

For Peace, Not for Palestine

by Roscoe Mathieu

“May we look upon our treasure, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try to discover whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.”

– John Woolman

When John Woolman penned those words into his *Journal*, he was worried about slave cotton on his back, aiding and abetting the oppression of African Americans in the South. Today, we must concern ourselves with whether the “seeds of war” are in our hearts, on our lips, and in our donations, aiding and abetting anti-Semitic violence, rape, terror, and the anticipated elimination of nine million people “from the river to the sea.”

And the complicity and full-throated support of Friends for all these things.

I do not think Friends would endorse horrifying violence of this kind, or any kind, knowingly – yet this is what our institutions, meetings, and individual Friends passionately support. The ASFC asks us to “shift the narrative” when talking about “Palestine,” stressing that “violence did not start on 10/7 or with Gaza” and laying the blame squarely with Israel, as if violence were Hamas’ only option. Pacific Yearly Meeting hosts Apartheid Free Meetings that similarly use language and arguments that systemically deny the human rights of Israelis, while (rightly) defending the infringed rights of Palestinians. A cursory review of Reddit’s r/Quaker group or the attached Discord will give a slew of individual voices for Palestine, many of them either dismissive of, or, more disturbingly, enthusiastic about Hamas’ violence towards Israel and Israeli civilians.

All of this is in defense of “the Palestinian people.” And the Palestinian people deserve to be free. But Palestine will never be free until Israel is secure – and by the same token, Israel will never be secure until Palestine is free. Those inflammatory statements and \$450 million in aid going to “the Palestinian people” are, after 10/7, supporting a Gazan government committed to a violent total war and which three-quarters of the Palestinian people considered corrupt, nepotistic, and rife with embezzlement on 10/6.

These words and donations are supporting Hamas, not Palestine. Some Friends (and friends of Friends) are happy to do so – they see Hamas as the Afghans and Iraqis invaded and occupied after 9/11, as just more Muslims being oppressed by the forces of Western/NATO/American/Zionist violence. Others are queasy about Hamas, worrying that Hamas actually may have done some of the unspeakable acts of violence and terror that they proudly broadcast on video and in written statements. These Friends say to themselves that such violence is deplorable, but only natural in the face of Western/NATO/American/Zionist oppression.

According to Hamas’ founding charter, “[Hamas] strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine,” because “Palestine is an Islamic land.” Here, they don’t mean the

current borders of Gaza or of Palestine, nor even the 1967 borders that some Westerners call on Israel to unilaterally cede, but every inch of the State of Israel. Hamas sees itself “one of the links in the chain of the struggle against the Zionist invaders.” They quote the Hadith that “the Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees.” “Death for the sake of Allah” the charter continues, “is the loftiest of [Islam’s] wishes.”

In Article 13 of their founding document, Hamas explicitly *rejects* any negotiated peace settlement, ceasefire, or treaty with Israel: “[Peace] initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement. . . Those conferences are no more than a means to appoint the infidels as arbitrators in the lands of Islam. . . There is no solution for the Palestinian problem except by Jihad. Initiatives, proposals, and international conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility.”

And they have not forgotten their roots.

On November 1, Ghazi Hamad (of the Gaza border guard) told the BBC that “we will repeat October 7, over and over, until Israel is finished,” and “we must *remove* that country [Israel].” 10/7, I remind you, involved acts of sexual violence and violence against children, the abduction and murder of civilians at a music festival, the slaughter of entire towns, and the murders of 1,200 Canadians, Thais, Chinese, and, not least, Israelis (including Arab-Israelis). 10/7 was an act of terror, regardless of whether Friends believe this act of terror was justified – and Hamas leadership promises it will not stop until Israel and its nine million citizens are gone.

Some Friends are quite comfortable with the idea of the dissolution of the State of Israel, demanding, in accordance with the North American land-back movement, that Israel cede its entire territory to Gaza and its current government. I ask you to imagine what would happen to nine million Israeli citizens, of any creed or color, under Hamas occupation.

No one can expect a people, so long denied their rights and led by such an organization, to respect the human rights of their former oppressors once they have power over them.

None of this excuses Israel’s excessive war of retribution, its frequent failures to obey its own policies of harm reduction, the bloodthirsty rhetoric of the ruling Likud party. None of this excuses Israel’s violations of international law and the temporary ceasefire. But, by the same coin, nothing Israel has done justifies Hamas’ terror tactics. Thee can’t have it both ways.

Supporters of the Palestinian people will tell you Hamas were legitimately elected – and they were, in 2007, during the Second Intifada and the height of violence against Israelis in our lifetime up to 10/7. Most of Gaza’s population are children under the age of eighteen, and *could not have voted* in the election that swept Hamas into power, the last election they’ve ever seen in their lives.

Hamas is not the Palestinian people. The West Bank, on the other border of Israel entirely, is governed by the Palestinian Authority, which rejects open violence and acknowledges the existence of Israel. Hamas has explicitly rejected the Palestinian Authority and all that they stand for, running Gaza as their own fief to continue an endless war to wipe Israel from the map.

These are the people Friends are supporting, defending, arguing for, when we chant “from the river to the sea,” claim Israelis are “settler-colonialists” or “white” who scheme for “Palestinian genocide,” or demand a unilateral ceasefire from Israel that does not even entail Hamas releasing its hostages. These are the people Friends are helping when we trot out hoary old anti-Semitic stereotypes like rootlessness (under guise of criticizing “settler-colonialism” and demanding Israelis “go back where they came from”), greed (under guise of criticizing “exploitation of the Palestinian people”), or divided loyalties (under guise of “holding diaspora Jews accountable” or musings about the shadowy influence of AIPEC or Israeli control of Western media). These are the people Friends are helping when we provide the thinnest fig leaf of criticizing, not Jewish people, but “the Zionists.” 80% of American Jews support Israel, according to Pew Research, and the number is only rising as Jews face rising anti-Semitic violence in the diaspora and see Israel as a refuge – even as they criticize its government. These are not the Jewish voices being “amplified” by Friends. Mistaking criticism of Israel for anti-Semitism aids Netanyahu and his war hawks – but mistaking anti-Semitism for legitimate criticism of Israel aids Hamas, too.

Hamas welcomes such aid. They enjoy the legitimacy and respect that Western organizations like the AFSC and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP) lend their campaign and their stated aims. JVP is often on pro-Palestinian Friends’ lips, which I find disturbing. This is the same JVP that called Israel “the source of all this violence” on 10/7, blaming the victims and hostages of Hamas’ terrorism for their horrifying circumstances. This is the same JVP that claims Israel is creating a “media blackout” and that international media is “part of an organized effort” to “delegitimize” Palestinian voices, echoing the anti-Semitic trope of Jews controlling Western media. The same JVP that happily posts cartoons of Israelis drinking Palestinian blood, claims there are no such thing as “civilian Israelis,” and repeatedly blames Israel for Hamas’ actions. JVP does not speak for 80% of American Jews, and yet it is JVP’s voice that is amplified in both secular and Friendly circles.

Are Friends to become a second JVP? Or are we willing to uphold our testimony, to be for peace, and not for Palestine?

I am not asking you to support Israel, nor to refrain from criticizing the State of Israel or its government. Unlike Gaza, Israel’s media is free to criticize, and does so. I would expect no less from Friends, especially while Netanyahu’s Likud party stands. I only ask you to be impartial in your criticism, and to understand that at the end of this war, both Israel and Hamas will still exist, and every day, Israel and Hamas are responsible for their own atrocities. One cannot hold one belligerent accountable for their violence, and excuse the other.

I hope the root lies more in ignorance than malice. This is as much a misinformation war as it is a shooting war.

Months before 10/7, my Jewish friends online reported rocket attacks from Gaza on a Friday evening, during their observation of Shabbat. This is not unusual – Hamas launches rockets into Israel every now and again. That Sunday, Israel retaliated with a targeted rocket strike of their own. The BBC breathlessly reported an “unsolicited attack” on innocent Palestinians. Only the French-language newspapers reported both rocket launches.

I no longer trust any news sources that fail to report both Israeli and Hamas atrocities. Neither should you. Trust only those news sources (in any language) that report the facts as neutrally as possible.

“But to be neutral is to side with the oppressor,” I hear you say, “silence is violence.”

Indeed, silence *is* violence. I notice the silence of Friends when allies accuse Israeli rape victims of making it up, when Hamas breaks a ceasefire, when Egypt categorically refuses to either accept refugees from Gaza or allow aid to cross their border into Gaza. I notice the silence when allies demand Israel remove their settlements from Gaza, and Friends do not remind them that Israeli settlements in Gaza were abandoned in 2007. I especially notice when Friends suggest that the violence of Hamas is acceptable, even laudable, in the face of Israeli oppression, casting it as a virtuous crusade against “Zionist settler-colonialists.” Fresh blood does not wash out old blood, and we as Friends should know this, and witness this, and uphold our testimony of this.

Passive neutrality has never been our testimony, and it should not be now. Our testimony has been an active and vigorous *principled impartiality*.

Historically, Friends have been renowned for our principled impartiality. During the American Revolution, we crossed the lines and barricades and ocean freely, delivering aid and letters to the needy of both Patriots and Loyalists. The ASFC was founded to serve the same needy in the bloody trenches of WWI. No less than Rufus Jones, D. Robert Yarnall, and George A. Walton visited the Schutzstaffel in 1938, as the Holocaust was already underway, trying to speak to the humanity of the officers carrying out the attempted genocide of the Jewish people. If we can afford the Nazis the benefit of their own humanity, surely we can afford the same to Israelis?

Many Friends look at the current Israeli-Hamas war, or all Israeli history, through the lens of 9/11. Let me suggest another lens, one Friends have had a direct hand in – the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Both the Orangemen and the Irish have lived in the area for hundreds of years, and the ongoing violence once seemed intractable. In the middle of this stood Quaker House Belfast, an institution for reconciliation and peace, steadfastly upholding principled impartiality. Quaker House opened their doors to refugees during riots and hosted the informal meetings and neutral, safe spaces that always precede a formal peace. Only by scrupulously upholding our testimony to be neither for one, nor against the other, but always for peace, were we able to be the arbiters and go-betweens of the armed factions.

This is our place as Friends. This is who we are as Quakers. Why, then, have so many of us picked a side? Why, then, do so many of us so eloquently decry the atrocities of Israel . . . and so loudly remain silent or deny the atrocities of Hamas?

If, like me, this troubles you deeply, what is to be done?

What we have always done – to be for peace, not for one side or the other, and to ask questions of ourselves, of our meetings, and of the world.

Do you, and I ask this with tenderness, know much about the history? Do you know what the Nakba was, what the Mandate was, what the Intifadas were, what the Oslo Accords were, who shot Yitzhak Rabin, what happened during the Six-Day War or the 1967 War? Do you know the parties ruling Gaza and West Bank (Hamas and Fatah, respectively) and their

relationship with one another? So much misinformation (pro-Israel *and* pro-Hamas) flies around the Internet and around after-meeting fellowship. To learn about the region, its politics, its people, and its history, allows you to cast Light on the facts, and to dispel ignorance. After 10/7, I was led to learn Hebrew and Arabic – do you have a leading to learn, too?

Does your meeting donate its charity funds to Palestinian organizations? Consider donating to Magen David or Red Cross/Red Crescent, both of which provide humanitarian aid to all, regardless of race, color, creed, or nation, and which draw fire from Israeli media for doing so. Consider donating to Standing Together or AJEEC-NISPED, two peace initiatives of Palestinians and Israelis working together toward a peaceful future for both peoples, and both heavily impacted by the violence of 10/7 and after. At the very least, follow the money, as a meeting or as an individual leading – too much aid money disappears into Qatari bank accounts for the Hamas leadership who live there. The Gazans are not wrong to suspect corruption at the top.

Do you march with allies in solidarity with Palestine? How many of you have seen violence against diaspora Jews or their allies . . . and looked away? How many of you have heard overwrought rhetoric about “internationalists,” “Zionists,” or “settler-colonialists,” rhetoric that implicitly denies the existence or legitimacy of Israeli civilians (Jewish, Arab, or other) . . . and said nothing? How many of you have demanded a “ceasefire NOW” without asking what the ceasefire would require – of Israel or of Hamas?

How many of you have chanted to remove the nine million “settler-colonialist oppressors” “from the [Jordan] river to the [Mediterranean] sea?” Because that is Hamas’ aim, and Hamas’ slogan. And when you chant their slogans, when you let that rhetoric pass unanswered, you are aiding them in those aims.

If these are not the “seeds of war,” then what is?

So, my query to all Friends, to all of you reading, is this: Are you for peace, or are you for Palestine?