

June 14, 2014
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PFMEP Breakfast
Detroit, MI

Good morning. Today is Shabbat. The Jewish Sabbath. It is a day of rest and reflection. When many Jews gather to partake in communal prayer and Bible study. So if you'll indulge me a bit, I'd like to begin my talk today with some words of Torah.

This week's Torah portion is found starting in Numbers 13. It tells the story of the *meraglim* – the spies. After some time wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, Moses dispatches 12 spies into Canaan. The Promised Land. The spies are supposed to report back positively on what they see and help build the Israelites confidence as they transition into a new life of freedom. But while they admit there may be some good in the land of milk and honey, the spies' report is mostly terrible. "It is a land that eats its inhabitants." They say, "There are the sons of giants there, and we were like grasshoppers in their eyes." The Israelites, hearing this report become terrified. Even after the miracles of the Exodus they do not believe God can deliver them into this new land.

For this reaction the people of Israel are punished. They are not worthy to enter into Canaan. Only after 40 years of wandering in the desert, when the entire generation of the exodus dies off will the Israelites enter into The Promised Land.

But there are two exceptions. The spies Joshua and Caleb come back with a different report. "The land we went through is an exceedingly good land," they say. They urge the Israelites to move onward. For this act they are rewarded. Joshua and Caleb are the only ones of their generation worthy of leading the Israelite people into their new life in Canaan.

As a child, the tale of the spies was – for me – a simple one about the importance of faith in God. The 10 spies and the people of Israel lacked that faith, where Joshua and Caleb held true to it.

But as I've gotten older – and in particular in light the last few weeks – this story has taken on new meaning.

The 10 spies look at the land, they see good and they see bad there, but they are overwhelmed – and frightened – by its flaws. Perhaps they are too scarred from years of slavery to feel optimism. Perhaps they are just fearful people. But for whatever the reason, they cannot fathom a good life in Canaan.

But Joshua and Caleb are different. Surely they see the same problems as their fellow spies. But they also see possibility. They see opportunity. They see promise. And it is

these senses that overwhelm them. They do not let the flaws hold them back from moving towards what could be the possible.

For anyone who cares at all about finding a peaceful and just solution to the Palestinian Israeli conflict, this has been a rough month. Most of the remarks I'm sharing with you today were prepared on trains, planes, in hotel lobbies and cafes in random cities where I have met with and talked with J Street activists around the country depressed and angry – as we all are – in the wake of stymied peace talks. Another infuriating squandered opportunity to end years of violence, war, occupation and injustice.

In our conversations, I have urged our activists not to become overwhelmed by the failure. To keep our eye on why we got involved in J Street and peace activism in the first place. I implored them to stay focused on what, despite the events of recent weeks, we know to be possible, just and necessary for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

J Street is the political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans fighting for the future of Israel as the democratic homeland of the Jewish people. We believe that Israel's Jewish and democratic character depend on a two-state solution, resulting in a state of Palestine living alongside Israel in peace and security.

Rooted in our commitment to Jewish and democratic values, J Street works to redefine what it means to be pro-Israel in America. We reject a zero sum game approach – we believe one can be pro-Israel without being anti-Palestinian. And one can be pro-Palestinian without being anti-Israel.

We are changing the U.S. political dynamics around Israel by mobilizing broad support for a two-state solution because it's in Israel's and America's interest. And we are expanding support for Israel by affirming — along with many Israelis — that being pro-Israel does not require supporting every policy of its government.

Four years ago, I addressed a group similar to this one, at an equally obscene early hour of the morning, where I urged leaders of the church to oppose a one-sided report and a resolution that supported divestment from Israel. After my talk a supporter of divestment asked me, "If your work is focused mainly in the Jewish community and on policy makers in Washington, *why are you here?*"

I was taken aback at the time, but upon reflection, it was a fair question.

I was there because I believe that this conflict can be resolved if, amongst other things, both sides feel and understand that their concerns and their narratives are taken seriously. And I believed then, as I do now, that the Boycott Divestment Sanctions Movement, because of its refusal to acknowledge the Palestinian conflict as a two-sided conflict and its refusal to accept an outcome that results in both a Jewish and a Palestinian homeland, actually undermines the peace it claims to seek.

But the truth is, that after speaking at two General Assemblies against divestment resolutions, I had no plans to come back this year. It's not that my views about the BDS Movement had changed, but I also felt that after twice saying my peace, the most important work to be done was primarily challenging those within my own community who support a two-state solution in name only, but fail to acknowledge the hard compromises that a two-state agreement will require. People who resist taking active, positive steps in order to help make a two-state solution a reality. Who, even over the past few months, when an American Secretary of State was in place who had the will and the commitment to focus on bringing the parties to some kind of understanding, did not actively take up his call to be part of a great constituency for peace, and did little to push their friends in Israel to do everything reasonably necessary to reach an agreement.

It seemed to me that the greatest contribution I could make to an end to this conflict and an end to an occupation that contributes to the suffering of the Palestinian people, and which also, frankly eats away at the heart and soul of Israel, was in fact in the Jewish community and in Washington. It was NOT here.

So why have I come today?

Several months ago I read a document that by now you've surely all heard about if not read yourselves and it saddened me. It saddened me.

Frankly, Zionism Unsettled unleashed a range of emotions in me. Sadness, outrage, frustration, anger. This is a document that distorts not only Zionism, which, at its core is simply put, a movement for Jewish self-determination. The very same self-determination Palestinians deserve to enjoy. It not only distorts Judaism, which it twists into a racist, supremacist religion, ignoring all mainstream strains of Judaism and willfully misrepresenting and maligning complex Jewish theological concepts like chosenness. But Zionism Unsettled distorts the Jewish people – and reduces who we are, our collective history, our memory, our experience, and our tradition into something twisted and hideous, pathological and completely unrecognizable to anyone who knows Jewish people to be more than just caricatures.

It was upon reading Zionism unsettled that I felt compelled to be here today.

I know that what brings so many of you into this room, to this issue and to the work of peacemaking is your profound sense of Justice and Love. So I have to wonder what it means when that work produces a study guide like Zionism Unsettled – which is reductive and divisive and does little to provide the kind of understanding, complexity or awareness that is necessary for peace.

I know that what brings so many of you into this room and to the work of peacemaking is a desire to see an end to suffering and an end to violence, so I have to wonder what it means when that work also perpetuates rhetoric that belittles and demeans the aspirations of the Jewish people to a homeland of their own.

I'm sure I said this 4 years ago at this very same breakfast, but it bears repeating: The only just solution to this conflict is one that ends with two states for two peoples. To be agnostic on this solution or to advocate for something other than two states is to condemn both populations to unending war and conflict.

The only just approach to this conflict is one which recognizes the national aspirations and narratives of both peoples – both peoples. Israeli and Palestinian. Justice for one people cannot come at the expense of another. That is why Israel must end its occupation and allow the Palestinians the dignity and freedom, which they so richly deserve. And it is why supporting a Palestinian State should not mean and cannot mean – tearing down Israel.

There are several resolutions being considered by the General Assembly this week that pertain to the Palestinian Israeli conflict. They purportedly aim to activate Presbyterians to help counter the occupation and hopefully to improve the lives of Palestinians in the region.

I want to say here and now that I fully and wholeheartedly support these two goals. They are part of the reason I work for a two-state solution and for peace every day.

But I support more than those two goals.

I support a sustainable, real, protected peace between these two peoples. I support security for both peoples – the right for both Israelis and Palestinians to live a life free of fear and free of violence. I support the right of both peoples to dignity. The kind of dignity that comes from the recognition and acknowledgement that both people have rich, layered and valid narratives and claims to the land we know as Israel and Palestine. I support a future for both peoples that allows each the right to its own state and to determine its own future. These are the goals and principles I support.

My question to you here today is, *do you?*

Do you?

If you do, ask yourselves, will the actions and positions articulated in the resolutions put before you advance those goals? Will the rhetoric they put forward get us to the kind of vision that you support? Because those resolutions cannot be read outside the context of Zionism Unsettled. Their rationales echo the same condemnatory language and extreme reading of the conflict.

Will divestment from companies doing business in Israel – a tactic that is non-violent, but that also lays blame exclusively on one side of a two-sided political conflict where both sides have done terrible things and both sides have suffered for too long; a tactic which seeks to divide, to oversimplify and to punish, rather than to reconcile – will that tactic help bring about the kind of peace we seek?

Will rhetoric that sends most progressive Jews who vocally oppose the occupation into a defensive crouch because it is so extreme and so hurtful, help bring about an end to that occupation or help the Palestinian people?

Because at the end of the day, this is not simply about the tactic of divestment, it is about how we approach making peace, how we approach a resolution to this conflict and how we approach each other.

It is easy and understandable to get overwhelmed by hatred and anger at the injustice of it all. To witness sick and elderly Palestinians stuck at checkpoints and Palestinian children cowering in shelters in order to shield themselves from Israeli incursions and hate Israelis for that.

It is easy to witness Israelis mangled in terror attacks and Israeli children cowering in bomb shelters in Southern Israel to escape Hamas rocket fire and hate Palestinians for that.

But isn't our job – as people of faith who are commanded to seek peace and pursue it – isn't our job to cut through hate and not to perpetuate it?

We have got to find a way to build a peace without destroying or demeaning one another in the process.

I don't want to pretend that I, or my organization, have some kind of magic silver bullet to resolve this conflict. J Street, like many Israeli-Palestinian peace organizations, has been doing some serious thinking and strategizing about what comes next after this most recent failure.

We, like you, are seeking out the right path that will get us to where we all want to go: An end to occupation, an end to violence, a secure Israel with a stronger democratic character, a free state of Palestine.

But we understand that getting to *that* destination – *that* end game which we all want – requires more than just figuring out where to place blame. It requires more than evaluating who has suffered more. What it requires is getting both sides engaged in resolving this conflict. Empowering both sides to lead their people towards a compromise that can serve each of its self-interests. This means we need Israelis *and* Palestinians as partners in achieving a solution. And it means we need the Jewish community *and* the Christian community as partners in helping to bring about a real and just reconciliation.

And this can only be done through engagement. It simply can't get done when we dismiss one another's concerns or aspirations.

So what can we do?

We've got to keep pushing our own government not to back down in the face of this failure but to try new strategies that hold both parties accountable for their actions and that push both parties to make difficult choices.

We've got to push American leadership and American Jewish leadership to be more vocal on this issue – but to be affective, we're going to have to do it in a way they can actually hear us, not in a way that will alienate them.

And we've got to invest in the region – in progressive Palestinian and Israeli society. In human rights work and progressive think tanks, in democracy building institutions and civil rights organizations. We must support and strengthen – and build, if necessary, those institutions in Israel and Palestine that will help change the status quo and move the people to that vision we all desire.

There is so much that must be done to realize the future we all want to see.

Thank you for listening to me today. Thank you for your commitment to peace and to justice. And may God bless us to be like Joshua and Caleb – to always be able to see possibility and hope and a way forward, even in the darkest of times.

Thank you.