

Heresies in Pursuit of Peace: Thoughts on Israel/Palestine

By Starhawk

In the ruins of Jenin, an old friend of mine is digging bodies out of the rubble where Israeli bulldozers flattened houses, burying people alive. Blackened, maggot ridden corpses, unearthed from the rubble, are displayed to anguished relatives for identification. A teenage girl unearths an infant's arm and wonders what to do with it. A Palestinian father cries over the dark smears of flesh that once were his two little daughters. Another Jewish friend leaves an anguished message on my cell phone: "I'm in downtown Washington DC. There's a huge, pro-Israel rally going on. I don't understand it. How can Jews support this? I know you must have something inspirational to say. Send me what you write."

She doesn't know that for weeks I've been trying unsuccessfully to write something about the situation. I'm overwhelmed with accounts of the atrocities. Yet I am also haunted by images of bodies shattered at a Seder meal, at a café, a Passover drenched in a new plague of blood. I'm frightened and saddened by the real resurgence of anti-Semitism, by swastikas carried in peace marches, synagogues attacked.

A third friend, a deeply spiritual woman and longtime ecofeminist ally, sends me a copy of a letter she wrote to President Bush entitled, "Standing Firmly With Israel."

In no way can I stand with her. And yet I cannot simply stand against her, either.

I cannot stand with an Israel that tortures prisoners, an Israel that has mounted a restrictive and dehumanizing occupation, that assassinates political leaders as a matter of policy, that has cut down ancient olive groves to destroy the livelihood of the Palestinians, that is daily committing war crimes: refusing medical care to the wounded, firing on journalists and peace demonstrators, bombing civilians, destroying homes. Nor can I stand in the bloody remains of the Seder meal, among the corpses in the café, the restaurant. Yet to say, "both sides are wrong, both sides should give up violence" is to ignore the reality that one side, the Israeli side, is the fourth largest military power in the world. That the suicide bombs are a direct response to calculated political assassinations and to a brutal occupation that has made life untenable for the Palestinians. That for over fifty years, the State of Israel has failed to guard and cherish the Palestinians' rights, aspirations, and hopes for an independence that could lead to peace and prosperity.

It is, on the one hand, incomprehensible to me that my friend could stand with such a regime, that the Jewish community as a whole, composed of people I know to be caring, compassionate and good, can stand behind the tanks, the bombs, the brutality.

On the other hand, I understand quite well the wrenching emotional journey that many Jews must make to admit the reality of what Israel is doing. For those of us who grew

up saving our pennies to plant trees in the Galil, who, snowbound in blizzards, celebrated the New Year of the Trees timed to the blossoming of almonds in the Judean hills, who ended every Seder with the prayer "Next year in Jerusalem," no other issue is so painful and sad.

I am a Jew who has spent her adult life as a voice for a different religion, a blatant Pagan whose spirituality is attuned to the Goddess of regeneration, not the God of my fathers. To Orthodox Jews, I'm a heretic, which gives me a certain freedom to say what I think. I was born into, raised in and acculturated by the post-war Jewish community, but I have not been immersed in that world for many years. I speak from the margins of the Jewish community. But I am still a Jew, and the view from the edge can sometimes be clearer than that from the center.

The San Francisco Chronicle writes a front page story about a school in Gaza where little Palestinian children are taught to hate Jews. I have no reason to doubt the truth of their story, although I question why they feature it front and center with no counterbalancing tale of, say, the International Solidarity Movement where Palestinians and Jews together risk themselves in nonviolent interventions for peace. The hate is real, and the fear it engenders is also real. Yet the story makes me consider what I was taught in ten or more years of Jewish education that included a teenaged summer spent on a kibbutz.

We never chanted, "Kill the Arabs". We were never told in so many words, 'Hate them.' Rather, we learned a more subtle discounting, a not-seeing, as if the Palestinians were not full human beings but rather a minor obstacle to the fulfillment of a dream, something to be moved aside, that didn't really count.

We were taught to be proud of the brave Zionist settlers and pioneers, the idealistic youth who fled the ghettos and the pogroms of Europe to build a 'new' land. And I am proud, still, of their experiments in new ways of living, their awareness of women's rights, their courage in leaving home and family to escape oppression. But I understand now that they did not come into an empty place, and they did not come with the capability of truly seeing and respecting and honoring the people of the land. They came out of a Europe that had an unshakeable belief in its own cultural and racial superiority and had for centuries been appropriating the lands of darker peoples.

They came as the settlers came to the "New World", saying, "This land is ours by right, God gave it to us," The people who had lived there during those two thousand years of exile were an impediment. And so began the long litany of justifications: that the land didn't really belong to them but to the Turks or the British; that they weren't doing anything with it, had not made the desert bloom nor drained the swamps, and above all, that they hate us, are raised to hate us, with a hate irrational, implacable, and unchangeable.

The word for this sliding off of the glance, this NonSeeing, is racism. Less blatant, perhaps, than chanting "Kill, kill!" but with the same insidious results.

Yet to simply condemn Zionism as racism without acknowledging the context of centuries of racial hate against Jews from which it arose is to absolve those who have blood on their hands as well. Worse, it is to support the complacency of Jew haters and

fascists who now emerge into the open again. Israel has indeed served the interests of the Western powers in subjugating the Arab world. But Israel also arose out of an oppressed people's dream of liberation. To discount the oppression, to deny the strength and the beauty of the dream of a homeland, is to miss the full tragedy of what is happening now. Unless we understand the dream, we cannot truly comprehend the nightmare.

I know what Israel meant during my childhood in the fifties, to my family still reeling in shock from the revelations of the gas chambers and the ovens, still searching for news of lost relatives. Israel was the restitution for all the losses of the Holocaust. It was the thing that restored some meaning and some hope into a world utterly shattered by evil. It was the proof that Jews were not just passive victims but actors on the screen of history, capable of fighting back, of taking charge of our own destiny. It was the one safe place, the refuge in a hostile world.

And for some, it was the answer to the anguished question, "How can I believe in God in a world in which such things can happen?" To acknowledge the truth of what Israel is now doing is to face a grief so deep and overwhelming that it seems to suck away all hope, is to gasp again in the suffocation chambers, to cover our faces with the ashes from the ovens and know that there is no redemption, no silver lining, no happy ending, no good and noble thing that emerged to give dignity to these deaths. There is only the terrible cycle, of victims becoming victimizers, the abused perpetuating abuse. It is to look down and see the whip in our own hands, the jackboots on our own feet.

"Don't make the Nazi connection," a Jewish peace group warns. "It only feeds the right wing."

And yet the Nazi connection begs to be made.

It is true that the Israelis have not built extermination camps. It is true, although not immediately relevant, that other people in the world besides Jews have done and are doing bad things. Other atrocities occur daily. But it is also true that to attempt to erase a people, to destroy their culture, livelihood, and pride, is genocide.

A wan young woman, looking depressed, wanders through the Justice for Palestine rally, carrying a sign that says: "My father survived Auschwitz. His parents didn't. Orphaned, he fled to Israel."

Part of the horror of Jenin lies in her father's new kinship to the teenaged boy dug alive out of the rubble of his house where his parents and brothers and sisters now lie dead.

That parallel is a dark mirror that reveals how easily we become what we most despise. If we look into it open eyed, we face truths so painful they make it hardly bearable to be human. For this is not just about Jews and Germans, Israelis and Palestinians, not about how any one people is prone to evil. It's about us all. The capacity for cruelty, for inflicting horrific harm, exists in us all. All we need is to feel threatened, and to let our fear define our enemy as less than fully human, and the horrors of hell are unleashed.

If we don't like the Nazi parallel, we must refuse to become Nazis. We must remember that the Nazis played on the German sense of deprivation and loss after World War One, and admit that our own real victimization has not elevated us to some realm of purity

and eternal innocence. We can grow beyond the propaganda we were taught and the myths of our childhood and the comfort of our chosenness, and see the Palestinians as the full human beings that they are. Even if to do so seems to require us to walk out again into the wilderness with no outstretched hand nor hope of a promised land to guide us.

For if we admit the Palestinians' full humanity, if we admire their knowledge and appreciate their culture and cherish their children, then all the justifications of conquest fall away. No God, no superior virtue or inherent right, has granted us dominion. We have the land because we were able to take it.

And while that admission might seem to threaten Israel's very right to exist, it is not nearly as much of a threat as clinging to the justifications and rationalizations that prevent us from seeing the Other as human.

For full human beings placed in a situation of utter despair may turn to suicide bombs and retribution. Human beings, humiliated beyond bearing, may turn to revenge. But full human beings are not mindless agents of hate. Given hope and dignity and a future to live for, human beings will tend to choose life. And full human beings can be reasoned with, bargained with, made peace with.

The wilderness, the desert, has always been the place where our people have heard the still, small voice of God.

Religion is supposed to call us away from our most brutal possibilities, to challenge us to act from compassion and love. Right now in the Middle East, religion is not doing its job.

I know well that to equate the actions of the Israeli government with Judaism is to risk feeding anti-Semitism and to erase the great spectrum of political and spiritual diversity that exists in the world Jewish community. And yet the question of Israel cannot be separated from Judaism. Our prayers for rain are timed to coincide with cloudbursts over the Sea of Galilee. We count the 'omer', the successive gathering in of the harvest from ancient fields bordering the Jordan. Fundamentalist Jews have established the contested settlements in the Occupied Territories and resist any concessions to the Palestinians. And the mainstream Jewish community stands firmly behind the Israeli government's rule of force.

The current crisis represents a great spiritual crisis within Judaism. I write as an admitted heretic, yet it's clear to me that the Orthodoxies of all three Great Religions, along with atheists, pragmatists and secularists of many political persuasions, are embroiled in a blasphemy that far outweighs any naked dancing around a bonfire. They are united in the worship of the God of Force.

The God of Force says that force is the ultimate answer to every dilemma, the resolution of every conflict, the 'only thing they understand.' The God of Force makes His appearances in the Old and New Testament, the Koran, and other sacred and secular scriptures. The God of Force licenses his agents to kill, unleashes the holy war, the jihad, the crusade, the inquisition. The God of Force says, "Go unto the land and kill all the inhabitants thereof."

Now, I'm a polytheist. I recognize many Powers, many constellations of energies and forces in the universe, that arise from a deep interconnectedness and unity but have their own flavors, characters and names. One advantage of being a polytheist is that you can choose your gods or goddesses, acknowledging that bloodthirsty and cruel powers exist, but turning resolutely away from them. When God tells you to commit some horrific atrocity, you have somewhere to go for a second opinion. But monotheism is, of course, the heart and essence of Judaism as it is of Islam and Christianity. I submit that the God of Force is incompatible with the oneness of God. For if God is one, s/he must by definition be God of All, not of any one people exclusively. He cannot simultaneously encourage callousness and cruelty and be Christ the God of Love, Allah the Merciful, or El Maleh Rahamim, God Who is Filled with Compassion. And if he chooses a people, he does it in the same spirit in which my partner confides to each of his four daughters that she is his favorite.

The current situation is a call both to God and to us to evolve. Judaism has always had within it a tradition of wrestling with God, as Jacob did with the angel, of arguing with God, as Abraham did when God wanted to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. To see God as fixed, eternally and unchangingly rigid is indeed to worship a graven image. Instead, we might see God as a dynamic process in which we are cocreators of the world we inhabit. We are actively engaged in shaping who God becomes.

We are commanded not to make images of God because our human imaginations are always limited and will reproduce our own faults and lacks and prejudices. God the General, God the Ruler, God the King, God the Distributor of Real Estate, God the Avenger, God of Holy War, God of Punishment, Retribution and Revenge, God Who Favors One People Above All Others, may in reality be that very idol, that truncated image, we are told to turn from. The worst heresy of all may be to limit our conception of the great force of compassion that underlies the world.

Judaism can march lockstep with the Israeli authorities deeper into the domain of force. Israel could conceivably exterminate the Palestinians utterly, and that is the trend of the current policies. Nothing less will crush their aspirations for independence and freedom. A Jewish community that supported that final solution would lose its soul and any claim to moral authority. An Israel that carried out the genocide would be no fit homeland for any person of conscience. The dream of Israel would become an utter and complete horror show. And genocide would not bring security to Israel: it would simply inflame the hatred of the entire Arab world and jettison the rest of the world's support. Given all the nuclear weapons floating around in the Middle East, that road is likely to lead straight to the fulfillment of Christian prophecies of apocalypse.

One of the agonies in the current crisis is that nobody seems to have much hope or vision of how to resolve it. We can see where the road leads, but we don't know how to step off of it.

"If only the Palestinians would practice nonviolence, embrace the principles of Gandhi and King," I hear from some of my Jewish allies.

Of course, there are Palestinians, and Israelis, and many others who have stepped forward to be a nonviolent presence in refugee camps, who have accompanied ambulances and attempted to deliver medical supplies, who have written their own

eyewitness accounts and spoken their truth.

But I find myself thinking "Wouldn't it be quicker if Gandhi or King reappeared among the Israeli leadership and their supporters? Are they not in an even better position to change this situation?"

If the Israeli leadership were to abandon the idea that force will resolve this conflict in any positive way whatsoever, the solution becomes stunningly, obviously clear. Any mind not clouded by fear or hate or self righteousness or utter religious certainty can see it in ten minutes of serious thought:

The Palestinians need their own state. And it needs to be a viable, coherent state with the potential for prosperity and beauty, not a Bantustan, not a few scraps of unwanted land the Israelis have decided to discard. A Palestine of milk and honey, of bread and roses, of the vine and the fig tree, of olive groves and red anemones, of health clinics and universities, of a new renaissance of Arabic culture, science, learning and art. Anything less will be an eternal festering sore, and there will be no peace.

An Israel that gave up the delusion that force will win all of Israel's demands while conceding the Palestinians nothing might recognize that a flourishing and happy Palestine would be Israel's best security measure, might even become her closest trading partner, best friend. Such a Palestine would offer its youth a better future than becoming human bombs. It is utterly in the best interests of Israel to nourish and support and foster the creation of the Palestinian state, to be surrounded by friends instead of enemies. And while that might seem impossible at the moment, consider the friendly relations between the U.S. and our former deadly enemies, Germany and Japan.

Those who love and care for Israel need to stand with her true interests now, by demanding an end to the occupation, the dismantling of the settlements, by calling for the intervention of a neutral, peacekeeping force, and by pressuring the United States government to stop covertly supporting and funding Israeli aggression.

The grip of the God of Force is strong, so strong that even though we can clearly see what the solution might be, we may despair at actually bringing it about. To pry that grip loose, we need to use all the tools of political activism, from writing letters and making phone calls to demonstrating, doing nonviolent civil disobedience, or even joining the peace witnesses on the front lines.

On a spiritual level, we can look into the dark mirror that reveals our own prejudices and reject them. We can believe that the force of intelligent, embodied love, as feminist theologian Carol Christ describes the Goddess, is indeed stronger than stupid, disembodied hate.

One last Pagan heresy is the belief that we can prod a sluggish God into producing a miracle or two, by performing an action with conscious, focused intention.

So, as a spell for peace, make peace with someone you think you can't make peace with. Notice what resistance arises even at the thought, how you build your case against your enemy, how you marshal your allies and ready your weapons. Note what it takes to give them up, what you must sacrifice and what you gain.

Maybe, in this process, we can all learn something. Maybe we can begin a turning, a transformation that will leave the God of Force starved of his blood sacrifices and burnt offerings, and feed gentler fruit to a kinder God. So that the children of Israel and Palestine can both grow up to enrich the land not by the blood of corpses but by the songs of poets, the works of artists, the healing of doctors, the fruit of farmers, the knowledge of teachers, the wisdom of mystics. And this corner of land, battleground for so many years, might become for all people a place of refuge, vision and hope.

-- *Starhawk, April 28, 2002*

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