

A JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF FAITH

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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On Friday, I returned from eight days in Israel and Palestine—my first visit ever to a part of the world that, in some ways, I know better than anywhere else, including New York. Growing up Conservative Mennonite, I memorized vast swaths of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. My father, a Mennonite minister, has always been fascinated by biblical archaeology and the role of Israel. Study of the Ancient Near East formed a central focus of my classics training in college, as well as my seminary education and graduate study. And the political quagmire that makes up the modern Middle East remains a constant focus of our deliberations at the Council on Foreign Relations. But I had never visited Israel or Palestine.

I was invited to be part of an interfaith mission, made up of senior religious leaders from New York. There were fifteen of us: four Protestant ministers, three Reform rabbis, two Muslim imams, two Episcopal rectors, two Conservative rabbis, one Catholic priest, and one Unitarian Universalist minister. And a camera crew to photograph our journey and film a documentary.

Since I had never been to Israel or Palestine, I felt out of my league among these colleagues, some of whom go to Israel more often than I go to New Jersey. One has been four times since September. So I decided to go early and get my bearings. Fortunately, my wife Holly was able to accompany me for the pre-delegation days. Also fortunately, Israel is a small country: including the West Bank and Gaza, it's the size of New Jersey.

When the delegation arrived, the fifteen of us embarked on a five-day whirlwind of presentations by leading journalists and academics, meetings with religious and political leaders, and excursions to places of interfaith vitality and internecine hostility. We met with the President of Israel and the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority; the mayors of Haifa, Bethlehem, and Sderot; the Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel and two members of the Knesset; the rabbi of the Western Wall and the director of Women of the Wall. And so on. I kept a daily journal along the way. After I add some photos, I'll send it to you.

One of the most impressive people we met was Natan Sharansky, the Russian mathematician and chess champion who became a human rights activist after the Soviets refused his application to emigrate to Israel. You may recall the image of Sharansky in 1986 walking across the bridge in Berlin after nine years in a Siberian prison. Now 63 and still a vital force in Israeli politics, he told us that the most profound realization of his life came to him in prison; and all of his experience since has substantiated this insight. People want two things, he said: they want to be free and they

want to belong. These are the two human passions: freedom and identity. The discovery of your identity, he said, gives you the strength to fight both for your own freedom and the freedom of others.

In the wake of my experience, I'd like to make three simple points about the relationship between freedom and identity. The first is about why the State of Israel was necessary and why the State of Palestine is also necessary. The second is about why Hamas is a threat and why some of the settlements and the Ultra-Orthodox Jews are a threat as well. The third is about why we need to balance freedom and identity in the practice of religion.

My visit to Yad Vashem—the Holocaust Museum—was an experience I will never forget. The long, narrow museum cuts like a knife into the top of a mountain. You walk down and down, further underground, as the story of the Holocaust unfolds. The slender prism of light entering from the world above grows increasingly distant and faint, until you reach the point in the narrative when the camps are liberated, at which point you begin to move upward, toward the light once more.

At one point in the descent, you stand before a large chart prepared for a Nazi conference on the final solution to the Jewish problem. The chart lists the number of Jews in the world by country. The Nazis counted a total of 11 million Jews at the time. What you realize, with chilling clarity, is that for the Nazis this chart wasn't a census: it was a list of targets. They had eleven million Jews to exterminate. By the end of the war, they were more than halfway to their goal.

Half a century earlier, a Hungarian Jew named Theodor Herzl had looked at the status of Jews in Europe and concluded that Anti-Semitism could neither be cured nor defeated, but only avoided; and that the only way to avoid it was to create a Jewish state. Following the publication of his book titled *The Jewish State* in 1896, European Jews began to emigrate from Europe to Palestine, where they started laying the groundwork for an eventual Jewish state. The State of Israel was necessary because the Jews of Europe had a strong identity; but until 1948, they had scant freedom, if any.

Today, the State of Palestine is also necessary. The Palestinians have their identity; but under Israeli occupation, they have insufficient freedom. Their suffering, both in the West Bank but more so in Gaza, is palpable and pervasive. Palestinians rightly feel marginalized and demoralized; many justifiably feel trapped and angry. Their lack of reasonable access to medical care, education, and work—not to mention their lack of freedom to travel to visit family and friends—is not only a denial of human dignity, but in some cases a major violation of human rights. Of course, the conditions in the Palestinian territories were better before the intifadas, when Israel closed borders and imposed restrictions in response to the violence. Even so, Israel's ability to maintain its standing among liberal Western democracies requires it to get out of the occupation business, and soon. It's the right thing to do—politically and pragmatically. And it's the human rights thing to do.

On Thursday, we spent an hour with Israeli President Shimon Peres in his home. When asked about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Peres replied, “We were not born to rule other people.” In fact, he added, Israel was the first nation willing to recognize the Palestinian state. He sees Salem Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, as his partner. Peres went on to pay Fayyad the ultimate compliment: he compared Fayyad’s role in building the Palestinian state to David Ben-Gurion’s role in building the state of Israel.

From our visit with President Peres, we traveled north into the West Bank to the city of Ramallah, which will someday become the capital of the state of Palestine. We met with Prime Minister Fayyad in his office. When asked about the core issue for the Palestinians, Fayyad responded: “We desire to live as free people in a country of our own with dignity. We want to live in peace and harmony with Israel.” Freedom *and* identity.

Fayyad is energetically building the institutions of the Palestinian state, buoyed by significant foreign investment from other Arab nations. Ramallah is beginning to look like the capital of a nation. The creation of the state of Palestine is a necessary next step, both for the human dignity of the Palestinian people and the moral integrity of the Jewish nation. The Palestinians have their identity; they need their freedom as well.

But there are stumbling blocks in the way, which brings me to my second point, about threats to progress. Among both Palestinians and Jew, zealots who oppose a two-state solution—and the idea of a secular state—are trying to impose their own identity onto others and thereby deprive others of freedom.

Hamas, the terrorist group that currently controls the Gaza Strip, opposes the idea of an Israeli nation and insists that Palestine should become an Islamic state—an idea that two-thirds of Palestinians oppose. Gaza has suffered under Hamas, while the West Bank has stabilized and begun to prosper under the Palestinian Authority. This disparity increases the tensions between Hamas and the Palestinian mainstream.

We visited the mayor of Bethlehem, a Muslim-majority city in the West Bank. Five of Bethlehem’s 15 city council members are from Hamas. The mayor agreed that the differences between Gaza and the West Bank, and between Hamas and the Palestine Authority, are not good for the Palestinian cause. When asked about the biggest threat to peace, however, the mayor cited the continual expansion of the Israeli settlements.

Whether or not the settlements are a bigger threat than Hamas, the settlements are indeed a threat. Here’s the situation: maybe 500,000 Israelis, many of them right-wing in their politics and strongly committed to keeping the Biblical “land of Israel” Jewish—have settled in Palestinian areas in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Two-thirds of these settlers live in four settlement blocks around Jerusalem that the Palestinians and Israelis have already agreed would remain under Israeli sovereignty in a two-state solution.

The remaining third of the settlers are the problem. They have built settlements outside these designated blocks for a specific reason: to thwart the creation of a

Palestinian state. If enough Jews live in enough settlements across the Palestinian territories, the theory goes, it will make it hard to form a contiguous state of Palestine.

The Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who make up about a million of the Israel's population of nearly eight million, reject the idea of Israel as a secular Jewish state. Like Hamas, they want to impose their religious identity onto the broader culture, thereby denying freedom to women and Palestinians, as well as to secular Jews. Here's the irony: Fayyad and the Palestinian Authority oppose the strategy of Hamas, whereas the Ultra-Orthodox make up an essential part of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition. Peace will probably not come anytime soon.

My final point this morning has to do with balancing freedom and identity in the practice of religion. What I found most energizing about my visit to Jerusalem is that people in Jerusalem take religion seriously. If you believe in the necessity of religion, as I do, there's no better place to visit than Jerusalem.

Make no mistake: to go to Jerusalem to learn about the practice of religion is like going to the Tour de France to learn how to ride a bike. People in Jerusalem are more serious, more fanatical, and more competitive in their practice of religion than anywhere in the world. There are three major teams in the competition—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—and lots of divisions within each. Minor differences, subtle adjustments, and apparently trivial modifications create huge crises of identity.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, for example, is the supposed site of Jesus' death and burial. The Muslims literally hold the keys to the church: they open it each morning and close it each night. Seven different Christian traditions have divided the spaces within into exceedingly small jurisdictions, with rights and privileges assigned to each tradition for designated places at specific times. One group can pause in front of the place where Jesus died, for example, but they can't pray there. Another can pray there at one time of day, or once a week, but only then. And so on.

The situation at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount—the most sacred (accessible) site of Judaism—isn't any better. You can have your bar mitzvah at the Western Wall only if you agree to abide by Orthodox custom. Women have a small and separate section to one side of the wall where they can pray, but only silently, and they cannot read the Torah at the wall. Atop the Temple Mount stands the Al Aksa Mosque (the third most holy site for Muslims) and the Dome of the Rock (where the temple Herod built for the Jews once stood). Only Muslims can enter the Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

One point on which all teams in this religious Tour de France agree has to do with the status of women. In one of our conversations with a leading Orthodox Jewish rabbi, I observed to him that three women had recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to bring peace to parts of Africa. "Let's say that ten years from now," I continued, "three women—a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian—win the Nobel Prize for helping bring peace to the Middle East. What will have happened?"

He quipped: “The messianic kingdom will have come.” Everyone laughed at his joke, and that was it for an answer. In other words, such an event won’t happen in this world. The subordination of women in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities in Jerusalem, as in much of the Middle East generally, infuriates me. Because women’s religious identity is second-class, their religious freedom is third-rate.

Given all these problems, why practice religion at all? Because in a deep and comprehensive way, religion gives us our identity. Just because religion can be practiced badly doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be practiced well. We develop an identity as we learn what matters and where we belong. We learn that this monument matters because of what happened here. This story matters because of the lesson it teaches. This symbol matters because of the reminder it evokes. Religion teaches us what matters and where we belong. It teaches us what we should value, how we should conduct ourselves and to what we should commit ourselves.

How do we learn these things? By practice: religion is a way of life. Orthodox Jews keep kosher and keep the Sabbath. Orthodox Christians pray three times a day and deprive themselves during Lent. Devout Muslims pray five times a day and fast during Ramadan. And Unitarian Universalists: what do we do?

The power of religious identity in Jerusalem inspired me. But the paucity of religious freedom stopped me short. When I told Natan Sharansky that I grew up Conservative Mennonite and had become Unitarian Universalist, he understood in a flash, and so did I. People want two things: to belong like Conservative Mennonites and also to be free like Unitarian Universalists. Identity and freedom: only with both will we be, as Dr. King once said, free at last.