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LOVE WINS: QUAKER ACTIVISM IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

JENNIFER BING AND LUCY DUNCAN

“I see things differently now. ... Both [oppressor and oppressed] live in fear and do not have peace. Others cannot bring us peace. What will bring us peace is transformation at all levels that will lead to action. Our miseries are not going to stop because we disapprove. We must take action to bring about transformation of ourselves and the structures of domination.”

—Jean Zaru, Palestinian Quaker, 2011

Quakers have had deep and powerful relationships with Palestinians and Israelis for over a century. As Quakers have worked in the region - at the Friends schools in Ramallah, doing service work, offering refugee relief in Gaza, supporting Israeli refusers, offering legal aid, and through many other projects, the relationships Quakers have forged have changed us, have made an imprint on the hearts of those of us who have loved and felt connected to the region. For us, our work to support peace with justice in the region is all about faithfulness, faithfulness to the inward stirring of the Spirit, and to those relationships. As we have walked with Israelis and Palestinians, we have been transformed. This article tells some of the stories of the work Quakers have done in the region and includes our stories of how we have been changed as we have done this work...and how current approaches arise from learning from these relationships and these experiences.

FRIENDS SCHOOLS

Elsewhere in this issue, the histories of the Ramallah Friends Schools and the Ramallah Friends Meeting are shared. Together, they have shaped the perspectives of those who have served the School and Meeting as they encountered conflict and military occupation.

Jennifer Bing was a teacher at the Boys School. Her experience there led to a deeper commitment to work for the end of the occupation of Palestinian territory.

During the first intifada (Palestinian uprising) the Israeli army closed all the schools in the West Bank to stifle protests, including the Friends Schools in Ramallah. When they reopened (after several months' closure at a time), teachers noted a clear change in their students.

“I was a Quaker volunteer teacher at the Ramallah Friends Boys School, teaching boys in elementary, middle and high school before and during the first Palestinian uprising (1986-89). Most of my students were Palestinian-American boys with their first language English. Prior to the uprising most of the side conversations in class were debates about the best US sports teams, the best type of pizza (there wasn't a pizza parlor in most nearby Palestinian villages), and who was the best male rap artist. After the uprising, the conversations were much more serious.

“One day in my social studies fifth grade classroom, a boy came in late for class. Teachers were told it was important to remind students of the school rules, since long periods of interrupted school often resulted in ‘truant’ behavior. I could tell that this boy, with his heavy backpack and head bowed to the ground, didn't need a lecture about class start time. ‘Why are you late Kamal?’ I asked. ‘There was an army raid in my village last night. Someone was shot. This morning, my kitchen was full of blood.’ The room went silent. I told Kamal I was sorry for what had happened and that we were glad he came to school. I continued with our lesson — I think it was a project about how to build healthy communities — when Kamal, still with his coat and backpack on, said, ‘I think I just want to kill myself. There is just so much blood.’ The room again went silent. My heart raced as I had never been in a situation where someone, much less a 10-year-old boy, said he wanted to commit suicide.

“Before I could speak, one of Kamal's classmates, Mohammed, stood up and shouted, ‘What are you saying Kamal?! Don't you know what the intifada is for? It is about our being able to LIVE, not DIE! The soldiers want us to die, but we need to go to school and live for our country! We want to be free in our country!’ At that point all the boys in the classroom started cheering. ‘Live!’ Kamal took off his backpack and smiled. I realized that they were the ones teaching a lesson about a healthy community.”

ENGAGEMENT IN GAZA

In the aftermath of World War II, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) gained experience resettling refugees and displaced persons. It was asked by the United Nations to organize relief efforts for Palestinian Arab refugees in the Gaza Strip. AFSC had intended to stay in Gaza until the refugees were able to return. When it became clear that they would not be allowed to return, AFSC felt it could not with integrity continue to offer refugee relief when a more permanent and political solution was possible. AFSC handed over the refugee relief services to the United Nations Relief Works Agency and they began operations on May 1, 1950.

After a brief hiatus, AFSC began work again in Gaza, creating kindergartens, training teachers, and other community led projects there. From its initial engagement with refugees in Gaza, AFSC has been committed to peace-building as well as relief efforts.

AFSC's most recent work in Gaza has been focused on Palestinian youth, supporting cohesion with Palestinian youth in the West Bank and with Palestinian citizens of Israel. In 2014 an AFSC staff delegation traveled to the region and offered reflections on the relationships built. Lucy Duncan, Director of Friends Relations at AFSC, wrote a piece about her experience there, "A hurricane of the Spirit to end the occupation of Palestine."

"The first time I experienced a gathered meeting was at Mid-Year Meeting of Iowa Yearly Meeting Conservative. We were in an old meeting house up on a hill that overlooked the prairie. It was a windy day. As we sat in meeting for worship, the wind whipped around us. The silence was deep and rich. As the wind swirled, stirring up dust and bringing a breeze into the meeting house, I could sense the Spirit also moving in the room. I felt as though we were one body, coming together. The experience shook me up and grounded me, helping me to see that powerful unity is possible."

A couple of years ago AFSC hosted a revolutionary nonviolence training series. In one conversation the idea of whether nonviolence was only a strategy or a deeper philosophy was discussed. I was reminded of the Tribe One song, "The saddest thing is that I will do what you have done to me." My sense is that trauma, whether from war or from other forms of violence, causes people to seek revenge, to want to make the person who has hurt you feel what you have felt.

This is such a human and understandable response; it arises from the impulse to defend oneself, from the impulse to resist. Sometimes the act of violence is transferred to others—not to the perpetrator that has hurt you, but to those who are weaker than you, to those who you encounter after the act of violence.

Repeating patterns of violence holds the person who has been the original target of the violence in the grasp of the act of violence, reacting to what he or she has experienced. This is a kind of prison of its own, as the target is still reacting to the act of the perpetrator, held in the grip of the act. The condition of one's heart matters in struggle. How you hold the struggle for justice matters if we are to create a new way of being, if the cycle of violence will be interrupted. The means inform the ends. Nonviolence is not only a strategy, but a philosophy of living, a way of liberating oneself from the acts of others.

When we were in Gaza, we met a young woman Ayah, who is working with AFSC as part of our Palestinian Youth: Together for Change project. Ayah told us that during the Cast Lead assault her four-year-old brother asked her if the bombings would happen again that night. Ayah told him, “no” and stayed up each night that followed covering his ears so that he wouldn't hear the bombings. Every time the house shook, she worried that he might wake up.

Ayah said her dream is to drive from Gaza City to Haifa, to be able to move freely in Palestine. She said that she reaches back in her memory, in her unconscious, for images of Haifa and Nazareth and cannot find them, they aren't there. Because of the occupation and the siege on Gaza, she has never seen the cities her grandparents called home, even though they are not far from Gaza.

Ayah said she wondered what it would feel like to be free. She seemed so hopeful, joyful even despite all she has experienced. Though I heard determination to work to end the siege on Gaza and the occupation of Palestinian land, I heard no bitterness in her voice, no desire for retribution, only a desire for freedom, for peace with justice. Ayah can't leave Gaza, but in the sense of having an open and resilient heart, she is free.

When we left Gaza, we walked the half a mile through the fenced in tunnel, past the ominous remote controlled machine gun perched on the separation wall, through the sequence of four metal sliding doors that buzzed slowly to let us through, to the long conveyor belt where we deposited our bags to be checked. We walked past the

soldier with the submachine gun who stood watching us as another soldier with plastic gloves unpacked and checked our bags. It was hard not to think we were walking through the enclosures of unhealed trauma, of a people who were victims now perpetuating the violence they experienced by putting up walls and checkpoints, limiting the movement of Palestinians, believing that guns and armaments will protect them. Walls that separate us are created first in the heart.

It was hard to leave Ayah behind. I wept, knowing that we could leave, but she could not follow. I wept because I didn't know when we might next see her and the other amazing people we met there.

What will it take to knock down the separation walls, the checkpoints, the intricate restrictions that Palestinians experience every day? As I've met Palestinians and Israelis working to end the occupation, I have felt the Spirit rising, have felt a powerful nonviolent commitment to come together to knock down the structures that separate, that dehumanize, and that imprison. To accompany their witness, what's needed is a worldwide hurricane of the Spirit like the unified Spirit that moved through the meetinghouse in Iowa that day. What's needed is coming together to knock the physical walls and those in our hearts down, to restructure society so that all are free to travel, to move, to work and to love.

I hope one day soon to meet Ayah in Nazareth or Haifa or Gaza City after the blockade is lifted, after the separation wall is gone, after the checkpoints are dismantled. When I see her, I will ask her how it feels to be free.

SUPPORT FOR NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE AND ECONOMIC ACTIVISM

The first intifada (Palestinian uprising) challenged the status quo of the military occupation. The first intifada was characterized by Palestinian popular organizing and resistance — most of it nonviolent acts of resistance such as tax resistance, organizing non-compliance with unjust laws, collective strikes, sit-ins, fasts, street demonstrations, petitions, building alternative institutions for self-sufficiency. Solidarity peace activism and refusal to serve in the Occupied Palestinian Territory also grew in Israel during this period. The refusal of the status quo by Palestinians living under occupation set the stage for the Palestine Liberation Organization (in exile) to begin negotiations

with the Israeli government, first in Madrid (1988) and later in Oslo (1993).

In addition to serving in the Quaker Schools, many Quakers were involved in providing accompaniment and witness to Palestinians living under military occupation during these years. Quaker volunteers have joined organizations working in the West Bank such as the Christian Peacemaker Teams, calling for nonviolent direct action and the protection of human rights, “getting in the way” of injustice through nonviolent intervention, public witness, and public advocacy for peace.

The tactics and nonviolent approaches of the first intifada created the template and pattern on which the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) call from Palestinian civil society was in part based.

Boycotts and economic activism have a long history among Quakers. In the 1800s, Quakers helped lead the “Free Produce Movement,” a boycott of goods produced using slave labor. In recent times, AFSC and many Quakers have participated in boycott and divestment campaigns connected to the civil rights, anti-apartheid, farm worker, and prison rights struggles.

Given its long commitment and engagement with both Palestinians and Israelis in efforts to achieve a just and lasting peace, the AFSC remains committed to supporting nonviolent activism designed to achieve this end. Taking into account AFSC principles and history, AFSC supports all nonviolent efforts to realize peace and justice in Israel and Palestine including the strategic use of boycott, divestment, and sanctions tactics — methods which appeal to human conscience and change behavior. To this end, AFSC supports divestment campaigns organized in the United States including supporting church divestment efforts, student-led divestment campaigns on US college campuses, and community-led boycott efforts against Israeli settlement products.

In the past decade several Quaker Monthly and Yearly Meetings have worked to educate and pass Minutes in support of the Palestinian call for boycotts and divestments, and to end investments that profit from military occupation and violence. In the Fall of 2013 several Quakers, led by Tony Bing, established a group to further Quaker work in support of BDS efforts. This is how the Quaker Palestine/Israel Network (QPIN) was born. In 2016 a consultation was held at Pendle Hill sponsored by AFSC to gather committed activists to work

within the Quaker community to support change. The newly formed organization describes itself in its by-laws as follows:

“QPIN was organized to continue the efforts of generations of Quakers who have devoted their lives to supporting the rights of Palestinian refugees, to opposing the Israeli military occupation, and to promoting equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel. QPIN’s purpose is to increase Quaker participation in these efforts by facilitating the sharing of ideas, energy, and experiences among Friends as they seek to educate their meetings and churches about Palestine and Israel. QPIN will mobilize Quakers to support the Palestinian civil society call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions as well as other nonviolent efforts to promote justice, equity, and shared security for Palestinians and Israelis.

“QPIN is grounded in the testimonies of Quakers, particularly those related to peace, integrity, community, and equality. We seek to contribute to a just and lasting peace among Palestinians and Israelis based on the principle that there is that of God in everyone.”

Several yearly, quarterly and monthly Meetings have adopted minutes supporting BDS campaigns, and meetings such as St. Louis Monthly Meeting have led successful campaigns in their local communities against companies profiting from Israel’s occupation. In the case of St. Louis, the international transportation company Veolia. In September 2012, Friends Fiduciary Corporation divested all holdings in Veolia because of “environmental and social concerns.” Friends Fiduciary also sold all shares in Hewlett Packard and Caterpillar because of their complicity with Israel’s occupation. Despite these impressive actions, the number of Quakers involved remains relatively small.

Popular resistance in Palestine in support of nonviolent, effective means to achieve freedom from military occupation, equality for Palestinians in Israel, and justice for the millions of Palestinian refugees needs more concerted action. As supporters of nonviolence, justice, and peace, we are required to take risks and be challenged about our comfort and privilege. We must examine how our lives contribute to war and injustice, and expend time and energy on efforts that oppose corporate crimes. John Woolman confronted us: “May we look upon our treasures, and the furniture of our houses, and the garments in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions, or not.”

Sustainable activism for boycott and divestment of companies and institutions that maintain Israel's discrimination of Palestinians is a hopeful movement committed to equality and justice. Veolia's sale of its discriminatory bus lines in the West Bank shows the power of this tactic. After losing its contract in St. Louis and cities around the globe, French corporate giant Veolia in 2015 sold off nearly all of its business activity in Israel.

Ramallah Friends Meeting clerk Jean Zaru asks Quakers to "take action to bring about transformation of ourselves and the structures of domination." Clerk of Quaker Palestine Israel Network in the United States, Steve Tamari, reminds us that, "Generations of Quakers have devoted—and continue to devote—their lives to backing the rights of Palestinian refugees, to opposing the Israeli military occupation, and supporting the equality of Palestinian citizens of Israel. As Quaker activists, we have the opportunity to engage other Quakers and Quaker 'spaces.' In addition to meetings at the monthly and yearly meeting levels, Quaker schools and colleges have significance well beyond exclusively Quaker circles."

Through our service and faith in action with Palestinians and Israelis, we move forward to a day when love will win.

TIMELINE OF QUAKER ACTIVISM IN PALESTINE-ISRAEL

(Adapted from the Time line, *When the Rain Returns*, Appendix D, p. 281

- 1868, Friends begin to explore work in Palestine
- 1869, Friends Girls School built in Ramallah
- 1901, Friends Boys School built in Ramallah
Both schools later merged and partially devolved from Friends United Meeting in 1986 (developed local Palestinian Board of Trustees)
Quaker volunteers have been working at the schools up to the present day
- 1948-50, At the request of the United Nations, AFSC and Quaker volunteers provide humanitarian relief to Palestinian refugees - Gaza

- 1949-62, AFSC sponsored youth work at the Acre Neighborhood Center
- 1948-50, AFSC begins self-help projects for internally displaced Palestinians in western Galilee
- 1950-55, AFSC works in agricultural development in Turan, a northern Palestinian village in Israel
- 1951-67, AFSC organizes workcamps and youth exchanges (in Israel?)
- 1967-1995, AFSC establishes and supports kindergartens in Gaza
- 1970, Search for Peace in the Middle East is published, a study prepared by AFSC, Canadian Friends Service Committee, Friends World Committee for Consultation, Friends Peace and International Relations Committee (London), Friends Service Council (London)
- 1972, Quaker International Affairs representatives are established by Friends/supervised by AFSC
- 1973, Quaker Legal Aid and Information Center is established by AFSC (devolves to local board in 1997)
- 1977-1981, AFSC operates a program for children with disabilities in Beersheva, Israel
- 1982, AFSC publishes the Quaker working party document, A Compassionate Peace
- 1984-94, Quaker Peace and Service (QPS; formerly Friends Service Council) sends volunteers to work with Palestinian and Israeli NGOs, including physical therapy work, work with women's committees; in the mid-1990's to act as international observers and in 2003 becomes the Ecumenical Accompaniers Project for Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)
- 1987, AFSC publishes Missed Opportunities for Peace
- 1994, AFSC begins youth leadership work in the West Bank and Gaza.
- 2002, AFSC begins support for the Israeli refuser and conscientious objector networks in Israel
- 2002, AFSC supports Palestinian NGOs with support and training in nonviolent resistance

- 2004, AFSC published the Quaker Working Party document *When the Rain Returns: Towards Justice and Reconciliation in Palestine and Israel*
- 2014 AFSC helps to found the Quaker Palestine Israel Network
- 2016 AFSC hosts a consultation of Quakers engaged on Israel-Palestine