

Underneath Peace

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About eight months ago, I had the privilege of attending the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio. I was excited about this one. As a Religious Studies major, I knew how seemingly intractable the issue of Israel/Palestine was. And the resolution was up for debate: whether the UUA should divest from companies that profit from "the human rights abuses suffered by the Palestinian people."

Now, a month after this Assembly, I'd be travelling to Israel with a peace delegation, to get a better understanding of the conflict. So I was very eager to see how a progressive, spiritually diverse community talked about such a hot-button issue. The resolution argued that state of Israel had been illegally occupying and colonizing Palestinian land for almost fifty years. They'd been using certain companies to systematically oppress the native population, and it was time for us to publicly divest. As a peace-loving, liberal community, we'd have no problem discussing this. Right?

The controversy started immediately. At the opening ceremony, a prominent rabbi took the stage to denounce the resolution, urging all us delegates to vote "No." In what was supposed to be a welcoming speech to the Assembly, he claimed that the divestment movement was a slap in the face to American Jews. Oh, the tension in the room was palpable.

Later that week, a panel of religiously diverse UUs discussed their personal backgrounds, and we couldn't just let them speak – they had to fend off applauding and even booing. And to top it all off, at the end of the week, the UUA announced that they had quietly removed their investments anyway. So, one side said they hadn't gone far enough – that they hadn't publicly *divested* to make a political statement. And the other side felt cheated, as if they hadn't gotten a vote, as if the unilateral move was anti-Semitic, anti-Israel, and/or anti-democratic.

So, the resolution was altered. Instead of voting to divest, we would now be voting on whether or not to *commend the UUA for removing its investments*. Pretty weak in comparison, right?

Debate began, finally, and was immediately halted by a motion to postpone the vote indefinitely. That failed, but then the next motion argued that the resolution was not a "business resolution" as defined by the UUA, so it should not be voted on. Most of the remaining two hours was spend debating amendments. "Explicitly recognize the state of Israel as legitimate!"

“Take out the word ‘Palestinians’!” The rhetoric was sour and angry. Accusations of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, and willful ignorance were hurled. And I witnessed my fellow delegates – hundreds of them – yelling at each other, at the speakers, at the moderator. Almost nobody got a chance to debate the actual resolution before it was time to vote. So much time had been spent bickering over details, almost no discussion had taken place! It got so bad, the moderator had to call a minister up to the stage to deliver a soothing meditation before the vote.

The final score? 55% voted *for* “divesting,” 45 *against*. But to be adopted, it needed two-thirds of the vote. Despite a majority in favor, the resolution failed.

Neither side was very happy about that outcome.

And my illusions about the peace-loving, progressive community getting together for insightful dialogue were shattered. *This wasn't supposed to happen to us!*

So it was with confusion and frustration in my heart that, a month later, I flew to Israel. My adviser had told me about an opportunity to travel with a group called Interfaith Peace-Builders, to talk to organizations and understand the situation on the ground. There were a lot of reasons I wanted to go, but I think I expected that, through dialogue and debate, some solution would present itself: one-state, two-state, whatever, that there would be some golden political fix, some quick policy change that I could advocate for back home. I ended up coming back even *less* sure that the problem even *had* a solution.

I knew a few things going in. (They gave us a reading packet.) I knew that Israel was created in 1948, occupied the Palestinian territories in '67, and that the area had been undergoing a series of confused peace deals since then. I knew that both sides were prone to using violence to get their way, and that there was no clear consensus on the best way to stop it. But mostly, what I learned from my reading was what I'd already experienced at General Assembly. An issue that is rooted deep in religion, culture, class, politics, history, and identity will inevitably become divisive.

There was a kind of recurring theme for the next two weeks. Misrepresentation. Lack of understanding or empathy. And point of view – both sides, I discovered, had constructed a reality of the situation that didn't consider the other side's reality. Arguments about Israel and Palestine tend to be fought using the terms “Jewish” and “Muslim,” or “Jews” and “Arabs.” Taking a side on the matter means, in the eyes of some, adopting anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or racism. If you bring up the legitimate need of the Jewish community for a secure homeland in the wake of atrocities, you might be accused of supporting genocide and oppression. If you express sympathy for Palestinians undergoing occupation and apartheid, says the other side, you must be okay with the Holocaust, or deny it altogether. There are a lot of lenses through which to view conflict. In the Holy Land, almost all of them apply in some form or another. But very quickly on, I saw how

this knee-jerk, jump-to-conclusions style of labeling opinions would only make the argument worse.

Before we left from Washington, the organizers ran us through what to do if we were denied entry to the state of Israel. We flew on five different flights, and each one had one person detained at the airport, interrogated, and sent back home. Five people were denied entry, and told that they were threats to national security. Each of them was Muslim except for Owen, a teacher from New York, who had a long black beard. The guard who questioned him was not subtle about his reservations. “Are you a Muslim who changed your name to be American? Or did you recently turn Muslim and you haven’t changed your name yet?” They were jailed for several hours before being sent back home. Owen said later, “I’ve never been to a place where profiling seems so celebrated.” I couldn’t help thinking to myself “whoa – I’m not in Kansas anymore.”

The rest of us made it to our hotel in East Jerusalem. The drive was pretty nice – actually, very reminiscent of New Mexico. Dry hills teeming with bits of brush. Small desert communities peppering the road every so often. A 26-foot-high concrete wall. We don’t have that yet, but – you get the idea. Over the next two weeks, we’d be staying mostly in the West Bank, the occupied Palestinian territory that’s sandwiched between Israel and Jordan.

We met with a lot of groups in the next few days. The first week was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. We travelled to Bethlehem first, to meet with some peacemakers. I prayed in the Church of the Nativity. I learned that two-thirds of Palestinians are considered forcibly displaced under International Law. I observed powerful art and poetry painted on the border wall. I discussed with a Christian organizer how anti-Semitism slowly seeps into public discourse – how a people under oppression can conflate politics with religion, and falsely condemn Judaism for the actions of the Israeli government. In Jerusalem, I went to the Wailing wall and to Golgotha, praying, learning, and observing. I also visited a shop in the Old City selling trinkets with FREE PALESTINE and END THE OCCUPATION stamped on them, standing poignantly under a proudly waving Israeli flag.

At first, I tried to split my experience into two: one as a pilgrim to the Holy Land, paying tribute to the matriarchs and patriarchs of western religion; and the other as a witness to the conflict, noting violence and oppression in the modern day. But as time went on, the more I listened and read and observed, the more the holy sites seemed like a distraction from reality. The more the conflict took the spotlight. The more disillusioned with the peace process I became. The less I felt I knew about right and wrong. I fell victim to the same jaded knee-jerk anger that I saw at the General Assembly.

I listened to an Israeli woman tell me the story of the rage she experienced at a mosque in Be’er Sheba, where she had been condemned for her race and her religion. So she moved to a

settlement, taking advantage of the government benefits, and lived in fear of leaving it – an oasis in a desert of hatred, she told me. That was her reality.

But I saw a different reality in a popular shisha lounge in the refugee camp Dheisheh, when I meet two young men named Omar and Saeed. Saeed had just returned from Italy. About a year prior, his younger brother had been shot in the knee by an Israeli soldier. The medical treatment in Israel did more harm than good, so through a series of covert donations, secret messages, and miracles, they managed to fly him to Europe, where he spent five months recovering. “I have no hatred toward anybody,” Saeed told me. “I only want to return to the home of my family. Jewish neighbors? Fine by me. I want out of this camp.” He, too, felt trapped in his community.

I talked to an Israeli cab driver in Jerusalem who warned me about the hotel I was staying in. “Everybody I talk to who stays in your hotel is disappointed! The food, the beds, the service. It does not represent Israel or Jerusalem!” He seemed to think that the west side of Jerusalem – the Israeli side – had their act together better. “That’s where most tourists go.” He very much wanted me to get a picture of *his* Israel, *his* reality – he truly cared that I left with a good impression.

Later on, we went to Nabi Saleh, a small town in the West Bank widely known for its activism. The Tamimi family runs the place, and hosted our overnight stay. The village stands across the valley from an Israeli settlement. Nawal Tamimi took us on a hike to the hill overlooking the settlements, and pointed to a long white building with a red roof. “See that?” She said. “That’s a swimming pool. There are times we go without running water for four, five days at once, and we can hear the kids splashing around in that swimming pool.” Different realities.

Near the end of my time in Palestine, I posted a few of these stories on Facebook. I got a few negative, argumentative responses in my inbox. One person in particular, a friend of a friend who lives in Israel, made a lot of assumptions from the stories I told. She opened her message like this: “when you have a narrative already in place, you will always find and see things that continue to support that narrative.” She followed that with this question: “Since the only place in your narrative for Israel is as an evil, aggressive occupier ... what do you suggest happens to the Jews who live here? Should they be murdered, exiled, destroyed?”

Wow. Uh... no.

But it made me think about the ways we view people who disagree with us. I didn’t question Israel’s right to exist, or mention its Jewish citizens at all. Those weren’t the issue. My opinions were inferred, dismantled and decimated. I was vilified for demanding action that I would never agree with.

So, I responded. I opposed settlements, occupation and oppression, but of course I didn’t believe anybody should be destroyed, or exiled, or murdered. Not Jews, not Palestinians. I didn’t

think telling these stories implied that I did, but I was happy to dispel that notion once and for all.

My new friend seemed surprised, and we launched into a better discussion, ironing out our specific views on political issues. Once we agreed not to jump to conclusions, and to listen respectfully, we could start talking about the facts. It was ultimately an enriching conversation. But it started off angrily, defensively. It started from misunderstanding. And if she hadn't said anything, both of us would have been none the wiser.

Underneath the peace that everybody wants, this issue is rooted deep. It's tied to religion, race, and identity. I learned that at General Assembly and I'm still learning it today. And as with any such issue, the dialogue, the way we approach talking about it, is so important, and so difficult to get right. How do we talk about oppression? How do we acknowledge societal issues that are so inciting? How can we avoid letting personal ties interfere with common ground? How do we affirm the worth and dignity of everyone? Before we left, I saw myself lashing out, getting frustrated, getting confused, not seeing that that big picture isn't about a simple solution. I've seen that attitude over and over since I've gotten back. But it turns out that simple solutions are in short supply. It's dialogue and debate that brings us something else – that humanizes us – and maybe all we can do is practice talking across the realities. Our contribution to the solution is our ability to see and talk about the world in all its complexities.