

The Resolution on Israel-Palestine Should Be Rejected -- But Not Because of Its Critique of Israel  
-- *Bruce Leichty, Delegate, Lawyer and Member of MennoPIN (Mennonite Palestine-Israel Network)*

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There are many good impulses but there are some profoundly problematic features of the resolution on Israel and Palestine that will be voted on at the delegate assembly of Mennonite Church USA at Orlando, Florida July 6. The problematic features do not include the limited critique of the state of Israel that appears in the resolution. Rather, the resolution is typical Christian "nice talk" when it comes to misconduct of the Jewish state, the kind of nice talk that has never solved anything, for all its theological symmetry. Yes, by all means let's seek reconciliation; but as the wise South Africans knew--we need "truth and reconciliation" both. What is missing in the resolution is a willingness to speak the more unpleasant truths about the Jewish state and its supporters, instead of pretending that it is only Christians or Americans who have a problem with support for Israel on the one hand or antisemitism on the other. Sadly, the resolution should be rejected and the framers sent back to the drawing board.

The drafters of the resolution unfortunately allowed the process to be co-opted, after an earlier version resolution failed at the MCUSA convention in Kansas City in 2015. Now instead of a resolution about the suffering of the Palestinian people, we are presented with a resolution that dares equate that problem with the problem of "antisemitism," circa 2017. Please understand that your commentator is not objecting to principled love-based opposition to "antisemitism" (there's a double negative in there, I believe), at least if it were limited to the definition found in the resolution. In footnote No. 3, page 2, the drafters of the resolution state, "Antisemitism refers to the discrimination against, violence toward, or stereotypes of Jews for being Jewish." Aside from the unfortunate use of the term "stereotype" there, that quasi-definition might be one of the better parts of what is an otherwise troubled analysis, but unfortunately the drafters seem oblivious to the very real attacks and suppression of speech that are currently being waged by the guardians of the antisemitism galaxy.

I put it to you that there are actually very few people, and certainly few Mennonites in this day and age, who actually discriminate against or wage violence against Jews just because "they are Jewish." (Stereotyping is a whole different subject, and stereotypes are applied to many groups--Mennonites included--and while sometimes problematic, do not by their nature connote the hatefulness that is usually associated with the term antisemitism.) Instead, people to whom the term antisemite is applied often function with a sense that they have been victimized by Jews acting in concert, or without accountability; or the accused "antisemites" believe that they bear the brunt (or they are pointing out how some non-Jews bear the brunt) of conduct that is somehow linked to the Jewish identity of a perpetrator or a perpetrator class, or deemed related to the practices or beliefs of rabbinic Judaism. There's a lot to unpack in there, but suffice it to say that these people are not acting or speaking against Jews for "being" Jewish. The resolution is flawed in the sense that it does not recognize that Jews are more often vilified for "doing" Jewish than "being" Jewish--whether or not properly so is not the issue for now.

It is not irrelevant to this point that Mennonites in different places and times have been accused of "sharp dealing" or dishonesty or mistreatment of hired labor or drug-running or other acts which "good Mennonites" believe having nothing to do with their faith. Some of might posture that we are being attacked "just for being Mennonite," and perhaps that is sometimes the case (we do have a profile that can cause resentment), but some of us know it is not always the case.

Those using the term "antisemite" these days are casting a much broader net than is needed for the few captured by the definition in the resolution. There is no acknowledgement in the resolution, for example, that many who object to U.S. Israel policy or who call for participation in the BDS movement (boycott, divestment, sanctions) or an end to or decrease in military aid to Israel are smeared with the term antisemite. That is highly relevant to any resolution on Palestine that also attempts to treat the topic of antisemitism.

Indeed there is a growing trend in state legislatures (often initiated by Jewish legislators) to make sure that individuals or companies supporting BDS are financially penalized. California, Kansas, Illinois and South Carolina have enacted laws that essentially create blacklists of certain companies that boycott Israel. In covering these efforts, the Jerusalem Post noted that "human rights groups have labeled the BDS movement as antisemitic." Universities are under pressure to deny free speech to those who oppose Israel's Palestinian policy for similar reasons. Is that the reason why this resolution falls short of calling for Mennonite participation in boycotts and divestment and support for U.S. government sanctions against Israel for its military occupation? Fear of being called antisemitic?

American human rights activists often have not yet grappled with some internal contradictions in their own position regarding Israel, and the resolution is no exception. While there is merit in trying to establish the distinction between critique of the government of Israel and critique of the Jewish people--and the resolution desperately tries to do so--even those distinctions ultimately have to be qualified. The insistence on a distinction falters when American Jews (indeed Jews worldwide) are not held accountable for the acts of the Jewish state in the same way--for instance--that the drafters are attempting to hold all Americans responsible for the acts of their government, or all American Mennonites accountable for the genocidal complicity of certain German Mennonites during World War II. As to the latter equation, there is no real moral equivalency: any participation by Mennonites in overt acts of harm toward Jews during World War II was veiled from the Mennonite community (certainly the world Mennonite community), whereas the harm caused by the military occupation of Palestinian territories is well-known to all Jews.

On that same point, it is to be doubted whether more than a few hardened souls in any Christian circle--at least where Christianity is more than just a facade--would contend that the known genocide of millions, whether or not part of a religious tradition, is anything short of abominable. Especially for Mennonites who were taught to love the enemy, even if Jews were or are regarded as "the enemy," genocidal intent or smug acquiescence to genocide is simply not plausible.

But Mennonites have to be made to feel guilty nonetheless, because the resolution is crafted by the partisans of tolerance who are embarked on an impossible burden of trying to please everyone. In the process, the drafters, whether wittingly or unwittingly, adopt a politically correct narrative acceptable to the American imperium, but above all one which does not risk relationships built up with American Jews. I daresay few Mennonites have relationships with Palestinians, American or others, but we have formed alliances with both the rabbinical and professional and mercantile classes found in Judaism because of the similar if much less prominent social profile of Mennonites. (America has provided not just a refuge but a place for the flourishing of Jews, even disproportionately so, but the same cannot be said for Palestinians). Far from recognizing--with respect and love--that American Christians will inevitably be at odds with Judaism for the same reasons their founder was, the narrative on which the resolution is premised, well-known in America, is that one must feel a kind of overwhelming racial guilt (see lines 17, 50) for one's own actions or inaction and that of one's ancestors and fellow citizens, in this case everyone who is not a Jew. Even

more specifically and controversially, one dare not stand against current oppression of Palestinians without at the same time paying obeisance to the almighty Holocaust idol (see lines 116-18). The word "idol" is used advisedly here, however controversially, to denote the fact that Holocaust has assumed the proportions of a dogma which dare not be denied on penalty of either shunning or jailing, depending on the context. This narrative ultimately holds that certain critiques of Israel or Judaic or Zionist influence may properly be labeled anti-semitic, no matter the extent to which these critiques arise out of Christian values and beliefs or even honest disagreements about historical fact.

Consider by way of contrast the words of Jesus--nowhere found or alluded to in the resolution--to the Jewish leaders of his day: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.....[Y]ou clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence....For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness." No connection to the present, you say? On what basis have Mennonites reached such a conclusion? The imperial agenda, and now the adoptive agenda of the resolution, is to ensure that few even consider the possibility that little has changed since Jesus uttered those words; that God may be calling the adherents of Jesus' form of Jewishness (expressed in Christianity albeit imperfectly) to hold Jewish leaders accountable in the same way that Jesus did in his day. Indeed, the resolution suggests that Christians ought to head in the other direction, toward utter deference to Jewish leaders and repudiation of the words of Jesus. Are there already echos of prospective Mennonite repudiation of the scathing judgments found in the New Testament, when the resolution urges that we must "read scripture in light of the Holocaust"? Granted, the mass murder of an ethnic group might well have some bearing on a people's theology, but what does it have to do with the way that we read Scripture?

There are problems with numerous specific formulations found in the resolution and this treatment may not be exhaustive, but I submit that it is important to recognize the flawed premises behind some of these formulations. For example, the resolution states that the suffering of Jews and Palestinians has often been "set against each other" (p. 1, line 10), whatever that means, but assuming that there is not a hopeless ambiguity in the expression, does the allegation have any basis? The "Summary" preface (p. 1, lines 10-11) goes on to say that, "We recognize...that the legacy of Jewish suffering is intertwined with the suffering of Palestinians." This equally ambiguous "recognition" of intertwining (whatever that means) is something that Jesus would not have claimed and that Mennonites should not endorse, based on the disproportionate suffering of Palestinians in our time, and based on the clear evidence that almost all violence of Palestinians is in response to their oppression and enslavement in their own land, and specifically to restraints on their movement and settlements that are unlawful under international law which threaten home and livelihood of the Palestinian people. Jesus was willing to identify predatory conduct where he saw it, not engage in false equivalencies. Jesus did not confuse predatory conduct for conduct born solely of insecurity, but this resolution does.

Perhaps the drafters are attempting to suggest that any critique of Israel must be accompanied by a critique of Palestinian violence, but this "flat" view of violence is particularly inappropriate for the occupied territories just as it is wherever there is violence of an oppressor class and violence of the oppressed class. Yes, there is a real and cognizable difference.

The subject of Jewish insecurity cannot be adequately addressed here, but Mennonites of all people should know that the love of Jesus compels Christians to tell the state of Israel just as much as

anyone else that security ultimately cannot be found in weapons, walls and violence. Moreover, when does the "continued threat to the security of the Jewish people" (lines 15, 38) become not a justification but a pretext? At the same time, there is another false equivalency as well as dishonesty in the resolution at line 38 when the drafters state, "Violence has not been effective for either Palestinians or Israelis...." In point of fact, violence has been effective on one level for the Israeli state, and it has largely produced the desired outcome, even though dehumanization and corruption have ensued and do in fact inevitably ensue.

The false equivalencies go deep. For many well-meaning Christians, they start with the equation of the Israel of our Old and New Testaments with the Israel of today, a tenuous connection indeed, since the Christian church is the new Israel. Too many Mennonites are still influenced, even if unknowingly, by a particular interpretation of Genesis 12:3, where God is said to have told Israel, "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee." Scofield in his commentary (subsequently magnified in the New Scofield Study Bible published by Oxford University Press in 1984), stated: "It has invariably fared ill with the people who have persecuted the Jew--well with those who have protected him. The future will still more remarkably prove this principle." Christian Zionists such as John Hagee now claim, "the man or nation that lifts a voice or hand against Israel invites the wrath of God." Too many Mennonites have toed this line carefully, irrespective of whether they are influenced directly by Scofield or Hagee. Lost in the glib Scriptural exegesis of this passage is how the modern-day state of Israel can lay claim to these biblical promises to the exclusion of those who chose to follow Jesus, who warned some about claiming Abraham as their father when "God could raise up from these stones children of Abraham."

The false equivalencies implicit in the resolution continue in the confusion of past harm with ongoing present harm, and particularly with the use of the Holocaust as a kind of talisman for the pinnacle of racial guilt. However horrific the events of World War II as they affected the Jewish people, there is no recognition here of the exaggerations and political use and suppression of speech that have long accompanied "Holocaust" historiography once the Holocaust became a symbol of the war and of Jewish victimization in the 1960's, too extensive a topic to cover in full. The increasing insistence on sacralizing the Holocaust in the American public square has helped drive American Mennonites to wring their hands over the slightest statement which might be offensive to Jews. It is deplorable that Mennonites would be willing to reinforce (p. 5 line 116) the discredited narrative that "the Holocaust [] killed six million Jews," a kind of sacral number that was used by Jewish partisans long before World War II to measure the suffering of their community. Historians now generally concede that they cannot prove numbers of war-related deaths of Jews anywhere near that number; and while one might be able to retort, "well, the number is not important, it is the genocide that matters," the number is not the place where the myths and exaggerations end. Most people will likely never know what really happened in the WWII camps said to be mass extermination camps organized to do away with Jews, although what these camps certainly accomplished along with any other sinister objective was to confer enormous power on those who claim vicarious victim status. (Is it an accident that in a world still obsessed with the imagery of bloody sacrifice the term "Holocaust" means "burnt offering?") It is a crime in many European countries to inquire into and research the subject of the Holocaust; clearly it is a worse social sin to deny the Holocaust than it is to deny the resurrection of Jesus. Books by revisionist historians, which raise significant questions about the standard accounts of the Holocaust, are reflexively despised and ignored (viciously so by some Mennonites and nervously so by others) for the same reasons that our Anabaptist forebears were hounded and killed for their incredible and disgusting dissent some 500 years ago: Some doctrines used to preserve order will be placed beyond question, and when reason is insufficient to combat them, the raw power of

the law and of social opprobrium will be used to make sure these doctrines are not questioned. If the resolution is adopted, we join the persecutors of freedom of inquiry and dissent.

If the resolution is adopted, we will be "confessing" that "we Mennonites, as Christians, and as Americans, bear some responsibilities for the injustice and violence that [Jews] have experienced historically and currently." (p. 1, lines 12-13, p. 5, lines 113-14). This collective confession is both hollow and inauthentic, nor is it warranted. Yes, many Mennonites have as both Christians and Americans helped exacerbate and perpetuate the post-WWII violence directed to Palestinians by their financial support (mostly in the form of tax dollars) for Israeli militarism and unchecked expansionism, but I am still waiting to be told where exactly American Mennonites have been responsible for the injustice and violence that adherents of Judaism have experienced. Where did Mennonites fail to help postwar Jewish refugees, for example? (p. 5, lines 116-17). Our leadership is eagerly (far too eagerly) seizing on a new book authored by Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton University Press, 2017) (see p. 7, lines 55-56), as proof that Mennonites were implicated in supporting Nazism prior to and leading up to WWII, before the book has been carefully reviewed or considered, but--even if that showed widespread German Mennonite participation in or acquiescence to or even initiation of violence and injustice perpetrated against Jews in Germany and neighboring states, which it does not, what has that do with Americans?

Furthermore, the resolution states, if we make that confession, then we are to go on to promise that we will "actively oppose antisemitism." Open that Pandora's box if you wish. All sorts of misguided condemnation can be expected to follow; indeed, one could argue that we have jumped the gun and already started on that project (see my accompanying piece on how Executive Director Ervin Stutzman cut me off from participating in a pre-convention delegate webinar after I critiqued the "antisemitism" bandwagon). Without attempting to exaggerate any single act of dissent, efforts to silence and squelch Bruce Leichty may well be part of the next report to the church (see resolution p. 5, lines 148-49) on what the church has done to fight antisemitism, never mind the pure motives.

The resolution is totally silent on the way in which the founding of the state of Israel itself has extraordinary implications for Christians. While Christian Zionism is lamented, the resolution completely ignores the political Zionist movement which began in Europe in the late 1800s, and includes the extraordinary story of how Louis Brandeis, eventually to become a U.S. Supreme Court justice and a close friend of Woodrow Wilson, founded a Harvard University secret society called the "Parushim" (relating to the Hebrew word Pharisee) which dedicated itself to the establishment of a state for Jews. (See *Against Our Better Judgment: The Hidden History of How the U.S. Was Used to Create Israel*, by Alison Weir, quoting Peter Gross, *Israel in the Mind of America*, New York, Knopf, 1984). The hypocrisy of ignoring the displacement caused by the post-WWII founding of Israel, indeed all history before the military occupation of 1967, is astounding, especially when considering that some of the same activists for Jewish tolerance would be the first to condemn early Americans for forcing Native peoples off their lands. There is no mention in the resolution of the "Nakba," or "the Catastrophe," which Palestinians commemorate annually to remember the 750,000 Palestinian men, women and children who were expelled during 1947-49 from their homes by numerically superior Israeli military forces, accompanied by massacres and destruction. Writing of those events, Dr. Salman Abu-Sitta stated, "for a country to be occupied, emptied of its people, its physical and cultural landmarks obliterated, its destruction hailed as a miraculous act of God, all done according to a premeditated plan, meticulously executed, internationally supported and still maintained today...[is a] Holocaust unsurpassed in history." Yet it merits no mention in a resolution that strives to be even-handed in its treatment of Jews and Palestinians.

One should beware language such as that found in line 19, which talks about "complicity in a web." That is dodgy language, since a web is by nature somewhat amorphous and hard to distinguish. By contrast, violence, injustice and suffering can often be traced to specific acts of the powerful. Historical research must be done, and it must be done carefully and honestly and without preconception.

The resolution at lines 35-37 ignores the fact that the West created a Jewish state which was doomed to always be insecure and demand a huge military. The resolution ignores the reality that Israeli Jews do not just "see themselves" to be in a hostile region, but they are in fact in a hostile region, and the reasons why, and the implications of that acknowledgement. Instead, "western Christians" are singled out for inflicting violence upon Jews, as mystifying as the reference to their supposed participation in "pogroms" against Jews (p. 2, lines 8-9). Jews have largely prospered, at least in the past 70 years, in societies which could be characterized as western and Christian. "Pogroms" usually refers to the massacre of Jews in eastern Europe and Russia. If Jews are worried about "pogroms" or persecution in the West, then one question should be whether they are governing themselves in such a way as to minimize the hostility that they face from violent neighbors. Granted that the subject is complex, and one does not want to "blame the victim," but there always needs to be intense scrutiny of those who are claiming victim status. Mennonites may be in an especially good position to know that, since they have been victims for nothing more than deviating from social orthodoxy, and they have also been targeted for violence for factors over which they had some control (and here I am thinking particularly of Russian Mennonite society where an imbalance of wealth led to great and glaring disparities between many Mennonite estate owners and industrialists compared to surrounding populations--although to be sure many Mennonites innocent of any complicity in predatory conduct got caught up in that violence, just as many Jews have in the eruption of violence that has followed perception of Jewish predation).

The resolution talks of peacemakers who are creating the context for fair and genuine negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis (line 44). Many such peacemakers are undoubtedly doing good work and peacemakers are much needed. One must also remember the words of Jesus from time to time, though, that he came "not to bear peace but a sword." The sword was not a literal sword, as he made clear, but is the sword of truth. Unfortunately, the adoption of this particular resolution will not contribute to a context where Palestinians and Israelis can have genuine, evenhanded dialogue. When addressing antisemitism in particular, there needs to be much greater wisdom, discernment and nuance than this resolution shows. Ultimately, Mennonite will do no one a favor by avoiding dealing with some of the hard truths and hard issues that are discussed above; and sorrowfully, no resolution should be adopted by the church as long as that situation pertains.

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