

30 May 2008
East Jerusalem

Dear Friends,

Grace to you, all kinds of grace, and peace! It's Friday evening in East Jerusalem. Outside our hotel, a band is banging drums, singing in Arabic, improvising on call-and-response. BANG-boom, BANG-boom, BANG-boom. Petition, repetition, petition, repetition. I can't imagine where I'd be – or the world, for that matter – without music.

1. I Am Eve

On Monday I took a taxi out to West Jerusalem and walked through Yad Vashem, the new Israeli Holocaust Museum. It's a breathtaking setting, forested hills high above Jerusalem, and it's a heartbreaking museum, as you can imagine. An hour into my tour, I came upon this, written by a condemned Jew on the wall of a sealed railway car in the 40s:

“Here in this carload
I am Eve
With Abel my son
If you see my older son
Cain, son of man,
Tell him I...”

Strangely, sadly, almost defiantly, the condemned insists that war is a family affair, so too, genocide and racism and bigotry. “If you see my older son...” It's not one people marking and slaughtering another. It's not one race blaming and cleansing another. It's not one tribe making war on another. It's Eve's son, Cain, in humiliation and rage, sealing his mother and brother in a railcar and sending them off to ovens and Auschwitz. But Eve will not be silent. “If you see my older son...”

2. Combatants for Peace

That one verse, written hastily on a deadly wall, weeps across the intervening decades, demands my attention, my response. Later that afternoon I sat for a long while in the courtyard of my hotel, thinking, writing, praying. Tell Cain what? In our own generation, Eve weeps again and again. From boxcars in Poland. From killing fields in Cambodia. From villages in Rwanda and Darfur and Guatemala and Iraq. From forgotten urban neighborhoods in LA and the Bronx. And from Palestine, always from Palestine. Tell Cain what?



Yesterday I met a remarkable man – a kindred spirit, perhaps, of the prophet who wrote that one verse in the 40s. As a Palestinian combatant, Bassam Aramim spent 7 years in an Israeli prison during the first intifada. Sixteen years later, he’s a founding member of a group called Combatants for Peace, Palestinian and Israeli fighters who’ve given up the

fight and joined energies to seek peace together.

Bassam says that it was difficult, at first, to meet the same men who’d harassed him and others in prison and at checkpoints. One Israeli had been an officer at an especially notorious checkpoint. He was well-dressed, kind, polite. “I told him,” Bassam says now, “that he looked nice; but I told him that I knew he was, in reality, a criminal, even a terrorist.” Two combatants meeting, shaking hands, searching for a future together. And the ex-officer said, “Yes, that’s why I’m here.” If there’s such a thing as a new heaven and a new earth, it begins in moments like this.

“He had made peace with himself,” Bassam says, “so he could say to me that he’d been wrong. And we could begin something new.” It’s a remarkable moment with a remarkable man. And I realize, all over again, just how much courage and strength peace requires. An Israeli and a Palestinian, enemies devoted to one another’s destruction, risking friendship and reconciliation! Bassam looks around the room at our U.S. delegation, at the impact of his

testimony. “Our stories,” he says, “are our new weapons in this fight against despair.”

3. Justice Has a Future

Two years ago, Bassam’s 10-year-old daughter was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers (“kids,” he says). Around the father’s eyes, I see edges of anger, grief and determination. I can’t help thinking about Fiona, my 10-year-old daughter, at home, in school, memorizing lines for a class play. Bassam adds quickly that 971 Palestinian children have died in occupation-related violence since the year 2000.

He tells us that his daughter (Abir) had participated in Israeli summer camps, in Tel Aviv, that she’d just begun to use some Hebrew words in conversation. “She was no fighter,” he says. She was a child learning to live in a complex land.

He doesn’t linger over the details – but reminds us that Abir was “killed by American bullets, shot from American M-16s, out of American jeeps.” He’s sitting just across the table, 19 Americans listening, aching, shifting in our seats. It’s another extraordinary moment, and I think again about Fiona. What would I do? How on earth does a father continue? Then Bassam says this: “To stop the cycle of violence, we must stop the pattern of revenge.” More than words: a man’s commitment to his daughter.

He has announced, he says, that he’s seeks no revenge for Abir’s murder. That’s not what he’s about. He wants to see justice done. He wants to know that Abir’s death means something. Bassam tells us that Israeli officials have said they’re sorry for what’s happened, for the grief his family’s been through. But this is a private apology, he says. It’s harder – and far more important – for there to be a political response, a meaningful confession. Something else is at stake. “We need to prove,” he says, “that there’s a difference between revenge and justice.” Revenge is madness. Justice has a future.

He's reached out, Bassam has, to the soldiers responsible – none of whom have been brought to justice as yet. There has been no response. "I can't think about forgiving," he says, "until I see the man who's done this, until I talk with him. Then, perhaps, I will know him and he will know me, and we will work together as combatants for peace." His openness to this last possibility seems outlandish, crazy and prophetic. Combatants for peace.

His is extraordinary focus: Israel and Palestinian, Jew and Arab must create a new and nonviolent intifada – together. There must be a nonviolent campaign against a common enemy: occupation, an occupation that provokes violence, instability, despair on all sides. "This conflict," he says, "cannot be solved militarily. That's been tried." Again, almost prophetically, Bassam insists that Israeli Jews cannot talk about freedom and democracy on High Holy Days without joining Palestinians in a fraternal struggle for freedom and democracy now. "What we all want" he says, "is simple and uncomplicated: our children growing wise and healthy in safe, nurturing schools."

4. Yad Vashem



There's a picture in the Holocaust History Museum, taken in 1937 somewhere in Poland. It's a wedding celebration, an extended family of friends gathered to bless a newly married couple. Long arms are thrown around angled shoulders, smiles reveal deep joy and thanksgiving, generations delight in one another's

eccentricities. Just beneath the picture is this note: Fifty-four of the sixty-four were murdered in concentration camps. Within a few years.

Yad Vashem takes its name from a verse in book of the prophet Isaiah: "I shall give them in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name (*yad*

vashem) that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:5). How is a people to remember, to memorialize, to honor the millions who died in the European Holocaust of the 20th century? It’s a huge question and a stunningly contemporary one.

In the “Hall of Names,” Pages of Testimony contain names, biographical details, sometimes photographs of over 3 million Jewish victims. In saving these pages, the Museum preserves personal identities the Nazis tried methodically to destroy. The Hall’s ceiling is an inverted cone, displaying hundreds of photographs and historical fragments. These are reflected in water at the base of an opposing cone – carved into mountainous bedrock – as a reminder that 3 million stories are yet to be told, yet to be restored to the annals of history.

I spent 3 hours walking through the huge museum, and I was so exhausted by the end that I had to find a bench and sit silently for a long while. A sculpture nearby was a relentless reminder of indescribable suffering. After scribbling some notes in my journal, I wandered unknowingly into the Children’s Memorial. In the darkness, I stumbled with dozens of others, surrounded by



hundreds, thousands of candles. How does one respond to such grief, to such history, to our human capacity for indecency and destruction?

I guess I return to those unsettling, yet prophetic words on the wall of a sealed railway car:

“Here in this carload
I am Eve
With Abel my son
If you see my older son,

Cain, son of man,
Tell him I..."

Bassam Aramim says that our stories are the new weapons, new weapons in a nonviolent intifada. We rehearse those stories as if our lives depend on them: stories of mothers crying out for children in places like Auschwitz and Dachau; stories of the Christian church's silence during centuries of anti-semitism and the terrible unfolding of the Jewish genocide; stories of the "nakba" in the Holy Land, the catastrophe that sent millions of Palestinians into exile; and, yes, stories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Bassam Aramim and Rabbi Arik Asherman, stories of Zoughbi Zoughbi and Eliyahu McLean and Ghassan Manasra, resisting occupation and living for a different world. Stories break our hearts into a thousand pieces and shatter our complacency. Prophets begin to get through. Visions begin to make sense. And a new world is possible, even promised.

5. Thy Will Be Done

At the base of the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane is home to dozens of ancient, twisted olive trees. Some say the trees are thousands of years old, witnesses to Jesus' agony, loneliness, prayer in the garden just before his arrest. I walk the path circling the old trees, and I try to remember his words. I remember them, but it's harder to say them, harder to feel them, harder to make them mine: "Abba, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Those who say prayer is meaningless, those who say prayer is a luxury, those who diminish it – are not praying Jesus' Gethsemane prayer. "Not what I want, but what you want." I recall the look around Bassam Aramim's eyes; and I ask: What does God ask of me? What does God want from the American church? I remember the history of the Holocaust and the church's complicity in the madness and I ask: What does God ask of us now? What does God want from the American church in this 21st century? I think of my children now, and their friends; and I say, with as much courage as possible: Not what I want, Jesus, not what I want; but what you want. Prayer is a kind of radical willingness to hear God out. And take God seriously.



Olive trees are revered in this part of the Middle East. Every village is convinced that its olives are the best olives, its olive oil better than any other. I dip a warm piece of pita into hummus tonight, hummus and olive oil together, and I give thanks for the land. Whatever else we do to one another, whatever else we do to the earth, the land keeps singing. Those crooked trees keep growing in Gethsemane, seeking light, making shade for dreamers. On contested hills in the West Bank, Palestinians line up in protest to protect their trees, to protect their villages and families. The land keeps calling. The land keeps singing.

I pray tonight, in thanksgiving, for all those who love the land and receive it as a gift and blessing from God. Bassam and Ghassan and Yossi and Rabbi Asherman. Everyone of them knows that loving the land has everything to do with sharing the land. And I pray for their courage and imagination in doing just that. May their dreams prosper and their work bear fruit!

And yours, as well. You're all blessings to me, for all the support and wisdom you continue to share. May your dreams prosper and your work bear fruit!

Shalom, salaam,

Dave Grishaw-Jones