

Ana Falastini Yehudi: I Am a Palestinian Jew

A response given by Dr. Mark Braverman at the Launching of the Palestine Kairos Document in Bethlehem

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Masa al kheir – good afternoon.

I want to express my gratitude to the World Council of Churches for inviting me to participate in this historic and critically important gathering, to Reverend Mitri Raheb and the Bethlehem International Center for your hospitality, to the distinguished guests and participants assembled here today, and most of all to you, my brothers and sisters in the Holy Land, for welcoming me into your midst.

Ana falastini yehudi.

I am a Palestinian Jew. My grandfather was born in the Old City of Jerusalem in the year 1900. My prayer is that someday, the phrase “Palestinian Jew” will not sound strange to the ear. It does not sound strange to me. In the short time allotted to me I want to talk about the journey that has brought me here, the issue of interfaith dialogue, and my conviction that the path to peace in historic Palestine lies in the actions of the global church.

As a Jew born in America in 1948, I was raised in an amalgam of rabbinic Judaism and political Zionism. I was taught that a miracle had blessed my generation and redeemed my people from the suffering of millennia. Over the years, living for a time in Israel and visiting frequently, I became increasingly concerned about Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and about its illegal settlement activity. Still, I held to the

Zionist narrative: Israel’s militarism and expansionism were the price of security. Then I went to the West Bank. I saw the separation wall and knew it was not for defense. I saw the damage inflicted by the checkpoints on Palestinian life and on the souls and psyches of my Jewish cousins in uniform. I saw the Jewish-only settlements and the restricted roads. I witnessed the vicious acts of ideological Jewish settlers. I learned that the events of 1948, what I had been taught to call the War of Liberation, was for Palestinians the Nakba. As my defenses against the recognition of Israel’s crimes crumbled, my fear for my own people grew. It grew in proportion to my horror, anger and sadness over the injustice that was being perpetrated in my name.

When I returned home and began to speak about justice for Palestine as the



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only path to peace, Christians, across denominations, received my message warmly and gratefully. But I also found that many of these same Christians felt constrained from speaking out, for two reasons: 1) their sense that the Jewish people were owed a state because of their history of suffering and 2) their feeling of responsibility for having caused that suffering. In fact, I discovered that for Christians, a new theology had grown up after WW II in an effort to reconcile with the Jews and to atone for the evil of anti-Semitism. This revisionist theology exalted the Jews as God’s chosen and lauded our quest for safety and self determination. In this view, the Jews were no longer condemned to wander the earth. In fact, we had been reinstated as God’s elect — the original covenant between God and Abraham was in force. Christianity’s correction of its historic anti-Judaism is in itself laudable – but there is a problem with this new theology: it incorporates a real estate deal. Christians were now being asked to support the superior right of the Jewish people to the territory of historic Palestine.

Examples of this tendency abound among contemporary Christian theologians. James Carroll writes in *Constantine’s Sword*: “The God of Jesus Christ, and therefore of the Church, is the God of Israel. The Jews remain the chosen people of God. And with this comes the Land.” In a

May 2009 article, John Pawlikowski, a progressive Catholic theologian, wrote that the Vatican's 1993 recognition of the State of Israel was pivotal in correcting Christianity's historic anti-Judaism. With that act, he wrote, "the coffin on displacement/perpetual wandering theology had been finally sealed." I find this an astonishing argument: recognizing the Jewish state corrects Christian theology! Just as astonishing, Pawlikowski goes on to repudiate a core feature of Christianity: its spiritualization of the land by lifting it out of the original tribal context of the Abrahamic covenant. In the original Christian revisioning – and this was a revolutionary and critically important development — Jerusalem itself became a symbol of a new world order in which God's love was available to all of humankind. But Pawlikowski was now maintaining that this spiritualization of the land was a betrayal of God's covenant with the Jews – that it had deprived us of our birthright! It was now, therefore, incumbent upon Christians to honor the claim of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, and indeed to Jerusalem itself.

We have to be very concerned about this — generations of mainstream pastors and theologians in the West have been educated in versions of this revised theology. Vigilance against anti-Semitism has trumped prophetic opposition to injustice. The Christian impulse for reconciliation has morphed into theological support for an anachronistic, ethnic-nationalist ideology that has hijacked Judaism, continues to fuel global conflict, and has produced one of the most egregious, systematic and longstanding violations

of human rights in the world today.

But this is where we are today, and here is why the Kairos statement is so important. Christians in the West today are in a bind. They are caught between the desire to preserve over 60 years of interfaith reconciliation and their mounting awareness that all is not right with the Jewish national homeland project. To be in such a bind is not comfortable – but the times call for hard choices. Because of the well-intentioned and confessionally-based desire to atone for Christian anti-Judaism, Christians, individually and institutionally, have been muzzled from principled criticism of Israel's human rights violations. This is a disaster for Christianity and for world peace. Never before has it been so urgent for Christians to hold fast to their faith in pursuing the clear social justice imperative of justice for the Palestinian people. The Kairos statement shines the brightest when it talks about the universal mission of the land. Christianity's spiritualization and universalization of the land, so clearly articulated in the document, is the clearest example of how the new faith came to fulfill the prophetic message of the Bible.

This is the theology that must be lifted up today. And this should not be seen as Christian exceptionalism or triumphalism. Rather, the faithful Christian witness to the urgent need for justice for the Palestinian people represents a challenge to Judaism and to the Jewish people. Judaism is the faith from which Christianity sprang. Universal justice is where Judaism was always headed in its depiction of a God who brought the Jewish people out of slavery. This same God requires

us to do justice for all of creation — without preference or particularity. In the words of the Kairos document: "the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election of the people of God [is to] open up to include all of humanity" (emphasis added). It is urgent that my people embrace this fundamental principle. For it is clear to me that Israel has lost its way. We brought to the world the teaching of one God, a God who seizes us by the arm, binds us to his covenant, and demands justice – but now we are enacting the creed of a tribal God who commands conquest. We have yielded ourselves up to tribalism and exceptionalism in the most profound and destructive way. And the evidence is before us: the checkpoints of Bethlehem, Nablus and Jenin, the blackened olive trees of Bil'in, the empty marketplaces of Hebron, the devastation of Gaza, and the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan.

The Kairos document talks about the unity of the scriptures. Theology too should unite, not separate. I am grateful to Naim Ateek for lifting up for me the passage from Ephesians chapter 2 about humankind united in the household of God, with Jesus as the cornerstone of the Temple:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets...In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple of the Lord. Ep.2:19-21

We know that it was not a physical temple nor a city of stone and mortar that Paul was describing. But the new "interfaith" theology represents a U-turn: a turning back from the vision

of a single community of humankind united in pursuit of social justice. It affirms not a universal vocation for the land, but an idolatry of land possession. It reaffirms particularism and the election of the Jews – going so far as to say that God always intended, through his grace, to fulfill his goal for humankind through the election of the Jews. This can be argued theologically, but the question is what is the use that is being made of this theology today? And the answer is – stated bluntly — this theology is being promoted as a guilt offering, to help make Christians comfortable with the more than uncomfortable reality of the human rights abuses of the State of Israel. But I have found that Christians are not comfortable with the actions of the State of Israel. They know what is right and what they are called to do about the injustice they see before them.

The church is poised to fulfill its calling, as it did against Apartheid on a global basis and as it did in the U.S. against the institutionalized racism of Jim Crow segregation. Engaging in the struggle for justice in historic Palestine is the most important thing that the church, on a global basis, can do today. Gathered here today in support of this historic document, we call to mind the words of Reverend Martin Luther King, responding to his fellow clergymen who were urging him to delay his plans for nonviolent resistance:

“The judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.”



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What is needed to bring peace to this land is not negotiations between politicians but a broad, global social movement that will change the political wind. And it is in the church that this movement will be initiated, led, and grow in strength. You are here – wide, deep, strong, organized — with the scriptures pointing you directly to the divine imperative to do justice. And we Jews, who have suffered too long,

must turn away from our history of suffering and dedicate ourselves instead to a process of reformation in which we purge ourselves of the exceptionalism and triumphalism that has brought us to this perilous pass.

I know that for Christians in the U.S. today, taking this prophetic stance puts the interfaith reconciliation work of decades at risk. Professional, personal and family relationships are on the line. That is painful and that is hard. But as Walter Brueggemann reminds us, the prophetic requires us to deal with the full range of emotions, especially those we want to avoid — sadness and grief chief among them. Only by acknowledging what has been broken can we be open to the new.

I close with words from the final book of the Bible, words that stirringly call on us to commit ourselves to the work we have gathered here today to undertake, united in hope and in faith:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them...’ as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’

Rev. 21:1-3,5

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