

CORNERSTONE

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION BY SABEEL ECUMENICAL LIBERATION THEOLOGY CENTER

A TIME TO REMEMBER, A TIME FOR TRUTH

by: *Naim Ateek*

The Seventh International Sabeel Conference ended on Nov. 19, 2008 with a Holy Communion service at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, next door to the Church of the Resurrection. The Lutheran Bishop, Munib Younan, gave the homily as over 250 people from over 20 countries around the world

listened. He emphasized the importance of memory for a sense of identity and a sense of direction. Before the people departed the church, they were commissioned to commit themselves to work for peace with justice. The following is an excerpt:

Leader: We have been together to share in the memories of

IN THIS ISSUE

A Time to Remember, A Time for Truth <i>by: Naim Ateek</i>	1
Peace & Remembrance Tapestry	3
Notes on the Nakba from the Jewish-Israeli Point of View <i>by: Efrat Ben-Ze'ev</i>	4
Seventh International Sabeel Conference Statement	6
Moving Forward: The Cost of the Struggle <i>by: Andreas van Agt</i>	8
Reflections on the Seventh International Sabeel Conference	12
Personal Testimony <i>by: Josef Ben-Eliezer</i>	18



Cactus plant, Conference logo and peace banner

those whose lives have been and still are affected by the events of the past 60 years. We have taken stones from villages that represent the past. We bring them here for blessing so they may represent memory and reality. We carry them with us to remind us and those we meet at home of the need for justice in Israel and Palestine. As we depart for our homes and our safety let us be guided by God's word in Scripture that makes a clarion call: Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. May these symbolic stones become the building blocks of a new future for all who dwell in this land!

Today we receive our commission to go from this conference, committed to pray for, and proclaim the justice of our God and God's eternal love of all creation.

People: We have received your message, O God, and we commit ourselves.

- To your works of remembrance and forgiveness with gentleness and reverence.
- To work for truth and justice with the energy of an ever flowing stream.
- To bring healing and liberation to all people with your joy and peace in our hearts.

Leader: O God of power, you have identified with the powerless and the weak of the world, and here we pledge our identification with them. O God, strengthen us in our desire and breathe into our bodies the passion of your love.

As the participants were leaving the church they sang "We are walking in the light of God" and each person took home a stone from one of the 20



Closing Worship at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Old City

destroyed villages they had visited in Galilee to remind them to pray for the Palestinian people and especially the refugees, to remember their cause of justice, and to become involved in advocacy on their behalf so that all the people of the land may live in security and peace.

From the perspective of the international and local participants, the conference was hailed as successful. From our perspective as staff and volunteers, although we were thankful for such positive impressions and encouragements, we were conscious of our many shortcomings. At the same time, we were truly thankful for the overall way the conference had run, and most importantly, the safety and health of all the participants.

In this Cornerstone issue, we like to remind the participants of their time with us and give a glimpse of the experience to those many who could not attend.

The theme of the conference was The Nakba: Memory, Reality, and Beyond - A Time to Remember, a Time for Truth. In Nazareth, the emphasis was in great part on memory as we listened to local speakers - Christian, Muslim, and Jewish - reflect on the Nakba of 1948 and its ramifications during the ensuing years. This was enforced by a

visit to over 20 destroyed villages mainly in the Galilee district. Five buses carried the participants on five different routes where testimonies were given by some of the original inhabitants of those villages and towns.

On Sunday, the participants worshipped with 12 different church denominations in Nazareth and surrounding towns and villages. This was followed with a lunch either with that particular church community or in various parishioners' homes. This proved to be an invaluable experience for both hosts and guests and left lasting impressions. I would like to take the opportunity here to express Sabeel's gratitude to all the clergy and families that received their guests with great kindness and generosity.

Another special event took place in Jerusalem on Sunday evening where Bishop Suhail Dawani hosted a reception at St. George's Anglican Cathedral. A number of Patriarchs or their representatives as well as bishops and clergy were present. It was a wonderful gesture of welcome and hospitality. Both Bishop Suhail as well as Patriarch Theophilos' secretary greeted the participants who packed the Cathedral. Again here, Sabeel expresses its thanks to Bishop Suhail and to all the representatives of the

churches of Jerusalem for their presence. It was, indeed, a warm welcome on a rather cold night.

In the Jerusalem part of the conference we addressed the question of Palestinian refugees and the issue of Jerusalem. After visiting several refugee camps in the Bethlehem area and visiting refugee homes and conversing with the families, a whole afternoon was spent at Dheishe Refugee Camp. The program continued with a number of speakers. This was followed by dinner and a cultural event of song and dance presented by the young people of the camp.

During the Jerusalem part of the program, the participants became aware of the ongoing Nakba of the Palestinians as they were exposed to the

many tragic faces of the occupation and the reality of Palestinian life on the ground.

The conference objective, however, was not only to dwell on the past and lament the present but to address the future and point to practical steps that both locals and internationals can take in order to contribute to change - the end of the occupation and the movement towards a genuine peace.

From beginning to end, the conference emphasized the significance of nonviolence and the condemnation of all forms of violence whether perpetrated by the state of Israel and its settlers or by organized Palestinian groups. For most of us, whether people of faith or secular, our only choice is

to confront the violence with nonviolence. This is what we believe and what we stand for. This is the way we can actively witness for truth and justice in our community.

Indeed, as Palestinians we have failed so far to see the emergence of a national movement of nonviolent resistance. There are weekly activities of nonviolence at Biliin, Na'lin, and Jayous as well as other villages that are taking place on a regular basis but it has failed to be translated to a national scale. Palestinian political leaders have been submerged in political negotiations that have taken us nowhere. They and their Israeli counterparts have become experts at negotiations that are futile and ineffective and have become an end in

PEACE & REMEMBRANCE TAPESTRY

On a spring Sabeel Witness visit in 2007, two members of Friends of Sabeel-Netherlands, Marijke Egelie-Smulders and Clemens Egelie, envisioned beginning the Sabeel Seventh International Conference "The Nakba: Memory, Reality and Beyond" with a tapestry that would fill the assembly hall, radiating a message of peace from around the world. From this original idea, promoted by active Friends of Sabeel members and the Sabeel newsletter, almost two thousand squares have been created and sent to Sabeel, each 30cm by 30cm piece holding its own individual vision of peace from the person who sent it. Some were made by children, some by adults. One piece was made with stitches from 78 different individuals. There are squares from around the world with images that range from simple to complex and all of them sharing the universal message of peace.

Each square has been put together in a banner of 12 squares sewn by refugee women from the Jalazoun Refugee Camp located near Ramallah in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Each banner additionally holds the names of four villages destroyed or depopulated in 1948 as part of the Nakba, etched along the bottom in embroidery. These banners honor the memory and demonstrate the commitment to peace. Cards commemorating the tapestry are available at www.sabeel.org.



Peace banners at opening reception at the Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth

themselves rather than the means to ending the occupation. Many Palestinians wish that these negotiations would stop and that the Palestinian leadership would turn its attention to building a strong nonviolent movement in the country. Such a national public strategy, if well planned, can potentially force Israel and the international community to take the Palestinian demands for justice more seriously and exert the right pressure on the Israeli government.

It is important to remind ourselves of the last words of the presentation of Bernard Lafayette. "I ask you, who built the settlements and who is building the Wall?" Such poignant words make us Palestinians ashamed of ourselves. Again, in the words of Lafayette, no one can ride your back if you are standing straight. Many of our people have sadly resigned themselves to a life of humiliation, oppression, and dehumanization.

The challenge of the conference was clear. We can all, local and international, contribute to building a just peace in Palestine and Israel. We must commit ourselves again to participate, educate, and advocate within our own countries and vis-à-vis our own governments.

The Sabeel Conference ended with a statement that was prepared and endorsed by the participants. I would also like to express my thanks to all our friends who shared with us this conference. I would also like to thank all those who supported us financially, to all the speakers, and all those board members, staff, and volunteers who toiled day and night to make it happen.

May God help us all to commit ourselves to truth and to work tirelessly for a peace that is based on justice.

The Rev. Naim Ateek is Director of Sabeel.

NOTES ON THE NAKBA FROM THE JEWISH- ISRAELI POINT OF VIEW

by: Efrat Ben-Ze'ev

This article is an excerpt from Dr. Ben-Ze'ev's lecture during Sabeel's 7th International Conference.

Nakba Facts & Figures

- Of a population of roughly 1.3 million Arabs in Mandatory Palestine, roughly 750,000 people were turned into refugees in 1948.
- Over 400 villages and towns were emptied of their inhabitants.
- Economically, the Nakba meant the loss of vast Arab property. The majority of the uprooted population was rural and hence lost its entire means for livelihood - its land, its flocks and the produce it accumulated. Life in exile meant deep poverty, that continued from one generation to the other.
- Socially, villages and families were disintegrated. An entire way of life was erased.

In the early 2000's, I conducted an anthropological study on the memories of Jewish veterans who fought in 1948. My study was triggered by the fact that earlier, I conducted an anthropological research on Palestinian memories of 1948. Having grown close to the Palestinian perspective through the life stories of Palestinians who have been through the Nakba, and

being a Jew, I wanted to understand more on the points of contact between Jews and Arabs in 1948; how was it that each side developed a completely different narrative of the very same events? I wanted to find out what did the Jews who participated in the 1948 War think about the Palestinians and how did they speak about it a half a century later. I chose a group of Palmach ex-



Dr. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev

fighters, members who came from families that were highly committed to Zionism. For them, the formative event of their lives was the 1948 War.

Interviews were my main research tool. My aim was to try and understand the ways in which these veterans relate to the less heroic sides of the 1948 War. I wanted to know if and how they describe the killing and expulsion of Arab civilians and what was their general reaction to the death and destruction brought about in war. The interviews revealed that these men maintained their own understanding of war. Their war narratives were very different from the national version of purity of arms and of simple justification of the Jewish side. The veterans had moral deliberations, strong emotional reactions, and criticism towards

comrades and officers. They described how a comrade killed an old Arab woman as they were entering a semi-deserted Arab village in the Eastern Galilee. They related to looting, to expulsion, to long rows of fleeing refugees. They tried to portray themselves favorably - not as fully-fledged perpetrators or even participants, but rather as witnesses.

The unit I studied organized a yearly reunion immediately after the war. For the reunion, the veterans composed their war chronicle. In this chronicle they listed some of the shattering war experiences - the killing of a man hiding under a bed, the cry of a baby silenced after a grenade explodes in the house. They also described their inability to grasp that the comrade they were carrying back from battle was dead. Moreover, the difficult events that were registered were written in a summarizing manner, in just a few words, without pointing to who did what and where. The chronicle was read on each reunion, every year. The reunions continued through the years, and still carry on today.

They did make the choice to share the war chronicle and one wonders why? There were at least two reasons for this change - for the decision to speak up of the 1948 war in a new tone and in a different manner, and reveal some of its controversial sides.

One reason was that these men were

growing old; it was a time to look back, reflect, and reconsider. Possibly even to seek understanding, if not forgiveness. If they were burdened with heavy memories through the years, now was the time to try and lift the burden.

The second reason, a more contextual one, is Israel has changed. Israelis were now more exposed to Palestinian memories of the War; they began to hear the term al-Nakba and to realize the scale of disaster brought upon the Palestinians. Israeli academics were now publishing work that did not conform with the old guard's version of the 1948 War as it was critical towards the unified Zionist voice. This was a gradual change. It began in the 1980's and grew more evident in the last decade. However, many of the old truths, those pertaining to 1948, still hold within Israeli society. Yet we should pay attention to the process whereby some silences were broken and some new truths surfaced. If this process were to continue, if there were more ways to expose Israelis to the Palestinian rendering of 1948, and if Israelis would open up a public discussion through means such as school curricula, the chances for reconciliation would be much higher.

Dr. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev is an anthropologist interested in the intersection of anthropology and history, focusing on Palestinian, Jewish and British perspectives of 1948.

Statement by Participants
of
SEVENTH INTERNATIONAL SABEEL CONFERENCE

THE NAKBA: MEMORY, REALITY AND BEYOND

November 12-19, 2008

We are more than 200 Christians from five continents who have come together to commemorate the tragic events that occurred 60 years ago in the lives of the people of Palestine. While we have come to hear from and to offer our solidarity and support to the indigenous Palestinian community in both Palestine and Israel, we have also heard from brothers and sisters in the Muslim and Jewish communities as they too have borne witness to the injustices visited upon the Palestinian population of this land. They have seen more than 531 villages depopulated and destroyed, and the creation of more than 750,000 refugees who have not been allowed to return to their homes since 1948.

We recognize the irony in the coincidence that this year also marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The establishment of peace with justice requires that the full truth be told about the events of 1948 and the subsequent displacement of hundreds of thousands more Palestinian citizens in 1967, a process which has continued to the present day. The human rights of the Palestinian people continue to be

crushed under a military occupation that dehumanizes both oppressed and oppressor. We share our conviction that it is only an acknowledgement of the full truth behind and within this current state of oppression that will lead to true freedom for all parties in the conflict.

Truth is essential for peacemaking. We acknowledge the truth that our silence about the status of the Palestinian people equals complicity in this ongoing tragedy. The status quo is a crime against humanity. As Christians, we can no longer be silent. Things worsen as each day passes. The so-called peace process is rather a consistent and persistent process of death and destruction, both physically and spiritually. The Nakba - the catastrophe - that has been imposed and is still being imposed on the people of Palestine-continues unabated and unrestrained. The truth of it is silenced or ignored both in our churches and in our media. This must change if we are to be true to Jesus' call to be peacemakers.

We have been encouraged by the thousands of Palestinians and Israelis who have practiced methods of nonviolent resistance in seeking to bring

an end to the current conflict. We lift up the practice of nonviolence as the most practical means of achieving peace in this situation where the balance of military power is so overwhelmingly one-sided and where the reliance upon violence only continues to make matters worse. We are concerned by the use of the Bible as an instrument of colonialism and exploitation by those who would enlarge the conflict. We reject the exclusivism presupposed in such an interpretive approach to biblical truth. We seek the reconciliation of all peoples throughout the world, and therefore call on our brothers and sisters in the worldwide church to speak out and act out the ministry of reconciliation.

We have been touched by the faces of children wherever we have gone. We have come to realize that an entire generation of children is being crippled because they have no access to the nutrition needed for normal growth and development, and thus endure spiritual and social alienation, violence and lack of opportunities which none of us would tolerate even for a day in our own communities. We remember the call of the Nobel peace laureates that the first



7th International Conference participants

decade of this new century be devoted to nonviolence. We hear anew the call of Jesus to “let the little children come unto me,” to let them be placed in the center of the current picture of marginalization, thus challenging the international community with their vulnerability and their need for protection.

Therefore, we call upon all our churches and governments:

- to work with renewed energy for an end to this endlessly spreading military occupation;
- to insist on full implementation of all United Nations resolutions and all human rights requirements in international law which pertain to

Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories and the right of return for Palestinian refugees;

- to insist on greater freedom of movement and more humane conditions in the occupied territories;
- to insist that Israel accord equal rights to all its citizens, Jewish and Palestinian alike;
- to divest themselves from investments in companies that enable the occupation;
- to insist that Israel lift its ongoing siege and collective punishments which prevent the free movement of people, goods and humanitarian aid in and out of Gaza; and finally
- to support the work of Sabeel in its efforts to build bridges of nonviolence

between people in all the monotheistic religions represented in the region.

We have heard the call of urgency from our fellow Christians in this holy land. As in Jesus’ own day, so Bethlehem lies under military occupation today surrounded by a prison wall. Our memories of the birth of The Child of Bethlehem 2000 years ago are contrasted and challenged by the reality of the children and the parents and the grandparents of Bethlehem today. As followers of that holy child, may our spirits meet in Bethlehem’s streets as we join in prayers and actions for light and life! May we seek creatively to disturb the status quo with acts born of the Spirit of courage, love and truth.

MOVING FORWARD: THE COST OF THE STRUGGLE

by: *Dr. Andreas (Dries) van Agt*

This article is an excerpt from Dr. Andreas van Agt's lecture during Sabeel's 7th International Conference.



Dr. Andreas van Agt, Former Prime Minister of the Netherlands

We would welcome a talk on: "The hope and cost of struggling against injustice", The Rev. Naim Ateek, the Director of Sabeel, told me in his invitation letter. Is there much hope within sight when one scouts the foreseeable future? Let us, first of all, engage in a brief search for encouraging developments in the outside world. What comes to mind immediately is, of course, the election of a new President in the US. Barack Obama's victory has aroused excitement far beyond his home country, yes indeed in the entire world. Will the new man at the helm of the world's most powerful state brighten the prospects for a just peace in the Middle East region?

As far as the Israel/Palestine problem is concerned Mr. Obama, in his address to the dominant lobby organisation AIPAC, jockeyed with his rival McCain for high marks by that audience. He went, inter alia, as far as stating that all of Jerusalem should remain under Israel's sovereignty. Apparently, he never took note of, or he did not care about the famous report the EU member states representatives in Tel Aviv and Ramallah have produced three years ago. In that report these diplomats unanimously concluded that without East Jerusalem

no Palestinian state would ever be viable. All the same, let us not indulge in gloom. Barack Obama is gifted with an open and inquisitive mind, his personal history makes him, of necessity, perceive the world out of America in a more receptive and less biased way. Let us hope that he will have the guts to start taking ground-breaking decisions in the domain of foreign policy already in the first term, such as promoting reunification in divided Palestine and exerting due pressure on the occupier.

What about Europe? As to its stance with respect to the conflict, I feel deeply disappointed. Back in 1980 the Heads of State and Government of the EU issued their latest Declaration (in Venice) pronouncing that all the territories conquered in 1967 ought to be returned to the Palestinians and that the construction of settlements there constitutes a violation of international law. Ever since, the EU has broadened and deepened its relations with Israel. The EU-Israel Association Agreement came into being in 2002. It grants substantial privileges to Israel on the vast European market with its great purchasing power. According to that agreement, the application can be put on ice in the event of human rights being seriously violated.

That article has never been activated. On the contrary, this summer the EU and its member states presented Israel on its 60th birthday with a special gift: Europe pledged to intensify and diversify the existing relations without attaching any political condition to that pledge.

Why are the Europeans so lenient and permissive towards Israel? There are several factors at play here:

- Public opinion is badly informed, to begin with. Most of the information about Israel/Palestine people have been supplied with, was warped or at least biased, due to the opulence of stories and images coming from the professionally superb information services of Israel and the lack of countervailing information from the Palestinian side.
- Moreover, many viewers, listeners and readers in Europe (and even more so in America) are hardly receptive to information that does not fit in with their prejudices. There is much unwillingness to take in information that contradicts preconceived ideas that are rooted in people's minds.
- Israel is still viewed by many as the land of the survivors of the Holocaust. This unspeakable horror occurred in Europe, with the Nazi-regime in

Germany at its centre, but research done in other European countries has revealed a lot about negligence to put up resistance that could have reduced the number of Jewish victims. Therefore shame has come to shape people's mindset, and in its wake the drive to compensate for previous failure and to refrain from criticising the Jewish state.

- Then there is the Holy Scripture, most notably the Old Testament with its misconstrued notions of God's Chosen People and the Promised Land. Too many Christians in Europe read into these words a special licence for Israel to take possession of the now occupied territories and to retain them.

- Another matter is Europe's propensity to orient itself on the US. That is a mental legacy of the Cold War and of our alliance with them in NATO. Yes indeed, President Bush's authority has plummeted over the last eight years. But on the other hand the assaults perpetrated by Al-Qaida in European cities after 9/11 fed

and fuelled the fallacy that Muslims are all potential terrorists. As Palestinians are widely viewed as Muslims, all Muslims, for all too many in Europe, Palestinians are just terrorists. Mr. Sharon has been quite successful in misrepresenting Israel's conflict with the Palestinians as part and parcel of the "war against terror". I need not elaborate here on the enormous damage done to the Palestinian cause in the world by the suicide bombings.

I just mentioned with sadness the lack of awareness in Europe of there being a Christian minority in Palestine (and Israel). When the subject is raised, Europeans readily assume that Palestinians try to take refuge in other parts of the world because living

together with Muslims is getting all too cumbersome. Of course, I know there are quite a few Muslims who engage in making life for their Christian brothers miserable. Without excusing that bad conduct I time and again do my best to make my audiences understand that our fellow-Christians are highly responsible for much of the hate among Muslims. For is it not the "God bless America" country, in its public appearances the most Christian nation on the globe, that keeps lending immeasurable support to occupying Israel? And is Europe, in spite of its thorough secularisation, still not

"Then there is the Holy Scripture, most notably the Old Testament with its misconstrued notions of God's Chosen People and the Promised Land. Too many Christians in Europe read into these words a special licence for Israel to take possession of the now occupied territories and to retain them."

perceived as a bulwark of Christianity? Well, Europe keeps failing to rise to its feet in defence of the fundamental rights of the Palestinians.

Admittedly, the Europeans are the biggest donors for the Palestinians. But that is administering anodyne without addressing the causes of pain. However well-intentioned, these aid programmes result in relieving the occupying force of the burden of taking care of the wellbeing of the people under occupation, as the Red Cross Treaties of 1949 dictate it to do.

The Palestinians keep suffering beyond description. Is there a better future in the offing? Is there a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel? In the short

term, I pin my hopes mainly on the next US President. Though he can't do miracles, he has both the ingenuity and the character to break deadlocks. Needless to add in this context that an inter-Palestinian reunification would be most helpful. I noted, by the way, Hamas-leader Haniyeh reiterated the other day (Saturday, 8 November) in a meeting with European parliamentarians that his government is willing to accept a Palestinian state alongside Israel within the 1967 borders. Members of the Arab League would be well-advised now to bring this

matter again to the table of the UN Security Council urging Israel to accept this position as well, in conformity with the Council's binding resolutions 242 and 338. It would be great if powerful world leaders like the presidents or prime ministers of India and Brasil and still revered icons like Nelson Mandela and Martti Ahtisaari from Finland would

raise their voices in support of this initiative, together with Saudi Arabia which was the driving force behind the Arab League's proposals launched in 2002 and 2007.

The Europeans would then follow suit, even more so if Gordon Brown would publicly lend his support as well. After the indisputable failure of the Annapolis enterprise a next and bolder initiative is badly needed. And so is a revitalisation of the crippled and discouraged Israeli peace movement.

Dr. Andreas van Agt was Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1977 to 1982, having served previously as Minister of Justice and Deputy Prime Minister.



SABEEL SPRING WITNESS VISIT

March 12 - March 20, 2009
(8 Nights)

The Sabeel Spring Witness Visit offers a window into the daily lives of Palestinians living under Occupation in the Occupied Territories as well as into the experiences and challenges of the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

MEET with Palestinian Christian and Muslim leaders of civic and religious organizations and Israeli advocates for justice.

LEARN the stories of Palestinian Christians and share the worship that sustains their faith.

SHARE thoughts and reflections with others from around the world who are working to end the conflict.

This trip includes visits to communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel, with 3 nights in Jerusalem, 3 in Bethlehem, and 2 nights in the Galilee.



REFLECTIONS

Seventh International Sabeel Conference

by: Robert Tobin

For those of us who did not live through the Nakba, the experience of meeting and hearing from those who did, seeing the tragic ruins of their homes and villages, and then being made aware of the continuing catastrophe that present-day Israeli Arabs and Palestinians live with, came with jolting new insights. The theme, Memory, Reality and Beyond, appropriately captured the new and old knowledge we all hoped for as we planned and prepared for the Conference. It is not always clear when planning and organizing a conference if the intended results will be fulfilled. In this case, from my point of view, the results were more than we could have hoped for. Several Sabeel conference 'veterans' (some having attended all seven Sabeel International conferences), said it was the best and most important yet. I agree. If the intention of Sabeel's ministry is to seek truth and pursue it, to advocate for a truly just solution for both Palestinians and Israelis, this conference took major steps to fulfill that mission.

It is not possible to note all the highlights of the conference here, but I think two moments capture the spirit and theme. There were few dry eyes in the hall when Muhammad Ali Taha, a noted but very elderly poet from

Nazareth who had experienced the Nakba as a young man, took the stage with Josef Ben-Eliezer, a former Israeli soldier who had participated in the expulsion of Arabs from Lidda in 1948, but then left Israel because he saw in the Zionist plan the same pattern of expulsion, cruelty and exile he had suffered in Poland under the Nazis as a young Jew. Muhammad Ali Taha's poetry reveals the deep pain that Palestinians and Israeli Arabs still feel. Ben Eliezer's story and apology to the Palestinian people for his part in the crime they still endure reveal in microcosm what must happen to affect the outcome for Palestinians and Israelis we all desire. Until Israelis acknowledge the hurt they have caused and offer an apology in word and deed to the Palestinians and until Palestinians can find a way to forgive, as Desmond Tutu proclaims saved South Africa, no just peace will be possible. The other very moving event happened after these two elderly icons of hope finished. Samia Khoury, one of our Sabeel Executive Committee members, arose on behalf of the Palestinian community to thank Ben Eliezer for his courage and apology. You will read elsewhere in this Cornerstone about other highlights.

As Coordinator of the Conference, I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of such an important and crucial event



Conference participants

and I give thanks for the incredible work by the Sabeel staff and volunteers who toiled for many months to design and implement a very complex agenda which involved three locations, Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. The logistics seemed overwhelming at times, but these people made it work for the benefit of all of us who participated. Whether making complex program and travel arrangements or designing inspiring worship services, our team at Sabeel excelled. But most important is our hope and prayer that people who attended will be compelled to tell the stories, to work for change in our own countries, and to join with enthusiasm the ministry that Sabeel promotes.

The Rev. Robert Tobin served as the Coordinator of Sabeel's Seventh International Conference.

by: Hans Morten Haugen

What is the idea of a conference with its main focus on the past? I believe that the 250 participants at the seventh Sabeel Conference entitled “Nakba - Memory, Reality and Beyond” would be able to answer that question - each in their own way.

I believe that people who were from very different backgrounds and experiences were able to get a broad picture of the core of the conflict and the requirements for a just peace. To start with the latter, the prospects for a just peace in the short term are not bright. Naim Ateek says that currently a two-state-solution must be promoted.

The Israeli public must be assured that an inclusive state and an end to the occupation is better for themselves, while an expansionist Jewish state will never be able to have peace and stability.

While the Palestinians are the primary actors to give assurances to the Israeli public, the international community of states has certainly failed in implementing the resolutions and decisions they themselves have made. The regional approach, as formulated in the peace plan of the Arab League in 2002, must be revitalized, a fact that was emphasized in Jeff Halper’s presentation. The responsibility of the Palestinian leadership, and that it itself needs to be united, was stressed in the excellent presentation by Rashid Khalidi.

Few presenters or participants were under 40 years. I found that some of the best presenters were the youngest ones, such as Abir Kopty, member of

the Nazareth City Council, and Tarek Abuata from the Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT). The challenge to the next conference is to search for more young persons.

On theology, Naim’s new excellent book “A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation” contains highly valuable theological resources. I think, however, that more sessions should be devoted to methodology of theology, as this is the way to reach out to the ‘unconverted’ Christians of the West.

Finally, the fact that 13 of the presenters were Jews must be acknowledged. At the same time, even more could be done to highlight the Jewish perspective in some sessions. As an example I will mention the very interesting film “The Land Speaks Arabic”, whose production has not involved Sabeel. This film would be even better if it had told about massacres such as the killing of 69 Jews in Hebron in 1929, since this massacre is an important part of the Jewish narrative.

Hans Morten Haugen is Dr. Juris and Associate Professor at Diakonhjemmet University College in Oslo, and chair of FOS Norway and board member FOS Scandinavia. He worked for Norwegian Church Aid in Jerusalem 2005-06.

by: Darrel Meyers

What were the odds I’d wind up for Sunday lunch in this Nazareth home! A thousand to one?

But first, backtracking a day or two in what, I believe, was the best Sabeel

International Conference yet - so imaginative, integrative, and yes, even incarnational at times - we conferees were sent out on that Friday to see and hear witness borne about some of the eradicated Palestinian villages of 1948. We’d just heard an informative overview of destroyed and demolished villages by Eitan Bronstein, a rep from a remarkable Jewish Israeli group, Zochrot, whose mission is to raise awareness about the Nakba. In fact, he’d arrived just on the heels of the conferees singing heartily Jim Strathdee’s version of “Micah 6:8” - where “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God” was, I think, quite fitting for the man and his presentation, and for the village visits to follow.

That same evening, under Rev. Sari Ateek’s direction for sharing our experiences of those village visits (along with his thoughtful, inspiring music) we gathered into groups for processing what we’d seen and heard that day. My circle was composed of European, African, and Asian faces. Their immediate comments were: “How could they let this happen?” “Anger!” “Outrage!” “Where was/is the world?” and the like. It was a sobering evening, where singing for mercy was both appropriate and inescapable, where a deeper sense of community was felt.

So, on that Nazareth noon, following Sunday worship, I and two other conferees were greeted outside the Melkite Church door by a woman and some kids who accompanied us as we walked up the hill to their lovely home for getting acquainted with the

extended family and one fantastic meal! As we were getting acquainted we learned that the matriarch of the home, Suhaila, has a sister in southern California (my home). When she mentioned her name I about popped out of my seat! “Nadia Sa’ad Bettendorf! She and her husband have been good friends of mine for thirty years! I see them often!” What a small world! My chance of being at that church, and then with that particular family -related to dear friends on the other side of the earth!

But not only that, the patriarch of the family, Yusef, proceeded to recount for us, step-by - step, his eyewitness report of the tragedy of his village, Eilaboun, on an October day in ’48. He had been a thirteen year-old, assisting his priestly father at Mass when the Israeli army came with its terrorism, looting, and murders. He described his and others’ expulsion to Lebanon. Many of them, thanks to U.N. intervention, were eventually allowed to return.

His reminiscences helped round out the theme of those Nazareth days: something of the stories and experiences of those people and villages that were so devastated-and which most of the world has forgotten or never knew about! - is being uncovered, heard and remembered.

I learned in a conference workshop how a Haifa - based research and human rights group, MADA al-Carmel, is working to bring to light the Palestinian narrative of these and subsequent events. Sabeel especially is to be lauded for its contribution toward setting the record straight



Cactus at site of Kawkab al Hawa, demolished village

about what happened back then. And about the truth of things now.

Discovering further the present realities through a Jerusalem area “Contemporary Way of the Cross” helped drive home the ugliness of Israel’s occupation over Palestinian land and life. But this and the whole conference experience also drives home something else, namely, the personality and character of so many Palestinians - kids, youth, and older-we met and which my country rarely is enabled to see: persons of warmth, courage, humor, dignity, grit, and a fantastic spirit of welcome.

No wonder so many of us return again and again. It’s not just about tourist sites that generate this budding axiom: “You can’t visit Palestine just once!” It’s about the people.

The Rev. Darrel Meyers is a retired Presbyterian minister, founder of Middle East Fellowship of Southern California (1969) and a national board member of Friends of Sabeel-North America.

Checkpoints for My Faith

by: **Gilbert Charbonnier**

My first experience of Palestine-Israel was in 2004 with an Ecumenical Accompaniment Program (WCC). Four years ago, I discovered Sabeel with the 4th International Conference in Jerusalem. Afterwards I kept in touch with the Center, for I am convinced a personal and pastoral solidarity has to be supported by theological reflections.

For me, Sabeel is the Palestinian theological voice that churches must listen to around the world. The struggle for justice and peace between people belonging to different faiths is the way par excellence for verifying their own theological backgrounds, especially with regard to an old tradition like the Palestinian Christian history. The ecumenical community needs the witness of the Palestinian churches for their own mission all around the world. We need to check

what we say about God and his Gospel of grace and love, his Gospel of reconciliation, peace and justice.

This 7th International Conference has been a checking opportunity. I could verify what I knew. We were very well informed: depopulated and destroyed villages, exile towards foreign countries and refugee camps, inward exile with a second class citizenship in Israel, and consequently an identity crisis. We know the ongoing Nakba by occupation, by denying Palestinian human rights, by the Wall, by checkpoints, by land grab, by house demolitions, by water lifting. The media is working well, if we are ready for wondering, for looking at reality, for listening to cries coming out from everywhere. But in addition to being blind, deaf, stupid, lazy and indifferent, we have closed hearts. This conference has been an opportunity for visits, for meetings, for common prayers—a checking opportunity: Can you continue? Can you take no notice of these cries? Can you take no notice of your sisters and brothers who are living with daily ethnic cleansing? What is your belief? Which image of God are you dealing with?

Another checkpoint. If my relation to faith includes necessarily my links with my sisters and brothers whose rights are denied, it is also impossible to cut it off from other traditions of faith and worship. Even in Anglican or Lutheran churches, praying in the Arab language opens to other ways of believing. I have to learn from Eastern traditions of faith. My experience of a Sunday service in one of the Melkite churches of Nazareth

made me more and more aware that we have forgotten a whole part of our Christian tradition. What a pity! After the Sabeel Conference I visited Moslems. I shared their Friday prayer in the mosque. And I felt again the same big question: Which image of God are you dealing with? Can you pray out of an interfaith framework? Can you pray out of a theology of religions? - May I pass through the checkpoint?

Gilbert Charbonnier is presently committed in chaplaincy among sick people in a Psychiatric hospital after 40 years of ministry in both Reformed and Lutheran Churches of France.

by: Richard A. Kauffman

When I was a child growing up in the 1950s my congregation put together Christmas bundles for Palestinian refugee children. I think the bundles included some clothes, hygiene items like a toothbrush, toothpaste and soap, school supplies like paper, pencil and crayons. And I know for sure the bundles included a gender-specific toy. Everything was wrapped in a towel that was then closed with safety pins.

I don't remember if we were ever told why these Palestinian children were refugees. I do know that the truth about that would have conflicted with another message I picked up from my upbringing: that the "Holy lands" belonged to the Jewish people. And the fact they were returning to it was a sign that God had not forgotten them and that indeed through this migration of Jewish

people back to Palestine biblical prophecy was being fulfilled.

It has taken a lifetime for me to learn why it was that over 50 years ago Palestinian children needed to have the care packages we sent to them. While I know from a Palestinian friend that the Christmas bundles were appreciated—he still has a toy he had received in his childhood—I now know they would have rather not lost their homes in the first place. And they'd rather have justice than handouts.

The Sabeel conference was one more piece for me in coming to terms with the reality of the Nakba, that what for Israel seemed a victory was—and remains—for the displaced people a catastrophe of the first order. I know now that the formation of the state of Israel wasn't simply the solution to the Jewish problem after the disastrous holocaust. The Zionist plans were in the works long before the holocaust took place. The holocaust gave the Jews a lot of sympathy and provided cover for the schemes of the Zionists.

The two most important events for me at this Sabeel conference were visiting three different Palestinian villages that were taken over by Jewish militia, and visiting several refugee camps where Palestinian people 60 years later are still living in conditions most people wouldn't tolerate. At one of the villages we visited, some Jewish families from a local kibbutz were having a picnic lunch right between an Orthodox and a Catholic church that remained. When someone in our group asked the families whether they

knew what took place here 60 years ago, a young father responded: “We don’t want to be reminded of that.” Of course not; how could they live with themselves?

I came home from the Sabeel conference wondering: if most Palestinians were Christians instead of Muslims, would the western world tolerate the way they’ve been treated by Israel? I doubt it. Muslims aren’t us. And after 9/11 it’s too easy to write them off as religious extremists at best and terrorists at worst. Still, we have to stand with our Christian brothers and sisters who are nearly invisible because, first, they’re Palestinians and, second, they seem like so few!

Richard A. Kauffman, senior editor and book review editor for the Christian Century magazine, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.

by: Bridget Rees

Sabeel’s 7th International conference was the fifth I have attended and was a particularly special one for me because of its focus on the Nakba of 1948 - “a time to remember and a time for truth”. As with the 6th Conference, the Forgotten Faithful, it was wonderful to have the focus on Palestinian experience - this is what I came for!

I have some of my own memories of this time when I was a child in Jerusalem, as well as family stories and my father’s diaries. But I was keen to hear the firsthand and family experiences of Palestinians - to get as full a picture as was possible and perhaps make sense of what had



Fawzieh al Kurd

happened around me as a child. I was not disappointed in what I heard though I don’t think I will ever be able to make sense of it - how can you make sense of non-sense?

The conference was full of moving memories and stories and worship. These were in formal sessions as well as in the visits and less formal conversations on buses and over meals. As so often in Palestine and Israel, I found myself on an emotional roller coaster disturbed and moved in a variety of ways. As on previous visits and conferences, I found myself swinging from despair to hope, from anger to calm confidence and back again.

Meeting in Nazareth, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, visiting and travelling around and meeting with ordinary people in their homes and villages - seeing and hearing things first hand was a rich and profoundly moving experience. Being able to share in this with others from around the world as the days went on was like icing on the cake.

It’s going to take a long time for me to process the conference and the rest

of my visit; this included seeing a house demolition on my first day and the eviction of the Al Kurd family a few days later from Sheikh Jarrah. Seeing and experiencing the growing *hafrada* (apartheid) infrastructure, which is all pervasive and seems to get more horrific by the day, cannot and should not be easy to process.

The living stones cry out for action and a just peace. May God help us not just to hear the cries but act to change this non-sense.

Thank you Sabeel staff, Board and volunteers for all your hard and creative work - you are an inspiration and give me hope, like the flower on the cactus and the graffiti on the wall.

Bridget Rees grew up as a child in Jerusalem. She has worked for the Anglican Church and ecumenically for 40 years, and has been actively involved with Friends of Sabeel UK.

**“I Come From There..
And Remember”**

Mahmoud Darwish

**by: Marijke Egelie-Smulders
and Clemens Egelie**

Our visit to 4 destroyed villages in the Galilee was a very moving event during the 2008 Seventh International Conference of Sabeel.

Only cemeteries are left from El Birwa. Cemetery? We saw a huge hole, where rubbish had been thrown in to hide the cemetery underneath, forever!

Except for a mosque, barricaded by the Israeli army, there was nothing left from Al Ghabissiyya.

Two heavily damaged churches and a mosque stood as a heritage from Palestinian history in Al Bassa, now a Jewish town. No opportunity for Christians to worship. But nevertheless, our guide told us that his grandson had recently been baptised in the Orthodox church. When cleaning up the church beforehand the family learned that they were not allowed to get the rubbish out.

What 'luckily' remains are the stories in the booklet, "I Come from There ...and Remember" giving a number of eyewitness testimonies of men, women and children, who had to leave their homes, their land with olive and fruit-trees forever.

On the last day of the conference we walked in a procession, carrying 15 of the 104 peace banners which had



Gathering stones at Samakh

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS FROM SABEEL

On behalf of all of us in Jerusalem and Nazareth, we wish you all a Merry Christmas and a blessed 2009!

We wish to express our heartfelt thanks for all of your hard work and everything that each of you does for justice and peace around the world.

With deep appreciation,

The Sabeel Staff and Board

Sabeel would like to sincerely thank all the contributors around the world who participated in making the squares of the peace tapestry. The peace banners will be sent to IFOS regional chapters, local and international organizations, refugee camps, schools and churches.

acompanied us during the conference from Nazareth via Bethlehem to Jerusalem, through the streets of the old city of Jerusalem to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer for the closing service.

During the service we laid down the stones, which we had collected in the "lost villages", on the peace tapestry as a symbol of our hope that peace will come after so many years of suffering.

Keeping memories in mind, feeling the pain in everyday life as a reality, and finding ways to make peace by young and old, all these came together in this, for us, a very moving hour.

The stones are now in our home and we will keep them as signs of hope in the coming weeks when we prepare ourselves for the feast of Christmas.

Marijke Egelie-Smulders (73) and Clemens Egelie (75) have been peace activists since the seventies. Marijke is member of the board of FOS Netherlands. She took the initiative for the peace tapestry.



Samia Khoury and Josef Ben-Eliezer

PERSONAL TESTIMONY

by: Josef Ben-Eliezer

This article is an excerpt from Mr. Josef Ben-Eliezer's testimony during Sabeel's 7th International Conference.

I feel honored to speak to you at this conference as we remember the Nakba, 60 years ago. I know that it is a tragic date for the Palestinian people, and I would like to share with you my personal experiences from that time. It has always been a pain for me that I took an active part in this tragedy, and it is my hope to reach out to those who have been hurt by those events. In order to understand my feelings at that time, and what followed, I need to go back to my childhood.

I myself knew what it was like to be driven from my home, to be a refugee,

to live in constant fear, to lose members of my own family. When I was 10 years old, my family was driven from our home in Poland by the Nazis. When our town was occupied we took everything we could carry on our backs and joined the mass of people, waiting in dread of what the SS soldiers would do to us. The German SS soldiers harassed us mercilessly as we walked towards the unknown. After leaving that place we lived as refugees, and experienced terrible hunger and disease, which eventually claimed the life of my mother. This was a terrible blow, as I loved my mother deeply.

After being taken in by an orphanage, I finally managed to reach Palestine in 1943.

As a young person in Palestine, and in the years that followed, many things occupied my mind. To begin with, I was appalled to hear about the Holocaust, and through my own childhood experiences I was determined to fight for a place of our own. Although I was not really nationalistic, I felt we had no choice but to fight in order to survive. At that time in Palestine the struggle from the Jewish side was mainly against the British government. The British closed the borders and did not let in new immigrants. The frustration, animosity, and hatred towards the British government were very strong. I was very much affected by this upheaval. I was not so much attracted to nationalism, I saw it more as a struggle for survival so that we could continue to live in Palestine, and felt angry at the British government for preventing Holocaust survivors from coming to Palestine.

Then as you know, in November 1947 the United Nations approved the plan to divide the land of Palestine. Most of the Jewish establishment and a majority of the Jewish population agreed to the division. But, most of the Palestinians felt cheated since they had a majority of the population, and they were only given a half or less of the country. For me, it now became a question of fighting for our survival since hostilities began soon after that decision. Therefore, I volunteered in February 1948 to enter the emerging Jewish army.

I participated in a number of military actions. At Tantura, my fellow soldiers rounded up a number of unarmed Palestinian men and I heard it said that they took them to be murdered. This disturbed me deeply and I was appalled by the way my comrades were acting. I did protest on several occasions over the next months, but I felt that we would be exterminated if we did not fight. Therefore, I continued to take part in further military actions.

The turning point came when I was stationed at Lydda. I can still see myself standing at the outskirts of Lydda, an 18 year old soldier in the Israeli army, under orders to expel the population of the town. By then, the State of Israel was founded, and we felt more in a position of power. I had thought I was fighting for my survival, for the survival of the Jewish people. But, as I saw the lines of men, women, and children leaving the town, under the harassment of my fellow soldiers, I began to ask myself: "What are we doing here?" It hit me that I myself as a boy in Poland had been in exactly the same position as these people. The memories flooded back, and I could identify with the feelings of these newly homeless refugees. I could not forget that we had been a persecuted people and other people had treated us cruelly. Now we are here in Palestine and are doing the same things to others. This shook me up, and it started a process, which eventually took me away from Zionism.

I will say that at that time I was not aware that the leadership had made a deliberate decision to drive the Arab population out of the area. Over the

next months the events I had experienced in Lydda worked more and more in my mind and in the end I came to the conclusion that I could not participate in this kind of thing again. In the meantime, I was still involved in some further actions, but eventually I left the army.

In civilian life, I tried to tell about the atrocities committed against the Palestinians and how they were driven from their homes, but the people would not believe me. But, I said that

“I had thought I was fighting for my survival, for the survival of the Jewish people. But, as I saw the lines of men, women, and children leaving the town, under the harassment of my fellow soldiers, I began to ask myself: “What are we doing here?””

I had been there and I had experienced it myself. I felt that we needed to face the reality of what we had done.

The injustice of the situation continued to haunt me. Eventually, I felt that just by living in Israel I was participating in this injustice, and so I decided to leave the country.

My search continued for an answer to why men cannot live in peace together. I was seeking how people from different nationalities could live in brotherhood and in harmony with one

another. Eventually, after a long search through many disappointments and hardships I found a faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Now, I experienced that Jesus' way is the way of love and brotherhood and non-violence.

Even though I had found a new life and hope, I could not forget the events of the Nakba, and my part in it. Some fifty years after those events, one of the members of my community was writing a book with stories about forgiveness. I was asked to tell my story.

The book was published and eventually came into the hands of Salim Munayer, from Lydda. I wrote him and told him that I wanted to ask his forgiveness for my part in it. This led to an encounter where I travelled to Lydda and met with Jacob, Salim's

father who lived in Lydda in 1948. It was a very moving experience for me, in which I could personally ask him for forgiveness, and I felt his love and outreaching hand to me.

Since then, I have thought a lot about that meeting. In the face of all hatred and division, here two men were able to reach out and find reconciliation. Perhaps one or the other will find encouragement through this, and other doors to reconciliation and forgiveness could open. This is my prayer.

Mr. Josef Ben-Eliezer presently lives with his family in England in a multinational Christian community and works for peace, reconciliation, and a life of brotherhood.

Purpose Statement *of* Sabeel

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. *Sabeel* strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on *Friends of Sabeel* groups in your area please contact our international representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.



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