

Session Five

5th Principle:

The Right of Conscience & the Use of the Democratic Process within Our Congregations & in Society at Large

Honoring the Courage in Prophetic Witnessing

- Israelis and Palestinians speak out
- UUs bearing witness

Pre-reading:

UU examples of bearing prophetic witness:

UUJME Young Adult Travel Blog Posts,
<http://uujme.org/home/YoungAdultTravelBlog>

Letter from Rev. Phyllis O'Connell

Letter from Rev. David Etherington on Ecumenical Accompaniment

Existing UUA Israel-Palestine Resolutions

Opening Reading and Discussion

Activities

Video: Teenage Israeli Conscientious Objectors

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acPE9qdPwYI>, 2 minutes

Short videos, Breaking the Silence testimonials from former Israeli soldiers:

<http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/videos/78477>, 3:08 min and

<http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/videos/60819>, 3:36 min

Discussion

Principle 5: The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process within Our Congregations and in Society at Large

Session Five lifts up voices of those searching their consciences.

Pre-reading

Increasing numbers of UUs and UU leaders are bearing prophetic witness to the need for UUs to become more aware and take action on human rights in Israel-Palestine, breaking the barrier of hesitancy to speak out on this issue. In the next pages, you will read recent communications from UU ministers and see the past resolutions that UUA General Assemblies have adopted.

UUJME Travel Blog Posts 2015

In early 2014, UUJME began offering scholarships to young adult UUs, age 18-35, for travel to Israel-Palestine. We asked each scholarship applicant to create a travel proposal as either a self-designed trip or as part of an existing delegation. We also asked them to plan post-trip outreach in their UU and local communities, including blogging for this or other blogs. Scholarship winners were chosen based on how their travel proposals furthered UUJME's charter and goals. UUJME also organizes the Don McInnes Journey for Human Rights Trip in odd-numbered years. Excellent posts are available by several participants in this summer's trip as well as one of the young adult travelers. Post authors include a minister, a seminary student and several college students. See <http://uujme.org/home/YoungAdultTravelBlog> and the UU section of the Resource section for two other sites.



Letter to UU Ministers

Rev. Phyllis O'Connell

Spring 2013

Dear Fellow UU Ministers,

I am writing this letter at the invitation of the editor of this publication [UUJME News] to offer encouragement for us, as UU ministers, to initiate interest in our congregations on the issue of justice in the Middle East.

We take pride in our active commitments for justice and have been in the forefront of so many justice issues—marriage equality, woman's right to choose, immigration reform—and yet, we have been uncharacteristically silent on the justice issues related to Israel and Palestine.

Other faiths have written curricula for their congregations to use as study guides and sources for principled action. It's hard to imagine that our UU congregations, composed of people from so many religious and ethical backgrounds—Atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Humanist, Pagan—are not in a particularly unique position to understand the issues in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle from a diversity of perspectives.

I readily admit to being reticent when I was first asked to become more publicly involved in the issue of justice in the Middle East. I was pretty sure I didn't know enough about the history of the conflict or the complexities of the struggle and, I was right, I don't know enough.

But not knowing is not a good enough reason to refrain from learning. I can do that. We can all do that. To date, the congregation I serve as an interim minister has taken a field trip to see the award-winning documentary *The Gatekeepers*, held an open conversation on "how to navigate differences respectfully," and read and discussed Sandy Tolan's remarkable book, *The Lemon Tree*. We have plans to see more films, bring in speakers and continue to become better informed. We don't have a specific goal.

Our learning may lead some to take a more activist role. One member is going to Israel-Palestine this summer on the UUJME tour. But for most of us, we are feeling our way as we become increasingly informed and knowledgeable and a great deal more interested in the question of justice in the Middle East. None of us wants to plunge headfirst into a subject that might result in polarizing our congregations, and there's no question that the subject of Israel-Palestine has great emotional content for many.

But set in the context of our UU Principles of promoting dignity of every person, of promoting justice, equity and compassion in human relations, of promoting a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all and promoting respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part—within that context of respect and caring, can we not talk with each other about hard subjects and, in doing so, who knows, perhaps even be a model for others?

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Rev. Phyllis B. O'Connell was at the time of this writing the interim minister for Theodore Parker Church, in West Roxbury, MA. She has been a minister for more than 25 years, previously serving congregations in Wellesley, Melrose and Springfield, all in Massachusetts.



Rev. David Etherington, an estates and trusts attorney, felt called to ministerial work and became ordained in 2013. Why the ministry? “I wanted a theological foundation to the solidarity and justice work I had been engaged in over the prior decades.” David sent this report to us in Spring 2014 in response to a query about his work in Palestine.

Letter from a UU Minister on Ecumenical Accompaniment

Greetings,

I am a Unitarian Universalist Community Minister affiliated with the UU Fellowship of Marion County, Florida but my ministry is outside the congregation reaching out into the larger world.

My work has me in Palestine with the World Council of Churches (WCC), an organization based in Geneva, Switzerland. The World Council of Churches has teams in multiple locations in Palestine. The team in Yatta, of which I am a part, is in the south Hebron hills. It was created two years ago in response to increasing demolition orders and settler violence in the area.



Here as an “Ecumenical Accompanier,” I work with a team of three other internationals who come from Sweden, Britain and Germany. The four of us live in a house in town, and our hope is that in some small way the work we do will contribute to the efforts to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

My work through WCC is to further advocate for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in accordance with international law and UN resolutions. This work is to witness life under occupation, engage with local Palestinians and Israelis pursuing a just peace, and seek to change the international community’s involvement in the conflict, urging them to act against injustice in the region. The current situation in Israel and Palestine is harmful to both Palestinians and Israelis. Only through resisting injustice and ensuring equal rights for all can there be true peace. In this work, my team and I stand faithfully with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized in an effort to serve all parties in this conflict in a fair and unbiased manner.

We walk side by side with local Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers, live directly with the local community, and work with local and international organizations in an effort to raise a consolidated and unified voice against injustice. We participate by providing “protective presence,” which includes being witness to and documenting demolitions, military incursions into Palestinian lands, arrest, detainments, settler violence against Palestinian persons and livestock, destruction of Palestinian property and agricultural lands—including the destruction of olive groves and planted fields.

We also participate in meeting with local leaders to determine where is the best use of our presence; we attend UN and other NGO meetings about how best to leverage our work in this area of Palestine. A key component to this work of providing protective presence is “accompaniment” with Palestinians as they simply try to carry out their daily lives without interference from the Israeli military or the Israeli settlers. This word “accompaniment”—derived from the Latin words ‘com’ and ‘panis’—literally means “sharing bread with someone.”

In our accompaniment, we witness life under occupation, live strongly connected to the local community and share together the basics of life, which offers us the opportunity to listen to and experience others’ struggles. Truly understanding these struggles gives each of us a stronger voice against injustice and the motivation to advocate for change.

This work also includes the monitoring and reporting of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, bringing the world’s attention to such injustices. We report these violations to the UN, the International Red Cross and Crescent, participating churches to the World Council of Churches and multiple other supporting organizations, as determined by the WCC administrative office.

Here in Palestine, the light of hope is kept shining through this public witness and presence on the ground and through the ongoing commitment to advocating for a just peace. This work for me is a continual reminder of my Unitarian Universalist faith.

In the words of those who have come before me: Be the change you want to see...

In faith, *David Etherington*

For information about the community of 1500 Palestinian shepherds in the community of Masfer Yatta, please see the video created by Christian Peacemakers: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szTvnK5rE_I. For information about the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment work in Israel-Palestine work, see: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/eappi>. Read more about Rev. Etherington's presence at the village of Susiya in June and July 2015 with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program at <https://www.facebook.com/uujme/posts/948893178505738>.



UA General Assembly Social Justice Statements on Israel-Palestine

1982 General Resolution - [United States Policy in Relation to the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab Conflict](http://www.uua.org/statements/statements/20174.shtml) (<http://www.uua.org/statements/statements/20174.shtml>)

WHEREAS, historic steps to end the warfare between Israel and Egypt were taken with the signing of the Camp David peace accords; and

WHEREAS, the goal of United States policy, as it approaches the remaining central issues in the Middle East, should be to encourage, in the spirit of Camp David, a comprehensive peace settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict; and

WHEREAS, a comprehensive settlement must be based on the commitment of all parties to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the others and to co-exist in peace and justice with their neighbors;

BE IT RESOLVED: That the 1982 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association urges the United States Government to adopt the following guiding policies in its efforts to help achieve a comprehensive settlement and to normalize United States relations with all of the Middle East's peoples:

1. Faithful support for the legitimacy, independence, and security of Israel;
2. Recognition of a Palestinian right of self-determination, including a right to establish a state;
3. Condemnation of all acts of terror, disproportionate reprisal, and attacks on civilian populations;
4. Continued opposition to the creation and maintenance of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and continued commitment to the United Nations Resolution 242 under which Israel should withdraw from lands conquered in 1967 and under which its right to security within its 1967 borders should be assured;
5. Urgent efforts to end the Middle East arms race.

2002 Action of Immediate Witness - [Toward Peace and Justice in the Middle East](http://www.uua.org/statements/statements/13983.shtml) (<http://www.uua.org/statements/statements/13983.shtml>)

Because our Unitarian Universalist Principles call us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice and equity in human relations, and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and

Whereas Rev. William Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has spoken out on the Middle East conflict in a pastoral letter of March 27, 2002, calling for "our congregations to educate themselves on [the] issues and to engage in honest conversation";

Whereas in 1982 the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly adopted a General Resolution encourage a comprehensive peace settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and calling on all parties to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the others;

Whereas Unitarian Universalists have supported and affirmed the rule of law and the positive role of the United Nations in building a world community;

Whereas United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 emphasizes "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace," and other United Nations resolutions have re-affirmed Israel as the "Occupying Power" bound by the Fourth Geneva Convention, "which is applicable to all the Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967";

Whereas the United States government is responsible for a significant portion of arms sales to this over-armed region, thus furthering its instability;

Whereas the Middle East situation has been deteriorating with increased violence on both sides and increased military oppression;

Whereas United States diplomacy has not led to peace or security for the region; and

Whereas the World Conference of Religions for Peace, an organization co-founded by the Unitarian Universalist Association, has responded to requests from the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the Palestinian Authority by calling for a "religiously sanctioned cease-fire" and recognition of Israel and Palestine as states with secure, internationally recognized borders;

Therefore, be it resolved that the 2002 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association urges the following principles as a basis for action by the governments of the United States and Canada:

- Freedom from occupation and equal rights for all, including the right to exist in peace and security.
- Opposition to Israeli settlements, land confiscation, house demolitions, and other violations of international law.
- Opposition to all attacks on civilians, whether by suicide bombers, F-16 or helicopter gunships, or any other means.
- Support for a central United Nations role in efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace.

Be it further resolved that the 2002 General Assembly calls on

- the Israeli government to abide by the Fourth Geneva Convention and international law;
 - Palestinians to immediately stop suicide bombings and all attacks on Israeli civilians;
 - the United States government to
 1. "suspend all transfers of those types of weapons and munitions used to commit human rights violations until Israel is clearly in compliance with the terms for arms transfers as expressed in United States law and bilateral agreements," as Amnesty International has called for, and
 2. work within the United Nations for a just peace that includes two viable secure states, Israel and Palestine, based on the 1967 borders, with mutual relations based on sovereignty and equality; and
 - our congregations to:
 1. become educated on Middle East issues and engage in honest conversation;
 2. redouble their efforts for peace based on the goal of justice and human rights for all;
 3. support actions of the anti-occupation Israeli peace activists, including Rabbis for Human Rights and the Israeli reserve officers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories;
 4. encourage Jewish Americans and others who support Israel but oppose its occupation of Palestine; and
 5. condemn and oppose expressions and acts of anti-Semitism and acts of terror against Jews, Palestinians, or Arabs and their legitimate institutions wherever they may occur.
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Opening Reading: Elaboration on the 5th Principle

"In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each **individual conscience**—a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of Theodore Parker, 'Democracy means not 'I am as good as you are,' but 'You are as good as I am.'" My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others."

—Rev. Parisa Parsa, First Parish in Milton, MA (read more from Parisa in *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, ed. Ellen Brandenburg.)

Grounding Questions and Discussion

1. How do UUs distinguish between **individual conscience** and **collective responsibility** of the 2nd principle?
2. Can UUs be effective as an organized voice on this issue, or is it best to leave actions up to the individual?
3. How have UUs used democratic process to reconcile individual and collective conscience?
4. Discuss the experience of becoming a Welcoming Congregation.

Activities

There is often a fear barrier that UUs must break through in order to have meaningful dialogue on the Israel-Palestine subject. Some are afraid of reawakening historic pain in others, and some are experiencing the pain of watching modern suffering in silence. In the prereadings by clergy, two UU ministers are examples of following their individual conscience

as well as taking collective responsibility for making a difference. In the prereading about UUA resolutions on Israel-Palestine, we can see historic grounding for our faith to move forward to uphold the original call as well as to take further courageous steps of conscience.

In Israel, soldiers are deeply impacted by enforcing illegal occupation. A small number of Jewish Israeli high school teens have refused to serve in the army. View and discuss the testimonies of the teens and the two soldiers in these short videos.

Discuss the Prereading.

Video: Teenage Israeli Conscientious Objectors <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acPE9qdPwYI>

Short videos, Breaking the Silence testimonials from former Israeli soldiers:

<http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/videos/78477> and

<http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/videos/60819>

Discuss reactions.

Call to Action Ideas. Based on what you have experience in the readings and activities for this session, what do you feel called to do by your conscience? Ideas may include writing letters of support to teenage Israeli conscientious objectors and to the former soldiers providing testimony to Breaking the Silence.

Closing

Each person in the group can share what they learned, found most notable, or a question that arose from the session.