

Unspeakable Things

Addressing the War Between Israel and Hamas

By
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January 21, 2024

A few months ago in August, I came across a headline, “Father shoots driver of car that crashed into and killed his son.” It was such a horrific story that I avoided reading it, but it has continued to disturb me, nonetheless. I imagined what it was like to be the person responsible for the accident, knowing that he was responsible for ending someone else’s life, only to suddenly find himself staring into the barrel of a gun, the last thing he’d ever see. As a father, I also felt incredible empathy for the man who, in a state of unthinkable shock, grief, and anger reacted from a place of raw emotion, removed from any thought, committing an act that would only add to the tragedy. I wish he wasn’t carrying a gun at the time.

I didn’t want to know any more about this incident than what the haunting headline had already stated, and wished I’d never seen it. But, as I began to work on this morning’s message, I realized this story is the best way to begin discussing what’s now going on in the Middle East, between Israel and Hamas, and what’s happening to those innocents caught in the crossfire. So, I looked the story up online and here’s what I’ve learned:

On Monday, August 13, 2023, around 6:30 a.m., Chad Woods and his teenage son were walking along Dink Ashley Road in Timberlake, North Carolina—heading for home after their car ran out of gas—when the teenager was struck and killed by a pickup truck. The driver of the truck stopped and called 911 when Woods pulled out a gun and shot him several times. He then tossed the gun into a nearby pond and drove the dead man’s truck home, leaving both bodies in the street. According to Woods’ own father, he was completely out of his mind when he arrived, repeatedly saying, “He just killed my son. He killed my son.”

Jeff McKay, the man Woods shot to death, was a 39-year-old employee of the North Carolina Department of Corrections, originally from Portsmouth, Virginia. His obituary described him as “a great, caring man who was loved by many. Jeff loved everyone he knew and wanted to help all that he could. He would jump into action for anyone who asked. A loving, kind soul that loved to fish, grill, and hang out with family and friends. He had an infectious smile and could light a room with his laugh.” McKay leaves behind his wife Jessica and their 2-year-old daughter.

The teenager, Chad Edward Woods, II was only 17 years old and was born in Orange County, North Carolina. His obituary says, “he leaves to cherish precious memories, his parents, Chad and Krystle Minor Woods; three brothers: Charles Minor, Carter Woods and Caleb Woods, all of the home; his grandfather, Lawrence Claiborne of Roxboro, NC; and a host of other additional loving relatives and friends.”

Both Chad and Jeff died during their ill-fated encounter on Monday morning, August 13, 2023.

Chad Woods, Sr. was soon arrested and charged with second-degree murder, vehicle theft, the illegal possession of a firearm, and held under a half-million-dollar bond. There haven't yet been any further updates, but Woods is sure to stand trial and will very likely be convicted of murder and spend years in prison. This is right. As much as we can empathize with him over the loss of his child, we cannot condone this type of revenge, be it premeditated or committed as a crime of passion. As tragic as this situation is for everyone involved, as much as I disdain our punitive criminal justice system, we cannot allow anyone to get away with murder or violence against others.

Less than two months after this incident, on October 7, 2023, Hamas led a surprise attack against Israel, launching thousands of rockets targeting it, even as nearly 3,000 militants broke through the barrier between Israel and Gaza and began brutally attacking Israelis on the streets and in their homes. The stories of cruelty, sadism, and the sinister disregard for human life they committed are horrifying. Nearly 1,200 Israelis were murdered during the onslaught, most of them were civilians, along with the capture of more than 250 Israeli hostages.

For those of us who understand the plight of the Palestinian people, we can empathize with those who feel angry and vengeful enough to lash out, people trapped behind a wall, living for more than a decade under a blockade of necessary goods. We can understand why they would be angry watching so many of their children being arrested and indefinitely imprisoned without ever being charged or given the chance to prove their innocence. We can understand the outrage as they watch the continued incursion onto their lands and the increase of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. But we cannot condone the violence and sadistic inhumanity that occurred on October 7th, any more than we can condone the revenge killing committed in the heat of passion by Chad Wood.

But, given the terror of the initial reports, we can also understand why Israel had to act. We may even understand why its response was a violent one, but, to date, nearly 25,000 Palestinians are reported to have been killed in Israel's indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, most of whom were civilians, including over 10,000 children. The response has further led to the displacement of more than 2-million Gazans, to critical shortages of clean water, food, fuel, medicine, and access to medical care, along with power and communications blackouts, and warnings of a coming famine. The cruel and inhumane response by Israel cannot be condoned, not any more than the Hamas attack can be justified, nor the murder of Jeffrey McKay by Chad Woods.

The United Nations Human Rights Council has determined there is "clear evidence that war crimes may have been committed in the latest explosion of violence in Israel and Gaza, and all those who have violated international law and targeted civilians must be held accountable."¹ Israel has been accused of committing war crimes, including genocide, by several organizations, and is now being investigated by the International Criminal Court. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has since denied the charges and accused the ICC of anti-Semitism for its investigation.

On September 11, 2001, nineteen Islamic extremists, members of the al-Qaeda terrorist group, hijacked three airplanes full of passengers and used them in suicide missions against targets in Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New York City, including the World Trade Center, causing its collapse and the deaths of more than 3,000 innocent people. I don't know the reasons why this happened, and I cannot empathize with those responsible. But I can empathize with the millions of people around the world who suffered and continue to suffer from the deadly consequences of my country's inhuman response.

First came the invasion of Afghanistan only a month later. The aim of "Operation Enduring Freedom," as it was called, was to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime believed to have harbored terrorists, although, of the 19 hijackers, 15 were citizens of Saudi Arabia, two were from the United Arab Emirates, one from Egypt, and one from Lebanon, none from Afghanistan. Yet the U.S. military maintained a presence in Afghanistan for 20 years, making it America's longest war in history (if we don't count the Drug War against its own citizens). When it finally withdrew in 2021, the Taliban that the war was supposed to have eradicated immediately regained control of the devastated nation. Yet estimates suggest that over 170,000 people were killed during that war, including tens of thousands of Afghan civilians. That's 170,000 in response to the evils of nineteen extremists.

But the response didn't end there. In 2003, the U.S. launched another major military operation, invading Iraq under the pretext of dismantling weapons of mass destruction, which were never found and never existed, and overthrowing Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's regime, even though Iraq had absolutely nothing to do with what happened on 9/11. This war, which officially ended in 2011 with the withdrawal of American combat troops, led to significant political and social upheaval in the region and to civilian deaths estimated to range between hundreds of thousands to over a million, although the exact number is impossible to pin down.

These three stories, the murder of Jeff McKay by Chad Woods, Israel's response to the Hamas, and the U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, are all similar in that they were, and are in the case of Israel, quite literally, overkill. The difference is that Chad Woods will be prosecuted and probably go to prison for the murder of one man. The U.S. has suffered no legal consequences for its callous disregard of human life, except another blood stain on our nation's soul, as if anyone cares. We'll see what consequences Israel might face for its war crimes, although I doubt there will be any.

I've begun my discussion of the war between Israel and Hamas in this way because I don't wish to go into the long and controversial history of the unending conflict in the Middle East. Trying to explain it is but an attempt to determine who's at fault. Like children fighting on the playground, those involved like to point the finger and say, "He started it." "I didn't start it. He started it." But as the adults tell them, "It doesn't matter who started it." What matters are all the innocent people who suffer the terrible consequences of such behavior.

I've spoken about these ongoing hostilities in the past, attempting to sort out what is and isn't true, and I've always gotten myself in trouble by those on Israel's side. And I've

sometimes gotten myself in trouble for not saying more about the matter by those on the Palestinian side. It is admittedly an issue I prefer to avoid, so the latter complaint is somewhat justified. But, given the latest and egregious violence now occurring, I have an ethical responsibility to address the matter before you. Good people cannot remain quiet when thousands of innocents are suffering and dying.

In fact, I've held off a little longer than I should have, but I wanted to get our new year started on a positive note by focusing the past three Sundays on the good things happening in our world. I did this so we can be better psychologically prepared to face all the challenges before us. But today is the day I will speak about these unspeakable things. They are unspeakable because they are almost too tragic to talk about. And they are unspeakable because there is always tremendous pressure in the West not to criticize Israel for anything. That pressure usually comes in the form of accusations of antisemitism.

The first time I spoke on the matter was more than twenty years ago, early in my ministry, after I'd been studying the matter for my own personal edification. I was still naïve enough about it that I had no idea of the pushback I'd receive. One of the strongest responses was from my own mentor, Phil Smith, and his wife Sharon, both of whom were also good friends. I was surprised by their reaction, and from others, because the concerns I brought up regarding the suffering of innocent Palestinians seemed incontrovertible, and I couldn't image intelligent caring people be anything less than sympathetic to their plight. Their reasons for arguing otherwise weren't grounded in anything but their emotional affections for Israel. Not that I'd said anything negative about Israel. In fact, I spent a great deal of time empathizing with the Jewish people during my address, but it became a topic the Smiths and I politely agreed not to discuss.

But a few years later, a group of prominent activists in Louisville, Kentucky made a trip to visit the Palestinians and bear witness to what was happening there, firsthand. Upon their return, they needed a place to share what they had seen and learned, including photographs to verify their accounts. I agreed to let them use our church space and to even let them lead a Sunday service. I again offended my dear friends, Phil and Sharon, even though, by then, they had retired to another state and didn't attend the service. But this time I didn't let up. I said what I believed was true and offered a few photos of my own showing the bodies of dead children buried in the rubble of their homes. That ended the conversation, but, fortunately, not our close friendship. The topic just became one of those unspeakable things between us.

During my years serving as your minister here in Spokane, I haven't addressed the matter much, although other people, more knowledgeable with firsthand experience have. One of them was the late Myrta Laddich, who made a trip to the region and came back ready to talk about the horrors and injustices she saw. Sometime later, I was asked by PJALS, the Peace Justice Action League of Spokane, to speak at an "End These Endless Wars" rally, downtown, to which I agreed. I was surprised to get a phone call from a local rabbi telling me PJALS is

an antisemitic organization, and that the rally was just another of its attempt to attack Israel.

So, I called the director of PJALS to confirm the event was about ending all wars, not only what was happening in the Middle East at the time and I was assured my understanding was correct. So, I called the rabbi and explained as much, but was still told, “If you attend, there’s going to be a problem.” And there was. My relationship with the Rabbi has never been the same and became nonexistent a few years later, after I organized the screening of the 2016 documentary, “The Occupation of the American Mind,” about the reluctance and failure of the mainstream American news media to address the plight of the Palestinians.

I received another phone call from the Rabbi letting me know the film is antisemitic and full of antisemitic tropes. I watched it a few times and disagreed, but invited the Rabbi to help our community figure out the best way to discuss the truth of what’s happening to the Palestinians in a way that does not offend members of our Jewish community. Although the rabbi agreed that at the very least it’s true to say, “the Palestinians are getting a raw deal,” I was told, “That’s not going to happen.” The only choice I was given was to consider the topic taboo—an unspeakable thing.

But instead of inviting the greater Spokane community to a screening of the documentary, I invited another rabbi to come to Spokane to talk about the matter, Rabbi Michael Davis. Rabbi Davis, who was born in Israel and served in its army, empathizes with the Palestinian people and isn’t afraid to talk about the matter honestly and publicly. He came and he spoke at our church in 2019, the day after I’d been publicly censured by the UU Ministers Association for being a racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, classist, and the day after my name appeared on the watchlist of an alt-right conservative as one of the most dangerous liberals in Spokane, and the day before I would forever be labeled antisemitic by many in the local Jewish community. The message to me, and to anyone aware of what happened, is this topic is off limits. It is an unspeakable thing and if you do talk about, “there’s going to be a problem.”

Again, I’ve spent most of my time this morning telling stories rather than sorting out complicated facts. This is largely so because the facts of the matter are so easily dismissed, especially these days when logic and facts are regularly denied, causing many of us to question reality itself. Nowadays these tactics are referred to as *gaslighting*—using psychologically manipulative strategies to make us feel that what we’re seeing is not what we’re seeing, and what we understand is not what we understand.

“It’s antisemitic to question Israel’s tactics.” “It’s antisemitic to talk about what’s happening to the Palestinians.” “Why are you talking about this now when there are so many other problems in the world? You must be antisemitic.” “Remember what happened during the Holocaust? How dare you criticize Israel, antisemite!”

Here’s what I know is true. Criticizing the Israeli government for some of its policies and actions toward the Palestinian people does not deny the holocaust, which remains among

the most sinister, deadly, disturbing, and unforgivable events in human history. Criticizing the Israeli government for the indiscriminate killing, crippling, maiming, starvation, and further suffering of millions of innocent Palestinians does not mean I am not equally as disturbed by the brutality and inhumanity of the horrific Hamas attacks on October 7. These truths are not contradictory. Nor does speaking against some of Israel's actions mean I agree with those protestors who now blame Israel for those attacks, justifying the sickening cruelties of the Hamas attackers.

Speaking against Israel's actions does not make me or anyone else antisemitic, no more than speaking out against and actively protesting the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq made me unpatriotic or Anti-American. What I know, is that indiscriminately killing innocent Palestinians, as well as Israeli hostages, then blaming Hamas for using them as "human shields," is the worst kind of gaslighting. Those who pull the trigger, no matter the circumstances, bear the brunt of the blame. And I know that thousands of innocent human beings, thousands of children, are now dead, and thousands of others injured in a variety of ways, and millions displaced, and hungry, and thirsty, with nowhere to turn for help or cover.

As a liberal and a Unitarian, I believe in our common humanity and in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, every Jewish person, and every Palestinian person, and every Afghani person, and every Iraqi person, and every other kind of person. So why is it that we will arrest, convict, and sentence an individual for the murder of one person, but keep quiet when nations murder hundreds of thousands or more?

Until, for this very reason, we are able to make war itself a crime, the world must continue to insist that all governments at least adhere to the rules of engagement that have been agreed upon, including those prohibiting the indiscriminate killing, abuse, and neglect of civilians and innocent people. And we must hold every nation that commits war crimes accountable for its actions, just as surely as Chad Woods will be held accountable for his crime. As one of our hymns says, "there is peace for us and everyone, we will say one more word, 'til every word is heard by everyone." Until that day comes, amidst the gaslighting and *ad hominem* attacks, we must remain brave enough to continue speaking of unspeakable things.

¹ Farge, Emma (10 October 2023). "[UN rights chief condemns Israeli 'siege' of Gaza, militants' taking of hostages](#)". [Reuters](#). [Archived](#) from the original on 22 October 2023. Retrieved 12 October 2023