Opinion
NCR Voices
Voices of Sisters
Social Justice
A girl lights a candle

A girl lights a candle, as people gather for a vigil in Tel Aviv, Israel, Nov. 7, to mark the one-month anniversary of the deadly attack by Palestinian Islamist group Hamas on Israel. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @joanchittister

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 15, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The airways have been heavy with wisdom these days: Unfortunately, too late. On the other hand, it is also heavy with superficial runaway judgements that are also too late to bring two peoples to peace.

Queen Rania of Jordan, for instance, put the debacle of the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza this way: "The root cause of this conflict is an illegal occupation," she declared. "It is routine human rights abuses, illegal settlements, and disregard of UN resolutions and international law. If we do not address these root causes, then you can kill the combatant, but you cannot kill the cause."

From another perspective, to ignore a well-known history of repression and debasement of Palestinians as well as ignore the most recent indiscriminate slaughter of the Jewish people, including women and infants and the kidnapping of some 200 more is to assume that one outburst after another is both justified and conclusive.

In response to a war that has been waged over and over again since 1948, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu swore on television to respond to Hamas' attack on Israel with "mighty vengeance."

But the Israeli president's focus on the immediate ignored the history of the case: the sense of debasement of Palestinians who had owned the land for centuries before the coming Jewish settlers in the 20th century.

> It is time to put away the swords and lead with the heart.
>
> Tweet this

The fact is that the vengeance that rained down on both Israelis and Palestinians solved little and reinforced the worst in their long and tangled history.

And for what cause?

Clearly, in this situation, the only way to create peace is to find a pathway to a Palestinian state. To fail to separate innocent populations from the violence being spewed — as well as to deny sovereignty to those burdened by powerlessness — exposes the real truth: Wars are routinely different from the effects imagined by the combatants themselves.

And we know those conclusions are embedded here, too. We have seen alien effects emerge again and again, one intifada after another, one occupation after another one, one settlement after another, with no genuine or universal resolution at all.

So inhuman have these expectations been that now its effects have managed to seep into other parts of the world, too, foreign and far flung. Into college campuses in the United States, for instance. Into Eastern/Western enmities as well.

Worse, it has become vengeance blamed on God who, both cultures believe, has created this land specifically for themselves and their own descendants "to till and develop." They are old ideas never extended beyond their past meaning.

For instance, this column is not new. At least it's not about new ideas. On the contrary. All the ideas are old ideas, so why are we not both happy to take a bit for ourselves? Why has nothing worked?

Why this ongoing hunger for destruction, each for the other?

Demonstrators march in Washington, D.C., Nov. 4 in support of Palestinians in Gaza.

Demonstrators march in Washington, D.C., Nov. 4 in support of Palestinians in Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. In places that include Washington, Milan and Paris, tens of thousands of pro-Palestinian demonstrators marched that day, calling for a halt to Israel's bombardment of Gaza that began Oct. 7 after Hamas militants invaded southern Israel. (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

We all know about the years of intermittent warfare between the Palestinians and Israel before this. And, I'm certain, too, that we have also hoped that simple decency, public morality, honest governments, and, in the end, personal conscience would sweep down and restore a sense of stability, of home, of peace, to both sides of one the oldest social systems on the globe.

But nothing ever happened.

I have seen it with my own eyes over and over again across the years. In fact, from July 2003 to June 2004 — shocked by the seething anger and despair of the Palestinians, seeing the concerns and personal exhaustion of the Israelis — I wrote columns to all of you about what I saw, week after week hoping to bring a broader awareness of the impasse. I explained that some Palestinians yearned to disrupt Israel's orderly world by planting suicide bombs. Israel, I noted, answered the problem with over 450 mobile checkpoints that kept Palestinians under control at all times.

It is a heartbreaking, inhuman and mutually unacceptable situation. One on side, Israel is a legally recognized nation with all the power that implies to address the United Nations, to solicit national support, to develop military defense measures, to

claim legal support and international equality.

The others, the Palestinians, live in an enclosed and entrapped sense of imprisonment on one strip of land, 25 miles long and five miles from the sea. Their lack of connection to the West Bank only increases their sense of helplessness and the invisibility of the stateless, the spumous breath, the frothing of the heart, as Palestinians fume under the blockade of the powerful.

Related: Editorial: A lamentation for the Holy Land

Israel had become a sovereign country with everything that implied. The Palestinian "Territories," on the other hand, had nothing left: no homes, no orchards, no thousand years of sheepskins to prove the ownership that was once theirs but now belonged to whom?

Or to put it even clearer: One side has homes and money and nice clothes and institutions and a rhythm of ongoing development. The other side is unemployed, unwanted, undeveloped, unaccepted, without citizenship, without passports, without welcome or home or ancestors anywhere.

How did this happen in a modern world? Where could it possibly have come from? Why is no one fixing it?

The history is complex, perhaps, but clear: After World War I, World War II and the Shoah, the Jewish community, with nowhere to go, pleaded for a homeland and the Western world gave it to them.

Jewish worshippers pray Nov. 6 at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Jewish worshippers pray Nov. 6 at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem, Judaism's holiest prayer site, on the eve of the one-month anniversary of the deadly attack on Israel by the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. (OSV News/Reuters/James Oatway)

With the hope that Israelis and Palestinians would have a common history upon which to build their mixed future, between World War I and World War II, thousands of Jews were given land upon which to stake their lives in the Palestinian Territories of the Middle East. But that was just the beginning of the Zionist movement.

In the meantime, Palestinians were left bereft, their centuries of ownership ignored politically. Bereft, yes, but most of all, without a sovereign political system and structures, totally stateless, without centuries-old self-government — and deeply angry about the powerlessness that entrapment spelled.

So here we are with more than enough land for two distinct peoples but not nearly enough heart. Which is where the problem really lies.

The Israelis, too, had learned what it means to be hounded from pogrom to pogrom over the centuries until, finally, under Nazi control, they found themselves driven out of their homes, denied their jobs, targets of an annihilation plan that slaughtered millions, the survivors of which had nowhere to go.

Who else could possibly understand the Palestinian situation as well?

Except that both the Jewish community and the Arab community itself believed that the Palestinian Territories were given by God to each of them separately and totally, one through Hagar, one through Abraham. And, all the while, fundamentalist Christians, intent on the conversion of "Jews to Jesus," have themselves provoked the divide rather than support the will of God for both.

Advertisement

Indeed, this is a spiritual problem. But it is not a problem devised by God. On the contrary. We have all been created to live in the Garden together. loving one another, caring for one another. Open to all the wanderers of the world.

From where I stand, it is not, in other words, God's decision where we are all allowed to live and how. That matter is ours. Israel and Palestine is not a question of land rights. It is a question of the spiritual obligation to everyone around us to live in creation together, each of us in peace with the other, rather than intent on waging wars of mutual vengeance.

If as the poets say, "Vengeance is the act of turning anger in on yourself," we are seeing it now, full bore, without blinking. But if that is the case, then "mighty vengeance" is not the answer.

It is time to put away the swords and lead with the heart so that both people may retain their humanity and pass it on to generations of people to come.