

4 June 2008

Daher's Vineyard,
Outside Bethlehem
On the West Bank

Dear Friends,

There's a story in the Jewish Talmud in which a Gentile asks two great rabbis to teach him the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai, the first, drives the Gentile away: There's no way the Torah can be condensed in such a way! But Hillel, the second rabbi, responds quite differently: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it."

Saturday morning, riding the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, I've got Hillel on



Figure 1 - Two Boys in Dhieshah Refugee Camp

my mind, and Jesus, too. Kindred spirits. Daring teachers. Radical monotheists. I'm watching the landscape twist and turn and dive through golden hillsides; even now, it's a wild ride, a treacherous road. And I'm remembering Jesus' story, the story of the Samaritan who stops to help the beaten Jew. I'm remembering that the busy priest and brilliant scholar pass by. Stories matter, make us

accountable. Jesus would have liked Hillel. "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

1. An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind

We spend a night in the Dhieshah Refugee Camp just outside of Bethlehem. Thousands of Palestinians live in camps just like it, and they have for three

generations now. They're known as the "internally displaced." Refugees. Walking Dhieshah's streets, alleys, neighborhoods, I feel as much despair, as much disappointment, as much anger as I've felt in a long time. How can the land of Jesus and Hillel tolerate displacement, poverty, systematic neglect? Shards of glass litter the roads where children scoot and play. A dead rat. An angry Palestinian mother tells us about nightly raids, calculated army explosions, the psychological toll on her children. "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." Is it really so hard?

In Hebron we visit with David Wilder, spokesman for Hebron's Jewish settler community, easily the most aggressive in the West Bank. David Wilder sees in Arab Muslims a lethal threat to Jewish culture and survival. "If it's either him or you," he says, "you do basically everything you can to survive." Then he adds: "We do not believe in turning the other cheek. If I'm attacked, I'm going to hit back." Hebron settlers – even their children – routinely attack Palestinian neighbors. Nets cover old Palestinian markets to catch stones and garbage tossed toward shopkeepers from settlements above. Nets do nothing to stop buckets of scolding water.

It seems to me that Hebron's settlers have come to define themselves and even their existence in terms of fear, security, retaliation. "My first obligation is to myself," David Wilder says, "to survive with my people... Would I accept, one day, that Jews are a minority here [in the Holy Land]? Of course not! Would we allow that to happen? No. This is the only place that Jews can be safe." Fear drives ordinary human beings to irrational violence. Settlements like Hebron's defy international law and incite lawlessness on all sides. It's madness in the land of Jesus and Hillel.

Earlier in the week, a Palestinian filmmaker reminds us that every morning United States taxpayers write a check for \$10 million dollars – to fund the madness. Though many Palestinians have given up on U.S. politics, Mohammed Alatar insists the United States is the only country that can make a difference. "I'm not against the money," he says. "But write the check for schools and hospitals and soccer balls, not guns and helicopters and rubber coated bullets and walls. It's \$3 billion dollars of madness."

One morning we arrive for a meeting with a member of the Bethlehem City Council. We're surprised to discover that Saleh Shukeh is not only an elected councilor, but a member of Hamas, the Islamic Movement in the Occupied Territories and Gaza. It's a sobering hour. He describes Islam as a comprehensive worldview that includes worship, politics, economy and social life. Islam is ready, he says, to govern Palestine, according to principles that fit well challenges of modern civilization.

Of course, he's talking about a fundamentalist Islam, one that's skeptical of accommodation and one that's responded violently, in the past, to the occupation.

When asked about violence and the bombs out of Gaza aimed at Israeli civilians, Saleh Shukeh is measured but clear. "We must distinguish," he says, "between resistance and terrorism. We have the right to defend ourselves. If you call this 'terrorism,' that's up to you; but we call it 'resistance.'" He insists that his party knows "evil from good;" but his careful defense of violence as justified resistance is disturbing and sad. David Wilder and Saleh Shukeh come from very different stories, with very different constituencies. Both have suffered, however, and both are choosing paths of retaliation and violence. I'm misquoting Martin Luther King; but he comes to mind: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind... Only light can banish darkness, only love can cast out hate."

2. What About Widows and Children?

Here on a beautiful hill, Daoud Nassar describes "Daher's Vineyard": a family peace center promoting vocational training, sustainable farming, children's programming and intercultural community. The Nassars are determined to protect their 100 acres on this hill – though hills in every direction have already been confiscated and illegally developed by settlers. There's no running water at the Vineyard and no electricity either. The tents we sleep in are under a day-to-day demolition order. It's not an easy life.

The golden hills of Palestine and Israel behind him, Daoud Nassar tells us a story about a 12-year-old girl from the Dhieshah Refugee Camp: how she came up here months ago for a summer camp. Going around the circle of campers,

on the first day of camp, Daoud asked the children about their hopes, their wishes for the future. The girl from Dhieshah had nothing to say. Daoud insisted; everyone had something to say.

“I want to die,” the 12-year-old said.

Daoud Nassar was unprepared. He gathered his thoughts for just a moment, then asked, “Why?” He knew that Palestinian children are traumatized by



Figure 2 - Girl in Refugee Camp

violence and occupation. He knew that Palestinian culture offers kids few chances to express such despair. But how could a 12-year-old carry such a burden in her heart? What kind of world was that? He knew she had to talk, had to get it out so her heart wouldn't explode. “Why?” he asked again.

So she told him. She told him her father had been killed, by soldiers, when she was just a baby. She told him: “When I die, I can meet him and we can be together.” The cost of all this violence – physical, psychological, economic – is harsh and never so clear as it is in Daoud's story. What happens to the widows and orphans of war? Often, they want to die.

3. What is Hateful to You, Do Not Do to Your Neighbor

At Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Museum, I remember a wall decrying the inactivity of the Christian Church throughout most of the Nazi crisis. There were individual resisters to be sure, but by and large the church waited far too long to register opposition and engage in resistance. It's a painful moment for me, in a painful place.

I think of that now as I reflect on five weeks of travel in Israel and Palestine. I think of the sin of silence as I recall the faces of impoverished children – CHILDREN! – in the Dhieshah Refugee Camp. I think of the sin of silence as I recall Zoughbi Zoughbi's tears in describing the olive and apricot trees soon to be 'annexed' behind the wall. I think of the sin of silence as I recall Tzachi and Anat and their family in Ashkelon preparing every day for missiles from Gaza.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I believe the American church has a moral obligation to speak and act for peace – not just an abstract and peaceful easy feeling, but a just and practical peace in this very specific and holy place. What is hateful to us, we must no longer do to our Palestinian and Israeli neighbors. If we were tardy in speaking to the Holocaust in the 20th century, we must not make similar mistakes in this 21st century. Radical monotheism is neither settler monotheism nor suicide monotheism nor detached monotheism. It has something to do with living in awareness of the unity of all humankind within the embrace of divinity and grace. It has to do with prophetic commitment.

I'm sober in knowing that such prophetic commitment will not come easily and will not be received gratefully in all quarters. I'm also convinced that our approach must be collaborative, disciplined and intentional: it's time to build a coalition – religious, civic, moral – with the capacity to change U.S. policy, with the capacity to turn the Titanic around, with the capacity to insist on peace and human rights as cornerstones of American foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere. Battering one another with self-righteousness doesn't cut it; it's time to change the conversation, talk about human rights on all sides, and get clear on legitimate American interests around the world.

In so many ways, we're all on that treacherous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. And in so many ways, we choose the kind of world that road becomes. It's more than getting our politics right; it's a matter of faith. It's a matter of practicing our commitments to human rights, nonviolence, dialogue and bread for the world. It's a matter of working deliberately with some whose opinions and perspectives seem unenlightened or worse. It's a matter of praying for the commonwealth of God and living with every expectation that it's possible. That beaten traveler is bleeding in the street. Priests and scholars, activists and rabbis, laborers and dreamers are coming along. What will we do?

Hillel had it right: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”

Blessings, peace and courage, to all of you! You’re in my prayers during these last days of my Holy Land trip.

Dave Grishaw-Jones