

Prophets or Reconcilers? Beyond Boycotts

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank has been a two-fold tragedy. It is tragic for the Palestinians – humiliated at checkpoints, their leaders imprisoned, their land stolen, their orchards and olive groves attacked, their children terrified especially during raids on their homes. It is tragic too for the Israelis – their industry, education and welfare are distorted by military imperatives, their international reputation is in tatters, their children are conscripted, brainwashed, brutalised and sent into danger in the West Bank; all this for a military occupation which benefits at most a handful of extremists.

As Quakers we are called to respond unconditionally to the pain and anguish on both sides – to be, in an important sense, simultaneously pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian. But that is only one aspect of our calling. The occupation is a situation of oppression: Quakers cannot take refuge in neutrality. Jesus was and always is on the side of the oppressed; and that is where Quakers have to stand. In particular, this is why Meeting for Sufferings has asked Friends to boycott Israeli settlement products.

Philosophically a Quaker might approach the decision to boycott in three ways:-

declare that the occupation is clearly wrong: we can have no part in the occupation or its products. We must boycott settlement goods as a matter of conscience. Quaker history offers examples of this approach.

feel led to boycott as a gesture of fellow-feeling for victims and perhaps for offenders too. This might be paralleled by an act of vicarious compassion such as fasting. Again there are Quaker precedents.

choose to apply pressure on the Israelis who are responsible for the occupation, in the hope of coercing them to withdraw from the West Bank. This antagonistic approach is more problematic for Quakers (though again there are Quaker precedents). History warns us that coercion, whether military, physical or political, tends to escalate.

It is essential for Quakers to recognise that those three alternatives are distinct. It is possible for us to adopt all three simultaneously, but we cannot claim that all are equally Quakerly. When deciding whether and if so how to boycott we should at least clarify our motives.

A boycott has the merit that everyone can take part. But boycotts are negative. Is there a more constructive alternative? Some of the ideas that follow are intended to exemplify the type of initiatives that Friends might support. Even if some turn out to be mistaken, they will have served their purpose if they stimulate other Friends to suggest something better!

The most obvious alternative is to stand the boycott on its head. Instead of, or in addition to, rejecting settlement products, we can deliberately promote Fairtrade Palestinian food, and perhaps Palestinian music, Palestinian poetry, Palestinian film and Bedouin handicrafts. For a start, every meeting house could become a distribution centre for Palestinian olive oil.

Communities in the UK can be ‘twinned’ with Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank. In this way, British sympathisers can share awareness of vulnerable communities under attack. They can raise money to support projects in their twinned community. They can

arrange for exchange visits. They can link schools perhaps by email. Above all, they can help to keep hope alive.

An ideal arrangement might be to 'twin' simultaneously with both an Israeli and a Palestinian community. This would indirectly link Israelis with Palestinians, with interesting spin-offs both in the UK and in Israel-Palestine.

Another suggestion is being piloted by the Israel-Palestine Working Party of Devon Area Quaker Meeting. They have listed Israeli and Palestinian Human Rights Groups and asked each of their twelve Local Meetings to choose one group to uphold both financially and by regular contact.

Ten years ago an international group set up a free telephone service to enable Israelis, Palestinians and US citizens to call 'over the wall' at no cost. That scheme seems ripe for adaptation to the internet. This would cost very little to run. Anyone willing to listen, one-to-one, across frontiers could be asked to complete a confidential profile form enabling the coordinator to act as a sort of 'dating agency' linking a nurse to a nurse, a farmer to a farmer, a granny to a granny, a cyclist to a cyclist, a footballer to a footballer, and so forth. Language difficulties may call for patience with internet translation services. Some Palestinians would object to this as 'normalisation', so the arrangement may have to be three-way at first, with a Palestinian and an Israeli both linked to a willing European or American.

Are there political initiatives which Quakers should be supporting? There is an immediate need for a 'shelf' agreement on the boundary between Israel and Palestine. (A 'shelf' agreement is an arrangement which does not come into force until agreement has been reached on other contentious issues, e.g. Jerusalem, refugees, security and water). The effect of a preliminary 'shelf' agreement on boundaries will straightaway be to discourage Israelis from creating new settlements on land which will later become part of Palestine; they could concentrate instead on developing the settlement blocs adjacent to the Green Line, which will become part of Israel. Boundaries would be based on the Green Line with agreed equivalent swaps. Part of the trade-off could well be a physical link across Israeli territory between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; this is discussed below.

President Obama and John Kerry have both advocated such a shelf agreement in the past, so one can assume that the US State Department is not hostile to the proposal. Friends should be pressing this possibility. President Abbas recently submitted Palestinian boundary proposals to the Quartet. The Israeli Government refused to do so, but that is of little consequence since their Separation Wall already defines the maximum territorial claims of the State of Israel in the context of a Two-State Solution.

Many Israelis reluctantly continue to support the occupation on grounds of military security, saying, "we evacuated the Gaza Strip, and Hamas fired rockets from Gaza. We left South Lebanon and Hezbollah fired rockets from Lebanon. If we withdraw from the West Bank, we will all be within rocket range". To meet their understandable anxiety, Quakers could advocate a phased Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, perhaps starting in the South Hebron Hills or the Jordan Valley. Ideally each stage should be planned in cooperation between both sides; this would be in everybody's best interests. But failing agreement Israel could start by withdrawing troops unilaterally from one sector. Palestinians will be aware that a second phase will not take place unless the first phase passes peacefully; so it will be in

their interests too to ensure that the territory released is not used as a launching site for Qassam rockets.

In the past when settlements in Gaza and elsewhere have been evacuated, objectors have been carried away one-by-one in full view of waiting television cameras. There is no need for this charade. The Israeli government should simply announce the date on which they will withdraw troops from a certain sector. Settlers who decided to stay would enjoy Palestinian, or perhaps joint Israeli-Palestinian, citizenship. While in Palestine they would be subject to Palestinian law, with precisely the same rights and duties, *mutatis mutandis*, as the non-Jewish citizens who now comprise one-fifth of the population of Israel. Those rights would include the right to vote in Palestinian elections, equal access to social and health services, and exemption from military conscription. The peace settlement would have to formalise this reciprocal arrangement, safeguarding minorities in both nations.

Some hard-line settlers may choose to stay and resist. If so the Palestinian authorities could simply cut off their electricity and water supply for a token period to demonstrate that isolated settlements were no longer viable. No violence need be involved.

This is essentially an extension of the “Mofaz Plan”, originated by Shaul Mofaz. Mofaz is a former chief of staff of the Israeli Army, a former minister of defence (under Ariel Sharon), and was briefly vice prime minister (under Benjamin Netanyahu). His record suggests that the proposal would have some support among the Israeli public, within the Israeli military establishment, and in the Knesset. Friends too should consider supporting these policies.

The fate of abandoned Israeli settlements may prove crucial to a final resolution. Here it is important to avoid mistakes that were made during the withdrawal from Gaza, when both sides agreed that all settlement dwellings should be demolished. This time settlers should be compensated only if their former homes remain intact. Abandoned settlement buildings in the West Bank must be safeguarded and earmarked for returning Palestinian refugees. Deep cultural problems will arise. Typical Israeli settlements are designed for American-style hygiene, housekeeping, gadgetry, privacy, recreation, storage, lawns, family cars and so forth. Many Palestinian refugees will have quite different needs and cultural expectations. Let's anticipate and conceive the necessary adaptations in advance. Now is a good time for the International Union of Architects (UIA) to sponsor a major competition with a prestigious international jury, to reconfigure in advance, on paper, the environment of an abandoned Israeli settlement. The UNESCO-UIA Regulations lay down an impartial blueprint for architectural competition briefs, procedures, judging, and publication of submissions. Even the top European architects are short of work in the present recession, and many would embrace the challenge.

Friends could encourage benefactors to offer the UIA generous prizes for the winning design. If no such sponsor is forthcoming, a financial appeal would have the advantage of helping to publicise the proposal and diversify the sponsorship. Multi-disciplinary teams with the best chance of winning would contain both Jewish/Israeli and Muslim/Palestinian staff; this in itself could have fruitful consequences.

There will be no stable peace until the refugee camps are closed, and Palestinian refugee families are housed in welcoming communities.

A self-governing Palestine will need a dedicated transport link between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israel accepted this in principle as part of the Oslo Accords, but the route was never specified. Naturally the Palestinians would prefer a line from Gaza City through Jerusalem, but Israelis would never accept the intrusion of a Palestinian road or railway across built-up Jewish neighbourhoods. The shortest and cheapest route would be along the northern margin of the Negev Desert, from the Gaza Strip to the south-west end of the West Bank, through areas which are sparsely populated, largely by Bedouin nomads. Such a route could well be negotiated as part of the 'shelf' agreement discussed above, balancing possible Israeli provisions against equivalent Palestinian concessions in the West Bank. What is urgently needed in advance is a feasibility study of alternative routes and transport modes, e.g. an overhead monorail, an underground railway (using 'cut and fill') or a road embankment. Each option has complex implications for cost and security. Political negotiations can scarcely proceed in the absence of a preliminary engineering feasibility survey along these lines. Quakers pioneered early railways in the UK, so may be well fitted to nurture an independent study to help resolve this aspect of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Now is the time to launch the initiative.

Jerusalem is another source of conflict. Even today Old Jerusalem is a cosmopolitan neighbourhood. Black-coated Hasidim rub shoulders with robed Christian priests and Muslims in traditional dress. Above all it is the Holy City - for Muslims, for Jews and for Christians. The Old City of Jerusalem embraces most of the holy sites - the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Al Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, the Temple Mount and the Western ('Wailing') Wall. But guns are here, there and everywhere - over the shoulders of worshippers at the Wailing Wall, in the hands of watchful Israeli conscripts, at the entry to every place of pilgrimage.

Recall the words of the Psalmist: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee" (Psalm 122:6). The psalmist's dream, and ours, will not be realized until those weapons are removed from the Holy City. We Quakers may feel lukewarm about 'holy places', but we can still embrace the idea of declaring Old Jerusalem a weapons-free area.

The Old City is bounded by an ancient stone wall, perhaps ten metres high, and penetrated by eight 'gates'. Shut your eyes and envision a couple of airport security systems outside each gate, staffed independently by Israelis and Palestinians. If our aircraft can be weapon-free, why not Old Jerusalem? Count the benefits. Pilgrims of every faith could come and go without fear of guns or bombs. Tourists would return to the old souks. Mosques, churches and synagogues would become havens of peace and prayer once more.

Here is how it might be achieved. It could be launched with a world-wide interfaith Week of Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem. Ideally the Week of Prayer would be endorsed by the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the various Chief Rabbis and Imams. Christians might be invited to pray in mosques and synagogues; Jews and Muslims also in each others' places of worship. Subsequent religious holidays involving Jerusalem, e.g. Isra'-Mi'raj, Easter, Tisha B'Av, could be encouraged to incorporate a link with the campaign. The combined prayers, the longing for peace, the dedicated conscience of the three Abrahamic faiths could launch such a compelling bandwagon that politicians (and even cautious church dignitaries) would hasten to scramble on board. Jubilee 2000 should have taught us: irresistible pressure can come from below. Who better than Friends to spark it off?

This would develop into an international campaign to persuade and press world statesmen to

join in declaring the Old City of Jerusalem a weapon-free area for a trial period of twelve months.

A Quaker initiative on these lines would not be unprecedented. In 1948, fearing warfare in Jerusalem Rufus Jones, on behalf of the American Friends Service Committee, launched an ecumenical petition appealing for a Truce of God. It was signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primate of the Church of Norway, the Presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church of America, the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church and other leading churchmen, and welcomed by the Chief Rabbi of Israel and by Muslim clerics in Jerusalem. Quakers can do it again!

An early step would be to remove all private weapons. These need not be monitored or surrendered, just taken out of the Old City – no questions asked. Cars and tractors must be removed too, to stop arms smuggling. All transport would be by camel or donkey, as in centuries past. Twin airport-type security systems staffed independently by Israeli and Palestinian officials would be placed outside each of the eight gates. Every visitor would have to pass through both of the security filters to enter the Old City. The twelve-month experiment would be under way.

Once this is seen to work we might hope it would spread. For example new Israeli ‘neighbourhoods’ in Greater Jerusalem could be internationally recognised as part of Jerusalem on the same terms as the Old City: no weapons, and free access and movement for all unarmed civilians.

These constructive ideas do not necessarily exclude boycotts. They do point up a dilemma at the heart of our Peace Testimony. Wolf Mendl’s 1974 Swarthmore Lecture reminded us that on any single issue a Quaker peacemaker may be either a “Prophet” or a “Reconciler”. A Prophet will typically confront and denounce injustice without hesitation. A Reconciler will strive for harmony. It is virtually impossible for one human being to be simultaneously a Prophet and a Reconciler. The actions of a Prophet may actually hamper the efforts of a Reconciler, while the Prophet may feel that the Reconciler is overcautious and under-committed. In the present context it is predictable that some Friends will feel comfortable with a coercive, even punitive, boycott; others will prefer a form of boycott that expresses compassion, or may question whether a boycott can ever rightly express our love for both offender and victim. The roles of Prophet and Reconciler are complementary, and we need to celebrate the gifts of both callings, and order our campaigning activities to harness the wisdom and insights of both.

A boycott will continue to embody the leadings of many Friends, but we need to discern the spirit in which we are setting out. It must be better to boycott than to do nothing in the face of injustice. But if we are to answer that of God in Israelis and Palestinians, the boycott should never be our only resource. There are plenty of creative initiatives we can take as Quakers. Let’s start proclaiming them. Now!