

The Sabeel Conference:
from the apartheid paradigm to commensality
Valerie Elverton Dixon, Ph.D.
November 8, 2007
revised March 27, 2008

On October 26 and 27, Friends of Sabeel North America sponsored a conference entitled “The Apartheid Paradigm in Palestine-Israel: Issues of Justice and Equality. “ The conference was hosted by Friends of Sabeel New England at the Old South Church in Boston. Founded in the early 1990s, Sabeel defines itself as a grassroots liberation theology movement. It was founded in Jerusalem for the sake of using a Palestinian liberation theology to address the conditions of occupation and to invite Christians around the world to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people (<<http://www.sabeel.org/etemplate.php?id=2>>).November 8, 2007) Since the early nineties, Friends of Sabeel chapters have been established in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Australia, and Ireland. According to the conference program, chapters are forming in France and Germany.

The sanctuary at the Old South Church was nearly full for every session and was completely full on Saturday afternoon when nearly 1,000 people heard Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak. The purpose of the conference was to bring together Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and secular thinkers to consider the propriety of understanding the Israel/Palestine conflict through the framework of apartheid. According to the United Nations, apartheid is a crime against humanity. The term derives from the Afrikaans and means separation; it was a system of separation of the races in South Africa. The United Nations still considers apartheid a threat to international peace and security. (The International Convention

on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid) Thus apartheid is a violation of international law wherever it is found.

All of the panelists that I heard agreed that the apartheid paradigm was an appropriate way to understand the Israel/Palestine situation. John Dugard, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory to the UN Human Rights Council and a South African, sees the Israel/Palestine reality as worse than apartheid in South Africa. There was no separation wall in South Africa; the separation did not include highways; there was no principle of collective responsibility such that an entire family could lose its home if one of its members acted against the state. Apartheid, in all its iterations, is a practice of separation, discrimination, and domination. In Israel/Palestine, the international donor community helps to maintain the status quo. The United States with its support of Israel also helps to support this brand of apartheid.

Thus, given the role of the United States and of the international donor community in supporting apartheid in the occupied territories, reason says each has a role in ending this violation of human rights and of international law. Speakers recommended grass roots efforts in the United States to advocate for a more balanced U.S. foreign policy and to use nonviolent means – boycotts, divestment and sanctions – to bring pressure to bear against Israel.

Naim Ateek, a founder of Sabeel and a Christian Palestinian theologian, made a theological case against apartheid. According to Ateek, apartheid derives from racism and racism says that some human beings deserve more privileges than others. Since all human beings are made in the image of God, racism, including antisemitism, is an insult to God. Ateek argued that racist and violent religious texts ought to be rejected. Thus, on the basis of

respecting the image of God inherent in all of humanity, we have a moral obligation to end apartheid.

Anat Biletzki, professor of philosophy at Tel Aviv University and an activist for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, argued from a secular philosophical perspective. She said that the moral argument for justice is equality, and separation is inherently unequal therefore it is unjust and immoral. Apartheid is linked to colonial domination. Domination usually follows inequality and separation, but in the case of Israel/Palestine the domination came first. However, she did encourage the audience by reminding it of the mystery: “We never know what might happen,” she said. This is the reason to keep on working.

In my opinion, the case that the apartheid paradigm is appropriate to describe Israel’s occupation of the West Bank is compelling. The conference program cited these facts:

Palestinians are ghettoized in 12 percent of their original territory.

(endtheoccupation.org/downloads/AAFWhyApartheid.pdf)

The International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid defines apartheid in part as: “ Any measures including legislative measures, designed to divide the population along racial lines by the creation of separate reserves and ghettos for the members of a racial group or groups, the prohibition of mixed marriages among members of various racial groups, the expropriation of landed property belonging to a racial group or to members thereof” (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/11.htm>> November 10,2007)

The West Bank is divided into more than 64 isolated cantons with no physical movement without Israel’s permission.

(poica.org/editor/case_studies/view.php?recordID=529)

The Convention says apartheid exists by: “establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”

There are over 500 military check points where Palestinians often wait for hours, and must have ID cards and passes just to travel short distances. Israeli settlers can travel easily on Israeli only roads.

(lht.com/articles/2006/12/25/news/mideast.php)

The Convention further describes apartheid: “By the infliction upon the members of a racial group or groups of serious bodily or mental harm, by the infringement of their freedom or dignity, or by subjecting them to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Israel is using the separation wall to appropriate large chunks of Palestinian land. In his book, *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, former president Jimmy Carter writes about the separation wall: “The original idea of a physical obstruction was promoted by Israeli moderates as a means of preventing intrusive attacks after the withdrawal of Israel’s occupation forces” (190). He says that the barrier surrounding Gaza did work to limit cross-border attacks. However, the separation barrier on the West Bank has been built entirely within Palestinian territory, intruding deeply into the West Bank to encompass Israeli settlements blocs and large areas of other Palestinian land.” (190).

This is contrary to international law because countries cannot keep land acquired as a result of war. The wall and Israel’s military presence in the West Bank are contrary to United Nations resolutions 242 and 338. Given all these facts, it is no surprise that the primary vocabulary of the conference was one of international law, of human rights and of justice.

However, in my opinion, the danger of the language of law and justice is that we use these words so often that they become exhausted. We say law and justice, justice and equality, human rights and equity to the point where they lose meaning and simply become sound. We say: “no justice no peace” so much that we automatically presume that we know what we mean and that the solution is simple: Israel obeys international law and withdraws to its 1967 borders; the wall comes down; the check points close; the Israeli settlers leave occupied territory, establish two states, and all will be well. The justice that we speak of is a commutative justice where each party upholds its end of a contract. It is a justice reckoned by punitive international law, where if one party fails in its responsibilities to the law, it is subject to punishment. This is another reason that I think the language of law and of rights is not productive. It relies on the threat of punishment to coerce compliance. Even if we are talking about nonviolent coercion, it is coercion none the less.

Further, the language of rights is a language that creates a conflict of rights. In the sessions I attended – I attended all but one panel discussion -- there was no voice to explain the Israeli position. My guess is such a voice would have argued the following: Israel exists not only as a homeland, but as a safe space for Jewish people. Given the history of the Jewish people of thousands of years of diasporic wandering, of persecution, including the Holocaust of World War II, without Israel, the continued existence of the Jewish people is in jeopardy. Israel’s continued existence as a Jewish state guarantees the continued existence of the Jewish people. The Palestinians are Arabs and Muslim. They do not have a comparable history of persecution. They can find a home in other Arab countries and in other Muslim countries. Thus, the right of the Jewish people to exist and to live in safety in a state and a society organized with Jewish

religious law in mind trumps the human rights of the Palestinians to live in Palestine.

For a Jewish perspective on the issue of the apartheid paradigm in thinking about the Israel/Palestine situation, I spoke with Ori Nir, a spokesperson for Americans for Peace Now. Nir believes that the apartheid paradigm is not the appropriate way to think about Israel/Palestine because in Israel proper the situation is far from a legally enforced separation, and the West Bank is occupied territory. He explains: “The West Bank is militarily occupied by Israel. The occupation victimizes Palestinians and corrupts Israelis. But occupation is not synonymous with apartheid. Palestinians are not oppressed on racial grounds - as Arabs or as Muslims or Christians. Rather they are oppressed as political rivals who were on a losing side of a war fought against Israel some 40 years ago, a war that exacerbated an existing national conflict (chiefly) over land. Israel is seeking ways to resolve that conflict.” Nir says that a two- state solution is the best option; this will keep Israel from becoming either a binational state that will lose its Jewish character or becoming an apartheid state. For Nir, the apartheid label is an unfortunate shortcut. He says: “I view the application of the ‘apartheid’ label to the situation in the West Bank as either a propaganda ploy or as a ‘shortcut’ that stems from intellectual superficiality or from not knowing the facts on the ground. The symptoms of the sickness that the occupation is may resemble the symptoms of the South African apartheid, but the disease is very different. The occupation should end, but it must happen as a result of a political agreement between the government of Israel and the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people.” Nir sees two sustainable states as the only solution that “can bring an end to an unjust and repressive Israeli rule of the West Bank.”

From the Palestinian perspective, their right to a homeland, to human dignity, to equality,

to their family properties now owned by Israelis and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to Palestine, all of Palestine, are equally compelling claims. Thus, we have a conflict of rights.

The apartheid paradigm does not consider this clash of rights, the fact of two competing claims. Apartheid is simply wrong, and it requires a response from the international community to end it. Therefore, the proposal to go down a path already established in fighting apartheid in South Africa arises. That path is the path of boycotts, divestment and sanctions. (BDS) Such a campaign is already underway. One of the panelists, Noura Erakat, a Palestinian-American and legal activist, is working to build the BDS movement. She reported that the movement is growing on college campuses nationwide; it is finding support among church groups. Those who support this tactic are looking forward to a long, but ultimately successful struggle. They look to South Africa as an example of what is possible.

However, when we look at the South African example, we see the limitations of such an approach. It is true that boycotts, divestment and sanctions helped to end apartheid in South Africa. We cannot deny that South Africa and the world are better because this injustice is over.

However, what we also see in South Africa today is a country where the poorest of the poor during apartheid are still poor. We see one of the most violent societies on the face of the earth.

We see a society sick with AIDS to an extraordinary degree. In peace theory, means and ends ought to cohere. Thus, we need to employ means that will get us to the end we want, and that is an end to oppression and the establishment of a government that provides at least the basic needs of all of its people. Those needs are found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 25 reads:

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

<<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (5of6)12/24/2003 7:02:54AM>

November 9, 2007

The Declaration also gives human beings the right to an education. The human family and the international community ought not remain silent about the human rights violations perpetrated against the Palestinians. Silence is another way to lie. Silence is complicity with injustice. It is important to call a thing by its proper name. At the same time, it is important to expand our thinking about ways to solve this problem and therefore to be willing to construct new pathways using new logic and new language. The international community ought to develop a vocabulary and a strategy that provide for the basic needs, including security, of both Israelis and Palestinians as a means to the end of peace in that region.

Toward this end, I propose the language of sustenance and joy. It is an ethics of commensality. (I am grateful to John Domic Crossan for this term) Commensal derives from the Middle English which means sharing a meal. Commensalism is defined as a symbiotic

relationship. It is a non parasitical relationship; the sharing diminishes no one. The Christian communion table is the source of this thinking. Traditionally, the communion table reminds believers of the life and the death of Jesus, the elements – bread and wine– representing the body and the blood of Jesus. I say within a bloodlived theology rather than a bloodshed theology, the elements represent sustenance and joy, bread representing the basic needs that human beings require to sustain life and the wine representing that which brings joy, that which makes life worth living. Celebration and fellowship are sources of joy. Excellence in our work is a source of joy. Sharing is a source of joy. Further, the ethics of commensality and the language of sustenance and joy can also be understood as an ethics of radical welcome, of hospitality and of generosity. These can become the foundation for a peacemaking strategy where means and ends cohere.

In just peace theory as I formulate it, there are three major categories: truth, respect and security. In the ten steps of just peacemaking as outlined by Professor Glen Stassen and others just and sustainable economic development is one of the steps. Sustenance and joy recognize the image of God upon the Other as a moral truth, respect that image and seek to provide what the Other needs to live and to flourish. This provision is the basic source of security. Truth, respect and security apply even to, especially to the enemy Other. The logic of commensality and the language of sustenance and joy, recognize as truth that my security and well being lies with the security and well being of my enemy. Respect and reverence for h/er divinity creates peace.

In their essay “Foster Just and Sustainable Economic Practices,” (In *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* edited by Glen Stassen second edition) David Bronkema,

David Lumsdaine, and Rodger A. Payne, help us to understand that just and sustainable economic development means working for the development of the whole human person in relationship to h/er community and to h/er local and global natural environment.

Self-determination is an important part of such economic development, along with a healthy respect for the history and the traditions of people.

Further, sustainable development is green. If it does not take the ecology into consideration, such development is not sustainable; it ought to consider the natural resources available to the community; it ought to consider the natural beauty of the local community. Sustainable economic development also requires a complex and sophisticated understanding of justice. I say justice is not only the commutative justice of the contract, including the social contract; justice is not only the punitive justice that comes after the contract has been broken and/or the law violated. Justice is righteous distribution of resources. Justice is the work of restoration. Justice is contributive; we each, no matter how poor, have something to give.

When we think of economic development, it is important that we think about the just distribution of goods, services and resources so that one group does not have too much while another group has too little. It is important that we respect the disadvantaged group enough to invite them into the decision making process. All of this ought to be done with the goal of restoring right relationships in mind. Peace comes when relationships are righteous. Thus, human beings ought to work together to provide each other with sustenance and joy. It is in this work that we create, understand, and enhance our humanity.

Such an approach would end the economic pressure that Israel is putting on Palestinians in Gaza. It would develop the West Bank so that Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in the

same communities. It would consider a one state solution to the problem, understanding that a two-state solution in such a small country is not the truth. First, there are large elements of both Israelis and Palestinians that want all the land from the river to the sea. Second, Israel will never tolerate a Palestinian state that is its equal in both economic and military power with a right of return for all Palestinian. A one-state solution would require that all parties give up violence and militarism as a means for security. This means that security is found in economic cooperation. I realize that given the demographic realities of the region, one state that remains a Jewish homeland and remains Jewish in character is hard to imagine. However, there could be some kind of federation where majority Jewish areas remain Jewish, where majority Palestinian areas remain Palestinian and where the rights of minorities in all areas are protected. A one state solution would require a radical new understanding of Israeli and Palestinian identity.

Our sustenance and joy do not come from atomistic understandings of our identities; they do not come from competitive zero sum thinking that all too often leads to conflict. Sustenance and joy require relational thinking that leads to cooperation, to commensality, to fellowship.

In the prophetic vision of peace, the people hammer their swords into ploughshares after the Messiah has come. It is a vision that implies that conflict is over and now ordinary life – planting and harvesting – may continue. I say that rather than the sword serving as an instrument by which peace comes, it is better to think of the ploughshares as the instrument that makes peace. The sword can make a negative peace, a feeble and trembling security where enemies still fear and hate each other, where violence may erupt at any moment. Such is the result of coercion. However, a positive peace comes when enemies see the humanity of the Other, begin to work together for the benefit of the Other. Fear and hatred melt away in the face

of a common effort toward a transcendent goal. And when fear and hatred melt away, the Messiah becomes visible. S/he has already returned.

All the major religions give us the vision of peace; they all command generosity and a care for the poor. Looking at the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions, we see this. The Koran says:

And remember We took
A Covenant from the Children
Of Israel (to this effect):
Worship none but God;
Treat with kindness
Your parents and kindred,
And orphans and those in need;
Speak fair to the people;
Be steadfast in prayer;
And practice regular charity. Sura II: 83

The Koran also says:

If God had so willed,
He would have made you
A single People, but (His Plan is)
to test you in what
He hath given you: so strive

As in a race in all virtues. Sura V: 51

The New Testament says:

Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Matthew 5: 44-45

It also says:

Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. Matthew 5: 42

And quoting Hebrew texts:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

If he is thirsty, give him a drink;

For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:20-21

The Hebrew Bible says:

These are the things you shall do:

Speak each man the truth to his neighbor

Give judgment in your gates for truth, justice and peace.

Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor

And do not love a false oath.

For all these are things that I hate says the Lord. Zechariah 8:16

It also says:

If you take away the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger, and
speaking wickedness,
If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.
Isaiah 58:9-11

Apartheid is an accurate description for the situation in the West Bank today. However, the way to peace is through a competition of virtues – generosity, hospitality, justice in all its iterations. The way to peace is to shower the enemy Other with blessings. The way to peace is through speaking the truth and not thinking evil against our neighbor, even the neighbor who is also an enemy. The way to peace is to maintain trust in God and in the prophetic vision of peace

that will come when we do what God has commanded us to do.

Archbishop Tutu called Israel to holiness and to remembrance in his keynote address. He described his talk as “a cry of anguish from the heart, an impassioned plea to my spiritual relatives, the offspring of Abraham.” He spoke of the power of the scriptures to give hope and guidance to all of humankind. Tutu reminded his audience that the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament in a Christian context, tells of a God who is not deaf, not stupid, not blind. They tell of a God who, according to Tutu is “notoriously biased.”

Speaking especially to religious Jews and to the State of Israel, he said: “God’s special people must be holy, but this is a holiness that expresses itself in mundane acts of caring, of kindness and compassion, of humanitarian concern.”

(< http://www.fosna.org/confeerence_and_trips/KEYNOTETutuBostonOct2007.htm>

November 16, 2007) He said Jews not only had a responsibility to be holy because God is holy, but that they ought to “hear the cries of the oppressed” because they ought to remember their own oppression in Egypt and in Germany.

Further, he pointed to lessons to be learned from South Africa:

We say please learn at least one positive lesson from apartheid South Africa.

Under Mr. F .W. deKlerk who must be commended for his outstanding courage, they decided to negotiate not with those they liked but with their sworn enemy and they found the security that had eluded them for so long and that had cost so much suffering and blood. It came not from the barrel of the gun.

Tutu spoke of how his visit to the West Bank brought back painful memories from the apartheid

days of South Africa. Tutu recommended the two-state solution. He ended his remarks by telling his audience that the world needs the Jewish people, especially those “ who are faithful to their vocation that has meant so much for the world’s morality.” The world has learned quite much from the Jewish people about right and wrong, good and bad, justice and injustice, oppression and freedom. Tutu said: “Jews are indispensable for a good compassionate, just and caring world. And so are Palestinians.”

I say, Israel/Palestine ought to put away the sword and make the ploughshare their instrument of peace, make sustenance and joy their language and their aim, make commensality their logic. And those of us who care and who live outside that country ought to encourage our governments to do the same. We ought to invite all to sit under our and their own vine and fig tree and study war no more.

