

God Is In This Place

© by Rabbi Alissa Wise

This sermon was given Sunday, January 23, 2012 at St. Johns Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Many thanks to St. Johns for the invitation and exceptionally warm welcome. The ideas within are in part thanks to the good thinking of JVPers who came before me and the work I did with my comrades at Jews Against the Occupation in NYC 2001-2004, among other smart people.

In Genesis we read:

Jacob woke from his sleep and said, surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!

It happened for me like that too. Well, maybe not exactly. Let me tell you what happened.

In the summer of 2007, while I was studying to become a rabbi, I lived in the West Bank for two months. One day I planted trees in a destroyed olive grove outside of Nablus. I was working with local Palestinian farmers and a group of activists from Sweden. None of the Swedish activists were Jewish; most of them were anarchist college students who were on the first trip to the Middle East, there just for a couple weeks to support Palestinian non-violent resistance.

Before we set out for the day, we exchanged information in case of arrest or injury, chose individuals to negotiate with the army, and reminded each other to follow the lead of the Palestinian farmers, to retreat when they wanted to and not to stray from the group.

As we walked the four miles out to the plot of land where the olive trees had been uprooted and now would be replanted, we got to know each other a bit. The Swedish internationals were intrigued that I was becoming a rabbi, and on our long walk out to the grove, they questioned me about what I believed about God. As happens a lot when I am with anarchists and activists who don't like or trust organized religion, there was a skepticism, or at least a confusion about my religiosity; especially as the nearest religious Jews were the ones who did the uprooting. I would often dodge the question about God in this kind of situation.

But, at that moment I had an answer. As if, I, like Jacob suddenly woke up.

There I was on the lookout for Israeli military snipers or jeeps and being pressed to answer what I believed about God, in a land full of claims on God. I scanned my history with this land—my family's connections to Jerusalem, my teen camping trips in the North of Israel, my dance club days in Tel Aviv in college — and I came to truly understand for the first time that it was against all odds that I was standing there. I had planted trees not too far from Nablus before with the Jewish National Fund — before I knew their participation in the erasure of Palestinian history. Yet there I was, a middle-class American Jew raised in a right-wing Zionist Jewish home, and now I was helping Palestinian farmers plant trees as an act of resistance in the occupied West Bank. It was in response to this question asked of me in Nablus that I filled in the blank about God: God is the impulse in me to serve the Other out of a sense of responsibility that stems from the Source of redemption.

God was in this place and I did not know it.

And, then I did. I never looked back.

My responsibility to the other — the most intimate and the most distant — is what brings me to and sustains me in the work seeking a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians.

We all have a responsibility to hear from those directly affected by occupation and oppression how we might support their struggle for dignity, self-determination and equality.

After all, these demands are basic — as much as we might hope for ourselves — as the Golden Rule teaches — treat others as you would like to be treated. So simple, so basic — so incredibly challenging.

In 2005, a Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) was made by over 120 organizations in Palestinian civil

society. This call, a request for solidarity, urges those concerned with Palestinian human rights to take action in their local communities by organizing consumer boycott and divestment campaigns — like the effort underway in the Presbyterian church to divest from Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions, and Hewlett Packard.

Make no mistake about it — the call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions made by Palestinian civil society is a rebuke of the current policies and actions made by the Israeli government. This includes the ongoing military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, and the lack of basic civil rights for non-Jewish Arab citizens of Israel.

Several Christian denominations, including your own, have made brave, constructive decisions to investigate whether their churches' investments contribute to violence and oppression in Israel and Palestine. Churches are reviewing investments as a means to ending the humiliation and brutality faced by Palestinians under occupation — an occupation that causes great harm to Israeli society as well. As long as one nation occupies another, neither can enjoy true peace and security. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. taught, no one is free until we are all free.

The churches engaging in this review and calling for divestment understand that investing in corporations that profit from the occupation is unethical. Examining the impact of their investments is a practical, effective way for American Christians to do good rather than cause harm — and is an answer to the Palestinian call for solidarity.

The decision to divest from the occupation is also critically important for Jews everywhere.

All too often, when a non-Jewish group or individual, speaks out against blatantly unjust Israeli policies and actions, they are accused of acting on that unreasoning hatred of Jews and Judaism that is commonly called anti-Semitism.

Anti-semitism, like all forms of oppression, seeks to lump all Jews together and assign us a set of characteristics—some negative, some positive. In the lumping, we are made less human, no longer seen as individuals with our

own individual lives and characteristics. Saying that all Jews support Israel unconditionally is in itself a kind of anti-Semitism, then, as it denies us the right to form our own opinions, beliefs, and relationships with Israel as whole people.

Issuing a moral rebuke such as a targeted divestment shows a respect for Jews, and others that support Israeli policies, that is fundamentally incompatible with anti-Semitism. Such an act is predicated on the belief that the recipients of the rebuke are capable of reevaluating their actions and turning onto a more just path.

I can think of no greater act of friendship than to risk defamation in order to remind one's friends of their own ideals when they, themselves, have forgotten them. In fact, this idea of sacred rebuke — *tochecha* — one of my most favorite Jewish concepts/values — is included in the Holiness Code — the section of the Torah that is famous for its focus on moral and ethical imperatives.

Tochecha is about our obligation to tell someone when they have done or are currently straying and behaving wrongly — whether to us, or to another. What's more, *tochecha* requires us also to engage with those we are rebuking and assist them and support them in the repair of the wrong you are calling out.

As we learn in Leviticus 19:17:

You shall not hate your fellow human being in your heart. Rebuke your fellow human being but incur no guilt because of this person.

You shall not hate your fellow human being in your heart — this is required for one to engage in *tochecha* — rebuke. It must be based on love and respect.

We know that Jews will not be truly free or secure until the oppression of the Palestinians ends. By examining the economic underpinnings and voting to divest from companies that benefit from the Israeli occupation, that literally have a vested interest in the failure of a just peace, Christian churches are acting as partners with Jews in our own liberation.

Millennia of persecution have left most Jews with deep scars. Whether our relatives

perished in the Holocaust or whether they suffered lesser forms of persecution and discrimination, we have been deeply affected by anti-Semitism.

Unfortunately the phenomenon is alive and well throughout the world. Many still hold wrong-headed beliefs about Jews — that we are miserly, loud, arrogant, or untrustworthy. Or that we are all rich, smart and powerful.

Even if American Jews are mostly safe and secure, we often don't feel that way. We remain vigilant and ask our allies to remain alert as well.

Because our wounds run so deeply, it is very difficult for many Jews to recognize that Israel, not Palestinians, hold disproportionate power.

But, even still, that sacred rebuke is essential — even if — and perhaps because — it is difficult for some Jews to hear. It is precisely because of my love for my own family members, my community members that I do the work I do and participate in the call for BDS and see the growing global movement as a path to a lasting peace, with justice.

As a third century rabbi, Rabbi Yossi ben Chanina, taught: "A love without reproof is no love." His study partner Resh Lakish added: "Reproof leads to peace; a peace where there has been no reproof is no peace."

Out of respect and love — highlight what is wrong, and together we step toward peace.

Highlight the harm of settlement expansion and of the various consumer products—like SodaStream and Ahava cosmetics that are profiting off of Palestinian's natural resources and stolen land. Highlight the acts of Caterpillar which makes millions off of demolishing homes and uprooting olive trees. Each year, U.S. corporations receive an alarming subsidy from U.S. taxpayers. By law, 75% of U.S. military aid to Israel must be spent in American corporations. It is with this money, for example, that Israel buys weaponized bulldozers from Caterpillar.

Highlight Motorola solutions who profits from Israel's control of the Palestinian population by providing surveillance systems around Israeli settlements, checkpoints, and military camps in

the West Bank, as well as communication systems to the Israeli army and West Bank settlers.

Highlight Hewlett-Packard who provides on-going support and maintenance to a biometric ID system installed in Israeli checkpoints in the occupied West Bank which deprive Palestinians of the freedom of movement in their own land and allows the Israeli military occupation to grant or deny special privileges to the civilians under its control.

The Presbyterian church's decision to openly look at your investments, and to call for divestment from the companies stated above — Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions, and Hewlett Packard — is so brave in part because you are doing it in the face of being painfully and wrongfully accused of anti-Semitism. The legacy of persecution against Jews runs deep and the prejudice is real even today. Accusations of anti-Semitism should not be taken lightly. Nor should they be issued carelessly.

As I see it, the quest for justice is at the core of Jewish tradition and identity. When Jews support the Israeli occupation, we are acting from fear due to centuries of intense persecution and genocide. When the US government supports the Israeli occupation in the face of international human rights violations, it is acting out of self-interests that have nothing to do with Jewish values, traditions or security. The very essence of Jewish values is a tradition of justice.

To the Jewish organizations that wield the accusation of anti-Semitism against those that speak out for justice, I ask, *When have you raised your voice when Israel demolishes a Palestinian home or uproots a Palestinian orchard?*

The truth is that the majority of American Jews have never felt so distant either from those organizations or from Israel itself. Major studies commissioned by these same organizations have found that most young American Jews feel emotionally unattached to Israel and report that peace is a higher value to them than security.

These same American Jews reject the idea

that all Palestinians or Muslims support terrorism. Other studies have confirmed that over two-thirds of American Jews are “disturbed by Israel’s policies and actions.”

For many American Jews, maintaining harmony with Jewish organizations like the Jewish Federation, the Jewish Community Relations Councils, and the Anti-Defamation League – comes at the price of the values that most American Jews hold dear: justice, equality and peace.

Because the organizations of our parents and grandparents no longer speak for us, groups including my organization, Jewish Voice for Peace, are generating phenomenal support among American Jews. Jewish Voice for Peace is one of the largest and oldest grassroots Jewish peace organizations in the US. We have a professional staff of seven that supports over 100,000 Internet activists and some 1000 members in over 30 chapters across the United States.

Our work at JVP includes having initiated the largest divestment campaign for Palestinian human rights in US history. This campaign — the [We Divest campaign](#) — is now a national coalition effort that is demanding retirement fund giant TIAA-CREF divest from the Israeli occupation. Our petition to TIAA-CREF highlights 5 companies — 3 of which — Caterpillar, Veolia and Motorola Solutions — are part of their “socially responsible investment” portfolio. There is currently no way for TIAA-CREF investors to not be investing in human rights violations against Palestinians.

Daily humiliation at checkpoints, segregated Jewish-only roads, illegal settlement expansion, restrictions on movement and access to jobs and healthcare — all parts of a Palestinian’s life living under occupation must be stopped.

While not all may be ready to hear us, we must continue to speak. Our obligation to sacred rebuke endures — for Jews and non-Jews alike. We at Jewish voice for peace need your help. We cannot end the Israeli occupation alone. We need our allies to stand side-by-side with us.

This work, my friends, is where God resides.

God is surely in this place, and, now, I do know it.

And yet, in truth, we do not know for sure what will come of it.

As the book of Proverbs beautifully teaches us in chapter 9 verse 8:

A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you.

For decades, churches have led the way in applying the nonviolent tactic of divestment to end violence against civilians all over the world. The Presbyterian Church has shown the integrity, and the courage, to rebuke the Israeli government for its bitter oppression of the Palestinians.

Whether it was intended, or not, this rebuke speaks also to the many Jews, and non-Jews, who support Israel’s oppressive policies, or stand aside and leave them unopposed. Now we must face the test of our own integrity, and our own courage: we must choose how we will hear the message of divestment. Will we be scoffers, hating our friends for challenging our misdeeds, or will we be wise, loving them for reminding us of the pursuit of justice that is our highest calling, and the expression of our better selves?

The answer, of course, is that our response will be mixed, and, at first, the scoffers may well predominate. Yet I believe that the day will come, be it in one year, five years, or in fifty, when the Presbyterian Church’s action in this matter will be remembered with love and gratitude by Jews around the world.

I am proud to be among the first to say, *Todah Rabah*, “Thank you!”