

I wrote this a few weeks ago in response to the NEYM Statement on Conflict in Israel-Palestine. After thinking about it since, I have decided to share it with the Meeting on our new website. While I realize what I am saying here might be controversial, I share it with the intention of opening the possibility of a discussion if that is what we are led to do. The italicized sections are quotes from the NEYM Statement.

David

1. *The global community of Quakers, of which we are a part, includes Friends with deep roots and relationships in the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.*

According to the Anti-Defamation League, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is an antisemitic slogan commonly featured in anti-Israel campaigns and chanted at demonstrations since the events of October 7.

I thought at once of this slogan when I read the above sentence from the statement. Was this instantaneous association just a personal perspective or will others pick up on a similar discomfiting connection, whether obvious or obscure? This also seems a strange way to identify a location. Is it common for a country to be referred to, not by name, but by the boundaries that surround it? In my experience it is not, and I wonder what the reason was for this unusual identification here and now.

2. *As violence has expanded and intensified in recent days...*

The statement makes no direct mention of October 7, a day marked by the worst atrocity perpetrated against Jews since the end of the Holocaust. Instead, the focus is on Israel's response since October 7. While I am troubled by the level of violence being inflicted upon Gaza, leaving out the initial cause of the violence is also disturbing to me. Why is there not as unmistakable a reference to October 7th in the statement as there is to the days that followed?

3. *All human beings are created and unconditionally beloved by God.*

To expand on my previous sentence, I believe it is just as tragic for innocent Palestinians to be killed and wounded as it is for innocent Israelis. I knew what Secretary of State Blinken meant when he said that he sees his own children in the faces of both Israeli and Palestinian children. For the past month, the sight of my three grandchildren, either in person or on Facetime, has brought, not only the usual

joy I feel, but now also sorrow as I recall the news every day from Israel and Gaza of children dying and being wounded.

- 4. We are called to reflect and pray more deeply, resisting reactivity, aggression, self-justification, and othering of those we experience as enemies. We must recognize and resist the escalating pressures throughout our human family that attempt to justify atrocities against fellow human beings. We remember that we are each capable of evil, even in the name of good. And we are called to daily examine and reject the seeds of war in our own hearts and living, through God's help.*

In a different context, these would be words that we all need to hear and keep in the forefront of our thoughts. But does referring to how we should universally relate to others at a moment when one particular tragic situation is before us risk sending a message that does more harm than good? Imagine going to the home of a friend who is grieving over the devastating experience of having a family member brutally killed before his eyes. Would this be the time to speak to my friend about the need for all of us to remember that we are capable of evil, that all of us need to daily examine and reject the seeds of violence in our own hearts?

- 5. With humility and boldness, we take up and renew a commitment to turn from indulging our own hostile impulses, from the fostering of division within our local communities, and from the rush to violence and escalating cycles of retributive action in conflicts worldwide and turn toward the courageous work of peacebuilding.*

Again, these are words to hear, take in and try with sincerity and integrity to make real in our daily lives. In a way that might be considered slightly comparable, I can personally relate to what is being said here. I have been in counseling at various times to deal with fear and anxiety. With humility, and perhaps some degree of boldness, I have achieved a degree of peace of mind that wasn't always previously available to me when I was young. I continue to strive to live in peace with myself, as well as those in my world. I pray others I don't know personally are living in peace. This is generally all right and good, but why, in this statement about Israel and Palestine, are we shifting our focus away from the conflict there to center on our personal emotional, spiritual, psychological state of being?

- 6. We join with people throughout the world calling for an immediate ceasefire and for the provision of desperately needed humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza.*

According to the U.N., a humanitarian pause is a "temporary cessation of hostilities" so that humanitarian aid can be carried out. A pause usually lasts for a defined period — it could be for a few hours or a few days — and occurs in a specific area. A "cease-

fire,” by contrast, is intended as a long-term cessation of fighting with the aim to “allow parties to engage in dialogue, including the possibility of reaching a permanent political settlement.” Words matter, and they must be chosen with great care, especially in a time of crisis such as this. The Biden Administration has been pushing the Israeli government to take part in humanitarian pauses and, in my opinion, that is the best, if not the only, way to proceed with getting desperately needed help to the people of Gaza at this time. Is it truly realistic or reasonable to expect the Israelis to engage in dialogue with a terrorist organization whose uppermost goal is to wipe them off the face of the earth? In the Hamas Covenant, the preamble states that “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.” How can any nation be expected to sit down and engage in talks aimed at a political settlement with an organization determined above all else to annihilate it, especially when it has just acted upon this evil intention?

If I were sitting in the chair of the Prime Minister of Israel tonight, what would I do? Would I declare a ceasefire in order to talk about a political settlement with Hamas, which had just savagely killed over 1500 innocent human beings for no other reason than being Jewish? How inclined would I be to do so if my father or mother was the sole family member who had survived Auschwitz? What would I do if I were leading a nation for whom these questions are not a thought experiment? What would you do?