



A solidarity trip reflection
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“Every bombed village is my hometown”

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During the Vietnam War, James Baldwin said “every bombed village is my hometown.” That profound insight, born of his own experience as a Black man in America, but also rooted in a deep and universal understanding of mutuality, is a call to solidarity with those who are suffering.

That’s the kind of solidarity we at Telos have been trying to live out these past fifteen years, and never more so than since October 7. The relational proximity we’ve stewarded all these years with Palestinians and Israelis ultimately led a small group of us to travel there last week, to mourn with those who are mourning. This was my 63rd Telos trip, but one like no other. The air was almost too thick to breathe, the faces of friends and strangers alike bore the weight of pain, sorrow, anger and despair. While we were there, trucks carrying aid to starving Gazans were attacked and diverted by Israeli settlers. Sirens sounded in Tel Aviv and central Israel as Hamas defiantly fired more rockets from the besieged southern Gaza Strip. More Israeli soldiers were killed in the north of Gaza, a place the IDF said it had previously cleared in the earlier operations there that displaced so many innocent civilians. And then, at the end of our trip, a massacre in Rafah. Women, men and children burned alive after an Israeli airstrike, one that was carried out with American munitions. No doubt Baldwin would tell us that today Rafah is our hometown.

We went just to be present, to sit alongside, to hear whatever stories needed to be shared, to share whatever silences needed to be observed. When or whether to go was not an easy decision. Those of us who were horrified by the morning of October 7 and have been horrified by every day since (and who were horrified by so many of the days before) know that our work is here in the United States where so much power and influence is wielded in the service of a number of lies and misunderstandings about the path to human flourishing. Nothing Hamas did on October 7 made Palestinians more free, nothing Israel did since has made Israelis more safe and secure. The violences of displacement, terrorism, hostage-taking, occupation, siege, and mass slaughter keep us trapped. This is how we got here, not how we get out.. For those of us who believe these things to be true, we have so much work to do *here*. But our friends are *there*, and eventually it became clear that as the nightmare they are living extends into so many months, just showing up and being with

them, seeing their faces, hearing their voices, was an additional act of solidarity. Not a substitute for the action required of us here, just another fumbling way to be a peacemaker in a time of horrific violence.

And so a small band of us converged on the land. From Washington, D.C., Chicago, Selma, South Bend, Orlando, Western Michigan, and Des Moines. And we entered into the shock and grief, the terror and anger, the pain and sadness,--but also the beauty and wisdom-- of deeply traumatized people. The resilience of so many we met gave us hope, but a fellow traveler from Selma, a civil rights activist and expert in nonviolence, cautioned us not to allow their resilience to absolve us of our own obligation to do the work we have to do. And yet it is an unsettling thing to return home having been proximate to such pain, having wept so many tears, and yet finding hope not dead, but being nurtured and pressed into. A reminder that hope is not a feeling or an emotion, it is what you do. And it is as necessary for life as food and water.

We began by seeing a brilliant couple, Palestinian Citizens of Israel, who have devoted their considerable talents to creating the world they want to see, a world where Palestinians and Jewish people live as neighbors, partners and friends, in shared equality, in a land devoid of supremacist and exclusionary ideologies. Today some of their relationships are frayed by their expressions of grief for the destruction in Gaza, and they fear both societal and government retaliation as they watch other Palestinian Citizens of Israel endure harassment and even arrest for social media posts and other expressions of dissent from the government's policies. The vision of mutuality this kind and courageous couple has cultivated like a garden has been plowed under, the land sowed with salt. Their pained and despondent looks seemed to be asking if anything good could ever grow in this soil again.

We met a Jewish Israeli man whose mother, famous for her peace activism, was murdered on October 7. He recounted the horror of the last phone call with her---they spoke until the Hamas gunmen were at her door to bring eternal silence to her voice. But her vision was not killed that day. Her son has picked up the baton, has joined the reconciliation work of the Parents Circle, quit his job, committed himself entirely to creating a shared future, of truth and reconciliation. And equally determined *not* to pass the work on to his own three children. To finish it. There is no other way but life.

We met with our longtime Israeli friend who has lived on the border of the Gaza Strip for decades and has long been involved in the work of peace. We heard of that harrowing

morning when she and her children and grandchildren came terrifyingly close to death, how the gunmen searched her daughter's home while the family huddled in a secret closet under the basement stairs avoiding notice, but then the men went next door and murdered their neighbors. Our friend's initial response to the 7th was shock and confusion, uncertainty if anything she'd long worked for was even possible. But eight months later, she's regained her voice and was more committed than ever before to her conviction that the only way out is through negotiations, discussion, respect, mutuality and nonviolence.

We sat with a woman whose compounding tragedies include two relatives murdered in Kibbutz Beerli, three others taken hostage, with two of those released in last year's temporary ceasefire, and one more still there, she hopes, in captivity. Her frustration with the willful indifference and neglect of her own government, with her prime minister, was her central theme.

This was all in our first 36 hours in the land.

And then we went to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem. The birthplace of the one known as the Prince of Peace. The streets were empty and the shops were closed. No pilgrims in a town built on tourism. No Palestinians have been allowed work permits to go into Israel for their jobs since October 7. Many of the Christians here have family connections with the Christian community in Gaza and many have loved ones who've died there while the others remain huddled inside the churches. Yet all of them feel connected to Gaza, unable to remove themselves from the news they receive from a land just a few dozens of miles from them—at times you can hear the bombs in Gaza from the area. Whether or not they are blood kin, they see their own family's faces in the faces of the men, women, and children bearing the ongoing and ceaseless horrors of famine, displacement, and interminable bombing.

Walking around Bethlehem felt post-apocalyptic. The despair in the eyes of grown men reduced to selling Kleenex and bottled water on the street—after 8 months of no work permits and no tourists, settler violence all around them, and the trauma of what's happening so nearby in Gaza, in many cases to their family members—despair on their faces was nearly unbearable to witness.

We went to a gathering at the Bethlehem Bible College in which local Palestinian Christian leaders called on Christians in America to repent of their support for Palestinian destruction. To turn from our weaponized theologies and from the ways we use and abuse our access to American political power to deny the humanity of Palestinians.

We listened to their laments and pleas for action, their rebuke of a the church in the West for it's failure to respond to what they and so much of the world now calls a genocide. Rev. Dr Mitri Raheb, founder of Dar al Kalima University, an arts and music school in Bethlehem, told us about the recent bombing of his campus in Gaza. With its destruction, he says all the institutions of higher learning have now been leveled by the IDF. He showed photos of his graduates there who have been killed, the filmmakers and musicians who will tell no more stories or sing anymore songs.

Our next leg of the journey took us through the winding narrow roads of the Judean hills southwest of Bethelohm to a farm owned by a Palestinian family for generations, with Ottoman-era deeds to support their claim. They live in an area designated by the Oslo agreements of the 1990s as Area C, the sixty percent of the West Bank under full Israeli military control. This family is denied permission to extend electricity or running water to their land, nor can they build any structures. And for more than 30 years they have engaged in a legal battle in the Israeli civilian and military courts while cultivating their land and making it sustainable off the grid. They host summer camps for children, teach environmentalism and nonviolence. Their reality is always fraught, but since October 7 they've suffered even greater isolation as their access to the main highway has been blockaded by the Israeli military, new settler outposts have been established on the perimeter of their property, and settlers attempted to build a road into their farm prompting two women, a family member and an international volunteer, to place their bodies in the path of a bulldozer. Another family member was recently held at gunpoint for three hours by settlers in Israeli military uniforms.

We next ascended to the holy city and met with two Israeli human rights activist friends, the kind who do honest co-liberation activism with Palestinians from a neighborhood that routinely has homes demolished by the Jerusalem municipality. And we received a fitting benediction from members of the Parents Circle. Rami Elhanan, who lost his 14 year old daughter in the conflict in 1997, told us, "The power of pain is enormous. You can use it to bring massive destruction, or you can use it to bring hope and healing." Rami and others in the Parents Circle like Bassam Aramin, Lailah alSheikh, and Robi Damelin--each who have

lost a child in this brutal conflict--use their pain in service of a shared future, of mutuality, an end to systems of occupation and control, and for reconciliation. After our meeting with them a pastor from Chicago said she first thought how brave these people are but then she realized "it's not courage, it's love."

To speak of love in such a time as this--is that delusional? Or is it more delusional to think that something good, anything good, can come from killing other people's children, from carnage and destruction? Is there anything more delusional than revenge? Here's what Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. said in the middle of the civil rights struggle:

"I'm concerned about a better World. I'm concerned about justice; I'm concerned about brotherhood and sisterhood; I'm concerned about truth. And when one is concerned about that, he can never advocate violence. For through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can't murder murder. Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can't establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate through violence. Darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that. And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to humankind's problems."

From Cornel West comes a key insight here to apply to realities like the one we see in the Middle East today: "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." To love our neighbor as ourselves often requires us to work for a more just world not just for me and mine but for my neighbor as well. My flourishing is intertwined with theirs. Mother Theresa said, "If we have no peace it's because we've forgotten we belong to each other." Remembering this requires moral imagination to see beyond more than just our differences. It means also seeing beyond the violence we inflict upon each other while still mustering the strength to love our neighbor, to work for his flourishing, to redress the injustices she faces. And even more so if our neighbor is our enemy.

A thought from Bethlehem still captures me. A young scholar named Dr. Lamma Mansour spoke of the role of hope and of the necessity of creating and casting this kind of moral imagination. This idea has been central to our understanding at Telos from the beginning. But Dr. Mansour took it a step further and said that if we don't cast a vision for a world more just and more whole, we will live within the distorted constraints of the imaginations of oppressors and of the violent. That is the world--the nightmare--we are trapped in at the moment. To wake up, the bombs have to stop. The refugees in Gaza must be allowed to breathe, to eat, to sleep without fear. The invasion in Rafah must stop. Military aid to Israel

must be constrained until it abides by international humanitarian and human rights law. The survivors in Gaza and Israel need the time and space to grieve, to mourn and lament, to weep and wail, but also to live again. Beauty can arise from even these ashes. In fact, it is already. I saw it. But no one should have to pay these prices. An immediate and permanent ceasefire is the only way. A release of all those held hostage from their long captivity is the only way. A lifting of the blockades and barriers to allow food and medicine and supplies to reach the hungry, the sick, the dying, is the only way we can begin to wake up. An end to the occupation of Palestinian territories and a viable path towards dignity, security, freedom, and equality for both Palestinians and Israelis in equal measure must be invested in. The world we have to imagine and then work for is one in which all can flourish in the land.

The message we heard from many of our Palestinian and Israeli friends is that America is part of the problem but needs to be part of the solution. They were too polite to say we have blood on our hands, but we do. In our desire to embrace and support Israel, we're helping it self-destruct on the global stage as we fund and provide space for the mass destruction of Palestinian lives. The trip was a stark call to radically alter our involvement and to be a common friend of all those who are working for peace.

We're back home now, but today Rafah must be our hometown. And every place where there is suffering and injustice, and in particular those places where we are complicit, we are duty bound to be in solidarity with those who are vulnerable and afraid. We are responsible to act on their behalf. That is the continuation of the work. To stand with those who are yearning for a better world and need allies and friends to join them until the bombs are silenced, the hostages are freed, the blockade is lifted, and the hungry are fed. And then even greater work of solidarity will begin.