

Division and conflict in Israel: A Jewish-Christian exchange

by [Yehezkel Landau](#)

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Yehezkel Landau and Tom Getman recently met over lunch in East Jerusalem to discuss political and spiritual issues. As friends and colleagues in reconciliation projects in both the West Bank and Israel, they challenge each other's views, meeting regularly to probe the causes of division and conflict. The increasing hostility between Palestinians and Israeli Jews pushes them to seek common ground for themselves and their friends. The following exchange of letters arose out of that luncheon engagement.

Dear Tom,

Thinking about our lunch conversation, I felt uneasy about your answer to my question about the meaning and justification of Israel's coming into being as a state. You said, "It's an open question." That answer gives the impression that Israel's existence is conditional on how we treat the Palestinians, who have been our declared enemies. Would you say, "Let's wait and see and time will tell whether the state should exist" about any other country?

The U.S. came into being with a genocidal displacement of the Native Americans; it enslaved black Africans; it waged an unjust war in Indochina; and it has been guilty of an economic imperialism that continues to this day. Would you say that the U.S. consequently has forfeited its right to exist? Should it give all its territory back to the original owners?

If you can't say this about the U.S., how can you say it about Israel, especially since the United Nations created the Jewish state under international law in 1947? The Jewish leadership here accepted the partition plan, while the Arab world fought against it, refusing to recognize the Jewish right to national self-determination alongside a Palestinian Arab state.

Israel's resistance to Palestinian statehood since 1948 has less to do with fear of Palestinian sovereignty than with anxiety over how a Palestinian state could be used by more powerful enemies to attack us. Israel did not seek the role of occupier in 1967, but prolonged military rule over some 2 million Palestinians, coupled with the establishment of Jewish settlements that enjoy a preferential status, created an Israeli mind-set that justified an unjust status quo. It took the Intifada to shake most Israelis out of their complacency.

The often-invoked "security" rationale must not be used as a cover for systematic injustice and human rights violations against Palestinians. But the zero-sum war mentality that breeds and condones such injustices is not Israel's alone. Surely the rejectionist stance of the Palestinian leadership before 1988, and its attacks against civilians, has had a lot to do with Israelis' reluctance to trust Yasir Arafat and his colleagues in the Palestine Liberation Organization.

This mistrust in turn has conditioned many Israelis to accept whatever has been deemed necessary to thwart the Palestinian dream of liberation. Hindsight has allowed us to see that the resultant policies backfired; but over the years they seemed a lesser evil aimed at preventing a greater one: the military defeat and destruction of Israel.

To have expectations of Israel that you do not have of any other country--that it treat its adversaries with compassion and accept their standards of justice--is to compound the Israeli or Arab double standard with one of your own. Then Israel will always disappoint you. It is one thing for Jews to hold Israel up to a higher standard than they would expect from other nations; but when Christians do it, even in the name of solidarity, Jews will inevitably see that form of criticism as prejudiced and judgmental.

We need to transcend judgmentalism, to critique the misguided actions and clear sins of others with greater compassion, recognizing the tragic dimension of human affairs. We must acknowledge what Jung calls the "shadow" in all of us and lovingly help others to see their own repressed "shadows" (e.g., anti-Judaism in Christianity, anti-Palestinianism in Zionism and anti-Zionism in Palestinian nationalism).

If you were to ask me if I thought it was a mistake for the Christian church to have emerged in the first and second centuries, wouldn't you be upset if I were to answer, "It's an open question," rather than to say something like, "I see God's grace in the

emergence of Christianity alongside Judaism, but I strongly condemn what Christians have done in the name of God or Jesus to Jews, Muslims and fellow Christians"?

If we can't make space in our hearts for our neighbors' identities, without condoning their harmful actions, we can't be effective peacemakers or even effective prophetic critics. The people who should be listening will shut their ears. Part of the problem is that folks in your position relate to Israelis as soldiers, settlers or government officials. The rest of us--fathers, mothers, teachers, farmers, scientists, artists--become marginalized in the field of vision, and the perceived character of Israeli society gets skewed.

God's Holy Land is also the homeland of two peoples: the Jews and the Palestinians. By divine grace, both belong in this land to consecrate life here. If we begin with this spiritual understanding, we can translate it into a political framework that achieves reasonable (though not absolute) justice for both sides. We can create two states, both of which guarantee the rights of their minorities and share Jerusalem as their capital. We can negotiate boundaries, the sharing of water resources, and compensation for refugees who cannot return to their original homes. For emotional and spiritual healing, the injustice of the Palestinians' dispossession should be acknowledged by Israeli leaders in the hope that Palestinians can forgive.

To achieve genuine reconciliation we must rise above the partisan perception and matrix of feelings that have colored attitudes on both sides for so long and to which the current Israeli government has unfortunately regressed. Open-hearted outsiders can offer empathy, solace and hope. They can build bridges based on our common humanity to span the gulf between adversaries.

The challenge is to oppose injustice and the assaults on human dignity without choosing one side for generalized moral affirmation and the other for total condemnation. To do that, people must experience the emotional realities of both sides. That will help them appreciate the tragic complexity of our situation so that they can work in solidarity with the struggling peacemakers in both Israel and Palestine for a better future.

Blessings, brother,
Yehezkel

Dear Yehezkel,

Our conversation and your letter affected me as no others have during my months in Israel. I especially thought about your statement that Christians should distinguish between loving concern and judgmentalism.

I do see God's grace at work in the creation of the state of Israel. But I have a deep, abiding and, I think, appropriate concern about Israel's definition of itself as a "Zionist Jewish state," accepting growing religious coercion from those who desire a theocracy, and about its willingness to put its own need for security ahead of every other value. This can only lead to more trouble. It exacerbates the traditional hostilities between Israel and its neighbors. Those who love Israel should not be silent about these things.

Maybe as a Christian I don't have the same freedom to speak about Israel's excesses as I did about conditions in Uganda, South Africa, Latin America and, indeed, in my own U.S.A. Because of our unfaithful past, evidenced in the Crusades, the inquisitions and the Holocaust, we believers in Christ are too easily misunderstood in this country. But as an American whose taxes undergird Israel, I may have some responsibility to speak if I can just manage to get my message and spirit properly aligned.

I will proceed, then, to say that in my way of thinking the establishment of a secular state through war and the emergence of a religion through sacrifice and love are not analogous, as you seem to think. We cannot excuse the cruel racism and oppression of the late 20th century by citing the injustices of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, whether perpetrated by the U.S. or any other country. We have laws, conventions, understandings, the UN and CNN. Our commitment to biblical justice and peace should have matured, as should our realization that the best way to respond to having been a persecuted people is by not persecuting others. Certainly a cruel and illegal occupation of another people's territory enhances neither Jewish moral teaching nor Israeli security.

I went into the West Bank with a CBS crew after you and I had lunch together. We visited the 90-year-old man whose ancient family property contains the tomb of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. His farm and family are now totally surrounded by the ever-expanding Efrat and other Jewish settlements south of Bethlehem. When he blacktopped his lane, the Israeli authorities told him to remove the blacktop; they threatened to do so themselves and charge him for it. This is on West Bank land recognized as belonging to Palestinians. He and his large family are

being pressed to move so that the Jewish settlers can take his land, with its holy site.

The repeated beatings of members of the Al-Atrash family and the demolition of their home by young Israeli soldiers are atrocities. One soldier held a gun to the head of the family's three-year-old to force his mother to come out of the house so that the soldiers could bulldoze it. The child was so traumatized he did not speak again for nearly two weeks.

The soldiers beat the 17-year-old daughter until she spit blood. She had to be hospitalized. The mother was stripped half naked by the soldiers who dragged her across the ground. Though the whole incident was recorded on videotape by human rights documenters, the Israeli authorities deny that there is any proof of this atrocity. Thank God for the Rabbis for Human Rights, who rebuilt the family's house. But their efforts were defeated again when the house was bulldozed for a third time. What does participation in such actions do to the morality and mental and spiritual health of the soldiers?

These are just two examples of the thousands of Palestinian families who are being dispossessed. Moreover, on the economic front, because of Israel's 50th anniversary celebration the checkpoint at Gaza was closed to our Arab staff, among others. They could not come from or go to Gaza to attend to urgent work for four days. No Gazans could get to their jobs in Israel during this time. Some Israeli and many Christian Zionists rationalize the state's oppression of Palestinians by reiterating the conviction that the Jews are "God's chosen," as if that ended all debate on the matter. But how can Jews be joyful when the price of their celebration is severe hardship for Muslims and Christians? The Israeli state's celebration of the commendable birth of a nation is polluted by injustices that are frankly disobedience to God. Israel is becoming so damaged by its unacceptable and unlawful actions that it has placed itself in demographic, economic and spiritual danger.

I know you understand the dilemma in which I find myself. Be assured I will take to heart what you say about people in my position acting with more love and less judgmentalism. Please pray for me, Yehezkel, because my blood boils when I see the infliction of pain, and actions that damage the cause of peace. I do know and love enough Israelis like you (lots of moms, dads, teachers, artists) to feel responsible to say to Israel, "You are heading for a cliff. Please redirect your route or at least reduce your speed." It is hard to love and justify the Israeli state that I experience each day. I need God's grace in full measure to live in a constant state of hope and

courage rather than outrage about the injustice I witness.

At the same time, I'm encouraged by finding that there are many Jews and Arabs who stand for what is right and for reconciliation despite cruel government policies on both sides. You and your wife, Dalia, are among those who speak out bravely when strident Zionists or Arab nationalists threaten to precipitate a conflagration.

Let's keep our dialogue open. I do believe deeply that the Lord has given us to each other for our mutual benefit, and perhaps for the benefit of others as well. Sincere thanks.

Affectionately,

Tom