

**Staying Awake and Overcoming:
A Unitarian Universalist Response to the Israel-Palestine Conflict
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There is a song we Unitarian Universalists sometimes sing as a hymn during our Sunday services—it is that anthem of the American Civil Rights Movement *We Shall Overcome*. We sing it when we want to be mindful of the myriad forms of oppression and injustice that beset our brothers and sisters, and when we want to celebrate the beauty and courage of the human spirit that rises up to meet those challenges. I have twice encountered that song while traveling internationally.

In January of 2010 when I was in Poland, I attended ceremonies commemorating the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. I was accompanying an old family friend who is a survivor of Auschwitz. One day during the week we spent there she had us link arms and walk through the camp singing *We Shall Overcome*.

We sang it out to the snow drifts and the empty barracks and the barbed wire, our voices like bells in the freezing January air.

The second time I encountered that song in a foreign country was just eighteen months later, in July of 2011. I was in the occupied West Bank, and there it was: the words *We Shall Overcome* spray-painted on the infamous Separation Wall that serpentine across the geographical, political and psychological landscape of Palestine—a monument to everything that can go wrong between peoples. That was out near Bethlehem, where the Wall is covered by some truly spectacular graffiti art, like a canvas on which people practice the art of overcoming.

The Wall itself is built by an Israeli security company called Elbit Systems, a company with numerous subsidiaries in the U.S., and who as it happens also landed a contract to build a similar structure right here along the Arizona-Mexico border.

In the words of A. Powell Davies, Unitarian minister, theologian, and political activist who said it most simply: “How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us! And I would add, how strange and poignant this concatenation of human tragedy and human triumph across time, across continents, across cultures.

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When I was in the Middle East in the summer of 2011, I thought long and hard about what it meant for me to be there. I had embraced this cause not because it the worst issue in the world, but because it is one in which we as Americans are most deeply implicated. As an American in the West Bank I was among people who live day in and day out under a grinding military occupation that is supported politically, economically and materially by my country. What did I represent to them? What did I want to represent?

On the one hand, I could look around the Middle East and see that the last thing they need in that part of the world is more Americans and Europeans showing up trying to do something.

But on the other hand, if the politicians and the war profiteers are already there, then the rest of us have a responsibility to act also. And so I struggled with questions about why I was there, how I would integrate my experience of it and what I could or should *do*.

Besides being an American in the conflict-torn Middle East, I was also a Unitarian Universalist in the Holy Land, where every square acre reverberates with names and deeds from Biblical legend—places like Jericho, Gethsemane, the Plain of Jezreel, the Sea of Galilee come alive with every excursion. I visited some of the world’s most revered sacred sites (the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock) side by side with Jewish, Muslim and Christian pilgrims who were praying and worshipping and having powerful religious experiences of a kind that we Unitarian Universalists don’t much go in for.

Religion is everywhere there, from tourist attractions to place-names to figures of speech people use in conversation. At one hotel I stayed in I drew back the curtains as soon as I checked into the room and right outside the window were a church steeple and a mosque minaret sticking up side by side. The minaret had loudspeakers that broadcast call to prayer five times a day starting at 4 AM, and the church steeple had bells that rang the hours. I didn’t get a lot of sleep there, but I was certainly mindful of the role of religion in daily life during my stay. It is impossible to be there without reflecting on one’s own spiritual life, without realizing that one is in fact on a pilgrimage.

Thus during my journey and in the months that followed I wrestled with (and continue to revisit) questions about my role and purpose in relation to the Israel/Palestine conflict, not only as an American but as a Unitarian Universalist. My reflections led me through a review of the principles of our covenant and our illustrious history at the forefront of movements for social justice, but I have come to realize that the answers I seek lay even deeper, in fundamental ways of thinking and experiencing that underlie our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition.

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When the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered the Ware Lecture to this General Assembly in 1966 the theme of his presentation was “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution.” King talked about several things that the church needed to do in order to “stay awake” for the revolution—in that case the passage from segregation to integration.

First, he called upon the church to teach the oneness and interrelatedness of the world and its people. Second, King said that we must challenge those who in his words “misuse the Bible to crystallize the patterns of the status quo and justify their prejudices.” And third, King called upon us to move out of the “ideological realm” and into the “arena of social action”. When we are doing these things King said, “we can sing *We Shall Overcome* because somehow we know that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

And there it is again: *We Shall Overcome*—the eternal struggle and the eternal triumph—because we never simply and finally overcome; we are always *overcoming*.

Overcoming is a way of being in the world—as it happens, a very Unitarian Universalist way. The question now is what that means for us in regard to the matter of Israel and Palestine. Or to use King’s words, how do we “stay awake for the revolution” in this case?

First of all we need to establish some ground rules for ourselves, some principles that we can use as anchors so that we do not drift aimlessly through the many distractions that take us off course as we navigate this highly complex situation.

When I say distractions I mean some of the issues that often shape our discussions about Palestine. For example, history: I have sat through more debates than I can count about what happened anywhere from 40 to 4,000 years ago, and I assure you that not one of these stimulating discussions has done anything to remedy the current crisis. Another example is the debate about the relationship or lack thereof between political Zionism and Judaism. We fall into a similar trap when we start responding to accusations that, for example, if we criticize the Israeli government we are somehow anti-Semitic, or if we are Jewish and do not stand with Israel right or wrong we are afflicted by self-hatred. There are a number of “hot topics” like this that constantly draw us away from working toward resolution of the immediate problems, and while they are fascinating and we should explore them just as we should examine and understand our own internal motives and biases, I also have to point out that while we debate amongst ourselves about these things the Occupation grinds on.

So what can we use to ground ourselves, to stay focused? Where are our anchors? For starters, our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition provides us with some valuable teachings and reference points, and we don’t have to delve far into our history to find them.

First we can simply consider the basic principles of the Unitarian Universalist covenant, the ideals to which we aspire. A covenant in which “worth and dignity” are inherent attributes of people whether or not we think or live alike.

A covenant filled with words like “justice, equity, compassion, democratic process, search for truth and meaning...”

In sum, I’d venture to say we place the highest value on human rights and civil liberties, and it does not take much interpretation to see that institutionalized violence, militarism, war profiteering, and any system that deprives people of basic human needs or participation in their own governance are all unacceptable according to our code of ethics. Nor does it require a leap to recognize that the current occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza violate our most basic values as Unitarian Universalists.

In 2002, then-president of the UUA William Sinkford recognized this when he issued his pastoral letter on the Israel/Palestine conflict. He stated, “U.S. policy to date has enabled the Israeli government to act in ways that no honestly religious person can condone.”

That same year the UUA General Assembly adopted an Action of Immediate Witness Toward Peace and Justice in the Middle East in which it supported Amnesty International’s call

for the U.S. government to cease transferring weapons and munitions to Israel until the latter complied in the use of those with both American and international law.

This points us to the second set of anchors, international law and internationally recognized principles of human rights. According to international law, it is illegal to take and keep and control territory that is acquired in military conflict. It is a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to prevent people made refugees by military conflict from returning to their homes. I saw that text from the Declaration reproduced in Arabic on the Wall in Palestine not far from where I saw the words to *We Shall Overcome* so poignantly written.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established in 1948, the same year that a great many Palestinians were driven from their homes.

Today the United Nations numbers Palestinian refugees at about 5 million, nearly half of whom are still living in the refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan where their parents and grandparents landed in 1948.

When we contemplate the complexity of circumstances like these, it is easy to become entangled in those debates about history and so forth that I referred to a few minutes ago as “distractions.” That is why I say that our first job is to establish some anchors, some reference points, from which to make choices about our role in relation to the issues. Unitarian Universalist values are one such anchor and international law and human rights principles are another.

A third reference point I want to suggest is to ask always *what perpetuates this conflict now, and who benefits from that?* Not how it got started or what happened 40 or 4,000 years ago, but *right now*.

We have always framed conflict in this region around religion and cultural identity; however, while those things are powerful motivators

for individuals, they do not motivate politicians or governments and are not the causes of war. War and conquest are about greed—for power, resources of all kinds. Early medieval European kings talked about a great crusade to reclaim the Holy Land, but what they were really interested in was the fact that all the major trade routes to the East ran through that part of the world, and they themselves had recently invested heavily in silks and spices. However, they needed some more inspiring rhetoric with which to drive their people to wreak violence on others they knew nothing about. Over millennia the stakes in this region have changed, but the rhetoric used to drive the masses has not.

Today one of the biggest barriers to peace in this region is that conflict there is big business—really big business. Most of the billions of American tax dollars that find their way to Israel “come back” in the form of defense contracts.

There is also a good deal of direct military aid. In addition to that, flocks of war profiteers circle this battlefield like carrion birds, building

walls and militarized bulldozers and so on and so on and so on. The estimated millions per day that goes to Israel does not just evaporate—it lines pockets. The owners of the pockets thus have a lot to spend on backing political candidates and lobbying in Washington.

We have to think about how these expenditures fit with our Unitarian Universalist values, with international law, with basic principles of human rights, and with our hearts as people of conscience.

We have to think about this now more than ever, when the global economy has given rise to global economic crisis and the globalization of protest. We have to think about this now when there is talk of removing from our national budget programs for women's health, for education, and safety nets for those who live in poverty.

Now when we, in King's words "stay awake" for Palestine and Israel it is not just for the rights of Palestinians or the future of the State of Israel.

We stay awake for health care—we stay awake for education—we stay awake for immigration reform—we stay awake for the 99% from Wall Street to the Arab Spring and we stay awake for government that is more than just political power for sale to the highest bidder!

It really is "one people, one struggle." If we will tolerate walls in Palestine we will tolerate them in Arizona, or to turn that around, if we do not want walls in Arizona, we cannot build them in Palestine.

So once we are "awake" to these things the question is *what can we do*, since as King pointed out in 1966 it isn't enough to remain in the ideological realm. How can we act in ways that are grounded in the values promoted by human rights principles and codes of international law? How can we act in accordance with our Unitarian Universalist covenant?

The first thing we can do is support the international Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement, or BDS. Why should we support BDS? Because it works—it worked in South Africa and it can work here.

Why should we support BDS? Because Palestinian civil society, and Israeli and international human rights activists have called for us to stand with them. When we support BDS we state that we are not willing to participate economically in endeavors that directly contribute to or profit from human suffering, or that violate international law.

There are several ways to approach BDS. One is to take a look at companies that profit directly from the occupation—companies like Caterpillar (who builds the militarized bulldozers that are used to demolish Palestinian homes) or Motorola (who provides electronics equipment used in surveillance) or Elbit Systems, builders of border security installations. We can also look at products that are manufactured in illegal settlements in the West Bank, many of which are built around some industrial enterprise—products like Ahava cosmetics, for example.

There are American corporate entities that finance settlement building through donations from their profits. There are American real

estate tycoons who build cheap housing developments on confiscated Palestinian land and then sell houses to Israeli settlers.

The UUJME Board has composed a BDS statement that can stand alongside those issued by Jewish Voice for Peace and other groups, and hopefully this will be something Unitarian Universalists across the country can adopt and use as a reference point.

Second we can support the work of Israeli human rights organizations, of which there are many. Groups like Machsem Watch, B'tselem, Rabbis for Human Rights, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, Gush Shalom all seek to promote peace and bring their own government into compliance with basic human rights principles and international law, and they are all begging for our help because they are under tremendous scrutiny and pressure from their own government, which wields an "Israel right or wrong" ethos against them.

When our small group of Unitarian Universalist activists was in Palestine last summer, we spent time with all of these groups. I vividly

remember a woman from Machsem Watch. This is an organization of, basically, elderly Israeli women who go out daily in shifts to some of the larger and more notorious checkpoints like the one between Bethlehem and Jerusalem and document any human rights violations they observe, reporting them all to the government and to international organizations. She said, "Tell people in America we need your help! We need you to save us from ourselves! We can't stop it by ourselves—the politics have become too extreme, the government too right-wing." These groups need our support, and we must demand to know why, if Americans wish to support Israel, they do not support *these* Israelis?

Third, we can support the Palestinian popular resistance movements and organizations—those villages that hold weekly protests against the Wall, or the cultural and educational programs for children and youth in refugee camps like the Jenin Freedom Theater, or the Al-rowwad Project in Bethlehem. I remember late one Friday afternoon sitting in the home of a family in one of these villages where they hold

weekly Friday demonstrations and use all sorts of creative non-violent means of protest. They are met every week by fully armed and equipped soldiers who fire on them with rubber bullets and tear gas. In this village several key people in the leadership of the protest movement have been killed, usually by being hit directly with teargas canisters. At this home we were served tea and lemonade and sweets—a little girl of perhaps seven carried a tray around to serve us, balancing it perfectly, peering over it with dark eyes too solemn from having seen too many armored vehicles, guns, tear gas canisters bursting, soldiers coming into her house to arrest her father.

He told us about the history of their movement, and their commitment to non-violent popular resistance. He walked us around the site where the demonstrations take place and from

there we could see the Wall snaking through the village's olive groves, and the settlement across the valley with a massive construction crane silhouetted against the sunset.

He said, "I don't hate Jewish people, I don't hate Israelis. I just don't want them to take our land. I just want to live in peace." I was tired and sad and depressed and as I listened to him I thought, "If I could only be a fraction of what this man is—how does he do this day after day, week after week? How does he live with this and maintain this lovingkindness that he radiates?" When we left that evening it was hard to drive out of the village because in that little community there were two big wedding celebrations going on—loud music and men dancing in the street, laughing and jostling one another, young men on each other's shoulders, an old man dancing and waving his cane around over his head, an anxious-looking groom being led around on a horse.

Life goes on even under the most trying of circumstances—they say in Palestine, "existence is resistance." I say, we are always *overcoming*.

These are just some of the things we can readily do to make a difference, and these are actions that anyone and everyone can take. But the last question for us today is what particular assets can Unitarian Universalists bring to bear? What are our particular strengths? Who can *we* be in the context of this conflict?

Our Universalist history, from a belief in universal salvation to the recognition of the oneness of humanity, and our Unitarian history, from a rejection of Trinitarianism to the recognition that one need not be divine to be divinely inspired have led us to a faith tradition based on *covenant* rather than on doctrine.

This fact alone positions us uniquely in relation to the Israel/Palestine conflict, in which doctrine (both religious and political) has been wielded like a weapon for decades, and has contributed to the extreme polarization of views that is a hallmark of this situation. People have been driven in this issue to reject complexity and ambiguity in

favor of polarization and dogmatism, and the only ones benefitting from this are politicians and war profiteers. In order to practice Unitarian Universalism we have to be able to tolerate ambiguity—and not only tolerate it but embrace the possibilities that ambiguity opens to us.

That means that we are uniquely situated to understand, mediate, and promote progress in many areas including this one.

Something else we Unitarian Universalists know a bit about is love. One of our Unitarian founders, Francis David, said in the 16th century, "We do not have to think alike to love alike."

When King addressed us in 1966 he talked about the relationship between love and social revolution. He noted that, "Most revolutions of the past have been based on hope and hate, with the rising expectations of the revolutionaries implemented by hate for the perpetrators of the

unjust system in the old order.” King saw love as a defining feature of non-violent change movements.

The Standing on the Side of Love campaign was launched in 2009 to respond to conflicts around marriage equality and immigrant rights as well as other forms of prejudice and racism, and since then our yellow tee-shirts have become well-known at demonstrations and city council meetings around the country.

I think that one of the things that we as Unitarian Universalists are most called to do in relation to the Israel/Palestine conflict is to “Stand on the Side of Love.” When we do that we will stand with the non-violent popular resistance movements in Palestine, with human rights activists in Israel, and with our own conscience as Unitarian Universalists and as Americans.

The absence of love is not necessarily hate, often it is just apathy—sleeping through the revolution. Nor is it necessary to instill hatred in order to mobilize lovelessness, which is actually unfortunate because really most people won’t go in for hate and our job would be easier if that was all we were up against.

Fear is actually a much stronger motivator, and fear more easily rushes in to fill the void when love is absent or sleeping.

Before they can build walls on the landscape they must first build them in the hearts and minds of people. Before they can sell guns and tanks and missiles, they must first sell prejudice and hatred, but the number one product coming off the war profiteers’ assembly lines is *fear*.

It is not primarily courage that dispels fear after all, but *love*. And love is alive and well in the Middle East, my friends—I was moved to tears by it every day of those weeks I spent there last summer. It just doesn’t make the headlines nor is it earning any money.

Let me finish today with a story I heard in Jerusalem that illustrates this. One of the many people our group of UU activists met with and interviewed was a rabbi who goes out to the West Bank and demonstrates with Palestinian villagers against house demolitions and land confiscations and so forth. He is a deeply religious man, and he

believes strongly in the good things that Israel could be. He also believes strongly that the occupation of Palestinian territory and all the abuses that go with that are a flagrant violation of Jewish spiritual principles. He told us this story:

One day he was participating in one of these demonstrations. The situation was escalating, the demolition crew was moving in, an adolescent Palestinian boy threw rocks at the soldiers supporting the demolition crew and the soldiers arrested him further agitating the demonstrators. The rabbi said, “There comes a time when you just have to stand in front of the bulldozers.” And so he did that, placed himself between the massive, militarized Caterpillar bulldozer and the Palestinian family’s house.

The soldiers finally were fed up with him and they moved in and arrested him too—they roughed him up and handcuffed him and threw him down next to the boy they had roughed up and handcuffed. He said he turned to the boy and said to him, “Don’t be afraid.”

Some days later a journalist following up on this incident tracked down the boy, who had been released, and asked him about that day. And on a day when soldiers came to his village, the house was demolished, and he was arrested, the thing that stood out most in that boy’s mind was that while he was lying on the ground in handcuffs, a “big rabbi” landed next to him and said, “Don’t be afraid.”

When a man we expect to be our enemy lands next to us in handcuffs and dares to challenge the Wall of fear, King’s moral arc bends a little more steeply. Something in the Universe shifts. And it shifts just a little bit toward the Side of Love.

So let us be that shift. Let us be the forming edge of peace and change. Let us know and teach that when many voices sing together *we shall overcome* those words are our covenant, and they are already true. So don’t be afraid, my friends. Amen, and Blessed Be.

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