

Unpacking the Presbyterian Vote – Temple Emanu-El, June 27, 2014

Last week 5000 delegates to the National Presbyterian Biennial General Assembly came to Detroit for an eight-day convocation. Of particular interest to our Jewish community was their discussion and ultimate vote on the divestment of Presbyterian funds, some \$21 Million, from three American companies: Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola, punishing them for profiting from Israel's occupation of Palestinian land—

- Caterpillar sold bulldozers that cleared land and constructed the barrier wall.
- Hewlett-Packard sold logistics and communications systems.
- Motorola sold military communications and surveillance systems.

As you probably heard or read, the motion to divest from the three passed by a narrow margin of 310-303, even after intensive campaigning by a number of Jewish organizations, including a message from Rabbi Rick Jacobs who leads our Reform Movement. The General Assembly also passed, by a much wider margin of 482-88, a resolution to re-examine the Church's present support for a two-state solution, favoring instead a one-state solution that would divest Israel of its Jewish character and qualities.

I wasn't at all surprised and am not particularly concerned by the divestment vote, for reasons I'll share later. But I was sincerely saddened by the one-state vote, and to explain that, we need to unpack 10 years of Presbyterian anti-Israel bias.

In 2004 the Presbyterian Church USA adopted its first resolution calling for divestment from Israel, becoming the only mainline Protestant Church to do so. It accused Israel of apartheid and the violent oppression of innocent Palestinians, while failing to make any mention of Palestinian violence. The appearance of that resolution surprised the delegates to the 2004 General Assembly who never saw it coming. After the General Assembly, and responding to that resolution, Jewish leaders took their concerns to Presbyterian pastors and lay-leaders, nationally and locally—including my own efforts with colleagues. At the next GA in 2006, the Assembly overturned the 2004 vote for the boycott of, and divestment from, Israel. And it should be noted that at no time then or since 2004 has the Committee on Mission Responsibility or the General Assembly singled out any other nation for divestment.

Though the 2004 vote was immensely unpopular with the people in the pews, the anti-Israel minority of its leadership continued the fight. In 2008 anti-Israel resolutions were again brought to the General Assembly and again defeated. In 2010 the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement within Presbyterian leadership ratcheted up the rhetoric, this time calling for the eradication of the Jewish state. A nine-member Middle East Study Committee (MESCC) prepared a 172 page report called the "Kairos Palestine Document" (*Kairos* is Greek meaning "opportune moment"). When the document was presented to the 2010 General Assembly, Presbyterian clergy and lay-leaders called it "unbalanced, historically inaccurate, theologically flawed and politically damaging". The Kairos Palestine Document was not adopted, but it was "lifted up for study" with the promise that at the 2012 General Assembly it would be re-written to be more balanced, presenting both sides. That never happened, and the document sent to delegates in May 2012 was essentially unchanged.

In June of 2012 I received a copy of the Kairos Palestine Document from a Presbyterian delegate to the General Assembly, as it prepared for another divestment vote. I spoke to you about it from this *bima* almost exactly two years ago. The Document began with letters of support from Palestinian Christian leaders who identified themselves as the new Jesus, once again persecuted by the Jews. It declared that Christianity had superseded Judaism as God's covenant with humanity. It rejected any Jewish connection to the Land of Israel. Zionism, and thus the State of Israel was, they wrote, imposed on the world by Western colonialists, driven by guilt for the Nazi Holocaust, on the backs of the true owners of the land. It completely ignored 3,500 years of continuous Jewish presence in the land, and it urged American Christians to reject the legitimacy of Judaism in general, and Israel as a Jewish state. The divestment motion in 2012 was defeated by two votes. The Kairos Palestinian Document was rejected. But that, clearly, was not the end of the story!

This year a new Presbyterian advocacy group, the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, issued a study guide titled *Zionism Unsettled*. It was prepared for churches to use as an adult education course with hardcopies available from the Presbyterian website for \$10. I found it online and read the over 70 page document carefully. It is hateful, racist and willfully ignorant of the violence against Israel by Palestinians and Arab countries. The document calls Zionism “Jewish supremacism” and a “false theology.” It denies Israel’s right to exist as a modern nation state. It directly attacks Zionism and the idea of a Jewish homeland, branding Israel an “illegitimate entity”. Jewish immigrants to Israel are described as “colonists” who took “Palestinian land” from the Palestinian people. The study guide declares Zionism to be an oppressive ideology comparable to Jim Crow segregation in the American South and apartheid in South Africa.

I pulled out four of the more salacious quotes:

Racism is the cornerstone of the Zionist project. Instead of equal rights for all, Zionism has created a system of domination and subservience.

Not much has changed in Zionism's purpose since Israel was born: to maximize the amount of Palestinian land and minimize the number of Palestinian people falling within the borders of the state. What has changed over the course of Israel's history is the modality used to achieve these goals: the crude brutal force at the beginning continues and is now supplemented by laws that promote the same ends. . . . The centerpiece of Zionism as it affects Palestinians is ethnic cleansing.

Zionism is heretical, a doctrine that fosters both political and theological injustice. This is the strongest condemnation that a Christian confession can make against any doctrine that promotes death rather than life.

The Zionist movement, like other colonial movements, required collective denial of what was being done to Palestinians . . . a denial that may even be characterized as self-inflicted blindness. The major American Jewish organizations bear considerable responsibility for spreading this fear and blindness by their uncritical support for Israel over the years.

And since Judaism upholds and promotes Zionism, erroneously reading in the Bible that God promised this land to *them*—erroneously because the Jews today are primarily of European origin not the seed of Abraham, Judaism therefore has been corrupted by colonial and racist Zionism. Islam, however, is remarkable for its evenhanded hospitality and openness to peacemaking. The document proclaims:

There are many texts in the *Quran* that affirm God's love for all people, demand that humans act justly toward others, and condemn any form of discrimination. The *Quran* insists that Muslims demonstrate God's special respect for Jews and Christians because God is revealed in all three Abrahamic faiths.

Zionism Unsettled go on to declare that prior to the arrival of Zionism in the Middle East, Jews living in Muslim countries enjoyed “harmonious relations” with their Muslim neighbors. And since 1948, the report states:

Jewish life [today] is alive and well in the Islamic Republic of Iran. . . . Sadly, this model of coexistence was destabilized by the regional penetration of Zionism beginning in the late 19th century.

Really?! Yes, there are Jews living in Iran, but they, like all religious minorities in Iran, have been subject to oppression and harassment, especially since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Our State Department wrote in 2012:

Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais, as well as for Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups not sharing the government's official religious views. . . . Government officials continue to make

anti-Semitic statements, organize events designed to deny the Holocaust, and sanction anti-Semitic propaganda.

Jews living in Muslim countries were treated well before Zionism, the report states. But in Israel the government plows under Palestinian orchards, bulldozes villages, forces families out of their homes. Israel has, since 1948 decimated the peaceful Palestinian people and their pastoral way of life the document declares. And yet, there is not a single word in these over 70 pages, of Palestinian terrorist attacks, of rockets from Gaza, or schoolbus and suicide bombings. Its single message is that Jews have no right to the land, only Palestinian Arabs. Not surprisingly, *Zionism Unsettled* has been praised by Iranian government media, and by none other than David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan who endorsed it as “a major breakthrough in the worldwide struggle against Zionist extremism.”

Though *Zionism Unsettled* claims its goal is “ending the occupation”, the only plan it offers is simply and directly to end the *Jewish* State of Israel. It calls for a one-state solution, abolishing the Jewish sectarian identity of Israel.

I said earlier that in 2012 the vote on divestment was defeated by 2 votes (333-331). I’m not surprised that this year it passed. First of all, the Presbyterian Church has lost a large number of its more conservative, evangelical congregations and members over the church’s acceptance of the gay and lesbian community. The conservative churches that left are generally pro-Israel, and their absence from the Assembly this year certainly made a difference in the voting. Secondly, Israeli obstinate refusals to cease building in the West Bank and disputed territory, despite worldwide condemnation, despite the continued objections of the Obama administration-- only promotes an upset-with-Israel agenda. And I can’t say that I blame anyone for being disappointed in Netanyahu, or angry that settlement construction continues. It’s bad policy, however one looks at it.

But it’s particularly disingenuous for *Zionism Unsettled* to declare “American Jewish organizations bear considerable responsibility for . . . their uncritical support for Israel over the years.” The document, arguing against itself, trots out a number of prominent Jews who question Israeli policy, and Jewish organizations who object to expanding the settlements. I can understand why Presbyterian leaders haven’t read my sermons or heard my objections, but the continuing debate on Israeli policy is loud and vociferous in the Jewish community.

What upsets me about the Presbyterian convention held in Detroit last week is not their vote to divest. That’s really no big deal!

- The loss of investment funds won’t bother Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard or Motorola.
- So our national leadership no longer “ecumenicals” with their national leadership! So what?
- And it doesn’t change my relationships with Presbyterian clergy-colleagues who are themselves upset that the tail is wagging the dog at the national level.

What upsets me is the equation that Zionism = Racism = Oppression = Israel = Judaism. I hardly need to preach to you that the Zionist dream was about realizing a Jewish home in the land that birthed Jews and Judaism. It was not about dispossessing resident Arabs from a land that, by the way, was never their national home. The conflicts that forced Palestinians to leave their villages were always started by Palestinians and Arab states. The violence that has become endemic to the region was never initiated by Israelis. And to fill over 70 pages with an unrelenting assault on Zionism as a racist and false theology, and Israel for its exploitation and persecution of poor Palestinians through its state sponsored destructive and oppressive occupation, without one word about years upon years of Palestinian attacks on innocent Israeli civilians, is simply unforgivable.

Zionism is not the problem! The actions and behavior of the Israeli government may be regrettable, but no democracy is perfect—and the Zionist dream did become a *democratic* reality! (Which is more that can be said about the Muslim Arab countries which surround it!)

If the PC-USA wants to express its moral outrage at religious oppression and persecution why point to Israel and not the abduction of Christian Nigerian girls by Muslim kidnappers? Why not vote to divest from Chinese companies over to their suppression of Tibetan culture and Christian worship? Why not condemn Egypt for the slaughter of Coptic Christians and the burning of their Churches, or Saudi Arabia for banning the teaching of Christianity? In Syria, Christians who refuse to convert to Islam have been kidnapped, shot and beheaded. In Iraq, terrorists deliberately target Christian worshippers. (This past Christmas, 26 people were killed when a bomb ripped through a crowd of worshipers leaving a church in Baghdad.) Last January a report by the Christian organization *Open Doors* documented the 10 most oppressive countries for Christians-- nine were Muslim-majority states, and the 10th was North Korea. Aren't they concerned about the welfare of their fellow Christians? Why is it that Israel is the one and only target of their moral outrage—especially since Israel is the only country in the Middle East with a growing Christian population?!

The supporters of *Zionism Unsettled* declare that racist colonial Zionism has corrupted our great Prophetic Biblical call for justice and righteousness, and they fault 20th and 21st C Jews for allowing Zionism to degrade Judaism. We, they declare, have abandoned the Prophetic call. So last week our own Rabbi Rick Jacobs addressed the General Assembly and answered their charge with this: *We are inspired by the poetry of the prophets, but we live in the prose of a daily struggle to create a better world through the difficult, sometimes relentless work of compromise.*

If the Presbyterian Church wants to side with and lie down with the Palestinians, in the end, it will be more than fleas that infest them.

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