

“Passover, Antisemitism, and Conflicting Truths”

Rev. DC Fortune

Sermon at UUCSV, April 28, 2024

[Please note that the video of the sermon does vary toward the end; this is the original sermon as written.]

In the Book of Exodus, the story of Passover goes something like this: the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt and being treated horribly.

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, instructing them to prepare a meal that included unleavened bread, and a roasted lamb. The blood of the lamb was to mark the doorways of all the Hebrew homes in the land, and on the night of the feast, the Angel of the LORD would visit every home in Egypt and kill the first born of each family there, including animal companions and livestock. Those homes marked with the blood of the lamb would be spared this horrible fate. They were instructed to eat their meal while dressed for travel, and to leave no leftovers.

Moses and his people obeyed, and when the tenth plague came to the land of Egypt, the Pharaoh finally relented and let Moses and his people go free, lest any more horrible plagues beset Egypt.

Moses, Aaron, and all the others wasted no time in leaving, for they knew that the Pharaoh was not trustworthy and that they would be pursued as they fled.

This is a great simplification of a very complex story, to be sure, but it is the foundation for a holiday that has been celebrated for thousands of years, to remind the Jewish people that once they were slaves in Egypt and that their faith and obedience freed them from bondage.

The overarching story of the Hebrew people is that of a group that has forever been in search of a place to call home. They were enslaved in Egypt, they were occupied in Judea, and there have been many times of diaspora – when they were driven from their home to wander and try to find a place to be. The great Temple was built in Jerusalem, and then destroyed, scattering the people. Then the Temple was rebuilt, and they had a home again, until it was destroyed again, and they were scattered once more. Only a part of the ruins of the Temple remain, and faithful Jews still pray at the remains of the wall, tucking prayers written on little slips of paper into the many cracks and crevices in the wall, hoping that those prayers may be answered.

The cultural identity of the Hebrew people is rooted in thousands of years of trying to get home and be safe. The twelve tribes of Israel scattered when the north and south

kingdoms split, and have never been reunited, although the yearning for a time of glory once enjoyed under king David has remained.

Jews have encountered resistance, rejection, and oppression everywhere they have gone. The varied nations of Europe in turn welcomed, then rejected Jews. Jews were forced into ghettos, permitted only limited occupations, and treated very poorly.

In the first half of the 20th Century, anti-semitism was at a global fever pitch. Adolph Hitler studied the writings of Henry Ford and idolized him for his passion for industrial innovation and hatred of Jews. Hitler had a portrait of Ford in his office in Berlin. It is terrible to be a admirer of Hitler, we can agree on that. But how terrible it must be to be the person Hitler admired?

This is a part of our US History that is not taught in schools today. But I digress.

In the 20th Century, the area now known as the two nations of Israel and Palestine was the Palestinian state.

The UK supported the Zionist movement to secure a state within Palestine, and in 1922, the League of Nations approved British rule of Palestine. The US was not a member of the League of Nations, but the House and Senate both voted to support the plan.

The history is long and complex, with conflict arising between Arabs leaving Syria for a safer place in Palestine, and Jews leaving much of Europe for the same reason. This, of course, resulted in tensions and conflict. Wikipedia describes just one of the many efforts at outsiders to find a solution to “the Jewish Question:”

In 1938, the US called an international conference to address the question of the vast numbers of Jews trying to escape Europe. Britain made its attendance contingent on Palestine being kept out of the discussion. No Jewish representatives were invited. The Nazis proposed their own solution: that the Jews of Europe be shipped to Madagascar. The agreement proved fruitless, and the Jews were stuck in Europe.

It should be mentioned here that most nations in the world were closed to Jewish immigration. Some Jews were able to move to the US, but many more were turned away, sent back to Germany to die in the Holocaust.

The US pledged to support the creation of an Israeli state and to support its self-defense. Americans were reluctant to send more soldiers abroad to die, so US aid was primarily in money, weapons, and money to purchase weapons.

For decades, the US has been trying to negotiate some kind of peace between the nations of Israel and Palestine. Jimmy Carter negotiated the Camp David agreement,

then Bill Clinton tried again in the 1990s. All of their efforts have proven to be as successful as any other over the centuries.

The government of Israel seeks to expand its territory to include all of the Palestinian state. The government of Palestine seeks to exterminate the Jews and reclaim territory that was allocated by foreign powers.

THIS IS A GROSS OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF THIS CENTURIES-LONG STRUGGLE.

I, AS A WHITE, PROTESTANT, AMERICAN CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE INTRICACIES OF THIS STRUGGLE, BUT I AM DOING MY BEST, AS SHOULD WE ALL.

The governments of the two cultures became more and more radical and rigid, while, for the most part, Jews and Arabs lived in relatively peaceful coexistence.

All the while, Israel has kept expanding its territory, taking over great swaths of land occupied by Palestine, bulldozing homes, and erecting high-end housing for Israelis to move into. Palestine, for its part, has been something of an international pariah, rebelling against global support for Jews to have a home that was anywhere but everywhere else.

The US made a commitment all those years ago to help Israel defend itself. Part of that means sending Israel very powerful, high-tech, and expensive military supplies. Part of that means turning away from the expansionist behavior of successive Israeli governments.

Palestine is now reduced to a tiny portion of the real estate it once called home. After each conflict in which Israel demolishes some part of Palestine, the bulldozers move in, the land is claimed, and Israeli "settlers" move into spiffy new apartments and homes, while the Palestinians seek refuge in an ever-shrinking Palestine.

This does not mean that Palestine is without blame. Hamas, the ruling government of Palestine, seeks as its ultimate goal the eradication of the Israeli state, and of all Jews. The people of Palestine, unable to overthrow Hamas rule, absorb the brunt of the world's reaction to those policies.

Politicians in the US have continued to support Israel since the post-WWII era. As a nation, we carry a significant cultural, historical guilt for permitting the Holocaust, and rejecting immigrants seeking refuge from European antisemitism in the first half of the 20th century. Jews in the US exert no small amount of political pressure on elected leaders to continue this support, and no politician is willing to offend that significant voting bloc, so the support continues.

As Israel has expanded, conditions in Palestine have become more and more dire. Israel controls the drinking water and electricity for much of the Palestinian territory. Check points prevent people from commuting to their jobs, or getting to their farms to tend their olive trees. More and more Palestinians are crowded into smaller and smaller areas. The UN declared the situation in Palestine as “an open-air prison,” in July of last year.

Which brings us to the current day.

Hamas attacked Israel on October 7 of last year. To outsiders, and to residents of Israel, it was viewed as an unprovoked attack, and aimed at non-combatant innocents. Hamas took hostages, and brutalized them.

I say this was viewed as unprovoked, in the same way the US viewed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as “unprovoked.” The foreign policy of Israel, like the foreign policy of the US, was deeply and painfully antagonistic to the nations that in turn attacked with brutality.

Intentionally killing non-combatants is a war-crime.

Taking civilian hostages and sexually brutalizing them is a war crime.

What Palestine – or rather – Hamas did in October was wrong, so very wrong, on so many levels.

And yet, the response from Israel has been outsized in its brutality and severity.

Intentionally targeting hospitals is a war crime.

Intentionally targeting residential areas is a war crime,

Intentionally stopping food and medical aid is a war crime.

Telling people to seek shelter in a particular area and then bombing that area is a war crime.

Bombing residential areas, then bulldozing the rubble to build new housing is a war crime.

Killing 13,800 children is a war crime.

What Israel has done in response to the Hamas attack has been absolutely out of scale.

Committing war crimes in response to war crimes may feel cathartic, but it is still wrong.

And US students see the role of the US government as immoral as it supplies munitions to the government of Israel.

They are protesting US foreign policy that permits – or supports – the expansionist agenda of Bebe Netanyahu.

They are protesting their universities' investment in businesses that support the Israeli expansion.

And Universities are responding as well to this generation of student protests as they have ever responded to previous generations of student protests. Which is to say, badly.

Not unlike the systems within Unitarian Universalism, where our young people protested the investment of the UUA Endowment fund in fossil fuels, the students of American universities are protesting the investment of their institutions in businesses that support the Israeli expansion.

(For the record, the UUA endowment fund is fully divested from fossil fuels. Because protest works.)

University brass are under enormous scrutiny from right wing politicians who want to yank their funding for being too woke. University leaders are desperate to offer congress an image of order and respectability to avert the negative attention.

And the students do not want their tuition money to be invested in companies that supply bombs to Israel.

Criticism of Israel's behavior in this moment is not antisemitic. We can criticize a government while respecting the people ruled by that government. Netanyahu does not represent the will of everyday Israelis any more than Donald Trump represented the will of everyday US citizens. Netanyahu's popular support now rests somewhere south of 15%.

The demonstrations on college campuses are not antisemitic. Senator John Fetterman is completely wrong when he describes them as similar to the neo-nazi violence in Charlottesville, VA in 2017.

Yes, there are people who say horrible things on TV, and, for the most part, those individuals have been proved to be unaffiliated with the official university protests. This happens. There are some folks who just like to stir things up and undercut the message of the real protest.

I saw it happen in Oakland and Berkeley, and in Ferguson and St. Louis. And sometimes those disrupters are undercover police officers. But again, that's another story for another day.

The point I am making is this – the humanity of Jewish people must never be called into question. Every Jewish person in the world has the right to feel safe and be unmolested by haters.

AND

The behavior of Netanyahu's government is absolutely wrong.

Are there people on both sides who want the eradication of everyone on the other side? Absolutely.

Is that position wrong? Absolutely.

AND they are the minority.

Religious educator CB Beal reminds us that more than one thing can be true at a time.

The people of Israel can be afraid of attacks from Hamas.

The people of Palestine can be afraid of attacks from Netanyahu's government.

Both are right to be afraid.

AND the people on both sides are human beings.

We must not lose sight of the humanity of others.

Both sides claim historical ownership of the holy land.

Both sides have legitimate claims.

Both sides are right.

AND

Both sides are wrong in how they conduct themselves.

Conflicting truths can co-exist.

Because truth is understood through the lens of lived reality.

We have all experienced this.

We have all, at some point, said "yes, I know what the data says, but THIS is what I have experienced, and it is true."

The Jewish people absolutely deserve to be safe.

The Palestinian people absolutely deserve to be safe.

What do we do now?

I wish I knew.

I am inclined to support the student protestors. The idealism of our young people, of artists and intellectuals, generally points to the right side of history.

Young people were right about the war in Vietnam.

Young people were right about Apartheid rule in South Africa.

Young people were right about AIDS.

And young people are right about this. Our tax money is funding a genocide. Protesting that is not antisemitic. Holding governments to account is not antisemitic.

It is the obligation of a world where we seek to recognize the humanity in each of us.

These are the waning days of Passover.

I pray that the people of Israel and the people of Palestine come to a place where they can feel safe without having to kill anyone else.

Amen.