
Editorial

In the wake of World War I, the Mennonite Church's Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers sent money and volunteers to support the work of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (now known as the Near East Foundation). Although hopes for a semi-independent Mennonite mission in the region failed to materialize, between 1919 and 1921 several Mennonites contributed to relief efforts in lands formerly under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹

Among those Mennonites was Orie O. Miller, future Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker and director. Miller assisted the director of relief in the "Syrian" area, which covered most of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine-Israel, and the Sinai Peninsula. Another Mennonite volunteer, B. F. Stoltzfus, helped run an orphanage in Jerusalem. Although Mennonite attention would soon shift elsewhere, these years mark the beginning of Anabaptist witness in Palestine.

The essays in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* pick up the story from 1948, after which Mennonites began to assist Palestinian refugees displaced during the First Arab-Israeli War. Mennonite presence in the region has been consistent since 1950 and has largely taken shape through various partnerships with Palestinians and Israelis. Meanwhile, Palestinians and the State of Israel have been locked in a devastating and asymmetric cycle of conflict that continues to unfold. Mennonites and their partners have repeatedly but vainly called for peace.

In the summer of 1993, when I was thirteen years old, I obtained a copy of Palestinian Christian Elias Chacour's memoir, *Blood Brothers*.² That book describes in vivid detail the 1948 destruction of Palestinian communities and the author's peacemaking work in the years since. Not long after reading *Blood Brothers* I was at dinner with a friend from church and his father. My friend's father made some remarks about US policy toward Israel that shocked me in their lack of concern for Palestinians. Surely as a Christian he would care about the fate of fellow Christians! This was my introduction to the vexed world of Christian Zionism.

In school the previous year my class had read the diary of Anne Frank.³ As we discussed the book, a Jewish classmate burst into tears and shared about the

1 For this and the following paragraph see the *Global Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* articles on "Israel," "Israel Mennonite Mission," "Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers (Mennonite Church)," and "Relief Work," all at <https://gameo.org/>. See also Near East Foundation, "Our History," <https://neareast.org/our-history/>.

2 Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 1984).

3 Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Bantam, 1993).

impact of the Holocaust on her family and the Jewish people more broadly. Her tears and story helped me understand that the migration of families like hers to the Americas, Israel, and elsewhere after World War II was a response to a horror of world-historic proportions.

Reading *Blood Brothers* gave me important additional context relevant to understanding the outcome of that response, especially concerning the machinations of British colonial authorities in the Middle East and the impact of the establishment of the State of Israel on indigenous Palestinians.

In September 1993, a photo of two men shaking hands—Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization—embraced by US President Bill Clinton, appeared on the cover of my hometown newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesmen*. I distinctly remember the hope I felt upon seeing the photograph and reading about the Oslo Accords, with their promise of Palestinian self-governance and peace. However, the alternating acts of terrorism that followed, including the 1995 assassination of Rabin by a right-wing Israeli opposed to the Accords, quickly made hope untenable.

The current phase of the conflict was initiated by a horrific attack on Israeli soldiers and civilians led by Hamas from Gaza on October 7, 2023. That attack killed approximately 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians.⁴ Around 250 Israelis were taken hostage by Hamas. The Israeli military response has killed over 40,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children. Much of Gaza has been leveled by Israeli bombs—many of which were given to the Israeli military by the United States government. The University Network for Human Rights has led a legal review of Israel's actions since October 7 and concluded that they violate the Genocide Convention of 1948.⁵

Since October 7, Israeli violence against Palestinians in the West Bank has escalated. Hamas's ally Hezbollah has launched a missile campaign from Lebanon leading to the displacement of over 60,000 Israelis from northern Israel.⁶ Israel has retaliated by invading southern Lebanon and bombing the Lebanese capital, Beirut. Many observers fear an escalation into a full-scale regional war involving Iran—Hamas's and Hezbollah's primary backer.

4 For statistics see Emma Farge and Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Gaza Death Toll: How Many Palestinians Has Israel's Campaign Killed?," *Reuters*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gaza-death-toll-how-many-palestinian-s-has-israels-campaign-killed-2024-07-25/>.

5 University Network for Human Rights, "Genocide in Gaza: Analysis of International Law and Its Applications to Israel's Military Actions Since October 7, 2023," <https://www.humanrightsnetwork.org/publications/genocide-in-gaza>.

6 Jaroslav Lukiv, "Israel Sets New Goal of Returning Residents to the North," *BBC*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cglkkrj94ldo>.

The first article in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* is a sermonic reflection from Amy Yoder McGloughlin of Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT). The author narrates her harrowing departure after October 7 with a CPT delegation from the West Bank. As Palestinian friends were their “waymakers” out of danger, she hopes Mennonite allies will collaborate with Palestinians to help them find a way out of oppression.

Some Mennonites in the United States have responded to recent events by creating Mennonite Action, an organization that seeks to mobilize Mennonite churches and individuals to demand a ceasefire and an end to the occupation of Palestine. Mennonite Action steering committee member and chair of the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) Robert Lee Aitchison discusses his participation in various attempts to convince US policymakers to bring about a ceasefire. Jonathan Smucker, Tim Nafziger, and Sarah Augustine place Mennonite Action’s work in light of calls since the 1960s for Mennonites to shed their historic “quiet in the land” posture and agitate for political transformation. From this perspective, the work of Mennonite Action can be seen as complementary to that of related organizations such as the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, led by Augustine. A sermon from Tim Seidel connects the prophet Isaiah’s vision of peace to the reality of Gaza and the work of Mennonite Action.

Seidel’s commitments emerged in part from his time serving with MCC in Palestine and Israel. Alain Epp Weaver, who also served there with MCC, provides considerable background on the organization’s work with Palestinians as he considers the necessarily slow and “fragmentary” character of Mennonite witness in the region. Examples of that witness take center place in the next set of articles.

David Lapp-Jost recalls surprising dimensions of the legacy of his missionary aunts, Ada and Ida Stoltzfus, who ran an orphanage in Hebron from the 1950s. He includes the story of one of their students who became a prominent translator for the US military during the Iraq War. Loren Lybarger shares stories and poetry related to his MCC stint in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1980s and 1990s. Biblical scholar and professor Dorothy Jean Weaver reflects on regular teaching and research trips to Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon that began in the 1990s—trips from which she “has never recovered.” Wayne Spiegel provides an overview of the work of Nazareth Hospital, which Mennonites have been involved with since 1950, and associated ministries such as Nazareth Village.

Byron Rempel-Burkholder then asks what Anabaptists can learn from Palestinian liberation theology and experience. He concludes that Palestinians challenge Anabaptists to follow Jesus in solidarity with those “under the thumb of Empire.” A poem by Hannah Redekop amplifies a core theme of Rempel-Burkholder’s essay: Loving in the way of Jesus means liberation for both Palestinians and Israelis—and indeed for us all.

The final two articles of the issue discuss one attempt to outline such a broad Mennonite approach to liberating love—the 2017 document “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine: A Resolution for Mennonite Church USA.”⁷ Resolution co-author André Gingerich Stoner narrates the resolution’s genesis, aims, and ongoing relevance to peacemaking in Palestine and Israel. John Kampen offers a dissenting voice. He is not convinced that the resolution or the process surrounding it adequately took the concerns of Jews into account, especially with regard to the ongoing challenges of antisemitism and the importance of the State of Israel. Kampen suggests that peacemaking strategies that fail to accept the validity of these concerns are unlikely to gain much purchase.

Several of the authors in this issue agree on the need to grapple both with legacies of antisemitism and the dispossession and now genocide of Palestinians. Mennonite witness in Palestine and Israel, and in the United States and other countries bound up with that region, will have to continue to discern how best to grapple with these intertwined legacies. We will have to respond empathetically to the tears, to the needs and aspirations, of all the inhabitants of Palestine and Israel, even as we seek to take a clear look at the region’s history and present reality—and act for justice. May this collection of articles contribute to a form of Mennonite witness that is empathetic, clear-sighted, and bold.

—Jamie Pitts, Editor

7 The text of the resolution is available at Mennonite Church USA, “Israel/Palestine Initiatives,” accessed October 30, 2024, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/israel-palestine-initiatives/>.