
Prayer and Song, Worship and Struggle for Gaza

Timothy Seidel

God have mercy.

1. Prayer and Song, Worship and Struggle in Bethlehem

In Isaiah chapter 58, the prophet challenges the people about their worship. He describes many ways they offer worship to God, such as fasting. But then, looking at their actions, he asks, “Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” The prophet goes on, pointing out, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (Isa 58:5–6, NRSV).

This Isaiah text is tough one. The prophet’s challenge to think again about our worship practices—like praying, singing, and fasting—has me asking: What does “true worship,” worship acceptable to God, look like? If Isaiah were alive today watching what is happening in Gaza, what would he say, what would he do?

This got me thinking about *prayer and song*, and my mind went back to a special moment I remember from my time living in Palestine. It was September 2005 in Bethlehem, meeting at a Christian monastery threatened by the construction of Israel’s Apartheid Wall. Palestinians from several local organizations had gathered. Thoughts and prayers were shared, speeches and encouraging words given, and songs sung that bore witness to a living hope in the midst of death and despair.

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Following our meeting, we all gathered for a prayer vigil. We left the monastery grounds and proceeded toward the Wall towering about thirty feet above us. Some of the most valuable land in this “little town” of Bethlehem has been expropriated by the state of Israel to make room for this monstrosity of concrete—a wall that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague ruled illegal back in 2004. Palestinian livelihoods continue to be devastated as they are denied access to land that has been taken for the construction of this 430-mile wall that has little to do with security and terrorism, built not on the “Green Line” but instead on Palestinian land, cutting deep into the occupied West Bank.

I kept coming back to these thoughts as we began walking along the path of the Wall. I looked up to see what was happening on the faces of those around me. It would have been a beautiful sight if not for the ugliness of this visually and physically imposing structure. I saw a mixture of Palestinians and internationals, joined in *solidarity and struggle* through *prayer and song*. Also beautiful was the mixture of Palestinian Christians around me—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. And the sight of Palestinian Christians and Muslims together, defying all of the dehumanizing stereotypes of “Muslim vs. Christian” used to distract from Israel’s role in the suffering of these people.

At one point we stopped in front of a gate in the Wall that serves as one of Bethlehem’s only entrances/exits, and somebody offered a prayer. When we began to walk again, we all started to pray, singing the words of the Christian liturgy in Arabic:

Ya Rabba ssalami amter ‘alayna ssalam,	Oh Lord of peace shower us with peace,
Ya Rabba ssalami amter ‘alayna ssalam,	Oh Lord of peace shower us with peace,
Ya Rabba ssalami im la’ qulubana ssalam.	Oh Lord of peace fill our hearts with peace.
Ya Rabba ssalami im’nah biladana ssalam.	Oh Lord of peace grant our land peace.

I had heard this liturgy so many times before, sung beautifully in the Palestinian Christian churches I attended for worship, but it carried with it so much power here, against this Wall. For here, it was a tangible, voiced protest against a tangible, concrete injustice. It was a loud “yes” to life and a resolute “no” to the death-dealing status quo of settler colonial occupation.

These images of *prayer and song* in occupied Palestine, is this what the prophet was talking about?

2. Gaza: Context

If Isaiah were alive today watching what is happening in Gaza, what would he say? What would he see?

The Gaza Strip is a small strip of land (141 square miles) that is home to 2.3 million Palestinians, over half of whom are children. The majority of Palestinians in Gaza are refugees living with food, water, and housing insecurity. It is one of the most densely populated places on the planet. Palestinians are confined to what the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem has called the world's largest open-air prison.¹ Palestinians in Gaza literally have no place to go.

At the time of this writing, it has been over eleven months since the beginning of a series of catastrophic events in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. After Hamas's October 7 attack last year, which killed some 1,200 Israelis and injured thousands more, Israel launched a campaign of genocidal violence on Gaza, killing over 41,000 Palestinians—over 16,500 of whom are children—and injuring over 95,000 more. Hundreds of hostages in captivity, thousands of political prisoners in captivity. Over 1.9 million (90 percent) of the Palestinians are displaced in Gaza right now. And over 10,000 more are missing, believed to be trapped or dead under the rubble.² Last fall, one Israeli scholar of genocide called Israel's attack on Gaza a “textbook case of genocide.”³ Earlier this year, the ICJ ruled that Israel's violence in Gaza is probable genocide.⁴ The United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories has also accused Israel of committing acts of genocide in Gaza.⁵

It is important to note that the story did not begin on October 7 but must be understood within a larger historical-political context of settler colonial domination of Palestinian life and land. Palestinians have been under attack, suffering

1 “One Big Prison: Freedom of Movement to and from the Gaza Strip on the Eve of the Disengagement Plan,” B'Tselem joint report with HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual, March 2005, https://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/200503_gaza_prison.

2 These figures are taken from Gaza's Ministry of Health and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; unfortunately, horribly, these numbers are increasing by the hour.

3 Raz Segal, “A Textbook Case of Genocide: Israel Has Been Explicit about What It's Carrying Out in Gaza. Why Isn't the World Listening?,” *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>.

4 Amanda Taub, “The Meaning of the First I.C.J. Ruling in the Genocide Case Against Israel: And Why Alliances Will Determine What Comes Next,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/26/world/middleeast/the-meaning-of-the-first-icj-ruling-in-the-genocide-case-against-israel.html>.

5 Imogen Foulkes, “Gaza War: UN Rights Expert Accuses Israel of Acts of Genocide,” *BBC News*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68667556>.

dispossession and dehumanization for decades. It has been seventy-six years since the *Nakba* or catastrophe of 1948, fifty-seven years of brutal military occupation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and seventeen years since the suffocating military blockade of Gaza began.⁶

Israel controls the flow of goods and resources into Gaza. Since last October, Israel has limited or denied Palestinians access to water, food, fuel, medical aid, and electricity in Gaza, at times cutting off all of those things entirely—actions amounting to collective punishment in violation of international humanitarian law. Israel’s intentional and targeted starvation campaign against Palestinians has led UN experts to say that famine has spread throughout Gaza: 2.15 million Palestinians (96 percent of Gazans) are facing crisis-level food insecurity or worse and extreme hunger. Most residents in Gaza no longer have access to clean drinking water. Health facilities are overwhelmed and, in most places, have collapsed—literally. Israel has damaged or destroyed over half of Gaza’s housing. Israel’s bombing of Gaza’s wastewater treatment systems has created a sanitation crisis spreading deadly disease.⁷

In the midst of all this, education has come to a halt.⁸ Six hundred twenty-five thousand students—that is, all students in Gaza—have no access to education right now. Israel has killed more than 10,000 students and 500 teachers and educational staff. According to one UN report, Israel has damaged or destroyed more than 80 percent of schools in Gaza. Additionally, Israel has destroyed every university in Gaza. “These attacks are not isolated incidents,” the UN report states. “They present a systematic pattern of violence aimed at dismantling the very foundation of Palestinian society.” Israel’s efforts to comprehensively destroy the Palestinian education system is being called “scholasticide.”⁹

Schools, hospitals, mosques, and churches that have not been destroyed have become overcrowded shelters for Palestinians seeking safety from Israeli airstrikes. The few available bathrooms have to be shared among hundreds or thousands of people who sometimes wait in line for hours to use them. Israel’s bombardment of Gaza and ground offensive have increasingly pushed Palestinians south into

6 See Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan, 2020).

7 Raja Abdulrahim, “Sanitation Crisis in Gaza Spreads Disease,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/24/world/middleeast/gaza-sanitation-crisis.html>.

8 “How Israel Has Destroyed Gaza’s Schools and Universities,” *Al Jazeera*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/24/how-israel-has-destroyed-gazas-schools-and-universities>.

9 “UN Experts Deeply Concerned Over ‘Scholasticide’ in Gaza,” *UN Press Release*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>.

overcrowded places like al-Mawasi near Khan Younis and Rafah and forced them to erect makeshift tents.

In June, Save the Children reported that up to 21,000 Palestinian children are missing in Gaza. This does not include the over 16,500 Palestinian children killed by Israel, or children forcibly disappeared by Israeli forces, including those “detained and forcibly transferred out of Gaza [with] their whereabouts unknown to their families amidst reports of ill-treatment and torture.” Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza is a literally a war against children.¹⁰

In July, *The Lancet* published a report estimating that the death toll of the Gaza genocide is 186,000 people or more, nearly 8 percent of Gaza’s population.¹¹ This is a systematic effort to exterminate the Palestinian people—armed, funded, and supported by the US.

The situation is horrific. Since ruling that Israel’s violence in Gaza is probable genocide, the ICJ also ruled that Israel’s “occupation, settlement and annexation” of Palestinian territories violates international law.¹² South Africa, who brought charges against Israel to the ICJ, likened Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians to an “extreme form of apartheid.” The United States once again came to Israel’s defense, imploring the court not to issue a ruling that Israel must withdraw from occupied Palestine. America’s was a lonely voice, with only Britain offering a similar argument.¹³

10 “Gaza’s Missing Children: Over 20,000 Children Estimated to Be Lost, Disappeared, Detained, Buried Under the Rubble or in Mass Graves,” *ReliefWeb*, June 24, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gazas-missing-children-over-20000-children-estimated-be-lost-disappeared-detained-buried-under-rubble-or-mass-graves-0>.

11 Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf, “Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential,” *The Lancet*, July 5, 2024, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01169-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01169-3/fulltext).

12 “Global Court Says Israel’s Occupation of Territories Violates International Law,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/07/19/world/israel-gaza-war-hamas#icj-israel-palestinian-territories-occupation>.

13 Mark Landler, “As Gaza Death Toll Mounts amidst This Ongoing violence, Israel’s Isolation Grows,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/world/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-israel.html>; Patrick Kingsley and Thomas Fuller, “Netanyahu Issues First Plan for Postwar Gaza,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/23/world/middleeast/netanyahu-postwar-plan-gaza-palestinians-reject.html>. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s plan to build more settlements in the West Bank has nothing to do with meeting people’s housing needs but is part of Israel’s larger settler-colonial effort to take more Palestinian land in response to the Palestinian’s Indigenous struggle against Israeli settlers. For more on this, see Timothy Seidel and Federica Stagni, “Settler Colonial Violence and Indigenous Struggle: Land, Resistance, and Refusal in Masafer Yatta” in *Resisting Domination in Palestine:*

The United States has enabled this genocide. The US supplies the most military aid to Israel, \$3–4 billion a year, which accounts for about two-thirds of Israel’s arms imports (the largest recipient of US aid). An additional 26 billion was part of a package approved by the House in April of this year. It also maintains large weapons stockpiles in Israel, which the United States has allowed the Israeli military to draw from. The US has vetoed several UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire, though abstaining from the most recent resolution.

3. One State, Two states: Not a Solution but a Struggle

This all makes talk of a political solution really difficult right now. Unfortunately, Israel’s Apartheid Wall, settlement expansion, and genocide in Gaza are chapters in a long history of Palestinian displacement and dispossession. The Wall has become the de facto border of a Palestinian quasi-state composed of several isolated islands of land on roughly 40–50 percent of the West Bank. Under this “two-state solution,” Palestinians are confined to what some call “reservations”—or, evoking South Africa under apartheid, “Bantustans”—partially connected by a network of roads and tunnels controlled by the Israeli military. Industrial zones may be established at the edges of these areas so that businesses can take advantage of a cheap, imprisoned labor pool. Absent a viable, contiguous Palestinian state, what remains is a “reservation” life for Palestinians parallel to the experience of many Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

One point for us to consider might be to move beyond the conceptual bind of “statehood”—whether Palestinian or Israeli. As Mennonite Christians, we might argue that our action and advocacy for a just and lasting peace should not ultimately be focused on whether or not a Palestinian state comes into being, because statehood, from a Christian perspective, is not an end in itself. Rather, what is a good in and of itself is the well-being of all who inhabit historic Palestine—that is, present-day Israel, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. If current realities have indeed rendered a two-state solution unfeasible, then those who care about the well-being and security for all must imagine new ways to live side by side in justice, freedom, and equality—including for Palestinian refugees who have been denied their right to return home.

An alternative to consider is one state. The struggle here is against Israel’s settler-colonial regime that has produced an apartheid reality in occupied Palestine and, in this moment, a genocide in Gaza. It would be a struggle for equal citizenship for all—in which Palestinians and Israelis are equal citizens before the law—in all of historic Palestine.

Mechanisms and Techniques of Control, Coloniality and Settler Colonialism, eds. Alaa Tartir, Timothy Seidel, and Tariq Dana (London: I. B. Taurus/Bloomsbury, 2024), 161–78.

However one chooses to confront these challenging questions, recognizing that statehood is not an end in itself begins with the confession that from a Christian perspective we are called first and foremost to practice and witness for a politics of jubilee, one which brings liberty to the oppressed and a secure existence in the land (Luke 4; Lev 25) and to work for the day when each will sit under vine and fig tree without fear (Mic 4:4)—a vision that cannot be confined to any notions of “one state” or “two states.”

It is a vision where we might shift our thinking from solution to struggle, steadfastness, and solidarity. We have seen this over the past eleven months, when hundreds of thousands of protestors all around the world have taken to the streets in struggle and solidarity—including in our own city of Harrisonburg, Virginia—calling for a ceasefire and an end to Israel’s genocide of the Palestinian people.

We can think of solidarity as those ties that bind people together as one, expressed through collective action based on recognition of shared interests. Astra Taylor and Leah Hunt-Hendrix point out that solidarity “weaves us into a larger and more resilient ‘we’ through the precious and powerful sense that even though we are different, our lives and our fates are connected.”¹⁴

It is a vision I also hear and see in the work of Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour. He writes about solidarity in this moment: “The global protests advocating for the freedom of Palestinians aren’t just acts of solidarity; they are expressions of shared humanity, where individuals, regardless of nationality, race, or creed, unite in spirit with the Palestinian cause.” He goes on, “It’s a reminder that one doesn’t need to be born in Palestine to understand the urgency and justice of its struggle. Standing up for the rights of Palestinians is a universal duty, a testament of empathy and commitment to a world where every individual can live free from oppression and fear.”¹⁵

This past spring, the largest campus protests this country has seen since the late 1960s emerged. One compelling story that stood out to me took place at Columbia University (New York City) in April. Like at many universities, students at Columbia staged peaceful protests including setting up Gaza solidarity encampments on campus, calling for their university to disclose and divest any funds connected to Israel’s military occupation. In the face of the outrageous response of their university president to call the police, and in the face of that police violence and arrest, how did students respond? Not by resisting arrest, not by responding in kind. *But by singing.* They sang as they were arrested, and then

14 Astra Taylor and Leah Hunt-Hendrix, “The One Idea That Could Save American Democracy,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/21/opinion/democracy-solidarity-trump.html>.

15 Sliman Mansour, “New Surrounding (ديـجـ طيـحـم),” *Instagram*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/sliman.mansour/p/C6WdPZwN0vC/>.

kept singing as they were being transported to jail.¹⁶ This is what we did in January when over 130 Mennonites were arrested in the Cannon House Office Building. We were singing, and we kept singing as we were detained in the rotunda, in the hallways, on the buses as we were transported.¹⁷

4. Prayer and Song, Worship and Struggle with Mennonite Action

I have been working with folks in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County to find ways to respond to the horrific catastrophe in Gaza. In the midst of the sadness, grief, and anger, a lot of collective energy and action has emerged, with folks working together to coordinate and amplify our efforts. This is one of the reasons I got involved with an initiative called Mennonite Action.

Mennonite Action is a movement of Mennonites and friends across the United States and Canada sharing a common belief that we have a responsibility to use our voices as powerfully as possible for the cause of peace and justice. Since December 2023, we have been mobilizing to use creative nonviolent actions to demand a ceasefire, an end to the genocide, and an end to US aid funding Israel's occupation of Palestine, so that a lasting peace can be built.

Organizing and mobilizing for collective public action has taken the form of prayer, hymn-singing, marching, carrying quilts and banners, and even peaceful civil disobedience—moving from witness to *solidarity and struggle* through *prayer and song*, like those of us who gathered in protest against the Wall in Bethlehem. And like then, we might also view this solidarity through public action as worship. Actions like the one in the Cannon House Office Rotunda are sacramental acts through which God's love and grace enter the world. There is an invitation to bring our full selves to this witness and solidarity, as integrated, not dis-integrated, people and with a claim that God is already there with us. We can pray, we can sing, we can cry, we can confess, we can declare that love has already had the final word. And that this solidarity and public action is bearing witness to this confession.

This is really important to me. I lived and worked in Palestine-Israel with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). I also served with MCC in the US as director for Peace and Justice Ministries, learning a lot about the connections between

16 Hadas Thier, "The Student Encampments Aren't a Danger to Jews. But the Crackdown Is," *The Nation*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/campus-encampment-police-crackdown-antisemitism-brutality/>.

17 Justin Wm. Moyer, "Around 130 Mennonites, Calling for Gaza Cease-fire, Arrested on Capitol Hill," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/01/16/gaza-protest-cannon-building-mennonite-action/>; Tim Huber, "Activists Call for Peace in Washington as Mennonite Action Expands," *Anabaptist World*, January 19, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/activists-call-for-peace-in-washington-as-mennonite-action-expands/>.

structures of violence and domination in Palestine and structures of violence and domination here in the US. Take, for example, the ways that walls and border regimes produce violence in occupied Palestine and in the US-Mexico borderlands, in some cases using the same technologies provided by the same corporations.¹⁸

For the past twenty years, I have been organizing and leading learning delegations from the US to Palestine-Israel, most recently this past summer when I co-led an Eastern Mennonite University intercultural program with twenty-one students. It was intense. We learned about settler colonialism—there in Palestine but also here in the Shenandoah Valley. We learned about the *Nakba*—or catastrophe—of 1948, Israel’s military occupation of Palestinian land, and its sixteen-year military blockade of Gaza. We also learned about Palestinian struggle and steadfastness, or *sumud* in Arabic, and the transnational solidarities that emerge when people organize together with creativity, courage, and love.

I did not grow up Mennonite. In fact, I often tell folks that I first learned what it meant to be Mennonite from my Palestinian friends and neighbors (MCC has been in Palestine since 1949, first arriving to provide relief to refugees following the *Nakba*). It was about community, the coupling of meeting human needs with struggling against oppressive structures that produce those oppressive material conditions. And a commitment to nonviolence and the life-giving love we know through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It is where I first learned about *sumud* as a kind of political theology of steadfastness against political theologies of elimination and replacement such as Christian Zionism, or, closer to home, the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery is a philosophical and legal framework that has legitimized the theft of Indigenous lands and domination of Indigenous Peoples. Christian Zionism works the same way in Palestine, legitimizing the theft of Palestinian lands and the domination of Palestinians.¹⁹

In addition to the accompaniment and partnerships in Palestine-Israel, an important part of that work was, and still is, challenging those political theologies that dehumanize Palestinians and Indigenous Peoples. It informs a peace witness that embraces public engagement aimed at challenging imperialism and white supremacy. It impressed upon me the critical importance of a pacifist ethic and political theology that is not selective in its condemnation of violence—settler violence there and here.²⁰

18 Timothy Seidel, “‘Emigrantes, Palestinos, Estamos Unidos’: Anticolonial Connectivity and Resistance Along the ‘Palestine-Mexico’ Border,” *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 1 (2023): 94–111.

19 Timothy Seidel, “Not a Solution but a Struggle: Anticolonial Connectivity and Steadfastness Against Replacement,” *International Politics* 61, no. 2 (2024): 399–406.

20 And as bell hooks reminds us, our efforts to challenge settler colonialism and militarism must be at the same time efforts to challenge racial capitalism, white supremacy,

I continue to be deeply distressed by Israel’s assault on Gaza. Israel’s violence against the Palestinian people has been extreme in its disproportionality (and media coverage in the West obscures)—one of the most powerful armies on the planet, supported by my government, using its full might against 2.3 million besieged, poor people, half of whom are children, most of whom are refugees, in one of the world’s most densely populated places.

I have dear friends in Palestine-Israel living through this ongoing catastrophe. It is truly a difficult and heart-wrenching time. Such grief. Calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to the genocide, for humanitarian action right now. That is the immediate need. There is no military solution. For a lasting peace born of justice, Israel’s siege of Gaza must be lifted and its settler-colonial domination of Palestinian life and land must end. As the Israeli organization Zochrot wrote, “Our safety and wellbeing are dependent on each other’s. No one is safe until everyone is safe.”²¹

As a Mennonite Christian, I understand this work—*sumud*, solidarity, and struggle through prayer and song—as a kind of worship. It is why I have continued to show up at church on Sunday mornings. I am eager to be in a space where other folks are looking to not only respond to this current moment but also organize for long-term change as a witness to our belief in a God of life and life-giving love who is present still, as Palestinian pastor Rev. Munther Isaac reminds us, under the rubble in Gaza.²² It is also a reminder that this is not a spectacle to be consumed but a work to be shared, collectively.

This is what groups like Mennonite Action are trying to do. So many folks are activated to work to make change, but we cannot do this work alone as individuals. We need to mobilize and organize for collective action, public action, across our communities.

I wonder if this gets at what the prophet spoke about—witness and solidarity that manifests in prayer and song. It is a worship and a struggle that we are all invited into.

May God have mercy and give us the strength and courage to be steadfast.

and hetero-patriarchy. See bell hooks and George Yancy, “bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness,” *New York Times*, December 10, 2015, <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-blackness/>.

21 Zochrot, “No One Is Safe Until Everyone Is Safe,” *Instagram*, October 18, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyjTk8mNyeE/?img_index=5.

22 Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, “God Is Under the Rubble in Gaza,” *Sojourners*, October 30, 2023, <https://sojo.net/articles/god-under-rubble-gaza>.