

## Threshing Session on Middle East Conflict December 7, 2014

### Introduction

The clerks introduced the topic and setting. A reminder was given that the purpose of threshing session is to discern and to hear many voices and to listen to spirit, not to decide. Individuals were asked to follow the Quaker discipline of respecting one another and informed that the session would be held in a worship sharing style. The Clerks noted that PSCC had voiced a desire for a minute but also asked individuals to think about how we might be led to deal with issues in the Middle East in a number of different ways, not necessarily only a minute. Individuals were reminded that this is the first of, potentially, many threshing sessions and that no decision was intended to be made this afternoon. Friends were reminded that the second scheduled meeting would be held December 18<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm at FMC.

### Comments from Participants

Peace & Social Concerns Committee (PSCC) noted that there are so many difficult questions on this topic that the committee could take on and how we select them is based on who comes to us. It came to us that the violence in the Middle East this summer suggested that we should have a reaction here at Friends Meeting Cambridge and we decided to set up a writing sub-committee to attempt to draft a minute. The sub-committee came back with two different minutes, each of which has gone through multiple drafts. Redrafts have come through hearing people's feedback and integrating that feedback. It felt as though we could not propose one or the other of these minutes without getting feedback from the whole FMC community. PSCC does believe there should be a minute, but also recognizes that this may not be the sense of the meeting. This discussion has gone on over the years and there has always been discontent -- feeling as though we may be taking one side rather than other. PSCC is not trying to take sides in the situation, but rather to identify the overall issue in order to respond.

- I grew up in a household that was Jewish, grew up with a grandfather who was a Zionist, at the same time I watched injustice, watched occupation. So there are two views: 1) How you can have peace with occupation? and 2) How can you have peace without security? Israelis are saying how we can start when we fear? Palestinians are saying how can we start during the occupation? The question for me is: How are we peace-makers? There isn't a right or wrong here. Both are truths. I struggle deeply and I don't have a practical answer, I just have a spiritual answer. Peace starts with reconciliation and peace starts with security. Unless both parties are willing to not consider the injustices of the past, and there are plenty on both sides, there is no way to go forward as brothers and sisters who inhabit this small place. It's not practical, it's spiritual.
- I am not a member of FMC, although I have been affiliated with it since 1953. I want to start with a story that I was reminded of and an encounter. About thirty years ago, a former senior general in the Israeli forces was visiting Harvard. He told a story of the end of the war in 1967 when Israel took the West Bank and Gaza. He said "Guys now that we've taken this territory we can complete the process of forming a Palestinian state." Others told him that was crazy. He gradually came to the realization that there was no place for him in the Israeli army. He spent the remainder of his life teaching Arabic literature at the University of Tel Aviv.

I went first out to the region in 1968 with the Friends' Service Committee and have been back approximately once a year since that time. What seems to me apparent for a group like us is that our significant focus ought to be on the United States. This is where we have the chance for greatest influence and communication. This is a society that we can claim some knowledge about its laws. We also are participants in this society. My sense is that this is a chance for us to think seriously about what we can actually do, not only what we can think, but also what we can do. To the extent that we recognize the role the United States plays in allowing the conflict to continue, and in not looking truth in the face and saying we have to respond to it, we and our government become somewhat complicit in the

continuing conflict. The simple, but not easy, task is to look at changing that. The outlines of the solution are clear, what can unblock change is complicated. A significant part of that change is determining what the US is willing and not willing to do. We've watched across Europe as they have made policy action.

A thought that in a sense comes to me: there is something that we can do beyond a minute and I think we do want to think through what we know and believe. We can, however, go share our beliefs. When we are ready, a delegation ought to go to Washington and visit each representative. They haven't heard enough from us on this issue. They've heard from one small lobbying group, but we can be another group of individuals to share our perspectives on what a peace would look like and what the United States ought to be doing -- whether in terms of selling arms, allowing those arms to be used in an army of occupation, or using those arms in perpetrating an occupation. We ought to be heard on that and we can be heard. Our government is carrying them out in our name. We can more directly and simply, get on the T and visit the offices where our congressional representatives have their offices and make appointments to see them. We are in a community which has a fairly substantial population of Israeli's and Palestinians and listen to the several voices that exist in these communities. Hearing them and coming away with a sense that we are better informed in something that we are involved. This would be a way to overcome the sense of "it's far away, I don't know enough about it." It's surprising how quickly you'll spot the questions. There are things we can do.

- A query: how does most of the rest of the world view the situation?
- An answer. Boycott and divest is beginning to be a force to contend with. It was very instrumental in bringing down the apartheid scheme in South Africa.
- I know very little about Israel and Palestine and I certainly don't know what most of the world is thinking. I've been in Roxbury and in El Salvador. But, according to MLK the problems are militarism, capitalism and power. I think he probably speaks for most of the world. I think that economics and power are what many people in the world think of. In terms of our responsibility, I think we might have the most power in speaking to our leadership and representatives.
- I'm noticing a few things and reflecting on what is the Quaker response and what is this community's response? I look at the history of Friends and I call the prophetic aspect of who we have tried to be. We have tried to look into the power that takes away the power. The opportunity for us here is that this is a topic that is not easy to talk about and it is the conflict of our age. It is an opportunity for us. What does it mean for us to be witnesses in this community? This is an issue that makes people go ballistic immediately, and it is hard for people to remain grounded. Oppression and safety are issues that are part of our community here and this influences how we approach our representatives -- not just from a leftist political position, but from that perspective. I've observed that there are a lot of men talking here, men who wrote the minute and men who are doing the fighting. I'm just another of those men talking.
- When I was reading the document online I struggled over a portion of it because I found myself empathizing with those whose homes were being taken away. So I put myself in their position to the extent that I could and I found myself crying: what is happening to my home? Of course it wasn't my home but the heartbreak of that I can imagine and is something where the sense is so strong that it just seems the key element. I guess I don't understand any of the other. Another way of putting it is: that it's nice to have a home, it could be a very a good thing to simply have harmony. That would be ideal. I truly don't understand the rest of it. As for the nation state system that we've got, and the colonialism that we have from the past, these are also things that at a heart level don't understand. So this heartbreak really runs very deep. That crime feels to me to tear across at the level of the soul.
- As some of you many know I've been working on this issue for some years as a photographer. One of the most heartening aspects of the struggle that I've engaged in is the broadening movement in the US. One group is Quakers and the other is Jews. We have several networks now that share information and minutes that are coming from

monthly and yearly meetings. Each minute takes a different tact. My observation of who these Quakers are is that they are mostly women. A woman who was a member of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) was giving a report about post-Gaza and she said that Boston was the flag-ship of JVP, noting that many of them were young, female and Jewish. We don't see that in the media. I know that many of us are prone to a feeling that "It's hopeless." I plug into these two networks for my own survival. One of my deepest wishes is that this meeting can join these networks and be a part of this movement. That's my fondest dream.

- My oldest daughter married into a Jewish family and it struck us when my grandchildren came along that if they were in Nazi Germany they would have been dead. This conflict has been going on for 2,000 years. I also empathize with those Palestinians: it does seem more than cruel. I joined JVP and told my daughter and granddaughter. I can't help but think about these Jews who are attacking homes and ruining gardens and forcing them into penury and death. I cannot help but think: How can they be doing the same thing that was done to them? I am so glad that some people feel optimism. I am completely puzzled as to what we can do and what the situation entails at a very deep emotional level.
- I wasn't going to speak and I figured I would come in and listen but I am very moved by what everyone has shared. I have practiced in Jewish, Buddhist and, of course here at meeting for now 40 years. I think that what Jonathan said really moves me a lot and to do what other groups are doing. I was part of a Jewish-American/Palestinian-American group for years and we met with Condoleezza Rice, and I've been to Israel/Palestine and I've been to the occupied territory, and led meditation groups there. I've talked to several people at a Buddhist retreat specifically designed for Israeli and Palestinians. I've had a moderate amount of experience. I've talk to relatives who immigrated to Israel and one particular cousin whose kids are very high up in the army, air force and the navy. I have a cousin who was injured, is in a vegetative state, because of a Palestinian terrorist attack. As someone who has a very strong follower of the practice of peace, the conscious objective practice, I know that I can't solve the problem but I can do something to reach out to individuals. Acknowledging what other people have said and the validity of what everyone said, I think that we, as a meeting and as individuals, can reach out to individuals both from a heart and economic sense. It doesn't make a difference how big it is, if it's doing something. There is one step we can do perhaps sooner than other steps. I go back to hearing deeply what Jonathon said about this is a Quaker meeting and how do we respond in that fashion.
- What [the message regarding what Quakers specifically bring to this conflict] spoke deeply to me. The question isn't what can we do but rather what do we bring that is unique as Quakers. If we could answer that question then we would know what to do. What is the fundamental (and unique) element of our Quakerness and how can we bring that to the world? How can we as a Quaker community do things that elicit change in the world?
- I want to talk a little bit about the five years that I spent as a representative of FCNL. I cannot unite with the idea that it is right for us to form coalitions. I cannot unite with that it is right to go lobby. As a person who had time to go to the state lobby, I found a lot of people who encouraged us to find other groups and lobby. What we ended up doing instead is that we ended up watching for two years and did nothing. We found there was no discernment going on, but instead people were speaking to the television camera. All of the television sessions were one guy speaking, and it looked intelligent, but it wasn't. *State House Witness* was published as a fair account of what everyone said and found that of God in everyone. We would find a way to say fairly what was at the heart of your message (even better than you said it and with footnotes that made your points) and we would report that the representatives were not at the committee meetings. After we had done this for several years all of the legislators started showing up. I started being invited in to the upper echelons because we were fair. We got full access because we were fair. Now during this time the (group) also developed a statement of the death penalty. The statement must have had forty drafts and was finally adopted by eighteen out of nineteen Quaker Meetings. We then passed it out at the state house. It said basically: here's what you think; here's what we think about that. We were answering the real questions of those with whom we disagreed. We were truly finding a way to make the space and time to hear the real questions. Both sides have deep convictions about their treatment. How do we speak the truth to those things? I don't join and get a bigger political force, I want to convince. The politics of coalition have failed for how long. You do the same thing over and over again and it fails.

And yet is there anyone in this room who has stayed with a conversation with someone you disagree with and the only commitment you make is that you will stay with the conversation? Is there anyone who has not found that things get better if you stay with the person and the conversation? If you wait you will find that you can engage until you have something better. I tell this story fairly often: maybe the guy was flattering me. With regards to the paper written on the death penalty in 1991. The death penalty was expected to pass. We passed out our death penalty paper. There were three wavering votes, and we were told by an aide to Gov. Weld that they backed off when they read this draft. It wasn't because we had power but we were reporting on their community and they had to read it because others read it. When the time came, the respect we earned was so great from the State House Witness that they really read our death penalty document and trusted it. I don't know if the three waiver votes were really due to us but I believe in being effective if you can be. This thing was not the usual political coalition, it was an exploration of engagement and fairness. And it moves people if we ask them to be persistent, to be fair. When we passed out the death penalty statement, and one on the Gulf War we had a whole bunch of people come through the door. We didn't hold them. I believe our committees want the meeting to come to the work that they are doing, and I believe that sometimes that's right. Sometimes the committees should go to where the meeting is. The sense of the meeting is not about every thought but is about what the whole meeting wants. It's not what I think, it's what works for all of us. We all believe in engagement.

- What happens if we do agree on a minute? What happens to the minute? Answer: A proposed minute would come before monthly meeting for approval. If people had more ideas they wanted to share with PSC committee they can email. Michael, Cliff and Skip's and the clerks email addresses are in the directory.
- I find in some ways I'm echoing [the message regarding the need to listen to others' perspective] said. I'm answering the question: What do we bring that is ours that not everyone else has? I think we bring two things. One is the faith, not the belief or hope, but the faith that there is a right answer to be found. That's what "sense of the meeting" is, to know the right answer. The other is that everyone is to be listened to. The point isn't to believe in that of God in everyone, the point is to answer to it.
- I'm thinking about the two minutes and the different approaches and the two different targets. I can see what we can do with [one] minute -- probably send it to other Quaker meetings and inspire others to join with us. [The other minute] seems like a larger challenge that is trying to engage with bigger groups which I find intriguing. Essentially we'd like the Israel and Palestinian peoples to engage in the ways that we are trying to do in this minute. We would like our leaders and all of the leaders in the world to use this as a model for dealing with conflict. That's a huge spiritual and political agenda which is intriguing. Another observation is that way that I judge a potential action is: Is it easy for me? I have suspicions about that. What's easy for one person is not necessarily easy for another.
- I think what has come up for me today is that I read through the minutes but not carefully. I'm feeling a tremendous need to reread George Mitchell. As I've watched more and more go by I know it is important to have my own base of knowledge. I'm feeling rather remiss. I'm feeling very called to do my homework. Whatever we are called to do as a meeting, when we all are sitting, hearing and listening, that we need to come to it with knowledge, having informed ourselves.
- George Mitchell helped us to solve the issue in Northern Ireland and he is uniquely gifted. What he said I take on board very strongly. If there is a solution, I think George Mitchell is going to help a lot. The other question is whether as a group, a Quaker group, we have more influence than we do as individuals? Are our politicians going to look at what we say as "oh they are a bunch of Quakers and we know what they think?" or will they take notice of what we say. Could we, by expressing ourselves individually, to our political leaders be more effective?
- I'm confused. I can't imagine that the people of Israel are sitting on the edges of their chairs waiting to hear what the Quakers think, or even what the Christian's think. Israel is a quasi-democracy, it has a hugely complicated political system, something like a third of the population are recent immigrants from Russia. I think it's wonderful

why we care, but I can't really think how we matter in this issue. We like to say if you want peace, then you work for justice. My feeling is that it is much too late for justice. Justice is not coming. The parents and grandparents of those who destroy Palestinian homes, their homes were destroyed too. Injustice is baked into this cake. It feels like we are trying to set ourselves up for conflict. We want to say 'you do what we think is right,' which is to me an invitation for conflict. I love it that we care and of course this is related to our spiritual lives, but I don't see it as an area in which we have a practical role except in so far as we try to interact with our own government. We have a mutual commitment there.

- Several years ago a scholar and a Rabbi came from the University of Jerusalem. The thing that stuck with me: We will not have peace until the Palestinians understand the terror that Israeli's face every day, knowing that it is their greatest wish that their neighbors wish them off the face of the earth. And, until Israelis understand the Palestinian's fear of their homes being taken. We do have Quakers down there working, at the Ramallah School. If what he said is true, then maybe that is the closest we can get to changing the situation.
- The Palestinian/Israeli issue is a much larger issue. We do bring a certain degree of hubris to this as Quakers --- to think that we can influence the US. I also think that the US brings a great deal of hubris to this to think that we can call the shots and to think that it is to our advantage to have a peace process. I'm not sure it is the most important thing to Israel and Palestinians. We have many people just wanting a better life. Maybe the peace process is really our idea about peace and about our and Europe's investment in a solution. I think we should go forward very gently and we need to work more within our community than in the US government.
- All of these questions are where we need to continue. We have set a second threshing session on December 18<sup>th</sup> at 7:00.
- Thank you for sharing your thoughts and feelings about this important topic. We want to hear this is out and to season it. How is it that we, in these threshing sessions, are modeling what we want in this process? Take the hand-outs and take a look at those. Come back on the 18<sup>th</sup> for further discussion. We welcome your input so if you have additional thoughts please email Michael, Cliff, Skip and the Presiding Clerk Team.