

“Moral Injury in Israel/Palestine and the Role of Hope in Nurturing Soul Repair”

Rev. Mary Wilson

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Introduction

This paper is essentially a reflection paper based on compelling stories of trauma, moral injury, and loss that I have observed in Israel/Palestine on a recent study trip with Chicago Theological Seminary. However, it is also more than a reflection paper because I want to pair this experience with what we have learned about moral injury from our U.S. war veterans in my class, Theological and Spiritual Approaches to Moral Injury and Soul Repair, at Brite Divinity School. At first, the pairing I hope to make will seem odd. It certainly has been challenging to articulate. But, I believe that we can learn something from the stories of the Israel/Palestine conflict when they are juxtaposed with the stories from U.S. war veterans. There is a common human thread, one of human reactions, human flaws, human longing, and hopefulness that bring them together despite their differences.

Certainly, one trip to Israel/Palestine does not make me an expert, of that I am very sure. However, it is still my hope that what we learn from one situation has the potential to give us insight into the other. One of these insights comes in the form of hope. I heard over and over from the human rights activists in Israel/Palestine that hope was the well from which they drew in order to have the energy for the justice and peace work they do. Hope is what enlivens the Palestinians I met to believe they have a future

that looks different than occupation. I believe hope also functions as a lens in the work of soul repair for veterans in which a future beyond their moral injuries can be imagined.

In addition, I hope to identify places where soul repair has occurred in both Israel/Palestine and with U.S. war veterans with the purpose of learning from the stories so that we have additional resources to address peace proposals, as well as individual needs. Jonathan Shay's definition of moral injury captures the shared experiences of both groups. Moral injury is "the betrayal of 'what's right' in a high stakes situation by someone who holds power."¹ This sense of betrayal is pervasive in the stories of veterans, but also in Israel/Palestine. For U.S. war veterans those in positions of power in which the betrayal may occur might be politicians sending them to combat, commanding officers deemed incompetent or unresponsive, other soldiers, naïve friends or family members, or the soldiers themselves. In Israel/Palestine it is similar, i.e. government authorities and military figures, but it may also include foreign governments who turn their backs on the traumatic conditions.

As I tried to take in the experience of being in Israel/Palestine, it was at times difficult to determine who or what is the legitimate authority. The possibilities also varied from region to region. For instance, in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority is an elected representative of the Palestinian people, and yet, I certainly came away with the impression that they were not always deemed as an effective authority.

Unquestionably, the IDF controls travel and other movement, but are they seen as "legitimate" by Palestinians? The instigator of the moral injury is not always easy to identify and yet, it is present and prevalent. Clearly, there is a sense among both Israelis

¹ Shay, Jonathan. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Vol 31(2), Apr 2014, 182-191. <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/pap/31/2/182/> (accessed February 1, 2016)

and Palestinians that the tension in the land persists because “what’s right” is an elusive reality.

It can be argued that the root of the moral injury stems from Western Europe’s anti-Semitism. Some of the earliest Jewish immigrants to the land of Israel in the late 19th century came because they felt betrayed and under attack for being Jewish. The anti-Semitism in Europe did not begin with Hitler. Theodor Herzl became the father of modern Zionism, after he experienced the negative repercussions of the growing nationalism in Europe. He considered himself to be a good German and as such, joined a German nationalist fraternity at his university in 1881. However, in two short years it became apparent that as a Jew, he was not accepted as the good German he considered himself to be.² Jews in other European countries experienced similar rejection if not outright hostility and violence.

The *aliyahs* (literally “the ascent”, or call to come home) that followed began as a call for the Jewish people to be free from Western anti-Semitism. The Holocaust or the *Shoah* (the calamity or destruction) was the culmination of the high stakes betrayal that had gone on for decades.

On the Palestinian side, they saw the Ottoman Empire collapse, replaced with the British Mandate. In the early 1900’s, they were promised a state, a Palestinian state similar to the states created in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.³ However, after WWII, the British energy for managing the swelling Zionists population dissipated as they navigated the fears of the native Palestinians, which led to their chaotic withdrawal. In essence,

² Alan Dowty, *Israel/Palestine*, 3rd edition. (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2012), 31.

³ Dowty, 60-64.

they threw up their hands and said to the Zionists and Palestinians, “You figure it out. We’re out of here.” War erupted. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced either by force or by fear, believing they would return home in a week’s time. They are still waiting. The high stakes betrayal has not been resolved and the moral injury remains.

Clearly, moral injury among U.S. veterans is different than the societal moral injuries experienced by the people of Palestine and Israel. Consequently, I do not want to overstate any comparisons. There are some obvious differences in the experiences of U.S. veterans and the people who live in the land of Israel/Palestine. First, our soldiers are sent off to war to fight in foreign countries. Despite the terrorists attacks such as 9-11 or the San Bernardino shootings, the conflict is not at our doorstep in the same way it is experienced in East Jerusalem or the West Bank or even the settlements on the West Bank. (Mass shootings are another story given that there have already been forty-four in the U.S. since the beginning of the year.) We, people in the U.S., have not experienced missile launches from our neighbors.

Secondly, a small minority of the U.S. population served in the armed forces, less than 1% in the most recent wars.⁴ In Israel, the expectations are very different. Although there are various reasons for exemptions and deferrals, every eighteen-year old Israeli citizen (with the exception of Israeli Arabs) is drafted by the Israeli Defense Forces.⁵ The disadvantage for U.S. veterans is that there are few people in our country who have a

⁴ Sherman, Nancy. *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). 29

⁵ https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/IDF.html (accessed March 1, 2016)

sense of how or why veterans have experienced moral injury. I would say the advantage and disadvantage of the common experience for those in Israel is that people may presume to know someone else's experience because they have had their own. So, although there may be more empathy readily available, there may still be a lack of compassion when individual experiences are shared because not all moral injuries are the same.

The ever-present nature of moral injury

Every time a Palestinian home is demolished or “sealed” by the Israeli Defense Forces, other families who know this heartbreak relive it.⁶ Every family who has an outstanding demolition order lives in tension every day wondering if today is the day their home will be destroyed. Every neighbor who sees another home demolished wonders if or when it will happen to them. There is no relief from the stress, no relief from the worry, and no relief from the trauma.

At the same time, every time a Jewish settler is stabbed, every other Jewish settler wonders if they are safe. Israeli Jews fear that an increased frequency of random acts of violence place them on the threshold of another intifada. Are we on the verge of the third intifada now? Has it begun with the violence in the last four months on the West Bank? Will the random stabbings turn into random bombs and then grow into missiles launched from the Gaza Strip by Hamas or from southern Lebanon from Hezbollah? The tension is very high right now and the stories of loss never end. The desire for security is understandable even if it is elusive. As Yossi Klein Halevi expressed in his book, *At the*

⁶ When a home is “sealed” by the Israeli Defense Forces, concrete 3-4 feet deep is poured into the home making it inaccessible and worthless.

Entrance to the Garden of Eden, “I hate occupation, but I didn’t trust the Arab world to let us live in peace.”⁷ Again, there appears to be no relief from the stress, no relief from the worry, and no relief from the trauma.

During the study trip I attended with Chicago Theological Seminary we met with people from every spectrum of life in Israel and the occupied West Bank. From the Palestinians whether they were Christians or Muslim or secular, the entreat was “come and see, go and tell.” They hope their oppressive conditions will change if enough outside influence is exerted on the current Israeli government. Although we did hear one exception to the plea, by and large the message we heard was that the Palestinians do not believe they have the ability to bring a peaceful resolution to their situation. And yet, it is unclear what pressure could be exerted that would persuade Israel to barter with their “security.” Is it possible for Israel to recognize that security will not come from building walls? After all, Hamas has been able to dig tunnels underneath it. Is it possible that Israel will recognize that peace will not come from demolishing Palestinian homes? After all, when a people have no hope and nothing to live for, then they have every motivation to die for something, anything that appears meaningful, anything that shows they are fighting back and not giving in to occupation.

Where will the impetus for peace come from within Israel? Where or when will the souls of the people, all the people, be repaired? Is it even possible? Among the human rights activists we encountered, despair is high, but hope continues.

⁷ Halevi, Yossi Klein, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew’s Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2001), 286.

Outside Pressure

The United States has some power as an ally of Israel, but it is also beholden to Israel for a friendly place to store weapons, if needed, in the Middle East.⁸ The Palestinians have very little to offer the U.S. in return for their support. Of course, on humanitarian grounds, I would argue the U.S. should be motivated to pressure Israel into isolating extremists and enforcing a peaceful agreement of sharing and co-existence on the land so coveted by two peoples. With power, rest responsibility. Both the U.S. and Israel have power and therefore, in my opinion, a greater responsibility to initiate and implement peace, cooperation, and opportunities.

And yet, this is more complicated than it sounds. Speaking at the Institute for National Security Studies International Conference in January 2016, Dan Shapiro, U.S. ambassador to Israel, spoke harshly against attacks on Jewish settlers while at the same time pointing out that there had been broken promises to the U.S. that settlements in the West Bank would not be encouraged or legitimized by the Israeli government.⁹ His statements were regarded as highly controversial. Since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, the settlements have exploded in growth. Their placement in various West Bank areas with the accompanying “security” wall makes any peace process more

⁸ Yaakov Katz, “US may give Israel Iraq Ammo”, February 11, 2010. <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/US-may-give-Israel-Iraq-ammo> (accessed February 28, 2016)

⁹ Daniel Shapiro. Embassy of the United States. January 18, 2016 – “Ambassador Daniel B. Shapiro’s Remarks at the Institute for National Security Studies 9th International Conference”. <http://israel.usembassy.gov/amb01182016.html> (accessed February 28, 2016)

complicated, if not impossible. And quite frankly, this is no accident by those who support their proliferation.

The United Nations has labeled these settlements as illegal via the United Nations Security Council Resolution 446, but it is easily ignored and dismissed by proponents of the settlements. Despite this dismissiveness of UN policies, the United Nations has a prominent role to play in the ongoing conflict. For example, they have been administering the Palestinian refugee camps that have been in existence since the 1948 war (either the War of Independence or the Disaster depending on one's perspective). Consequently, the United Nations is possibly the most informed entity about the plight of the Palestinian people and the difficulties they face.

But, again, critiques of the Israeli government are met with great controversy. The U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, has recently observed, "Palestinian frustration and grievances are growing under the weight of nearly a half-century of occupation." He continued by pointing out that the uninhibited growth of the Israeli West Bank settlements occurring at the same time as homes of Palestinians are being demolished does not lend itself to a comprehensive peace plan.¹⁰ He suggested that those hearing his words in a negative light should not shoot the messenger, but instead realize that these are the realities of occupation. Of course Prime Minister Netanyahu accused him of giving "tailwind to terror."¹¹

¹⁰ Ban Ki-Moon. "Don't Shoot the Messenger, Israel". New York Times, January 31, 2016.<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/opinion/dont-shoot-the-messenger-israel.html> (accessed February 28, 2016)

¹¹Peter Beaumont. "Ban Ki-Moon calls Israeli settlement expansion an 'affront' to the world". The Guardian, January 16, 2016.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/26/ban-ki-moon-calls-israeli-settlement-expansion-affront-to-world> (accessed February 28, 2016)

From my vantage point of an outside observer, it appears that the current Israeli government has no incentive to seek a comprehensive peace plan. They are capable of squelching random attacks and have the power to allow the settlements to continue to carve up Palestinian territory. Furthermore, they use the attacks as a basis for justifying harsher and harsher consequences for the Palestinians. And yet, I cannot see how the course of action can sustain itself indefinitely. Occupations are always resisted. As one of our Palestinian guides expressed the sentiment, “We were here before the state of Israel, before the British, and before the Ottomans. We will be here when this occupation ends as well.”

Here is the climate in which moral injury resides on a daily basis.

Palestinian options and choices

Outside pressure from the United States or the United Nations may alter the situation, but effective Palestinian leadership is crucial. In the past, the Palestinian people have been plagued by fickle allies, lack of unity among their leaders, and inept leadership. This in and of itself plays a part in the moral injury suffered by the Palestinian people. For instance, after one of the more recent stabbings in which a 19 year-old female Israeli border police officer was stabbed and died in East Jerusalem, three Palestinian young men were shot and killed, presumably because they were the attackers. Hamas applauded the attack and lauded the martyrdom of the dead Palestinians.¹² I fail to see how this is a helpful approach. I would argue that since Hamas is the official

¹²Daniel Eisenbud and Khaled Abu Toameh, Ben Hartman. Jerusalem Post, February 3, 2016. <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Suspected-terror-stabbing-at-Damascus-Gate-in-Jeruselems-Old-City-443706> (accessed February 28, 2016)

Palestinian government in the Gaza Strip, their praise for these random attacks, especially ones that result in so much death, inflicts moral injury on the Palestinian people. Of course Israel is going to respond to these attacks, even if it is a hyper-response. And what are the Palestinian people supposed to do? Keep attacking until they are decimated? Violent opposition to the Israeli occupation seems like a failed strategy and one that will continue to fail. Simply put, Israel has more firepower than Hamas, and with U.S. support will continue to have more firepower.

I believe there are initiatives the Palestinians can take, but not all will be welcome ones. However unsettling and dissatisfying it may be, I believe the Palestinians will eventually need to acknowledge that there is no going back. It is beyond unfair that families lost their homes during the 1948 war, whether they were forced out, evacuated, or subjected to harsh violence, but one of the misfortunes of war is that it changes the landscape. For many, if not all of these families, there is no going back to these homes. I take no satisfaction in making this statement, but the realities of war, the passing time, and the movement of people during that time would seem to make this dream impossible.

Again, it does not make me happy to reach this conclusion, so the amount of grief it would take to reach this conclusion as a Palestinian is beyond my experience or comprehension. Having said that, I am willing to concede that there are other events in history that would suggest there is reason to hope otherwise. Seemingly incongruous examples such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and marriage equality in the U.S., which I did not expect to see in my lifetime, serve as reminders that we cannot predict the future.

The reality of the issue became real during a Shabbat meal at the home of an orthodox family I visited, along with other members of our CTS travel group. The father

of the family was a Jewish convert from Philadelphia. His wife was from Israel. We were having an interesting conversation, good dialogue, and mutual curiosity about one another. At one point in the conversation, the father said, “Truth be told, we’re living in a Palestinian house right now. It was vacated.”

My internal immediate reactions were all over the place. I was stunned, surprised, and speechless. I did not know what to say or do, but I immediately thought, “We shouldn’t be here.” It wasn’t long before our group headed back to our hotel and as we walked, we tried to process that particular piece of information. I don’t know that we did, but I keep asking myself, “How and why should an American from Philadelphia, who is a convert to Judaism no less, wind up in the home of a displaced Palestinian family? And, feel justified living there!”

The truth is, there is no justice to that arrangement. And yet, it is clear to me that the Palestinian family will not be moving back to that home anytime soon and possibly, never. How does that revulsion turn into peace? With a lot of grief is my only answer.

It is also my hope that this grief is met with empathy and compassion. As one Holocaust survivor recounted in the “Miriam’s Kitchen”, there was no going back to Poland, especially going back to her home. She tried, only to find a former neighbor and friend living in it, who greeted Miriam’s knock at the door with, “I thought they got all of you.”¹³ She then shut the door in her face. Going home was not an option.

Where is home? I think this is a question both the Jewish and Palestinian people are trying to grasp. And with it, the moral injury keeps on coming. In part, the moral

¹³ Elizabeth Ehrlich. *Miriam’s Kitchen: A Memoir*. (New York: Viking, 1976), 9.

injury may keep coming because it is unclear where the legitimate authority resides to make things right.

Nevertheless, there is one word that stood out to me as we listened to the people, Palestinian, Jewish, and activists from all quarters. The word was “hope”. Our Palestinian guide in Bethlehem gave the most captivating and intriguing response to a question posed to him. He was asked, “What do you do for mental health care?” He replied, “Hope is our mental health.”

The Power of Hope

After the word “peace”, “hope” was the most spoken word we heard as we listened to various speakers in Israel and Palestine. We witnessed how the power of hope gave the human rights activists energy to overcome despair, energy to have a vision of peace, and energy to continue their work for peace. Without hope, I daresay, they would be broken because we saw the fatigue on their faces and heard the angst in their voices. The tension is so high. The threat of violence so present. Rabbi Arik Ascherman from Rabbis for Human Rights, spoke to us passionately about his hope for better Palestinian and Jewish relationships.¹⁴ Hope is the fuel that keeps him going as evidenced by one story he told.

He described a scene in which the Israeli police were using tear gas to disperse a crowd. But, in the midst of the chaos, he noticed a young Palestinian youth had become isolated and was up against a police car. Fearing for the young man’s safety, he ran back through the tear gas to help the young man. He told us with a contorted pained

¹⁴ Rabbis for Human Rights, <http://rhr.org.il/eng/about/> (accessed March 1, 2016)

expression on his face that he hopes one day that young man will be able to say, “A tall Jewish man in a kippah came to save me.” In that one act and with that grain of hope, Rabbi Ascherman hopes this young man will choose non-violence at a time when violence would be the easier path.

As I listened to Rabbi Ascherman and others, I was reminded that the places where we have hope are also the places where despair resides. We do not need hope when there is peace. We do not need hope when all is well. We need hope to lift us out of the despair of illness, violence, and moral injury.

Shifting our thoughts back to U.S. war veterans, it is easy to see that hope functions in a similar capacity. Story after story from U.S. vets and their families produce stories in which hope for a better future, hope for recovery from moral injuries, and hope for a new way of living are heard over and over.

Nancy Sherman shares these insights from the stories of soldiers seeking a path to healing. “For Lalo Panyagua, another Marine who served in Marja, what wracks him is the constant thought that he should have done more to save three of his troops. And it is his spouse, Donna Hernandez, through her remarkable vision and spunky wit, who has seen him through and found a way to rekindle his *hope* in himself in his new civilian life, shorn of both uniform and the sense of dignified purpose and identity it offered him.”¹⁵ And then there is the case of Dan Berschinski, “a West Pointer who lost the bottom half of his body in Afghanistan, the key to his postwar adaptation hangs on determination tethered to *hope*, and a remarkably upbeat disposition.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Sherman, 9.

¹⁶ Sherman, 9-10.

It is important to keep in mind, as Sherman reminds us, that there is no “universal soldier.”¹⁷ Everyone experiences war differently. Everyone experiences their moral injuries differently and consequently, everyone will experience a variety of paths to healing. That is especially true of those who fought for the United States in comparison to those impacted by the Israel/Palestine conflict. But, I found it compelling to hear the common refrain of the role of hope from both U.S. veterans and those engaged in seeking peace in Israel/Palestine. There is something about hope that speaks to the resilience of the human spirit.

During our trip, we often listened to a personal reflection from one of our traveling companions. Chuck Currie offered a reflection on the topic of hope atop Masada.¹⁸ In that location, a place where people chose suicide over defeat and domination, hope was an ironic topic, to say the least. Chuck, a Star Trek fan, started his meditation with a summary of an episode entitled “All Good Things”. In this episode, Captain Picard worked as an archaeologist bouncing from one period to another. Eventually, all the time periods converged into one time. Chuck remarked that it felt as though we had been traveling in different time periods, from ruins to the future.

There are events in history that may seduce us to be optimistic about the future. For instance, the cold war ended with the tearing down of Berlin Wall and it seemed that optimism for the future was acceptable. But, Chuck remarked that seminary cured him of that, along with events such as 9/11 and the war in Iraq. Nevertheless, as his optimism

¹⁷ Sherman, 10.

¹⁸ Currie, Chuck, “Hope Against the Evidence in the Holy Land.”. January 13, 2016. http://chuckcurrie.blogs.com/chuck_currie/2016/01/hope-against-the-evidence-in-the-holy-land.html (accessed February 28, 2016)

decreased, his hope increased. Chuck shared a quote from William Sloan Coffin that distinguishes the difference between hope and optimism.

“Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart's full of hope, you can be persistent when you can't be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. So while I'm not optimistic, I'm always very hopeful.”¹⁹ Chuck shared with us that he continues to hope and his hope today is born out of the Ferguson protests, listening to President Obama sing “Amazing Grace”, watching Women of the Wall, listening to Sami Awad from the Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem²⁰, and finally in the life and death and life again of Jesus who came to teach us the ways of peace.

In Chuck’s meditation, I heard that hope is persistent. And I believe persistent hope can be contagious. For instance, the “Women of the Wall” have sought to gain equal religious rights at the Western Wall. They want to read the Torah and celebrate their daughters’ B’nos Mitzvah without getting arrested for their “subversive” acts. But, the wall has a visible wall of separation, a divider keeping the men and women separate, one that kept the Torah on the men’s side, one that kept wives, mothers, and siblings for the boys’ B’nei Mitzvah’s in their place. There was also a wall of presumption, one that said that the Wall is uniquely holy to Orthodox Jews.

Fortunately, there has been some movement on the Wall issues since we have returned from Israel, although it is unclear how it will really be implemented long term. Through their persistence, Women of the Wall, along with leaders in the Reform and

¹⁹ Steve Inseep. “Peace Activist William Sloane Coffin Dies at 81”. April 13, 2006. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5339877> (accessed February 1, 2016)

²⁰ Holy Land Trust. <http://www.holylandtrust.org/staff.html> (accessed February 28, 2016)

Conservative movements of Judaism, have gained government recognition and hence, the rights to hold mixed prayers and B'nos Mitzvah for their daughters at Robinson's Arch, south of the main Western Wall area. Anat Hoffman, one of the leaders of the Women of the Wall, shared with us the importance of their persistence to gain official recognition.

Anat Hoffman is also the executive director of the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC).²¹ Hope is a word of importance for this organization as well. She gave us a refrigerator magnet of all things, with the word TIKVAH, which in Hebrew means, "hope". The magnet adds, "TIKAV comes from the root KAV. KAV means "thread" or "string". I share with you this string of victories, this thread of hope, from Israel." In the work for human rights she energetically pronounced, "One subversive act leads to another."²²

Compared to difficulties in Bethlehem and occupied Palestinians territories, this compromise of a victory at the Western Wall may seem like a lesser cause and a lesser victory. However, by resisting patriarchy and the status quo, the women hammered a crack in the slab of injustice. And wherever injustice develops a crack, the crack allows light to shine on more injustice. So, although the Women of the Wall may not directly connect their resistance efforts to the non-violent resistance efforts of the Palestinians, they are related. In my opinion, these recent changes recognizing the egalitarianism of the women and the reformed and conservative Jewish movements, sow seeds of hope for the Palestinians. Any break through of barriers in their quest for land, peace, and equality is a break through for justice.

²¹ Israel Religious Action Center of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism <http://www.irac.org> (accessed March 2, 2016)

²² From a verbal presentation given to our group on January 14, 2016.

Shifting Hope – Giving up Hope as a Means to Create a New Future

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki has written,

“The longer the group has been oppressed, the more tenuous the hope will be that society will change in openness to entire wellbeing...hope must be borne entirely by the future, calling the present to transformation. But a hope with no hold on history teases the heart with too much anxiety...The realizable nature of a goal is the difference between hope and despair. Hope is catalytic, giving momentum to efforts that can accomplish the goal. Despair is debilitating...Justice, to be sought, must be visualized as achievable. An illusory justice cannot inspire the necessary hope.”²³

As much as hope seems to be a mitigating force in overcoming despair, the work for justice and peace comes with costs and with losses. Sometimes it is necessary to give up hope in order to move to a new future.

Several years ago, a young twenty-seven year old member of my congregation died from a rare pediatric cancer that is particularly devastating to young adults. Over the years, as I have talked with her parents about their loss and about their experiences during her last few months, her mom indicated that they had to give up hope. In particular, they had to give up hope that she would recover in order for them to be present with her as she died. Obviously, this was incredibly heartbreaking. And yet, giving up “hope” became in a sense liberating because it changed their focus.

Consequently, I wonder if those words “we had to give up hope” might be helpful in other situations. When we give up hope for a particular outcome, especially one that simply is not going to happen, then do we offer ourselves a new future? Maybe that

²³ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*. (New York: Crossroads, 1999), 77.

future is not our first choice, but maybe having a future that moves us out of where we are is still a productive life-giving endeavor.

What if both the Palestinians and Israelis give up hope that they alone will occupy the same land? What if the Palestinians give up hope that they will return to their former homes? What if the settlers give up hope that they will occupy all of *Eretz Israel*? Could “giving up” hope for a particular outcome, open up their future? If they give up hope for these particularities, then are they in a position to envision another future, different than the ones they wanted to be sure, but one that is nevertheless desirable and life-giving, one that begins to heal their moral injuries?

Giving up this kind of hope has the potential to open up the future because it is no longer rooted in their finite experiences. This movement suggest there is another, heretofore unimagined future that is a life-giving, viable option. Or as Suchocki maintains,

“The hope cannot be rooted in our finite experiences, for all of our experience denies the full condition of justice. How paradoxical, that we nevertheless experience hope – and how thoroughly necessary this is for the gains that are made and that might yet be made....But, perhaps the power of hope against despair is not paradoxical at all. Perhaps it rests with the nature of God as the power for justice...God is the source of hope.”²⁴

The Necessity of Telling Stories

One of the biggest problems US veterans face in recovering from moral injury is the perpetuation of the injury after returning home. People who have not shared their experiences do not understand them and consequently, make judgments about the stories they are hearing without a context to make that judgment. Unfortunately, silence feels

²⁴ Suchocki, 78.

like the only option remaining. “Veterans return from combat to solitary confinement. Some begin their emotional spiritual isolation in battle as they grieve losses or silently doubt the morality of what they are doing. Others feel it when they come home. Many return locked in a space of inarticulate silence where they cannot find words for the atrocities and terrors they experienced.”²⁵

I would also argue that one of the bigger obstacles in Israel/Palestine is that they live in the space in which the moral injury has occurred. In both situations it becomes imperative to find places in which to share their collective stories. Sherman’s observations are applicable to both US veterans and those traumatized by the violence in Israel/Palestine, “Here, the moral call and response are internal, but the healing depends in part on being able to tell others about the inner struggle, and in the telling others, allowing them to empathize and share some of the journey together. In that sense, we also are being asked to listen.”²⁶

During our visit to Yad Vashem we learned from our guide that Holocaust survivors were not embraced upon their arrival to Israel. There was a deadly silence. From the sculptures outside the facility (replicas of ones in Warsaw) we heard that there have been two very opposing views about the survivors. In one sculpture a group of people are being led away by soldiers. They are carrying a Torah, their children, and very little of their possessions. In this image they are pictured as sheep being led to the slaughter and not as people who are victims of a great atrocity.

²⁵ Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 48.

²⁶ Sherman, 55-56.

Apparently, it was not uncommon after the war to suggest to and condemn the survivors with accusations that they survived at another person's expense. Where did they get bread to nourish their body? Was it out of the hands of someone else who then perished? With these questions, survivors opted for silence for many, many years. As so often noted with war veterans, the moral injury of the Holocaust survivors continued in sometimes even more painful ways after arriving at their promised land.

The second sculpture is one depicting the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Here the Jews are fighting back. This was the image that the new state of Israel preferred to promote. Breaking through the silence was difficult to overcome in this environment until the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Israel suffered defeats in this war for the first time. Soldiers began to question whether they could be the "ideal" Jew and fight back. The "crack" in the wall of silence began here with the understanding that war can break people. And then our guide told us that the movie "Schindler's List" was the last piece in dismantling the wall of silence.

Over and over, from the stories of our war veterans, to the Holocaust survivors, to the people of Palestine in refugee camps, to the human rights activists, we heard how important it is to tell the stories of their experiences. This is the first step in soul repair work. Silence only perpetuates and exacerbates the moral injury.

Fortunately, we were able to hear how a couple of groups in Israel/Palestine are working to break the silence. One group is called "Combatants for Peace." The members of this group are Palestinians who have been in conflict with the Israel Defense Forces, possibly imprisoned for a variety of reasons including violent confrontations. The other half of this group are Jews who have served in the IDF who speaking out about

their moral injuries that occurred as a result of their service. They have two primary goals, build relationships with one another and tell their stories. One way they share their stories is through theater. In that setting they are able to speak in multiple voices in ways that are unavailable elsewhere.

We also heard of the value of theatre for the children in the Aida refugee camp. The theme of their theater work is “beautiful resistance.” In addition to providing a platform for the children of the camp to share their stories, they also want the children to come away with the belief that their voices matter. Theater allows them to express themselves in ways that are suppressed in most every other aspect of their lives.

The arts have been powerful healing tools for as long as they have been in existence. So, it is not surprising to find that veterans healing from moral injury find relief in theatre, literature, and music. Whether it be former Marine, Jess Goodell in “Shade it Black”, or Camilo in “Soul Repair”, or Palestinians and Jews, there needs to be an outlet to tell the stories of their moral injuries. Given a means to share their stories, they connect to the hope that has kept them going, helping them survive in order to arrive at a place where life begins anew. With hope there is an opportunity to envision a future not necessarily free from the moral injuries, but one that includes them as scars that are no longer open wounds.

As we listened to the two young men from Combatants for Peace, we witnessed genuine affection as they shared their stories with us. It was obvious these two had built a relationship based on mutual respect and admiration. It is significant to note that in order to meet and build relationships these individuals take risks due to the restricted travel environment. The two members who met with us, a Palestinian who had been a

prisoner for ten years and a former Israeli soldier do not have natural meeting grounds. We met with them on the Palestinian side of the separation wall, which meant that the former soldier took some risks in coming to meet with us. But, every time anyone from Combatants for Peace tries to meet, someone is taking a risk. Someone is crossing the green line or other obstacles. The willingness to do that indicates the level of their commitment to build relationships, work for peace, and heal, together.

Seeing them interact so graciously in person served as a poignant reminder that storytelling empowers and heals, even when the scars remain. As Dr. Shay makes plan in *Achilles in Vietnam*, “Narrative heals personality changes only if the survivor finds or creates a trustworthy community of listeners for it.”²⁷

Examples of Moral Injury and Soul Repair from Israel/Palestine

Finding a trustworthy community can take many forms. In his autobiographical story, “At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew’s Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land”, Yossi Klein Halevi describes his quest to find prayer partners in Israel/Palestine. He wanted to know “whether faith could be a means of healing rather than intensifying the conflict in this land.”²⁸

Like so many others, he had served in the IDF in the Gaza strip. In particular, his reserve unit had been called into service during the 1987 intifada. Out on patrol, he described the tension and fear he and his fellow reservists felt. They were very aware that another Israeli soldier tragically made a wrong turn one day. The soldier wound up alone,

²⁷ Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph. D. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. (New York: Scribner, 1994), 188.

²⁸ Yossi Klein Halevi. *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew’s Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*. (New York: Harper, 2001), 1.

in the hands of the Palestinians, and was killed, suffering a terrible death. One day out on patrol, Yossi was injured by someone throwing rocks at the soldiers. A rock hit him in the head and knocked him unconscious. Fortunately, a Palestinian baker helped him escape further injury by pulling him into his shop.

As Yossi's story continued and as he sought out answers for the struggle in the Holy Land, he sought out people to pray with, Christians, Muslims, and other Jews. Eventually he found himself back in the Gaza Strip. All the old fears returned. The tense patrols through Gaza neighborhoods and his injury came rushing into his mind and body. He wanted to run away. But, he didn't run, even when he recognized the bakery where his physical injury occurred. Instead, he stayed and prayed in the mosque with the Muslims who he was sure would want to kill him if they knew he was Jewish.

Fear dominated his first trip back into the Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, he made a second trip to the mosque, this time wearing a kippah. There could be no doubt he was Jewish. Again, he was afraid, very afraid. But, he stayed and talked with the Palestinian Muslims and then prayed together with them. Eventually, the fear left him. His Muslim companion asked him what he was experiencing this time. He replied, "I felt that a person who truly loves God doesn't need to be afraid..."²⁹ Yossi provides us an example of a way forward in this conflict and in soul repair work. His way was a way of prayer. The desire to seek prayer partners ultimately brought him back to his enemy. And by praying with them, he lost his fear of them.

I wonder what would happen if Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohammed Abbas began praying together for their people every week. What would happen if they prayed,

²⁹ Halevi, 309.

but did not discuss policies, politics, or controversial issues for six months or a year?

Could they pray together this long and remain where they are right now? I think praying together would change them and change their worlds.

Marjorie Suchocki offers this perspective on prayer that invites us to enter into it with hope.

“Prayer changes the world. The statement is not metaphorical but literal. ... God works with what is, in order to lead the world toward what can be. To pray is to change the way the world is by adding that prayer to the reality of the world. Because prayer is added to the world, the reality of what-can-be changes. Redemptive possibilities that might have been irrelevant, and therefore inaccessible to the world without prayer, can be released by the power of prayer.”³⁰

Hope in the midst of Death and Life

There are options for peace in Israel/Palestine, but at this moment they seem very illusive. Dr. Thistlethwaite said in all the trips she has made with students in the last four or five years, she was never as discouraged about a peace process as she was on this trip. As I have said, it was an intense experience, heartbreaking at times, despairing at others, and yet, we also witnessed genuine joy. We shared it in the Shabbat service in Jerusalem, a service so full of joy it lifted the spirits of everyone. And we shared it at the grotto in Beit Sahour while we ate, drank, and danced with our Palestinian hosts.

Hope remains.

In the midst of the nonexistent peace process, in the midst of increased violence, and in the midst of ongoing moral injury, where is the way forward? Shelley Rambo’s work on trauma from the text “Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining” offers some insight on how we might contemplate the potential path ahead.

³⁰ Suchocki, 220.

“The storm is gone, but the ‘after the storm’ is always here.”³¹

And so it is in Israel/Palestine. There was a war in 1948 that led to the establishment of the state of Israel and the refugee status of hundreds of thousands Palestinians. The “after the war” is still there. It is seen in the streets of the refugee camps. It is seen in the violence in the settlements. It is seen when a rabbi in Jerusalem puts their child in a cab rather than allowing them to ride a bus. It is seen in the bathrooms – in West Jerusalem toilet paper can be flushed down the toilet; in Bethlehem, it needs to be placed in a nearby trashcan so it will not clog the water waste system. It can be seen every time one sees the separation wall. And it can be experienced walking the beach in Tel Aviv and then realizing a Palestinian living in the West Bank could not walk it with you.

Shelley Rambo says, “Trauma disrupts the narrative”.³² It is never truer than in Israel/Palestine where trauma is the narrative and a very complicated narrative at that. One of the complicating factors with the ‘after the storm’ presence is the fact that the past does not stay in the past, not in New Orleans, not in Iraq or Afghanistan or Vietnam, and not in Israel/Palestine. So, one question we might want to explore is how trauma theory provides a framework for understanding Israel/Palestine.

The unfortunate, yet fascinating reality in Israel/Palestine is that everyone has a story of loss, grief, or trauma. It is clear that the people in Israel/Palestine live in the aftermath of death, far too much death. In other words, they live the reality of Rambo’s

³¹ Shelley Rambo. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 1.

³² Rambo, 6.

assertion that, “The nature of life is bound to that death, not in terms of what is known of that death but the ways in which that death continually escapes comprehension.”³³

Rambo’s observation reminds me of the demeanor of a Sami Abu-Shechadeh from Jaffa. While he was telling us an awful story about his family, he was smiling and laughing, not out of joy or amusement, but due to his disbelief that what he was saying had actually occurred. In most everyway imaginable, the indignity and injustice he and his family experienced was beyond comprehension. At yet, there he was, sitting next to his Israeli Jewish friend speaking also about the power of story-telling together, sharing their narratives. Hope persists once again.

Resurrection is a term uniquely linked to the Christian faith, and I want to be very cautious here not to impose a Christian theology on groups of people who claim their own vibrant faith traditions, but the ways in which Rambo speaks about resurrection parallel the function of hope heard in the stories of trauma. So, when she offers the image such as “The picture of resurrection is a beginning out of death”, it seems applicable to the conflict in Israel/Palestine. The hope needed to look forward to a peace between the peoples is a hope that is born out of death literally and figuratively. So many people have died and so many dreams have died.

“This is the image of resurrection. It is not the victorious image of new life. It is a desperate image, in which the impossibility of a beginning becomes its starting point.”³⁴ I do not know if Israel/Palestine has reached the point of impossibility, but if not, it is close. But, even here, especially here is the hope of resurrection, the hope of life. And I think many human rights activists would truth in Rambo’s thought that, “Between death

³³ Rambo, 37.

³⁴ Rambo, 78.

and life, there is a testimony to Spirit, to a love that survives and remains not in victory, but in weariness.”³⁵ It is clear the weariness is there.

Will it be possible to reconceive life together “after the storm” in Israel/Palestine? I think Rambo’s dance between death and life, not jumping to a victorious resurrection too quickly is exactly where the people of this land find themselves. And yet, even in this place, there is hope. We met with Sheik Samir Assi in Acco, Israel. Among other things, the Sheik said that despite the mounting tensions and violence he remained hopeful that there would be peace. He even offered that in a time of great tension, there necessarily comes a breaking point in which change must occur. So, while others we encountered wore their weariness on their faces, Sheik Assi carried himself with an air of confidence that there is a solution to the problems they face. He was inspiring.

So, inevitably, despite the ever-present trauma, we witnessed glimpses of ever-present hope. Rambo has one more piece of hope to add to their complex narratives. “Trauma is the crises of what remains after a radical ending. It is the crisis of what persists beyond its end. ...Death persists. Life is not victorious. There is no life after the storm but only life reconceived through the storm.”³⁶ The history of the Jewish people is one of survival in the diaspora. The history of the people in Palestine is one of survival as well, including the Crusades and the Ottoman Empire occupation. Can these two people, who are survivors, reconceive life together through their conflict?

I hope so.

³⁵ Rambo, 80.

³⁶ Rambo, 109.

Now That I Am Home, Now What?

The intensity of this trip has a lasting impact, not just with images and experiences from the trip, but with the way it impacts how I see home. For example, when I think of the water issues in the West Bank and then I read the news about the water debacle in Flint, I recognize how much there is to do here in terms of combatting racism, poverty, and economic classism. Those without money, i.e. the poor in our country are easily exploited. Despite many claims that we are a “Christian nation”, we do not always bring good news to the poor.

As the story in Flint progressed, I began seeing awareness brought to our attention about the plight of the Navajo people. They have no running water, primarily because the natural water options have been poisoned by uranium.³⁷ So, I may shake my head that in the West Bank Israeli settlers use 80% of the water with a quarter of the population of the Palestinians. There is no justice there, but is there even less on the Native American reservations here? For me, this is a call to action. I do not know exactly what that will look like just yet, but I know I can’t let it go. One resource that is an obvious way to make an impact is the Navajo Water Project.³⁸ By providing clean, accessible water, the project seeks to end a cycle of poverty that is a drain on the community. I have made a small monetary donation to start and I will bring this site to others attention.

³⁷ Justin Gardner “Navajo Water Supply More Horrific Than Flint, But No One Cares Because They’re Native American”, January 31, 2016.

<http://thefreethoughtproject.com/navajo-water-supply-horrific-flint-cares-native-american/>

³⁸ <http://www.navajowaterproject.org/press/>

As I turn my thoughts again to Israel/Palestine, the question again stays with me. What can I do, here, where I live? Again, the answer comes in the form of people and building relationships. Shortly after our return from our trip, Betty and I noticed a relatively new Mediterranean restaurant literally across the street from my church. We decided to check it out and went in for lunch after church one Sunday. It turns out that it is owned by a family from the West Bank, part of whom are Muslims from Ramallah and part who are Christians from the Bethlehem area. We have returned many times and I have inquired as to whether they would be open to coming to Church of the Savior and sharing their story. Although they did call me to discuss it, they are nervous and hesitant. Hopefully, by building a relationship they will feel more at ease with my invitation.

On a less positive note, I talked with a woman in Cedar Park who read my brief article about my Israel/Palestine trip in the Hill Country News.³⁹ She wanted to meet with me, give me a book, and engage in conversation about Israel. It became apparent rather quickly that she had an agenda, which was to make sure I heard from the “right” resources. She was sure I had a biased presentation and did not understand the real story.

I offered up positive statements about Israel and so many of the people I met. But, I also suggested that the U.S. and Israel bore a responsibility from positions of power to pursue peace and justice for the Palestinian people. She has sent me numerous links to stories about Israel, all lauding their virtuous endeavors, and of Palestinians, always negative. When I asked her what she hoped to accomplish in sending me this particular stories, she became very defensive and ended our exchanges. After a poor

³⁹ Mary Wilson, “Israel and Palestine: What is the Deal?”, February 3, 2016. http://www.hillcountrynews.com/opinion/article_dcde5456-caa1-11e5-a389-e308abfc784a.html

experience in one of the settlements while on our trip, I was determined to approach this conversation with openness, yet authenticity. It seems to me at this point that she simply could not accept that I hold a different view of the conflict than she does given all the “unbiased” information she tried to share with me. We have talked past one another and unfortunately, our conversations have reached an impasse and I am not sure if or when we will attempt to renew them. This experience is a reminder to me just how difficult it will be to forge a peaceful agreement in Israel/Palestine.

Fortunately, there are other relationships I can nurture. For instance, I just chatted with Ruth Ebenstein from Jerusalem.⁴⁰ Ruth works for peace in Israel/Palestine by sharing her breast cancer recovery story and the friendships she formed in a recovery group. She will be coming to Texas in March and we are arranging for her to come to Austin to share her story. I hope to work with some of my interfaith colleagues to put together a wonderful gathering. I had the good fortune of meeting Ruth while in Jerusalem. It occurred in a random encounter that we now blame on God.

Our study group had Shabbat dinner at the home of Fred Tauber and Paula Fredriksen. After dinner, walking back to our hotel, we met Ruth. Fred introduced us and then she shared a story about her mom, uncle, and grandmother when they were in a concentration camp. Her mother was a young girl and predictably, was not doing well. She was predictably malnourished and her mother feared she was in danger. So, she sent Ruth’s uncle out of the concentration camp, instructing him to find a farmer’s family, knock on the door, and ask for food, shoes, etc. He snuck out that night, found a house

⁴⁰ Ruth Ebenstein. “An Israeli and Palestinian Brought Together by Cancer”, April 23, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/04/an-israeli-and-palestinian-brought-together-by-breast-cancer/360930/> (accessed April 20, 2016)

and followed his mother's instructions. The woman who answered the door told him to come back the next night. Obviously, it was a huge risk, but he did. She handed him a box of supplies. These gifts helped save Ruth's mother.

Ruth's story doesn't end there. As a nursing mother, she was diagnosed with breast cancer a few years ago. It was in a support group for breast cancer survivors that she developed deep friendships with Palestinian women. Out of the friendships she has made, she hopes to spread a message of peace that is not focused on politics, but on relationships. I am thrilled to have Ruth come to Austin, bringing together Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Austin for yet another interfaith event. All Ruth asks is that we include a fundraiser for women with breast cancer in the region who cannot afford sufficient care. I think we can make that happen. Ruth is inspiring and her message of hope and friendship is a universal message that has the potential to reach us all.

The gifts, challenges, and insights from this trip keep on coming with no end in sight. And I hope that never changes. I also hope it will continue to challenge and inspire me to be focused in the ways I seek to live out my understanding of faith, justice, and peace here at home. I believe the key to fulfilling that desire will be to forge relationships, engage in hopeful productive endeavors.

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