

Speaking Up for Palestinian Children

Steve Chase

The horrific events and war crimes in southern Israel and Gaza committed by both Hamas and the State of Israel since October 7 have roots in decades of oppression and resistance that are missed by much of the US public and mass media. As both the American Friends Committee and the Friends Committee on National Legislation have long emphasized, learning to understand these underlying dynamics are a necessary precondition for effectively pushing for a just peace in the Middle East.

Inspired by the work of AFSC and FCNL, I seized the opportunity to take part in a Quaker delegation to Israel/Palestine in June 2023 to examine the human rights situation there. The trip is sponsored every year by Friends United Meeting and is led by North Carolina Friends Max and Jane Carter. Based at the Ramallah Friends School, which has been supported by US Quakers since 1869, we traveled throughout the Occupied West Bank and Occupied East Jerusalem, as well as the Galilee region in Israel. Because of the deep relationships the Carters have built over decades, we met with Palestinian religious leaders, businesspeople, farmers, educators, students, activists, and current and former members of the Palestinian Authority. In Israel, we met with a reserve officer in the Israeli military, a kibbutz rabbi, an educator, a journalist, two Palestinian Israeli priests, and the Palestinian mayor of a fully integrated Israeli "peace village."

It was the most intense and gut-wrenching three weeks of my life. When I returned home, I felt called to give a talk entitled "Is It Apartheid? Reflections on a Quaker Delegation to Israel/Palestine" for Friends Meeting of Washington and for the DC Metro Chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace. On the basis of my July JVP presentation on Zoom, I was then invited to give a talk entitled "The Children of Apartheid" at a JVP-led event in northern New Jersey on October 22. The event was scheduled weeks before the recent events in southern Israel and Gaza and was planned to take place at the Montclair Unitarian Universalist Church. It was co-sponsored by Northern New Jersey Jewish Voice for Peace, Pax Christi, Combatants for Peace, and a local FCNL Advocacy Team, as well as publicized by the Montclair Friends Meeting.

I was pleased for this additional speaking opportunity, because the impact of apartheid on Palestinian children was one of the most heartbreaking aspects of my trip and I believe that these young lives should not be ignored even in the midst of the horrifying shock and grief over Hamas' brutal attack on kibbutzim, villages, and a music festival in southern Israel. My hope was to share some of my observations and experiences and highlight the findings of Save the Children International's new report on Israel's years-long practice of soldiers breaking into Palestinian homes at night, beating and arresting children, and then imprisoning them—often without charges for months on end. The numbers have been about 500 to 750 children a year for the last ten years according to Save the Children's research.

While I was editing my PowerPoint slides two days before the talk, I got a phone call from Alice Golin, one of the JVP organizers of the event. She was upset. She had just received a voicemail from the UU minister saying that his church had decided to recind their rental contract and cancel the Sunday community meeting. The minister said this was “a final decision” and the leadership of his church no longer wanted to be associated with Jewish Voice for Peace.

Alice invited me to join a Zoom meeting with the event organizers that afternoon to discuss what should be done. After close to two hours of animated discussion, the organizers decided to do two things. The first was working to find a new day, time, and venue for my talk in Montclair, so that this church is not successful at silencing an important segment of the Jewish community and other faith groups’ expression of their moral concern for Palestinian children.

The second was to hold a vigil at the church on the day of the canceled event. The plan was for members of the co-sponsoring organizations to hold signs and pass out flyers protesting the church leaders’ decision. They also held signs questioning the morality of the US-backed Israeli collective punishment of 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza--which the Center for Constitutional Rights and Amnesty International have now determined to have risen to the level of genocide under international law. This action at the church allowed them to talk with congregation members, many of whom had not known about the board’s decision and disagreed with it. The vigil also sparked an open dialogue with the two co-ministers.

Hopefully, all this will bear fruit in the future. The organizers are also not alone in engaging the church. As news of the New Jersey congregation’s abrupt decision spread online, Unitarian Universalists across the country, including the President of the Unitarian Universalists for Justice in the Middle East, began to discuss the situation. The UUJME board intends to reach out to the Montclair congregation as well as begin publicizing the matter among UU members in the United States. They see this as a “teachable moment” to encourage all UU congregations to stand up for the core UU principles that support peace, social justice, equality, and freedom of speech no matter what the pushback by organized interests who oppose these values when it comes to Israel/Palestine. One UU minister in Boulder, Colorado, even included the Montclair story on the same Sunday as the organizers’ protest in his sermon. His theme was about rising to the moral challenge of hard times instead of trying to play it safe and avoiding controversy.

This is shaping up to be a good outcome to a bad situation. It shows that you can’t kill the Spirit, or successfully silence a deep moral concern for Palestinian children. At the same time, this moment also seems like a good opportunity for Quaker Meetings around the country to reflect and conduct a moral inventory of our own. Will we support and facilitate interfaith peace work aimed at changing US policy on Israel/Palestine, especially when respected human rights organizations have determined that US policy is currently enabling the crimes of apartheid and genocide?

It seems that many Quaker meetings are rising to this challenge. I have now been invited to give my “Is It Apartheid?” talk to Chesapeake Quarterly Meeting and to the meetings of New England Yearly Meeting. Other Quaker groups have asked if I might be able to speak to their meetings. In addition, many meetings are working with the Friends Committee on National Legislation to lobby for a ceasefire *and* to resolve the root causes of the lopsided conflict in Israel/Palestine. Several Quaker Meetings have also joined the Apartheid Free Communities network, an interfaith effort coordinated by the American Friends Service Committee. Some Quakers are also active in the Quaker Palestine Israel Network. Is this where your Quaker Meeting or Church is at? Why or why not? What educational work does your congregation need to undertake to address these issues and move forward together?

My own Meeting in Washington, DC, has partnered with Jewish Voice for Peace for years on joint educational events and nonviolent actions on these issues. We also recently made our meetinghouse available to If Not Now, the Jewish youth organization that represents the opinions of the 40 percent of Jewish young people in the United States who believe that Israel has created an apartheid state and do not want their pain and sorrow at the Hamas attack to be twisted into a justification for genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza or the West Bank. Our Meeting is also working to discern if we are ready to take the Apartheid Free Communities Pledge and to live into its moral commitments. We also agreed to host a major fundraiser for the Ramallah Friends School in December before the Israeli attacks against Gaza and the sudden increase in settler violence in the West Bank made travel impossible for the RFS Head of School. Blessedly, even in this dark time, several FMW members have expressed interest in taking part in next year’s trip to Israel/Palestine led by Jane and Max Carter. (I heartily recommend participating in these FUM delegations to all Friends.)

It took the Religious Society of Friends in the United States over a hundred years to discern together that all Quakers should oppose the sin of slavery. My prayer is it will not take us that long to reject the US government policy to back Israeli apartheid and genocide, or to decide as a body to offer our support to all nonviolent efforts to ensure peace, justice, equality, and self-determination for ALL in Israel/Palestine.

As a Palestinian village priest told our delegation in June, “It doesn’t matter if you are named Moshe, Mohammed, or Matthew, all are precious in the sight of God and all deserve to live in peace, love, and justice.” We also heard from an Imam in Ramallah who said, “Most Palestinians don’t mind having Jews as neighbors. We only object to them being our masters.” There is much work to be done. How will you and your meeting be well used by the Spirit in this peace and justice effort?

Steve Chase is a member of the Friends Meeting of Washington and the Quaker Palestine Israel Network. He has also served as an interfaith ally of the DC Chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace and is the author of the Pendle Hill pamphlet *Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions? A Quaker Zionist Rethinks Palestinian Rights*. He is currently working on a book entitled *Seeking Justice in the Holy Land: The Evolution of Quaker Perspectives on Israel/Palestine*.

