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# Witness amid Catastrophe

## Fragmented Reflections on Mennonite Work in Palestine-Israel

Alain Epp Weaver

How to witness to God's love amid catastrophe and a society's devastation? Contemporary (as in post-World War II) Mennonite work in Palestine-Israel began in the wake of what Palestinians came to call the *nakba*, or catastrophe, of 1948, in which the founding of the State of Israel went hand-in-hand with the expulsion of more than seven hundred thousand Palestinians—over two-thirds of the Palestinian population between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea at the time.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent Palestinian history can be narrated as an ongoing *nakba*, with continuing dispossession of Palestinians inside Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, both at gunpoint and by labyrinthine bureaucracies that seek to maintain the deceptive sheen of legality.

The catastrophe has intensified unimaginably since October 7, 2023, with Israel's unrelenting military assault on the Gaza Strip in response to attacks by Hamas militants from Gaza on Israeli communities and military bases.<sup>2</sup> I have

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1 Throughout these reflections, I will generally refer to Palestine-Israel, naming both the modern State of Israel established in 1948 and the occupied Palestinian territories of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Reference to Palestine-Israel underscores how Palestinian and Israeli lives are intertwined with one another, how Israeli sovereign control extends from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, and how the State of Israel both includes a significant percentage of Palestinian Arab citizens and is the remembered homeland of Palestinian refugees. Reference to Palestine-Israel also points to a hoped-for future for the seven million Palestinians and seven million Israeli Jews in the land between the river and the sea, in which both people might live in equality, justice, and peace, be that in two neighboring states or in some type of binational configuration.

2 The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, which included taking Israelis and others hostage inside Gaza, did not emerge within a vacuum but came after fifteen-plus years of a crippling economic siege on the Gaza Strip coupled with periodic bombardments, with

struggled to wrap my heart and mind around this bleak devastation, let alone articulate what a Mennonite witness for peace might look like within these realities. A peace in which Palestinians and Israelis alike might, in line with the vision granted to the prophet Micah, sit under vine and fig tree, with no one to make them afraid (Mi 4:4). The best I can muster are fragmented reflections on what witness to God’s love looks like amid catastrophe.<sup>3</sup>

## I. The Miraculous Movement of God’s Spirit

“We are so tired. Believe me, we are so tired.” Multiple friends in Gaza have texted me variations of this message this spring, expressing the soul-crushing exhaustion from nine months (as of this writing) of unrelenting Israeli attacks across the Gaza Strip. Exhaustion from the daily desperate search for clean water and food, with the specter of famine and even starvation never far away. Exhaustion from the life-upending disruption of needing to flee to temporary (and uncertain) shelter in the face of Israeli assaults (even in areas declared “safe” by the Israeli military), with painful calculations of what to carry and what to leave behind. Exhaustion from the inability to properly mourn the death of loved ones—and, in many cases, not even having bodies to bury, as they are either unrecovered under mounds of concrete and rebar or torn apart and rendered unrecognizable by Israeli bombs. Exhaustion from fruitless searching for medicines and medical care, with Gaza’s hospitals on life support. Exhaustion from not being able to send children to school, with schools having been either destroyed or turned into crowded shelters. Exhaustion from the constant buzzing of quadcopter drones overhead. Exhaustion that cries out for a respite, for some moments, days, or weeks to begin to piece together one’s life.

These friends were my gracious hosts when I lived with my family in the Gaza Strip for two years in the late 1990s while coordinating Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC’s) humanitarian relief, development, and peace programs. They invited us to the beach, showed off Gaza’s architectural jewels, introduced us to Gaza’s spicy dishes, brought us with them to worship at Gaza’s Catholic and Baptist churches, and generously welcomed us to their cinderblock homes in Gaza’s densely populated refugee camps. Their lives were constrained by living in what Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations would, over the years,

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tight controls on the movement of people and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip. Adding to the intensity of the current situation is Israel’s accelerated land grabs and ethnic cleansing across the West Bank.

3 For two additional sets of fragmented reflections, see Alain Epp Weaver, “Hope Buried in Gaza?,” *Macrina Magazine* (November 18, 2023), <https://www.macrinamagazine.com/posts/hope-buried-in-gaza>; and “The Church’s Worship in Gaza,” *Macrina Magazine* (March 15, 2024), <https://www.macrinamagazine.com/posts/the-churchs-worship-in-gaza>.

increasingly refer to as the world's largest open-air prison, as the Israeli military and economic siege on Gaza progressively tightened from the beginning of the Oslo peace process in the early 1990s onward. Yet despite these constraints, these friends were animated by possibility, driven by a commitment to support and mobilize their neighbors.

The Near East Council of Churches operated a vocational training center in Al-Qarara village in the southern Gaza Strip, where young men learned electrical engineering skills. Al-Najd Developmental Forum supported low-income families to start initiatives in Gaza city to improve family food security through breeding rabbits for sale and consumption. The Culture and Free Thought Association in Khan Younis operated centers in which children and youth developed skills and confidence as community leaders. In my last visit to Gaza in January 2023, my heart was buoyed by the strength, creativity, and determination of MCC's partners and the communities with which they worked, even as this hope was tempered by United Nations' warnings that conditions in the Gaza Strip—in a perpetual state of what Harvard political economist Sara Roy identified as Israeli-imposed de-development—were rapidly becoming unlivable.<sup>4</sup>

Since October 7, my friends working for these organizations have, like over 90 percent of Gazans, lost their homes, with most having been forced to flee multiple times for safety in the face of Israeli military attacks, some well over ten times. Yet despite having their own lives uprooted, these friends continue to mobilize their communities and to deliver humanitarian assistance in whatever ways they can. The courage and determination they and so many other Gazans show as they struggle not only to survive but also to care for neighbors and to nurture joy when it breaks forth stand for me as the miraculous movement of God's Spirit, even as the grim present and probable future within which they live tempers any temptation to romanticize or aestheticize this courage.

## II. To Listen and to Learn

The seventy-five-year story of MCC's work in Palestine-Israel since 1949 is, in large measure, the story of the Palestinian and Israeli organizations MCC has accompanied as they have carried out humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding initiatives.<sup>5</sup> MCC's program from the 1950s into the mid-1980s certainly involved MCC organizing and implementing various initiatives, such

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<sup>4</sup> Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Politics of De-development*, expanded 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For an examination of MCC's first fifty years of work with Palestinians and Israelis, see Sonia K. Weaver and Alain Epp Weaver, *Salt and Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine, 1949-1999* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1999). For a shorter overview of MCC's seventy-five years in Palestine-Israel, see Alain Epp Weaver, "Nakba Redux: Gaza, Catastrophe, and 75 Years of Mennonite Witness." *Anabaptist World* (January 9, 2024): 8-13.



MCC worker Geraldine Ebersole, left, and Palestinian refugee women in Jericho, West Bank, who received MCC newborn layettes in 1951. (MCC photo)



as distributing relief supplies to Palestinian refugees, establishing Christian schools in Hebron and then Beit Jala in the West Bank, setting up an income generation project for women to earn money by selling Palestinian needlework through MCC's nascent SELFHELP Crafts enterprise, and operating agricultural development programs that supported rural West Bank communities in seeking to protect their land from confiscation by Israeli authorities by bringing it into sustainable cultivation.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid-1980s, MCC's program in the West Bank had begun shifting from direct implementation to partnership with Palestinian churches and civil society organizations. This was a reflection of a broader trend toward local partnerships that began within MCC in the late 1970s, with MCC serving as a forerunner of what within the global humanitarian world in the 2010s would come to be called *localization*. In this missiological model, MCC sought to *accompany* churches and community-based organizations in realizing their visions, seconding staff and giving financial grants in support of their efforts, recognizing that successful and durable humanitarian relief, development, and peace initiatives depended on the knowledge, skills, and insights of local communities.<sup>7</sup>

During our first MCC orientation in 1992, before being sent to teach English at a Catholic school in the northern West Bank village of Zababdeh, my spouse, Sonia, and I received the strong message from MCC leaders that our main assignment was not to teach English but instead to drink tea and coffee with our neighbors, to join them in the daily rhythm of their lives, to be *present* with them. Implicit missiological messages from this orientation included the injunction that “you, Alain, are not at the center of God’s mission. God has been at work in Zababdeh long before you arrived and will continue to move through Zababdeh’s people long after you have gone. You are there to be present, to *listen* and *learn*.”

However, the lure of imagining oneself at the heart of events was hard to resist. We arrived in Zababdeh when the *intifada* that had begun in 1987 was nearly five years old. Our colloquial Arabic classes had included words for “curfew” and “checkpoint.” My body and spirit yearned to be part of the action. One evening

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6 While white Mennonites from Canada and the United States are the main voices featured in MCC's archival material, Palestinian Christians and Muslims were at the core of these initiatives, carrying out the bulk of the daily work in these relief, income-generation, educational, and agricultural development initiatives.

7 For a discussion of these global shifts, see Alain Epp Weaver, *Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation: A Missiological History of Mennonite Central Committee* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2020); and Alain Epp Weaver and Emma Smith Cain, “‘Outside Agencies Do Not Bring Development’: Mennonite Central Committee and the Decades-Long Challenge of Decolonizing Aid,” *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy: The Journal of the Accord Network* 5, no. 1 (2023): 7–18, <https://crdajournal.org/index.php/crda/article/view/569>.

during our first month in Zababdeh, as we sat drinking tea with our landlord's family under their grapevines, I heard a vehicle passing by the family's property walls, with a loud voice issuing a message from a crackling loudspeaker. My body tensed with excitement, wondering if I was about to be swept into the dramatic realities of a people living under occupation. In my elementary Arabic I asked if the vehicle was a jeep from the Israeli army base a kilometer to the north of the village, and if we were being placed under curfew. My neighbors laughed heartily, explaining that a truck had just passed announcing the sale of watermelons for five shekels per kilogram.

While an ensuing decade of MCC work with Palestinians (in Zababdeh, then Gaza; Jerusalem; and Amman, Jordan) would involve plenty of encounters with the machinery and bureaucracy of Israel's military occupation,<sup>8</sup> this humorous incident early in my first MCC assignment made real for me the message that MCC leaders had sought to convey in orientation—namely, that God's mission in the world was not about me but about the movement of God's Spirit in the everyday lives of my neighbors, and that my job would be to listen and learn from the Palestinian communities in which I had been placed.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Learning the Shape of Peace from Palestinian Christians

The late Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said trenchantly analyzed the social and political forces that sought to deny Palestinians the “permission to narrate” their realities, to narrate their exile, to describe how Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel entailed their dispossession.<sup>10</sup> Insistence on listening to and learning from Palestinians disrupts efforts to silence them.

Mennonites have haltingly learned over time the vital importance of listening to and learning from the Palestinian churches about what witness to God's nonviolent way of love looks like under the reality of military occupation. Any account of Mennonite witness in Palestine-Israel must include the Palestinian Christians

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8 These encounters usually occurred in banal, everyday ways, like waiting for hours on end at a checkpoint, though sometimes they included a heightened threat of deadly violence.

9 Organizations like Christian (now Community) Peacemaker Teams—which was set up with a mission of “getting in the way” of Israel's military occupation through nonviolent direct action—have also shifted over time to embracing a posture of “being with” communities bearing the brunt of occupation. See Alain Epp Weaver, “On Breaking Bread and Stones: A Review of the Literature of International Peace Teams in Palestine,” *The Jerusalem Quarterly File* 22–23 (2005): 93–102; and “‘Getting in the Way’ or ‘Being-With’: Missiologies in Tension in the Work of Christian Peacemaker Teams,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 19 (2011): 260–77.

10 Edward W. Said, “Permission to Narrate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 27–48.

from whom Mennonite workers have learned over the years about the embodied shape of the gospel of peace—from Naim Ateek to Cedar Duyabis, from Samia Khoury to Mitri Raheb, from Munther Isaac to Michel Sabbah.<sup>11</sup> In some cases, the Palestinian Christians from whom MCC learned were themselves MCC workers for some years—the lawyer and nonviolent activist, Jonathan Kuttab, and the founder of Bethlehem Bible College, Bishara Awad. Through support for organizations like Bethlehem Bible College and the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, and through learning tours that have highlighted voices from the Palestinian churches, MCC has aimed to amplify the witness of the Palestinian churches to the broader Christian *oikoumene*.

#### IV. Standing Against All Forms of Racism

Resistance to listening to and learning from the witness of the Palestinian church about their lived reality under Zionism is strong—and not only from churches shaped by diverse evangelical and fundamentalist forms of Christian Zionism. For example, in the early 2000s I attended a conference in Jerusalem at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, operated by the University of Notre Dame, where the German priest and theologian Johann Baptist Metz spoke. Known for his writings about the “dangerous and liberating memory of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” and his influence on various forms of liberation theology through his focus on the importance of the church’s *praxis* for theology, he was asked by conference participants what the implication of that “dangerous memory of Jesus Christ” might be for Palestinian Christians and for a critique of Israel’s military occupation.<sup>12</sup> Metz responded that he would remain silent, arguing that as a German Christian he had no right to speak about the State of Israel, given the legacies of German antisemitism and the Holocaust he had inherited.

Metz’s stance is common within mainline Protestant and Catholic circles—namely, that grappling with and being accountable for Western Christian histories of antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence entails silence in the face of the violence perpetrated by the Israeli State and requires a tacit or full-throated

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11 Among the many works of Palestinian theology that could be cited, see these recent studies: Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023); Naim Ateek, *Call and Commitment: A Journey of Faith from Nakba to Palestinian Liberation Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023); and Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Lisle, IL: IVP, 2020). See also the groundbreaking Kairos Palestine document, endorsed by the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, *A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering* (2009), <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf>.

12 Metz’s most significant work was *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980).



affirmation of Zionism understood as a movement to establish Jewish dominance within some or all of Palestine-Israel.<sup>13</sup> Reckoning with the church's legacy of anti-Jewish theology and antisemitism is vital work, and the pull of Metz's position can feel strong.

Mennonites in Europe, Canada, and the United States are only starting to come to terms with histories of Mennonite antisemitism. MCC, meanwhile, has begun to grapple with its historical entanglements with National Socialism and its legacy before, during, and after the Second World War as it worked to resettle Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union. The question arises: What right do Mennonites have to critique how Zionism has been intertwined with Palestinian dispossession or to protest the violence of Israel's military occupation?<sup>14</sup> This question facing Mennonites is a variation of a question that churches in the West more generally have faced in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.<sup>15</sup> Some Christians in the West have concluded that these

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13 Other forms of Zionism existed prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, such as the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am or the Zionist binationalism promoted by the Brit Shalom circle. Yet the real-world Zionism that has been practiced is one of seeking to establish exclusive Jewish dominance within part or all of Palestine-Israel.

14 For examinations of Mennonite antisemitism and involvements with Nazism, see Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2017); and Mark Janzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021). For summaries of research by twelve historians into MCC's entanglements with National Socialism related to its resettlement of Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union, see the fall 2021 issue of MCC's quarterly publication *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice* on "MCC and National Socialism."

15 One might wonder if MCC's entanglements with National Socialism and its legacy influenced MCC's decision to start working with Palestinian refugees. No peer-reviewed research has established a direct connection between the history of Mennonites and Nazism and MCC's work in the Middle East. MCC's archives are open to researchers seeking to investigate such potential connections. From my own broader research into MCC's history, I would identify multiple factors that influenced the start of MCC's Palestinian refugee work: The late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of rapid expansion for MCC globally, so it is unsurprising that MCC would respond to a high-profile refugee situation; MCC's decision to second Titus Lehman in 1949 to the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Gaza built on MCC's collaboration with AFSC in administering Civilian Public Service camps during WWII; and MCC leader Orié Miller—who had a pre-existing interest in West Asia having served in Syria and Armenia with Mennonite relief efforts after the Great War, and who also served as secretary for the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC)—understood the events of 1948 as profoundly significant. He pushed for both MCC and EMBMC to become involved, with MCC responding to the Palestinian refugee crisis and EMBMC sending mission workers to accompany Messianic Jewish communities in the new State of Israel.

legacies of antisemitism demand silence about or muted criticism of the catastrophes inflicted by the Israeli state on the Palestinian people. Others have concluded that complicity with injustice and oppression in the past demands renewed commitment to work for justice and peace in the present.

Mennonites—especially white Mennonites in the West—who advocate for Palestinian rights and against oppressive structures and ideologies that drive and justify ongoing Palestinian dispossession cannot do so from a position of imagined moral purity. Rather, such advocacy must be animated by a recognition of various forms of white Mennonite entanglement with legacies of antisemitism, racism, colonial expansion, and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The purpose of this recognition is to spur an intersectional struggle for justice in the present, with commitment to combatting antisemitism forming an integral part of a commitment to stand against all forms of racism.<sup>16</sup>

## V. Zochrot: Remembering the Nakba

On a beautiful morning in 2002, I drove westward down from Jerusalem, where I was living while serving as MCC representative, toward Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, a community established as an intentional exercise in Israeli Jewish-Palestinian Arab life together. My destination was the community's School for Peace, where I was scheduled to meet with one of the school's trainers, Eitan Bronstein. The drive took me past the ruins of 'Imwas, a Palestinian village associated with the biblical Emmaus, that was destroyed in 1967 after Israel had conquered and occupied the West Bank. These ruins had since been covered

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16 Advocates for a just, peaceful future for Palestinians and Israelis alike must also be soberly realistic about how accusations of antisemitism are weaponized to stigmatize and in some cases even outlaw advocacy for Palestinian rights, labeling nonviolent tactics such as boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS)—even divestment from companies profiting from investments in companies contributing to Israel's illegal military occupation—as antisemitic and dismissing as antisemitic attempts by scholars, human rights groups, and activists to analyze and name the nature of the catastrophe the Israeli state carries out against Palestinians (be that analysis in terms of settler-colonialism, apartheid, or genocide). The International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, for example, has been used by governments and other institutions in efforts to suppress advocacy for Palestinian rights and to stigmatize critiques of Zionism and Israeli state policies and practices against Palestinians (see <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>). For an alternative definition of antisemitism that does not treat critiques of Zionism and Israeli state policies and practices against Palestinians as inherently antisemitic, see the *Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism* (<https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>). Mennonites advocating for a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians must both stand firmly against antisemitism and reject efforts to suppress advocacy against unjust Israeli state practices and to silence advocacy for Palestinian rights by labeling those efforts as antisemitic.

over by trees planted by the Jewish National Fund after the Israeli military had bulldozed the buildings in ‘Imwas and the neighboring village of Yalu, the land now forming a get-away nature destination called Canada Park.

As Eitan and I sat down to talk, he shared about how his work at the School for Peace and the school’s proximity to the ruins of ‘Imwas and Yalu had convinced him that a genuine, durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians required that Israelis honestly confront the catastrophe of 1948. Specifically, that Israelis acknowledge Israel’s role in the Palestinian refugee crisis and encourage Israeli-Palestinian discussions about what an Israeli recognition of the right of Palestinian refugees to return might look like in practice.

Together with friends, Eitan sought to establish an organization called *Zochrot*, a Hebrew word translated both as “remembering” and as “the ones [feminine] who remember,” a name that captured the envisioned group’s focus on public memory work as essential to peacebuilding, a type of memory work that challenged “masculine,” nationalist forms of memorialization. *Zochrot*, Eitan explained, would stimulate discussion and debate within Israeli society about Palestinian refugees and their return by “remembering the *nakba* in Hebrew.” By the time I left Neve Shalom, I had agreed that MCC would provide *Zochrot* with funding for its first public actions—return visits to the sites of destroyed Palestinian villages like ‘Imwas, in which signs would be posted in Hebrew and Arabic to name what had been erased from the landscape.<sup>17</sup>

As optimism from the Oslo peace process began to curdle by the late 1990s and as the peace process gave way in the early 2000s to unilateral Israeli measures to fragment the occupied Palestinian territories (with the increasing enforced isolation of the Gaza Strip and the construction of walls, fences, checkpoints, Israeli-only road networks, and more), hope for a future of justice, peace, and equality for Palestinians and Israelis alike started to seem increasingly tenuous. What constantly rekindled my hope was participating in the return visits organized by *Zochrot* to the sites of destroyed Palestinian villages. These visits brought together Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and sometimes Palestinians from the occupied West Bank or from exile in Europe, Australia, or elsewhere around the world.

As these groups gathered to remember the places and people who had been erased from the landscape and to post signs in Hebrew and Arabic to commemorate those places and people, I caught a glimpse of a possible future of reconciled life in the land. I came to understand these return visits as *liturgical actions*, with remembrance of the past through actions in the present pointing to and

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17 For an account of *Zochrot*’s founding and actions, see Eitan Bronstein Aparicio and Eléonore Merza Bronstein, *Nakba: The Struggle to Decolonize Israel* (London: Nomad, 2023). See also Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Villages of 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).



In November 2021, Sarah Nahar (then Thompson) (right), a participant in MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, joined volunteers organized by Omar Harmacy (left) of Sabeel, an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology center, to plant olive trees at Tent of Nations, the farm of the Nassar family, Palestinian Christians from the Bethlehem area whose land is threatened with confiscation by nearby Israeli settlements. (MCC photo/Ryan Rodrick Beiler)

tentatively embodying a coming future—and, more specifically, as *exilic vigils*, a waiting amid the devastation of exile wrought by settler-colonial nationalism for the inbreaking of alternative futures.<sup>18</sup>

## VI. Together at Peace Under Vine and Fig Tree

On our first full day in Zababdeh in August 1992, a loud banging noise on our apartment door roused us early in the morning. Opening the door, we found our landlord's oldest son on the other side offering us a tray of fresh, plump figs picked that morning from a glorious tree next to their home. From that moment, the prophet Micah's vision of a future in which people will live securely under vine and fig tree has stood for me as a vision of the coming future toward which all peacebuilding action and Christian witness in Palestine-Israel must point—a coming future of justice, equality, and peace for all in the land.

Tragically, the three decades-plus since the start of the Oslo peace process in 1993 have not witnessed movement toward such a future. Instead, accelerated Israeli military measures have resulted in land confiscations, home demolitions, expulsions of Palestinians from their land, and the building of walls, fences, checkpoints, roads, roadblocks, and illegal settlements to fragment the occupied Palestinian territories and thus to divide Palestinians from one another and to separate Palestinians further from Israelis. Just as the isolating Israeli siege on Gaza represented an extreme case of the ways that East Jerusalem and other West Bank cities and towns were being progressively isolated from one another, so the Israeli assault on Gaza is an extreme example of intensifying assaults by the Israeli military and Israeli settlers (increasingly indistinguishable from one another) across the West Bank.

As ministers within the current Israeli government call not only for the expulsion of Gazans but also the uprooting of West Bank communities and the repression of Palestinian citizens of Israel, the vision of a reconciled future of Palestinians and Israelis sitting at peace under vine and fig tree can seem like a delusional mirage. A one-state reality encompasses the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, a one-state reality of deep inequality and oppression built upon and driving Palestinian dispossession, a one-state reality

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18 I develop this analysis of Zochrot's return visits as *liturgical actions* and *exilic vigils* in the final chapter of my book *Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014). For works of Jewish political theology that counter Zionism's "negation of exile" (*shelilat ha-galut*) and that articulate exilic (or, in Boyarin's case, diasporic) understandings of landedness in ways that are congruent with my analysis, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Exil et souveraineté: Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée binationale* (Paris: La fabrique, 2007); Shaul Magid, *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance* (New York: Ayin, 2023); and Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

that systematically privileges the seven million Israeli Jews in Palestine-Israel while systematically disenfranchising the seven million Palestinians.<sup>19</sup>

Yet within this bleak reality, the prophet's vision of a transformed future continues to break forth and point toward the potential transformation of the one-state reality of oppression and dispossession into a landscape of shared life in equality and freedom. This vision shines through in the liturgy of churches across Palestine-Israel; in the return visits organized by Zochrot; in Israeli peace activists from groups like Ta'ayush, who accompany Palestinians in the south Hebron hills to protect them from Israeli soldier and settler assaults and to prevent the ethnic cleansing of their villages; and in the mobilization of Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel through the Standing Together initiative to stand against Israeli settler attacks on humanitarian aid convoys to Gaza and on Palestinian communities in Jerusalem's Old City.

These actions can seem small, fragile, and tenuous, yet they embody hope that a transformed future is possible. At its best, Mennonite witness in Palestine-Israel has accompanied and encouraged such embodied witness and hope. May such efforts continue.

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19 For analyses of this one-state reality, see Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ian S. Lustick, *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); and Michael Barnett et al., eds., *The One State Reality: What Is Israel/Palestine?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).