

**SCARBORO UNITED CHURCH
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**MESSAGE BY:
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This summer Carla and I got the opportunity to travel to Palestine and Israel for 10 days. This trip was part of the United for Peace campaign created by the United Church of Canada. The Campaign, which runs from November 4, 2007, to December 2009, was approved out of grave concern for the situation in Israel and Palestine. Part of this initiative was to expose some young adults already active in the United Church to our churches' ongoing involvement in the peace process in Israel and Palestine. 16 young adults between the ages of 18 to 30 and 3 leaders were chosen for this great opportunity. The 16 youth came from all over Canada, and we got to meet each other for team building in Toronto on May 16th. We then flew to Tel Aviv and teamed up with the United Church partners, the Jerusalem Inter Church Centre, Department of Service to Palestine Refugees (DSPR) and the Middle East Council of Churches. Our itinerary included travel to Nazareth, Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem, where we met with various organizations, both Israeli and Palestinian, to form our own opinions regarding the conflict and to stand in solidarity with our partners.

In order to provide context for our reflection today, we thought it would be useful to provide a brief history of the conflict within Palestine and Israel. This is in no way a complete history, so for those who would like more details, please feel free to come visit us downstairs during coffee time.

- 1915: Britain promises the Land of Palestine to the Arabs, but in 1917: promise to create a Jewish national homeland that would respect the rights of the non-Jewish, indigenous people already living there.
- After the WW2, an influx of Jews from Europe into the region, and start buying large tracts of land. Britain tries to restrict land sales, Zionist (radical Jewish) start violently driving the Palestinians from their land. 1947: British no longer have any say.
- 1948: "The war of 1948". Zionists proclaim a Jewish state of Israel, occupy additional Palestinian land beyond what the UN has permitted. Over 450 Palestinian villages are destroyed. 700,000 displaced Palestinians fled in large numbers to refugee camps. Israel expands from 52% to 77% of Palestine.
- 1967: Six Day War. Jordan, Syria, Egypt vow to regain Palestinian's lost lands. They are defeated by Israel. Israel now occupies the West Bank, Gaza, areas of Syria and Egypt. A UN resolution is passed, which prohibits the acquisition of land by force, demands withdrawal, calls for a just solution to the refugee problem. Ignored.
- 1987: First Intifada. An economic uprising by the Palestinians, it includes withholding taxes, boycotting Israeli stores, and stone throwing by children. Israel responds with violent reprisals. In response, the Muslim-based Palestinian organization known as "Hamas" is established.
- 1994: A Jewish settler in Hebron, massacres dozens of Muslims as they pray in the Mosque of Abraham. In response, some Palestinian militant groups begin suicide-bombing attacks in Israel.
- 1995: The leaders of Israel and Palestine almost reach an agreement, but the president of Israel is assassinated by an Israeli gunman.

- 2001: Sharon elected as Israeli leader provokes the second intifada by bringing his troops into the temple mount- a Muslim holy site in Jerusalem- and firing into crowds of Palestinians. Many suicide bombings follow.
- 2002: Israel begins building the separation wall of over 700 kms, taking additional Palestinian land and water supplies and breaking Palestinian communities into separate ghettos.
- 2003: Road Map for peace created by the Quartet Group (US, UN, EU, Russia). Palestine accepts; Israel disagrees.
- 2005: Sharon and new Palestinian leader start off relationship fairly hopefully, and Israel evacuates its colonies from Gaza and four colonies from the West Bank.
- 2006: Hamas is elected as the government in Palestine. Israel and US isolate Palestine, cutting off all funds.
- 2006: Israel “withdraws” from Gaza and then enclosed Gaza, blocking trade, dropping over 700 guided missiles in March 2006, and cutting off water and food and medical supplies after an Israeli soldier is captured by Palestinian militants.

One of the main things that I learned from this experience is how complicated the conflict is. I thought I had an idea what the main conflict issues were, from the news media here in Canada, but what I learned is that there are many different layers of conflict and hurt and peace will take time.

Before we start speaking about some of the things we saw while in the region, we thought it important to make something very clear. Our comments and observations that follow are in no way meant to be taken as anti-semitic. They are instead questioning the Israeli government’s current actions and in no way are speaking of the Jewish people as a whole. This is an important distinction to be made, as it is a very touchy and controversial subject.

One underlying theme that was prevalent throughout the trip was water. We all need water to live, but in the desert it is even more precious. Upon arrival to Israel and more specifically to Nazareth I was surprised at how lush and green it seemed. There were trees and flowers all over. As the trip went on and we traveled from Israel, to Occupied East Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, it became apparent that water is used to manipulate and oppress. Israeli citizens, living in settlements, are given excessive amounts of water to use, and waste, as they wish. To the degree it looked like we were in Florida when we drove through a settlement. Palestinian people who live in the West Bank get the water turned on for a few hours, once a week, so they can fill their reservoir tanks as much as they can; and then ration it the best they can. Before this trip a garden hose was just a garden hose, by the end of the trip I it became a symbol of power, control and oppression.

A resounding theme that has stuck with me since returning from the trip is deception. The Israeli government is clearly doing an impeccable job of concealing their true motives to not only the international community, but to their own citizens as well. After reflecting upon what I had learned on this trip, I came to realize the true extent that our newscasts have deceived the general public regarding the real situation in this conflict ridden region. What I saw with my own two eyes was vastly different than the story that has been crafted and fed to the Western countries. News broadcasts concerning these issues rarely focus on the Israeli government’s illegal actions and instead solely report on the Palestinian suicide bombers. The Palestinian side of the story is not told. Even within the region, the Israeli government has taken great efforts to camouflage their illegal actions. As a tourist, it would be easy to travel to Jerusalem and not even

notice the separation wall, which is quite well camouflaged within the buildings and strategically placed trees. A tourist bus could commute hordes of tourists to the various Israeli settlements within the region, and they wouldn't even notice the neighbouring Palestinian communities that have been deprived of water, live in the fear of getting illegally evicted from their homes, and have to fight for basic human rights. We were also told that not only are these ignorant tourists tricked into believing that nothing is wrong, but that the majority of the Israeli community- an astounding 85% of the Jewish settlers- also have no idea that their new homes are built on land that was brutally and illegally taken from the Palestinian people.

During the trip we had opportunity to visit some of the Holy Sites along with other "Holy Tourists". I cannot speak for the other participants on the trip, but for me I had a hard time with these parts of the trip. I was witnessing thousands of international tourists wanting their pictures taken at the Holy Sites, yelling at other people to get out of the way, angry they had to wait to get around one of our members who was in a wheelchair, stealing dirt from the Garden of Gethsemene... to me I felt I was witnessing people who just wanted to take for themselves. I do not know if any of the tourists were aware of the Separation Wall or checkpoints anymore then they would be of a stop light. I found it frustrating.

The military presence was also a new experience for me. We arrived to East Jerusalem on, what the Israeli Government calls, Jerusalem Day. It's a holiday celebrating the reunification of Jerusalem. It also is a day of strong military force. The Israeli Military is very prevalent, keeping a close eye on anyone they believe, or know, to be Palestinian or a supporter of Palestinians. The airport security is very tight as well. When leaving from the Tel Aviv Airport, some members of our group had their luggage searched because the x-ray machine showed they had some books and papers. The airport security people wanted to see what kind of books and papers. Upon inspection the security personnel become quite upset at the "propaganda" that was discovered. This led to the more intense questioning of one of our leaders with frequent reference to the propaganda, where did we receive it, and who gave it to us. Please come visit Jenn and myself after the service where you can read some of these items of "propaganda".

We had the opportunity to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians who wait in line at the checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. We were able to walk through the checkpoint itself to get a feel for what the Palestinians endure on a daily basis, sometimes starting as early as midnight. They must cross over to Jerusalem to find work for the day and to make the necessary money in order to provide for their families. Human right violations were immediately evident. The masses of Palestinians are literally put into cages like animals. We are told of a man who had a heart attack in this line. It is unlikely that he survived, since it took 45 minutes to get him help. We go through a turnstile and show passports to enter the terminal. Our guide told us about older people vomiting, releasing the stress and pressure from suffocating and being harassed in the line. We go through a metal detector to enter the main building. Everywhere there are travel posters advertising the "glory of Israel"; a clear Israeli attempt to prove who is in charge. The catwalk above is for the Israeli soldiers, often teasing condescendingly to the waiting Palestinian citizens. Next, passports are re-analyzed and fingerprints checked, with an atmosphere of survival, desperation, hatred and cruelty. It is emotional to experience such clear signs of injustice, illegal occupation and dehumanization at the hands of a people whose ancestors had suffered the same fate.

Throughout the trip we all witnessed many signs of hope, some were shared observations among the Youth for Peace group and others were individual personal experiences. One of my signs of hope was having supper with a Palestinian family. The main Youth for Peace group was divided into smaller groups and welcomed into different Palestinian family homes. The mother of the family I spent time with was a fascinating woman. She is a retired school teacher and shared many kinds of stories with us about her family and other people. After the meal was complete, and we were sipping on our extremely strong shooters of coffee, this woman started

pulling out many different hand embroidered items and other handmade items; like the earrings I am wearing today. She explained to us that she was able to visit the woman in small villages and

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the Gaza Strip. During one of her trips she noticed many of the women created beautiful cross-stitch designs, however they did not know how to finish these items. So she offered to finish the items into purses, scarves, etc and sell them, and then give the money to these village women so they could create some income for their families. The sense of community and being a good neighbour is strong in all the Palestinian people I met. They are trying their best to support each other and work together for existence and peace.

Despite the devastation and violation of human rights that we witnessed while in these countries, there is still a glimmer of hope. The positive and encouraging messages written on the Separation Wall, messages such as “Laughs not War”, “Don`t let this become another Berlin”, and “This wall is a shame on the Jewish people, on my people.” As well, both Palestinian and Jewish organizations are working hard to promote a just peace. One organization we visited is called the Oasis of Peace. It is a village in Israel founded in the 1970s that is composed of both Palestinian and Jewish citizens. By 2007, more than 50 families have come to live in the village, an equal number of Jews and Arabs. The members are demonstrating the possibility of coexistence between Jews and Palestinians by developing a community based on mutual acceptance, respect and cooperation. Democratically governed and owned by its members, the community is not affiliated with any political party or movement. They hold workshops for teenagers from neighbouring high schools, where they teach about solidarity and peace. Over 50,000 students have attended. This was very inspirational as they emphasize non-violence.

In closing I`d like to share another hopeful statement I heard during a conversation with a Palestinian University student. To me this statement sums up the perseverance many of the Palestinian people have and their connectedness to the land. I had asked him “Do you plan to leave Palestine when you are finished school?” He looked at me with a puzzled look in his eye with hardly a hesitation saying “Why would I leave? This is my home.”