sup> So she refused the military’s offer. “That I should take the home of a family that may be living in a refugee camp? The home of another mother? Can you imagine how much they must miss their home?”<sup>4</sup> She was also ashamed of the way her country looted the beautiful furniture, rugs, and other belongings of the homes they’d stolen.

Anyway, while at the SABEEL Conference in Portland, I had the opportunity to speak with Miko Peled about how difficult it has been for me to talk about this issue, not wishing to offend my Jewish friends and neighbors, but also wanting speaking honestly about the injustices against the Palestinian people. He advised me to stop worrying about it and to choose a side and let the chips fall where they may. So far I’ve not been able to do that, mostly because the more I explore the conflict, the less sure I am there is only one right side and one wrong side to be on. Choosing a side, to me, means one side must inevitably go away. Either Israel ceases to exist or the Palestinians are completely exterminated, neither of which is an acceptable option. So I’ve mostly just stayed quiet on the topic while addressing many other important issues. But, as I said earlier, “every murder is a suicide,” and, as Dr. King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” None of us can choose to remain silent about this issue, no matter who it upsets, and claim we care about justice. Even if all we can do is talk about it, helpless to do anything about it, we have to be willing to talk about it.

A few months ago I was emboldened in this opinion when Bernie Sanders, while still running for the Democratic Presidential nomination, said something unprecedented for a Presidential hopeful, let alone a Jewish Presidential hopeful. Last April Sanders said he believed Israel’s response in the 2014 Gaza war was “disproportionate,” that the U.S. needs to be more balanced on the issue, that “Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “is not right all of the time,” and that, “If we are ever going to bring peace to that region, which has seen so much hatred and so much war, we are going to have to treat the Palestinian people with respect and dignity.” Sanders has repeatedly affirmed Israel’s right to defend itself, but has also repeatedly criticized it for going too far.

So today, inspired by Sander’s courage, I’m unwilling to go another day, let alone the rest of my life, without saying, I agree, Israel often goes too far. Granted, the hostilities between these two peoples had existed long before 1948, but forcing three-quarter of a million people from the land and homes that had been theirs for 2000 years, and taking them for themselves, is going too far. Moving further to take control of West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and Golan Heights, in 1967, displacing another 400,000 Palestinian and Syrian refugees, is going too far. Continuing to build Israeli settlements in the disputed West Bank is going too far. Using the actions of a few militant Palestinians as another excuse to kill Palestinian civilians, to bulldoze their homes, to grab more of their land, is going too far. Although it is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 35f.

understandable that Israel would retaliate against Hamas' firing rockets at its cities, which Hamas did in response to Israel's crackdown in the West Bank after the 2014 murder of those three Jewish teenagers, military actions that resulted in the deaths of 66 Israeli soldiers and more than 2000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, including hundreds of children, is going too far. Building a 440-mile fence along the West Bank, declared illegal by the International Court of Justice and condemned by the United Nations, segregating more than 25,000 Palestinian people, restricting their freedom of movement, their access to medical care, to enough food and clean water, and to jobs and a sustainable economy, is going too far. Controlling the borders to the point that the Gaza Strip has effectively become the largest prison in the world, is going too far. To call an organization like PJALS anti-Semitic because it wants land and freedom restored to millions of Palestinians and for our own country to stop funding violence against them, is going too far. To use intimidation tactics and accusations of racism against anyone who tries to have a conversation about what's going on over there, and to bring it to the attention of others, is going too far.

Personally, I don't use the term, "End the Occupation," because it doesn't specify what territories should be returned to the Palestinians, and makes it sound like Israel must just disappear entirely, which, for me, is going too far. The plight of the Palestinians is similar to the plight of the Native Americans, whose homes and lands were taken, who were mostly killed, with the remnants rounded up and placed on impoverished reservations where most their descendants remain today. My home, your home, this very church building, are on land that rightfully belongs to them. But I do not have the courage to walk away and give it all back to its rightful heirs. For me to then hypocritically suggest Israel ought to do what I am unwilling to do, to end the occupation of this land, is going too far. Likewise, to suggest our government ought to suddenly cut off all its financial support of Israel, would leave them too vulnerable, and, again, in my opinion, goes too far.

But this doesn't have to be an all or nothing situation. Israel can return control of the lands the international community has agreed they've illegally seized. And the U.S., instead of saying, "Here's some money to fund your military forces. Oh, and by the way, we'd like peace in the Middle East," can offer support with a few strings attached that will insure such peace actually happens.

In Sandy Tolan's book, *The Lemon Tree*, Dalia, a Jewish woman in Jerusalem opens her door one day to find Bashir, the son of the Palestinian family who once lived in her home and were driven from it, standing on the step. Bashir told her who he was and asked if it might be possible to come in and see the house. "And I opened the door wide," Dalia said, "and I said, yes, do come in." This was the beginning of how these two families befriended each other, came to better understand each other, and to see each other as human beings. Since it was the place where Bashir had lost his childhood, Dalia and her family eventually turned the home into a kindergarten for Arab children in the area, as well as a center for Arab and Jewish dialogue, which they named, "The Open House." Dalia says this could not have happened if she hadn't been willing to open the door and invite Bashir and his family into her life. Later,

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when Bashir was arrested and convicted for participating in a terrorist attack, she also said there will never be peace until such violence ends.

I think she's right. Violence only begets more violence, and falsely justifies the rage behind it. Nor do I believe a two-state solution will work. We have a two-state solution here in the U.S. and look where it has gotten the Native Americans. Do I think it's going to require a one State solution in which Jews and Palestinians can live together as friends, like Dalia and Bashir, and all are treated as equals? Of course. But more importantly, to me it's going to require a one world solution, in which all people everywhere are equal and guaranteed the same basic human rights. But this isn't going to happen until our own nation is willing and able to own its roll in this terrible and tragic conflict, something that won't happen until we feel free and safe to begin talking honestly about what's going on over there.

I know, as is often the case, and especially in this case, this sermon may be criticized for all I've left out, which is probably fair. But, with such a short time, and my own limited understanding, I always leave stuff out. But today, this isn't about what I didn't say, it's about what I haven't said, and what I'm saying now, that in the name of National security, Israel often goes too far, and when it comes to talking about and doing something to finally end the conflict in the Middle East, none of us have gone far enough.