

“Holding Both”
A Sermon about the Holy Land
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The handsome young security agent for El Al Airlines is 25 at most, with acne and intense blue eyes. “Why do you want to come to Israel?” he asks me, in thickly accented English. From conversations I've had with other travelers, I know this is not a chatty question. There are good and bad answers, answers that draw a storm of new questions. Saying you are visiting family or friends brings on a database search. My husband Robert answers confidently: “It's been a lifelong dream. I was raised Jewish.” My answer doesn't come so easily. Everything I think of sounds vague, grandiose. Beauty. History. Religion. To save the world. The safest answer, the one that will get you through process fastest, I'm told, is “Tourism,” so that's what I say. I've also been asked this question more than once by family members. This is a very Minnesotan style; we like to hide criticism in a polite question. If I had been raised by Italians in New Jersey, I suspect the question would have been more direct: “What are you, nuts?”

The other question I've been getting by many people, is the one buried in my family's question. People have been asking me, again and again, "Did you feel safe?" This too is not an easy question to answer. Yes, I say, once I was able to put aside my fears going in, and listen to people who were there. Or yes, when I could really pay attention to what was going on around me. But neither of those answers seemed to satisfy.

Partly because the real answer to that question starts about 10 years ago. I couldn't fathom why my rabbi friend Naomi spoke with such longing to return to Israel. I didn't get it. Nor did I understand Robert, when he expressed a desire to go. When I thought about the country, I didn't think of beauty or history, heritage or religion. I thought about bombs, guns; I

thought about intractable hatred. I saw nothing else. What I did start to understand was that Israel was their heart, as it is for so many Jews. That they grew up with talk of Israel at the dinner table, it was an intimate part of family life. It actually took Linda Henderson and Harvey Price to snap me out of my fear long enough to consider going. They talked about playing steel drums in Tel Aviv, which was like a Hebrew-speaking New York City. They talked about beaches. It started to sound a little more like a normal country.

And I was a tiny bit desperate. My sabbatical was coming up, I wanted to go somewhere abroad with a husband who travels, shall we say, reluctantly. I remembered his weak spot. I played the Israel card.

But we were not going to the West Bank. Definitely not the West Bank. Then I spoke with a friend of Noreen Bayly's, a retired Presbyterian pastor, who convinced me that if you wanted to get the full story, you had to go to the West Bank. He gave me some contacts of interfaith organizations, and I wrote to them all. The one person who wrote me immediately was George Rishmawi, director of the Siraj Ecumenical Center for Holy Land Studies. "Salaam, you are most welcome," he wrote. "When do you come? How much time you have?" Perhaps I could call him, and we could discuss the trip? I had trepidation, just making the phone call. Not sure why. What did I think he was going to do, throw a bomb over the telephone?" Warily, I began our conversation. He asked at one point, "Do you mind if I ask what is your faith?" "Unitarian," I said, winding up to give my elevator speech. "Do you mean, Unitarian Universalist?" he said. "Y-yes." "Oh, we had some Uus come visit this fall. They spent two weeks with us. It was great. They've invited me to speak at your GA. I'm going to Fort Lauderdale this June." Well, didn't that change everything? It became clear to me in that moment that deliverance from fear takes time, it takes experience, and it takes significant encounters with people. Mine was just beginning.

Once we cleared security, Robert & I played Travel Scrabble in the terminal and watched people. There was a growing contingent of Hasidim, or Ultra-Orthodox. The men dressed in all black, long coats and broad-brimmed hats. Some have long pais, or ear curls, the rest of their heads shorn. The women do not show one peep of their own hair, and wear a variety of snoods, scarves, stocking caps, and wigs. Orthodox Jewish men wear yarmulkes, the women wear long skirts and fashionable hats or scarves. The secular Jews wore nothing distinctive, which distinguished them from the others, nonetheless. In America, I thought, religion is private and individual; in Israel and Palestine, it is public and tribal. You mark yourself by where you belong.

The Hasidic women on our flight are young. They chase toddlers and waddle with pregnant bellies. Their job, we are told by some secular Jews, is to increase the ultra-Orthodox population. As the plane approaches, 10 of the men gather at the window for a minyon. They hold up prayer books, chant, and bend toward the incoming plane. They are blessing our flight. On the plane, I feel for these young mothers, soothing toddlers walking up and down the aisles on a nine-hour flight. When I flirt with one little man with ear curls, his mother swings him toward me and says, “Here, you want him?”

We spent much of the trip seeing Roman ruins, churches in the Galilee and Nazareth, the wonderful ruins of Capernaum, which as far as anyone can tell anything, really was a synagogue where Jesus taught. We saw the Al Jazzar mosque in Acco, and the stunning symmetry of the Bahai Gardens in Haifa. Since our guide, Izzy, was a veteran of the six-day war, he gave us a personal account, while standing in the Golan Heights. And there was the shimmering, creamy gold brick of Old Jerusalem, the two thousand year old olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Tomb of David and Maimonides. I left a prayer in the Western Wall.

And I have to tell you, we spent 12 days in Israel, but what stands out, really, was one day, on the West Bank. Our guide Izzy clearly did not approve of this little day trip of mine. The original plan was for him to drop me at the checkpoint - "Checkpoint Charlie", he insisted on calling it, and for Robert to tour more of Jerusalem with him. Izzy could not legally cross into the West Bank with an Israeli passport. He insisted, though, that Robert come with me. I had a definite love-hate thing going with Izzy. He'd been a guide there for as long as I've been alive. As a boy, he'd emigrated there from Bulgaria with his family when he was 10, shortly after independence was won in the late 40s. He was a veteran paratrooper who had served in five wars. He was a wealth of historical, archaeological and even Biblical knowledge. He schlepped our bags, he drove us everywhere, he took wonderful care of us. "I am your mama and your papa," he said. And he hated Arabs. Never lost an opportunity to insult them or blame them for all of his country's problems. He would give copious details of all eras of history except for big hunks that were under Arab rule. I wasn't about to argue with him about Middle Eastern politics or history, having just stepped off the plane, but I wanted to, every minute.

He drove us up to the checkpoint, nervously passing his paratrooper pendant back and forth across his lips. We were early. Our Palestinian hosts were late. Things were clearly passing out of his control, and he was not happy about it. He insisted, our mama and our papa, on our leaving cell phones on at all times. And right before we crossed over, I hugged him, hard. I suddenly got the sense of personal risk he felt, just coming this far with us.

Now the Security Fence, as the Israelis call the barrier between Israel and the West Bank, is not a fence. It's a thirty-foot high concrete wall. On the Israeli side it's clean and has pretty posters saying "welcome" and "peace". Then we crossed through the turnstile and into the third world. We walked in through a narrow passage, hemmed in by high fence on one side, graffiti-

covered wall on the other. “Free Palestine,” it said, over and over. And my favorite, “Jesus wept for Jerusalem, we weep for Palestine.”

We land in a swarm of yellow compact taxis, with shouting drivers stirred to life by the rare prospect of customers. There is no neat line, no turn system of first in line gets the next customer. So they are all shouting at us, *Bethlehem, Bethlehem! Taxi? Tour Guide? I take you, I take you, I take you.* But we don't get this yet. We're dazed and hyped from Izzy's fears. I keep seeing every violent wire service photo that sells newspapers. Never mind that George has insisted this is a quiet time, very safe. As we stand, waiting for Rafat, our guide, my mind clears and I begin to calm down. They want our business, I realize. They are poor. What you are feeling so palpably is despair. A young man approaches, hoping we might say yes to his cab, despite seeing us turn down everyone else. He wears a sweater and jeans on a very warm day. He'd have been quite handsome if it weren't for his eyes: red, anxious, deeply sad. To him, we must look like wealth, education, opportunities – America. Even though we say no to his cab, he lingers. “My name is Tafik,” he says softly. “Where are you from?” “It's terrible here since the wall,” he says. “No money, no work. I make three fares a day, maybe.” That was 30 shekels or less than \$10 a day, from which he also had to pay rent on the cab. We don't know what to say. I don't think he was begging. I think he wanted someone from the outside to know, to hear.

I call our guide, Rafat, for the third time in half an hour. “What kind of car do you have?” I ask, wanting to make sure we won't be conned by a stranger. “A Lexus,” he says, laughing. I was still too freaked out to get that he was joking. He said, “It's a yellow taxi. Don't worry – we're coming.”

They drive us through town, past mostly shuttered businesses, or shops that displays merchandise that doesn't match the sign. One advertises fine

jewelry but sells plastic shoes or cheap handbags. Men in western clothes gather by newsstands and smoke. Sides of beef and lamb hang whole from butchers' shops, chickens poke and bob in cages. Occasionally a woman in a hijab or headscarf, leads a toddler by the hand. Paint peels. Signs sag.

Rafat introduces himself, and Hader, our driver. He is a pleasant man in his 50s, with weathered skin and nice green eyes. He speaks English, German, Arabic and Hebrew. He points to the University of Bethlehem, where he studied at the seminary. He is Catholic. Hader is Muslim. This doesn't seem like an issue – half our Palestinian hosts are Christian, half Muslim. They accept the information that Robert is Jewish without pause or reaction. They tell us that since the wall was built, things have gone from bad to worse. Businesses have dried up, people have stopped being able to work in Jerusalem, tourism has slowed to a trickle. Employment in the West Bank is now 40%; 60% of the people live on under \$2 a day.

We pull up to Siraj Center, which shares offices with the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement. We are meeting with another George Rishmawi, the cousin of our host. He ushers us into his office with bare white walls, thin screen computer, and worn furniture around a conference table. He wants Robert and me to tell him about ourselves, why we are here. We explain that I'm a Unitarian minister. I give him my elevator speech, and he explains to me that he has spoken at three UU churches in Boston. When I apologize for telling him what he already knows, he graciously says, “It always helps to know more. To understand.” Would so many Americans know who we are, I think, and hold us in such obviously high regard.

He tells us some of his own story. He had been a teenager in the first intifada, in 1988. He had been among the rock-throwers. He was put in jail, though was never told what the charges were, nor did his family ever know.

Most of the people we met there had either been put in jail themselves or had someone in their family put in jail, with no one knowing why. When he was released from jail, though, he witnessed a non-violent demonstration, something he had never seen before. He wanted to be part of it, and joined the Center for Rapprochement, which trained people in non-violent methods of resistance similar to those used by Gandhi and by our civil rights movement in the 1960s. He became convinced that this was the most effective thing a person could do to resist the occupation.

Last Christmas day, he said, the PCR organized a protest of 350 people at a military station. They were all trained in non-violent methods of confrontation. They came face to face with soldiers, without rocks, without weapons. The protesters included Israelis who had come over at great personal risk, as well as internationals. I later learned that hundreds of young Israelis are now risking jail time for refusing on ethical grounds to serve their mandatory military duty on the West Bank. I ventured the opinion that people are violent because they are afraid. "I agree with her," Rafat put in. George thought differently. "I think people are always afraid," he said, "and it takes doing things like we do to help overcome their fear. Coming face to face with your enemy requires you to see them as a human being. It requires them to see you as a human being, too."

They explain to us some of the basics of life under occupation. The Israeli government gives cash incentives to religious Jews to move into the West Bank. The settlements force people off their land, but also require a wide swath around the original site for military protection - which pushes more people out. Settlers sometimes shoot into the property adjacent to the military buffer, intimidating farmers and ruining their property. If they succeed in keeping them away for three years, they are legally free to take this land, too. The Centre has a positive reputation in the community, largely because they have actually helped people recover their farms. They organize international volunteers to accompany the farmers, finding people protected

by law and the by the Israelis' desire to avoid international protest. George tells us that he believes in a one-state solution, and not a Jewish state. Once again, I suppress the urge to argue. I've seen belief in the need for a Jewish homeland run fierce and deep; I just don't think it's practical. And I just got off the plane, so again, I keep my trap shut.

We visit two more humanitarian organizations. One was the Maher Center, an organization that supports children and families with cancer, and the Rural Women's Development Society, directed by Nadia Harb. I love Nadia immediately. She is a short, round woman with a ready smile with a gap between her front teeth. She volunteered as a nurse in Gaza during both Intifadas. When her husband was put in jail, she decided that it was time for her to do something. She is a social worker, who goes from village to village, starting women's clubs. Men have been hard hit by the wall, and its economic impact. Many of them have become paralyzed with defeat. The women have to either work or let the family starve. In a traditional Arab culture like Palestine, there are considerable obstacles to women taking on such a role. Nadia's women's clubs help women get their GEDs, and even university degrees. She trains them in how to present themselves with confidence, and in securing jobs. And, she bolsters them when they feel the backlash from their men. Some of her women's club presidents became trained to form new women's clubs, elsewhere. She was awesome.

But her work is tremendously difficult. “We can't plan for the future,” she says to me, without bitterness. “We have to plan for today.” Whatever these people do to affect the larger situation, I decide, they are giving people something they can do right now to have purpose and dignity. They're not waiting around for their hard-line leaders to make their lives better.

We then squish ourselves into the taxi, Robert, Rafat, Hader, Nadia and

me, and drive around. We get used to their talking amongst themselves in Arabic, apologizing to us, and then talking in Arabic some more. We see girls walking home from school, wearing hijab, giggling arm in arm, and eating popsicles. We stop for lunch at a restaurant so empty, Rafat asks if they were open and could serve us. Being good Arab hosts, they insist on paying. Joyful Arabic music bounces and jangles in the background. They explain the political situation as they see it. I listen, trying not to slop hummus and olive oil on myself.

We drive by a refugee camp, a concrete jungle of tenements. We stop to look at a settlement that is half-empty, waiting for more settlers to arrive. “Paid for by your American taxes,” Nadia says pointedly.

We tour the Church of the Nativity, which does have some tour groups, thankfully. Out in a courtyard, we are shown the place where George Bush had spoken. Rafat, our guide, gives its religious significance. We watch as other tour groups hear probably the same talk; their tour guides point at the same things. Then he does something the other guides didn't do. He points up. There are splotches of plaster along the tops of the walls. “Those were from bullets”, he says softly. When people were taking shelter here during the last intifada, Israeli soldiers sprayed bullets into the church, where people were trying to shield themselves.

There is no answer for this. Our hosts ask us to join them in their offices for one more stiff belt of Arabic coffee before we left the West Bank. They ask us to come back, and bring other people to see and hear what was happening here. And I'll never forget what they said. “We don't want you to leave here hating the Israelis, or hating anyone.”

I can't believe all that we have seen in such a short time, how much we have learned. I say to our host, "If we are quiet, it's because we are trying to take in what you've told us. It's a lot."

This day haunted me for the rest of the trip. We were scheduled to fly down to Eilat after this, a pleasure-town on a southern Mediterranean beach, a jumping off point for the cave tombs of Petra in Jordan. In delicious irony, our travel agent had booked us in the Dan Panorama Hotel, a name that made people's eyes widen on the airplane, when they asked where we were staying. We found out why. It was an enormous luxury hotel, with live entertainment, world-class restaurant, and fine jewelry shops in the lobby. After what we had just witnessed, it felt so wrong to be there, to spend money on that. It felt obscene. But it did put some hard realities right in my face. You can't say you're not a rich American, I realized. You can't say that things are fair.

Our last few days were spent in Tel Aviv. It was indeed a fun city, very much like a small New York with a nice beach thrown in. We toured the Museum of the Diaspora. We saw exhibits of Jewish life from all over the world. And it was here that the full impact of anti-semitism really hit me, perhaps for the first time. The Holocaust wasn't some aberration in world history. Expulsions and mass killings have been part of Jewish life in every town in every time, including the present. The assimilation and interfaith relationships we know in America, causes us to miss this. Israel has provided shelter in this, albeit an imperfect one. As we wandered through the museum, an elderly woman came up and started chatting with Robert and me. She had been a teenager in Auschwitz, she said, and had lived in Australia for much of her life. Ten years ago, she moved here, and it was, indeed, home. I thought of Izzy, and his story of being a seven-year-old boy, watching his mother pack for the death camps. They were told only at the last minute that the Bulgarian Jews did not have to go. Israel is a response to this kind of suffering.

The wall dividing Israel and Palestine is a brilliant success, and a tragedy. It means that average Israelis live much more of a normal life than they have in years. The terrorist acts of just a few Palestinians was still frequent. It kept people inside, fearful. It kept the tourists and their needed dollars away. The wall has reduced incidents that used to happen monthly, weekly to an almost complete halt. I had to admit that without the wall, Robert and I would never have felt safe enough to go to Israel. And it's killing the Palestinians. It's fostering more rage at the Israelis than ever, from both the people who live there, and other Arab countries.

My journey to Israel was one of constant shifting within. My idea of who was right, my images of Arabs and Jews, even my sense of history, as I would hear more and more stories, kept shifting. It was a valuable shifting, a valuable kind of cognitive dissonance, and it kept both Robert and me thinking the whole time. We never stopped having to think, because each day, we were offered a fresh point of view, a fresh reality to integrate with what we had just heard and seen.

In talking to both Israelis and Palestinians, I found that both tended to cast their own suffering in blame of the other. It was a challenge to hear the suffering, feel compassion, without wanting to somehow “correct” their lack of understanding of the suffering of the other. I suddenly realized that when you are living in fear, or hardship, it would take a saint to keep the fear and hardship of the other in your heart, to consider it as important as your own. It would take a saint. And compassion came in seeing that most people aren't saints. It comes in being willing to live for awhile in that swirl of unknowing, willing to listen to both, to hold both in our hearts.

It also felt like a Unitarian Universalist discipline. Someone asked me if it felt like a holy place when I visited. And I had to say that the clearest sense of holiness I found was in this discipline of holding both in my heart.

Peace in Israel and the Palestinian territories is not terribly hopeful at this moment. But I found hope in these small groups of people who are trying to do small things now, not waiting to be delivered. I found hope in just listening to people. Sometimes you can find hope in your determination to do one thing, yourself, to make the situation better. My one thing, I decided, was to bring more people to experience this, to enter this complicated swirl of listening and compassion. I'll meet you after the service. Robert and I will also answer any questions you might want to ask about what we learned on our trip.

I hope that many of you will join me, and those of you who cannot go might consider sponsoring someone who can. And that all of us may consider learning, listening, and holding the tensions of opposites as holy work. Shalom. Salaam. Amen.