

# CORNERSTONE

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## Increase Our Faith

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### Reflections on forgiveness in the context of occupation

*by Sabeel Staff and Friends*

How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”  
Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you,  
seventy-seven times [seventy times seven KJV].”

(Matthew 18:22)



Forgiveness is an essential component of Christian faith and life. From the earliest years, we teach children to pray “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” (Mt. 6:12). God’s merciful forgiveness of sins, through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, is the central message of the Gospel. Even from the cross, our Lord said: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

There is no Christianity without forgiveness, and yet the practice of forgiveness continues to be a spiritual challenge for followers of Jesus today. Recently a small group of Palestinians and local internationals met at the Sabeel office in Jerusalem to reflect on the meaning of forgiveness in this particular time and place. We prayed together, read Scripture, and reflected on what forgiveness looks like in this context, amid ongoing occupation and state-sponsored oppression.

Some common themes emerged from this conversation:

- How do we understand forgiveness when the violation is not in the past, but is ongoing?
- Is repentance required to receive forgiveness? Is it required in order for us to give it?
- Does forgiveness help or hinder the cause of liberation and justice?
- Jesus said, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” But what if our oppressors know very well what they are doing?
- How do we find the courage/strength/faith to forgive?

First, it must be said that for many, it seems premature to be discussing forgiveness in this context at all. As

someone in our small group stated, perhaps we should have waited until the occupation is over before we publish a “Cornerstone” issue on this theme! Even so, these friends of Sabeel felt it was important, as people of faith, to faithfully reflect on the scriptural command to forgive.

This was by no means an exhaustive study of forgiveness, either in Scripture or in Christian practice. In fact, we discovered that there are at least as many ways to interpret Jesus’ words as there are people in the room! But what became very clear is that it is impossible, in this context, to discuss forgiveness as merely a theological concept. In the context of oppression, conversations about forgiveness necessarily lead to discussions of justice, reconciliation, and reparations.

One of our group, an Ecumenical Accompanier ([www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)) in Yanoun, shared with us the story of standing with a resident in the rubble of his family business, which had been destroyed by Israeli soldiers—again. Not once, but many times, this man’s means to support his family was taken away. Not once, but many times, he was stripped of his dignity.

This situation is not unique. The Palestinian experience is filled with this kind of repeated violation. Entire villages are razed, again and again. Humiliation at the checkpoints occurs day after day. The separation wall blocks the sun, blocks the road, and blocks liberation not once, but every single morning. How does one forgive injustices that are not in the past, but are ongoing even now?

When we look to Scripture, we read

that Jesus has said we must forgive “as many as seventy-seven times”. And again, he said: “And if that same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent’, you must forgive” (Luke 17:4). This seems to suggest the need for a Christian to forgive even ongoing or repeated offenses.

When we consider this in the context of the occupation of Palestine, we wonder: Would Jesus ask a man to forgive the demolition of his home seventy-seven times? Even seven times a day? We know that when the disciples of Jesus heard this teaching, they responded in disbelief, saying, “Increase our faith!” To our ears, this command also sounds unbelievable, maybe even unhelpful.

First of all, we know there are religious leaders, community leaders, and family members who rush grieving people into forgiveness before they are ready. It is actually a form of theological oppression to demand that a man standing in the rubble of his house must forgive. It is theological oppression to insist that a mother who has lost her son to violence must immediately forgive or to even praise God that he “died for the cause.” Forgiveness may come, but are not the grieving allowed to weep first?

Secondly, when we consider Jesus’ teaching to forgive ongoing and repeated offenses, we wonder: Does forgiving let the offenders “off the hook?” Would forgiving these sins diminish the possibility of achieving justice? And what about compensation for our pain? What about reparations?

*Taking a Stroll: Since 2015, Israeli soldiers carry their machineguns with the safety pins pulled. Children are constantly exposed to a highly militarized environment that brings extreme levels of stress and fear that affect their behavior and education.*

We started discussing forgiveness, and as you can see we have already moved to repentance, justice, and reparations! We really don't understand how to forgive while our families, our neighbors, and our communities are not yet free and we cannot let go of our desire for justice. For this reason, we join the disciples in praying to Jesus: "Increase our faith!"

Although forgiveness is never simple or easy, it is always simpler when the offense is in the past. It's also much easier if the offender shows repentance. We are in a situation today in which some occupiers deny they are occupying Palestine. Some even deny the existence of Palestine or the existence of Palestinians! For this reason, the relationship of repentance to forgiveness was a major theme of our discussion.

When Jesus commanded us to forgive, he said, "If another disciple sins, *and if there is repentance*, you must forgive." But what if there is no repentance at all? Are we still required to forgive? Is it even possible to forgive in this circumstance? What would such forgiveness look like? A staff member offered the example of people who never receive a confession or repentance, but still choose to forgive their offender – for example, women who have been victims of sexual violence. Although such abusers often never admit to their crimes, many women have found the act of forgiving them to be powerful. Forgiving the offender becomes an important part of their own healing.

Forgiveness is costly. The great sacrifice involved in offering forgiveness is something many in our group affirmed.



Especially when we are talking about forgiving injustices that are ongoing, and forgiving offenders who deny they are hurting us, it is important to acknowledge that this can be painful.

Of course, as followers of Jesus, we are familiar with sacrifice. We know that our Lord took on the sins of the world when he was crucified in Jerusalem, and we have heard his call to all disciples to also “take up the cross and follow me.” The way of the cross is never without pain and struggle – but we also believe the way of the cross leads to life.

As we continued to ponder the relationship of forgiveness to repentance, our group spent a lot of time discussing what is important to see from a person (or a state) requesting forgiveness. At this point, it was clear that we had moved on from forgiveness and repentance, and now we were discussing the ultimate goal of both: reconciliation.

“Above all, when we forgive, we do it because of our faith in God, who through Jesus has already forgiven us.”

In order for forgiveness to lead to reconciliation, it seems clear that a number of things must occur. First and foremost, it would be important to hear an admission of guilt and responsibility. In our context, for example, we hope to

one day hear the state admit that the occupation of Palestine was wrong. Along with this admission of guilt, one would hope for a confession and the desire to be forgiven.

Admission of guilt and the desire to be forgiven must also be accompanied by repentance. Repentance literally means “to turn back”. It is impossible to turn back time and to erase the injustices of decades of occupation. However, if forgiveness is to lead to reconciliation, there would need to be a real change in behavior, an intentional turning away from tactics of oppression and turning toward liberation, justice, and human rights.

These steps are critical for imagining a time when the occupation as a whole could be forgiven. One of our group shared the story of going through a checkpoint recently, and for some reason he and the soldier started talking. He could see that this soldier, although he wore the uniform and carried the gun of the occupation, was uncomfortable with the job he was made to do. In fact, at one point, as he was checking his ID, the soldier said, “I’m really sorry for this.” And he said, “I forgave him! I really did. It is easy to forgive an individual. But I do not forgive the unjust system which puts the gun in his hand, and gives him the power to oppress me. That is something much different.”

Again and again, the contrast between forgiving individuals and forgiving systemic injustice came up in our group conversation. Although a person can imagine forgiving small, daily offenses, the task of forgiving these many years of suffering and oppression requires something more. Love alone cannot do it. Maturity alone cannot do it. We

look to how our South African sisters and brothers have worked so diligently for truth and reconciliation after the end of apartheid, and we see that while it is difficult, through grace, real repentance is possible. Liberation and living together are possible. Forgiveness is possible. Reconciliation is possible. But this is the work of grace.

So where does this leave us? How do we understand forgiveness in the context of occupation? What have we learned through our praying, studying, and reflecting together?

Forgiveness will not end the conflict. Forgiving the occupiers will not close the book on our grief, nor does it release them from responsibility for their actions. It does not take away our passion for justice. Sometimes we are so burdened by our own anger that we become stuck. Perhaps when Jesus commands us to forgive, it is to release us from the prison of grief, anger, and bitterness, so we are freed to pursue justice for our neighbors.

Forgiveness is very important for our faith, and for our context, for when we forgive, we are the ones who are liberated. When we forgive, we take away the power the oppressor has over us. When we forgive, it is out of a responsibility to break the cycle of violence.

Above all, when we forgive, we do it because of our faith in God, who through Jesus has already forgiven us. Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Jesus has also called us to seek justice, to liberate the oppressed, and to speak truth to power. We seek to be faithful in all of these commitments, and so we pray along with the disciples: “Show us the way. Increase our faith!”



# The Value of Being: The Armenian Genocide and Forgiveness

*by Elise Aghazarian*

Have you ever felt that presence? It might visit you in certain moments. Tiny sensations of a place, person or a melody engraved in your memory, a painful loss that makes you stronger to exist, or that mysterious strength to go on.... In the

place where I grew up, many families had been refugees at one time or another. Stories of place and survival traveled across the Armenian, Christian, Muslim and Jewish Quarters. Even simple questions such as “What is your name?” Or “Where do you come

from?” would often stumble upon a collective memory of dispossession and transcendence.

### **The loads of memory...**

My grandparents were among the thousands of Armenians who sought

refuge in the Levant in the aftermath of the Genocide after World War I. The journey took them eventually to Jerusalem. One of my grandfathers had lost both his parents. My paternal grandmother's mother had been deported from a village not far from the Mediterranean. Before the deportations, she had many children. But they were among the estimated 1.5 million who lost their lives as a result of an Ottoman policy of extermination of Armenians. She was thrilled to discover that she could still conceive when she had two babies afterwards. One of them was my paternal grandmother, born in a refugee center after deportation, not far from the Turkish-Syrian borders. We lived with her in the 1980s. I would often observe her, early in the morning, as she sang in Ottoman Turkish, French and some Armenian while boiling milk for breakfast in her house in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem. "Had the Armenian Genocide not happened, or if it had been properly recognized at the time, then maybe the ensuing catastrophies would not have taken place", she would often say. I later learnt that Hitler had said "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of Armenians?" while planning for the Jewish Holocaust. It has been a snowball ever since. Eventually Palestinians also became victims of the Holocaust after becoming refugees in 1948 following the establishment of the State of Israel. The Turkish Parliament did actually discuss tribunals against Armenian Genocide perpetrators in 1918, but then the subject was suppressed by the successive Turkish governments. Penal code 301 was employed, considering it an act of "insulting Turkishness".

This purely human incident has since been a matter of international and regional politics. Recognition, denial or indifference have been very much influenced by the discourse of the moment.

In January 1989 we moved to the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, centered around the ancient brotherhood of St James Cathedral. An Armenian Palestinian community existed there long before the Genocide, but the rest of the Quarter consisted mainly of refugees and their descendants. Some of them had arrived to Jerusalem as orphans, hand in hand, or with their mothers, and started a new life together around that compound. This involved learning new languages, crafts and skills, and meeting new people.

In moments of connection, second generation neighbors would share difficult episodes in their family saga, including rape, decapitation, starvation... Also tiny details, such as a kind Muslim Bedouin saving them, the scent of an orange tree, the churchyard, foot pain.... Some fellow quarter members had become refugees a second time after losing their houses in West Jerusalem after the 1948 war. Despite that, our semi-closed community was open to the joys and bliss of the moment: with much celebration and learning.

#### **Settling accounts with the past**

I often wondered: how did the first survivors feel towards the past they had left behind, especially as years went by and they could no longer go back home? How could the perpetrators live with it all? Did certain faces ever haunt them? If the soldiers killing civilians received orders from higher officials,

did that make them less guilty? Modern Turkey attempted to simply close this difficult page and pretend it had never happened, and move on, building a modern republic that was to endorse an ideology of growth, modernization and selective memory.

#### **So what does Turkey say?**

The Turkish governments have successively sought to justify or deny the Genocide under different allegations. It was after all an "equal war" with "victims on both sides", they sometimes say. Other times they blame the Armenians.

The calls for reform and freedom by some Armenian figures at the time were interpreted as a form of treachery. Some Armenians were blamed for "allying with the Russians", which led to collective punishment of all Armenians, using different conspiracy theories. Turkish national superiority was gaining popularity at that time, and provided a fertile ground for the spread of such ideas. Since Armenians had high positions in the Empire, it was also a scorched earth policy as the Empire was falling. Religion was also utilized by those in power to justify a "holy" mission by Turks and Kurds at the time.

#### **On forgiving**

What do you think about the Genocide and forgiving? I raised this question to some Genocide descendants from my grandfather's village. I reflected on one answer. K., a woman involved in the subject, told me: "How can I forgive when they don't even ask for forgiveness?" Others emphasized the difficulty of forgiving or forgetting. Remembering is a burden some-

times, a heavy painful weight on the descendants' shoulders. An encroachment of the imagined past and future. An enforced identity. At the same time, it creates a sense of internal bond and perseverance.

Year after year, for over a hundred years, Armenians have requested an acknowledgement and recognition by Turkey. Concealing what happened or taking it for granted contributes to normalizing history. Sadly enough, in the past years, some Kurdish villages have also been under attack by the Turkish military.

An impoverishing regional isolation was also employed by the Turkish governments by closing off the borders on what remained of post-Soviet Armenia.

### **Recognition?**

The Kurdish national movement has recognized the Armenian Genocide, yet it is more complicated for Turkey, which often responds to Genocide recognition by some countries with economic and political pressure.

Unfortunately, the current global system is gradually normalizing ethnic cleansing and devaluing human life. The proliferation of weapons makes it even more dangerous.

Forgiveness and true reconciliation are processes of healing that do not happen in one day. To forgive, one first needs to settle accounts with the past. To see the other. To recognize the atrocities while emphasizing human dignity. It requires some elements: will, courage, acknowledgement, reciprocity, empathy and sincerity. This would all

be too vague and unrealistic without true justice and repatriations. The thorns of the past cannot be totally eliminated after such a process, but they can help in building bridges.

### **Glimpses of hope**

I still remember a related encounter. I was standing at the door of my grandmother's dress-making shop in Azzahra Street in East Jerusalem, when a Turkish man stepped out of a car with his wife. "My wife's dress needs to be trimmed", he said. They needed someone to save the moment. "Let them in", said my grandmother. She glanced at him with her thick glasses, then told him she speaks Turkish and that she is Armenian. Seeing her speak in Ottoman Turkish made him somehow nostalgic. "Would you like some Armenian coffee?" she asked. The man and his wife nodded. She told them how people lived well together in the past and that "colonial powers divided the people". "The Armenian people did not die. We are alive", she added with a lively smile. "The Ottomans thought that by eliminating the Christian Armenians they could save themselves. But little did they realize that this would mark the end of the Empire". The man and his wife visited her again. She would ask them how the places her Mom had told her about looked. One could feel the human compassion. An attitude that reminds me nowadays of some brave Turkish writers and figures like the Dutch-Turkish journalist Sinan Can, who decided to challenge himself and follow a quest to understand what had really happened during the

Genocide in the Dutch series "Blood Brothers". Such an endeavor was very valuable and close to the true spirit of genuine solidarity.

I have often reflected on that moment. It was my grandmother's simple way of expressing her side of the story. Since ethnic cleansing often attempts to destroy the life and identity of a particular group, seize away land and economic resources, normalize ethnic cleansing and overlook the uniqueness of different beings, altering those relations would involve doing the complete opposite.

Now, over a hundred years later, hundreds of Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians and Yeminites are dying, in their beds, streets, and places of worship, drowning in the sea or tortured in the same deserts that Armenians once crossed as refugees. Radical groups such as ISIS remind us of former Genocide perpetrators. The message of remembering this part of history, even after almost 102 years is not a message of holding a grudge. It is about fully embracing the moment, learning from history and holding on to the value of life. Hopefully some day, the descendants of those killed in the region will stop for a moment, breathe in and remember. Those who acted for justice, saved lives or removed people from under the rubble should be commemorated as war heroes. In the meantime, those dispossessed this year, last year and during the past 100 years have yet a lot to challenge and a lot to teach us.



*Don't Move!: Very zealous IDF soldier, threatening a Palestinian man with his gun who refused to pull his pants down in the middle of the street.*

# Is Forgiveness an Act of Compulsion or an Act of Liberation?

**Bassam Aramin** | Member of the Bereaved Parents Circle -Families Forum

In violent conflicts among peoples and nations, such as the Palestinian Israeli conflict, the only victors are the graves or the arms dealers who get even richer on the blood that is shed on both sides. Although the Palestinian and Israeli sides are in agreement on most of the things that pertain to the conflict, the conflict is primarily a shooting between both sides, with each side trying various ways to justify their act in continuing the conflict, while seeking a solution in accordance to their narrative, whether historical, national, religious or political.

So often it seems as though this kind of conflict doesn't have a solution, and this is the most difficult conflict of all. Neither side is willing to compromise on certain situations in order to bring it to an end.

Human history has taught us that conflicts, regardless of severity, or whether they are accompanied by wars, bloodshed, destruction or displacement, do not last forever. Each conflict has a solution and an ending. Conflict resolution doesn't happen all at once and takes more than just a peace agreement. There are several

necessary stages, and most importantly, there must be a formal popular and historic process of reconciliation which should be the final phase for ending this conflict.

Hence came the philosophy of the establishment of the Palestinian-Israeli Bereaved Parents Circle – Families Forum for peace and equality.

Talk about historic reconciliation between two peoples requires primarily a long and intensive prelude to accepting this idea, especially from civil society organizations which have the integrity and moral authority to raise

their voices to spread their message. The PCFF is an organization that was founded in 1995. It consists of more than six hundred Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost their children or beloved ones as a direct consequence of the conflict.

This forum represents a noble moral phenomenon which calls to stop the killing and bloodshed which increases and prolongs the struggle that leads to more killing of people on both sides. Even though talking about the process of reconciliation is brutal and difficult, its importance is justified as a healthy and necessary historical process which is indispensable to overcoming the pain of the past and preparing for the future, and turning the pages with all its tragedies.

Genuine reconciliation depends mainly on the truth, which means the recognition of each side's tragedies caused by the other party, and taking moral responsibility for this recognition, which would pave the way for a vital and effective reconciliation. Perhaps this process depends mainly on the individuals, the Palestinian and Israeli members of the Forum, each with their own personal story, which is part of the national narrative for each side.

I personally have suffered a lot like most of the Palestinian people due to Israeli military occupation. I spent seven years in Israeli jails when I was 17 years old. These years were filled with oppression, abuse, torture, and all kinds of psychological and physical torment in order to break the will of the Palestinian resistance against the occupation.

These years are full of painful memories, but rising above the psychological wounds is part of our faith as fighters seeking to end the occupation and liberate the Palestinian land and the Palestinian people. Sublimation of pain and trying to overcome the tragedies

of the past is the first step towards reconciliation and thereby forgiveness. On the 16th of January 2007, my beloved 10 year old daughter Abeer was killed by an Israeli soldier. She was hit in the back of the head with a rubber bullet shot from a distance of no more than 20 meters between her and the soldier. She was accompanied by her sister on her way back home from school.

It was a black day, and a point of eternal transformation in my personal and family life. A person pays an exorbitant price when one loses their beloved child without a logical reason for death. Abeer was my third child, she was 10 years old, she was not fighting or resisting the occupation, she didn't even know anything about the conflict or belong to any political faction, but her life was sacrificed because of the occupation and only because she was a Palestinian girl.

It's not something very easy to talk about within this framework of reconciliation and forgiveness or to overcome the consequences of the conflict. Theoretical talk about these human values is completely different than when we attempt to do it in reality. Tolerance, reconciliation and forgiveness, they are noble human values; we learn them as we learn hatred and fear, but they are all personal perspectives that affect a person's life in all its details according to the dictates of reality and sometimes even more than from being theoretical noble values.

Many people from different faiths believe that the concept of forgiveness is a religious concept, and according to my faith as a Muslim who believes in the oneness of God, even if that were true, it is also a human concept.

Religions came to conform and reflect our human nature and not to go against

it. Islam, for example, is talking about the concept of amnesty, which is the highest form of tolerance, because the linguistic meaning of the word amnesty is wiping out the effect when forgiving your enemy, opponent or one who has offended you. It is a permanent amnesty with no reverse to it, and it is not linked to any price you pay in the future because you erase its effects altogether. Islam has urged us to add yet another aspect to amnesty – the purification of the human soul from grudges and hatred, which is beneficence. Beneficence is the finest rank of amnesty and tolerance among human beings. It means to do good to those who offend you after forgiveness.

From here forgiveness becomes a lifestyle and a human behavior which includes all aspects of life.

The ability to reconcile and forgive others begins with a person's ability to reconcile with himself first, because forgiveness benefits primarily oneself rather than the other.

I want to emphasize what is meant here by the process of reconciliation under the existing Palestinian Israeli conflict, that there can be no reconciliation nor peace as long as the Israeli occupation exists. The process of reconciliation and the signing of a peace agreement between the two sides only becomes right after the end of the occupation.

What we do in the PCFF is the beginning and preparation for the reconciliation process that follows the agreement. Therefore, the beginning of peace is the last day of the occupation. We have the right to remember the past. It is our right to be liberated from pain and tragedy. But it is our duty to be stronger and greater than our grief and pain. We have to go on in our life path to make the future.

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*Bassam Aramin, Co-founder of the Combatants for Peace, has Master's Degree on the Holocaust. He is a spokesperson and works with International relations for the Parents Circle-Families Forum.*



*Militarized Festivities: During Passover, settlers and soldiers flood the streets of H1 Hebron to visit historical sites. Heavily armed, this presence interrupts the busy market and brings tension and intimidation.*

# Forgiveness and Revenge after Fifty Years of Occupation

**Rami Elhanan** | *Member of the Bereaved Parents Circle– Families Forum*

Jews never forget anything, nor do they ever forgive.

The Yom Kippur prayers redeem sins between man and his God, but not sins between a person and another person. We carry on our backs 3,000 years of history, as victims of injustice, pogroms, massacres and holocausts. We have memorial days of fasting and remembrance; we send our children to the death camps each and every year, and their schoolbooks are full of horror

stories. The ancient Jewish fear of annihilation created a monster.

This is how the prolonged occupation created a situation in which the rule of one people over another carried a price which is unbearable for both nations.

The military rule created resistance, resistance created oppression, and oppression created terrorism that has led to more oppression and counterterrorism. Most of the victims have been innocent.

Holding the occupied territories has made the Israelis a people of murderers and victims.

This situation created a cycle of bereavement, with all the intense feelings that accompany it. An endless cycle of blood has been created. Each party is digging deep into its own victimhood; both sides are blind to the pain of the other, and every minute a drop is added to the blood link in the chain. You kill one of mine, I'll kill ten

of yours, and so on. Like gang warfare, like Mafia chiefs struggling for honor and interests.

The two nations have created elaborate systems of brainwashing which have deepened the socialization process designed to build in the younger generation a willingness for self-sacrifice. This is done by hiding the other side and turning it into a deadly monster - in the academics, literature, poetry, the media, in kindergartens, youth movements, textbooks, elementary schools and high schools.

In Jewish as well as Muslim or Christian cultures, a place of respect is saved for the fallen martyrs, shahids, and heroes. This ancient tradition has also been absorbed into modern nationalism.

When the boy falls on the altar of homeland defense, or at the front of the armed national struggle, immediately he and his family win the support and respect of the nation. Songs, movies and books have elevated and glorified the heroism and sacrifice. On both sides, an industry of memory and commemoration has been created: the two societies glorify the blood; there are rituals and days of rage; a whole industry is designed to reinforce the sense of victimhood, confirming that the way and the struggle sanctify the lack of choice.

As mentioned above, bereavement brings a sea of emotions: rage, frustration and anger.

The question is what to do with all this emotion? What to do with the immense intensity of pain that has the characteristics of nuclear energy? Will this huge force be used to bring destruction, killing more humans and creating the dark bloody cycle that has no end, or will we try to use it in order to illuminate and widen the cracks in the wall of hatred and fear? Will we refuse to continue to pay this exorbitant price? Will we try to redefine what we

are dying for and what we are killing for?

As the number of victims of the occupation rises, more and more Palestinian and Israeli families have begun putting question marks on the sanctity and purpose of armed struggle. Public discourse on both sides has heard new voices of bereaved parents who refused to accept the decree of fate and chose to see the tragedy that happened to them as leverage for change, families who refused to allow their martyrdom to be confiscated from them for the purposes of continuing the struggle, and chose to use their loss as a basis for reconciliation and peace, to try and prevent additional families from experiencing their cruel fate.

Over six hundred bereaved families of such victims of terror and war have united under the common denominator of the Palestinian-Israeli Bereaved Families Forum for reconciliation and peace. This might be the only organization on earth which does not seek new members. This is a rare and unusual situation where people are looking for symmetry between occupier and occupied and find a reality in which there are moments of hope next to the depths of despair, between slogans like "Death to the Arabs" on one side, and "Normalization" on the other side. This is an almost unprecedented example in the history of wars between nations: the willingness to reconcile between those who have paid the highest price - on both sides. In the midst of fighting, despite the natural human desire for revenge, they are looking together for a better future while looking back to the past. The victims themselves are blowing away the cycle of violence. These are people who oppose the

occupation, believe it is possible to end the conflict through dialogue, believe that we are destined to live here together on this earth, or split between us huge cemeteries underneath. This is one of the few sane voices that is heard in the dark today.

This is the tragic price of occupation: Rami Elhanan was a soldier in the IDF and fought in three wars. Smadar, his 14 year old daughter, was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber on Thursday, September 4, 1997 in Jerusalem. Rami Elhanan, as a Jew, does not know how to forgive. It is not clear to him how to forgive the murder of innocents. He does not understand how you can forgive the killing of young innocent children who have not done any harm to anyone. No matter if they are Arabs, Jews, Christians or Hottentots.

But he understands that emotions of anger and the natural desire for revenge take over the person and put him into a prison of irrational feelings. He asks himself every day: "If I kill someone in response, will this return my baby? If I make someone hurt, will it ease this unbearable pain of mine?" He believes that between these opposite feelings of "Hatred" on one hand and "Forgiveness" on the other, there must be something halfway: "Reconciliation."

For him everything lies in this one little simple word: "Respect."

Recognizing the pain of the other and their humanity entails deep commitment to their human rights. This recognition opens the door for creating a reconciliation process, and sets the basis for the existence of an in-depth sincere political discussion. Eventually peace will prevail. Insh'allah.

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*Rami Elhanan was born in Jerusalem, 7th generation, a Jew, Israeli and most important, a human being. He is the father of Smadar Elhanan, who was killed in a September 1997 Jerusalem suicide bombing. He is the Israeli co-director of the Parents Circle-Families Forum.*



*Student's Backpack Searched: "A survey of 33 communities carried out in 2015 showed that almost one in five students in the West Bank must pass a checkpoint to reach school. Body and bag searches are frequent, and schoolchildren and teachers are subject to regular harassment, including verbal intimidation, by Israeli soldiers." From: Freedom of Movement, Human Rights Situation in the oPt, including East Jerusalem. Feb 2016 [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/PS/SG\\_Report\\_FoM\\_Feb2016.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/PS/SG_Report_FoM_Feb2016.pdf)*

# Sulha, Reconciliation

Jean Zaru

Finger pointing and blame is the fuel of the cycle of conflict. But the prophet Isaiah gives hope to those who would find another way.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in

(Isa. 58:9-12).

How do we take away the yoke and the pointing of the finger? What are the demands of reconciliation? I cannot reconcile myself to structures of domination and oppression, covered over with words of peace and reconciliation. To me, it is hypocrisy when words of peace and healing are preached without regard to any genuine change in the oppressive situation created by the powerful over the weak. Too often in our talk about peace and reconciliation, the victimized are called to forgive and reconcile in a way that perpetuates rather than rectifies the root causes of injustice, alienation, and division. Reconciliation can mean a collapse into acceptance of the status quo because of the belief that nothing

can be done.

Real reconciliation involves a fundamental repair to human lives, especially to those who have suffered. It requires restoring the dignity of the victims of violence. Reconciliation contains four dimensions: political, economic, psycho-social and spiritual. Christ did not merely announce the good news that the sick can be healed. He healed and in that act proclaimed the Kingdom. Word and deed are one. They are inseparable. Reconciliation is central to the gospel and those of us who are Christians must be active in reconciling – in repairing lives and proclaiming the good news. Reconciliation as a way of transformation challenges us to resist the temptation simply to rearrange the furniture whether that rearrangement

is in the structures of our psyche or those of our planet.

But the fact remains that many Israelis do not feel guilt for what they did; they do not feel that they have done anything wrong because of their Zionist ideology. Therefore, reconciliation is not an issue for them. Many talk to us about reconciliation by suggesting a hasty peace. They speak of reconciliation instead of liberation or reconciliation as a managed process. These calls want us, the victims of violence, to let bygones be bygones and exercise a Christian forgiveness. In trivializing and ignoring the history of suffering, the victims are forgotten and the causes of suffering are never uncovered and confronted. Reconciliation is not a hasty peace that tries to escape the examination of the causes of suffering. If the causes are not addressed, suffering is likely to continue. The wheel of violence keeps turning and more and more people get crushed.

Let me share with you our Palestinian and Arab way of making peace and granting forgiveness. If my neighbor or any member of the community has violated my dignity in any way or even has taken my land or injured any of my family members, the first step in this nonviolent form of peacemaking is for the person who wronged me to choose a mediator, someone who is well respected in the society for his or her values of justice and reconciliation. Then we proceed in the following way:

1. A date is set to visit me in my home in the presence of my extended family members. Reconciliation involves community participation.
2. The person who wronged me will come with the mediator and his/her extended family members. Reconciliation involves this expression of humility.
3. The person who has wronged me recognizes the hurt that was done. Then a commitment is made to re-



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*Keep Harvesting, Keep Resisting: The Israeli military imposes strict measures on Palestinian farmers, who have to obtain permits to pick their olives.*

pair the damage and forgiveness is asked for. Reconciliation involves the heartfelt expression of truth and a commitment to repair.

4. The mediator takes the responsibility of executing the repairing of the damage. There is a trusted third party to see to it that reparations are followed through.
5. Then forgiveness is given (“ahli samah innah”) by saying, “You are in our home. You are one of us and we take it upon ourselves to help and protect the person who has done us wrong.” It is then proclaimed: “Forgiveness is a gift from God” (“samah min Allah”). Forgiveness is essential for real reconciliation.
6. Finally, all share in eating together, breaking bread together, which is a commitment of friendship and sharing rather than enmity and exploitation.

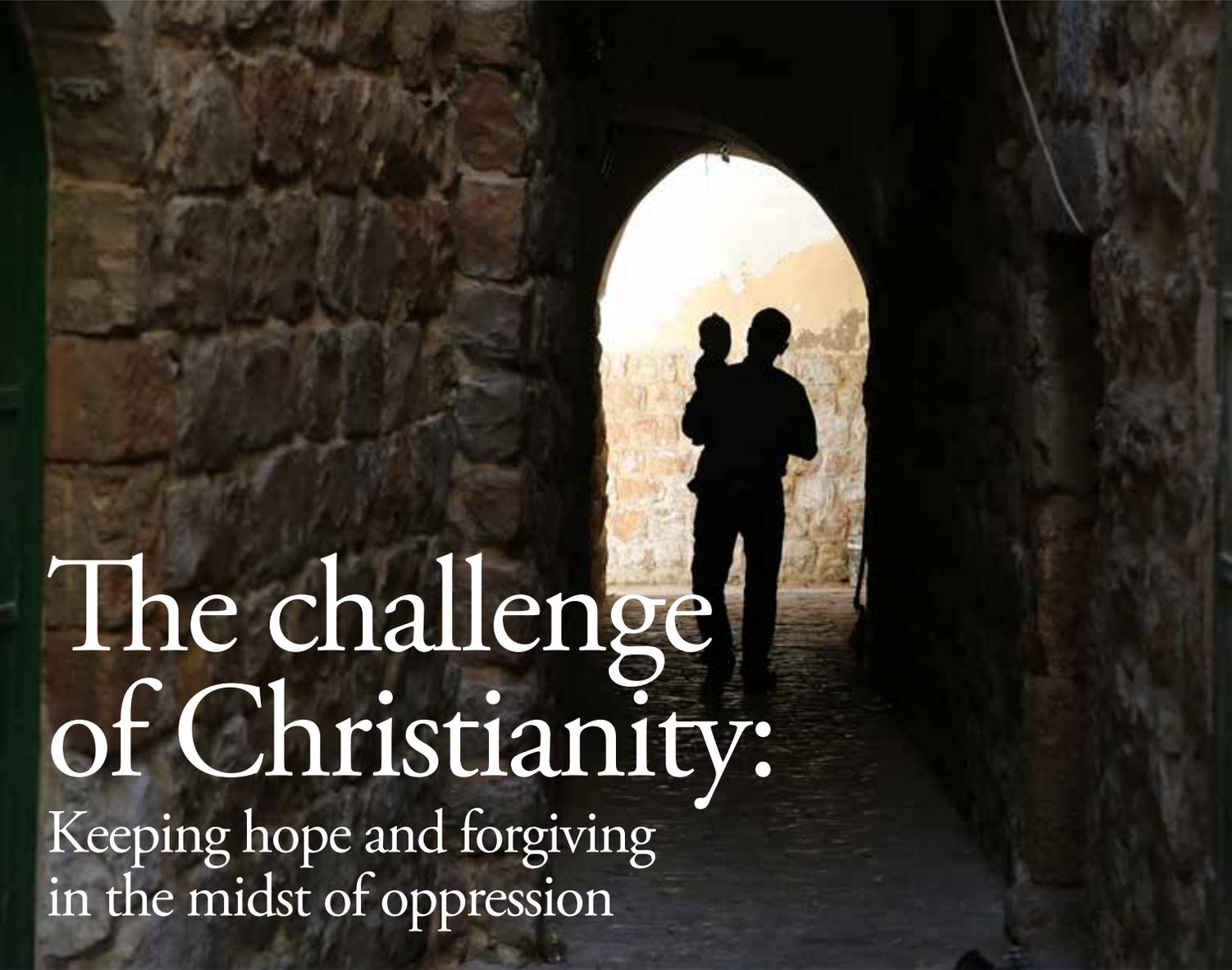
This way of making peace and reconciliation, called *sulha*, respects and restores the dignity of both parties. Rather than continue a cycle of humiliation and violence, *sulha*

takes steps toward a new relationship of equity and respect. In my humble experience, I have found that peculiar strength of nonviolence comes from the dual nature of its approach: offering respect and concern on the one hand while meeting injustice with noncooperation and defiance on the other.

Let us nurture the growth of a breakthrough community of friends that crosses boundaries, deconstructs the dominant ideology that normalizes sin and injustice, and shapes an alternative praxis of mutuality.

We form a circle of hope  
 We pass the flame to one another  
 If my candle goes out,  
 yours will light it.  
 Together we make a brighter light,  
 And each candle promises  
 something of its own:  
 That darkness is not the last word.  
 - David McCauley

*Excerpted from the book Occupied with Nonviolence, by Jean Zaru, a Palestinian Quaker who is a founding member of Sabeel, and Presiding Clerk of the Ramallah Friends Meeting (church)*



# The challenge of Christianity:

Keeping hope and forgiving  
in the midst of oppression

*Fr. Jean Nyembo, SJ*

It's been more than half a century since my country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, has gained its independence from the kingdom of Belgium, in June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1960. During this period, we have had different sorts of political instabilities that affected all dimensions of national life, ranging from strong oppositions on leadership

visions amongst political authorities, dictatorship, aborted democracy, wars of aggression, clientelism, amateurism, nepotism, and the like. The country, one of the richest in natural resources and the mosaic of its people, is classified amongst the poorest in the world. The cry of Congolese people today resound higher as they don't see clearly when

is the end of this disastrous situation and the beginning of an era of stability, prosperity, peace, justice and happiness for all that they long for.

How then, as Christians, do we continue working for God's kingdom and the happiness He promises to His own in such an environment without falling into the trap of hatred,



resentment and vengeance?

The cornerstone of any hope here is Jesus' prayer for His executioners: "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Put in their context, these are very strong words: He is killed by people He came to liberate from the slavery of sin (cf. Luke 4:18). However, they are not just words. This short, liberating and powerful prayer translates what Jesus came for: to give abundant life (John 10:10). In other words, at His Hour, the Hour to glorify His Father by His

atoning death, Jesus skillfully bypassed the snare of hatred which could keep Him captive of worldly realities (it seems natural and normal to get one's revenge from wrongdoing). But, by his forgiveness, He opened the gate and paved the road to the glory of His resurrection or the full, abundant new life He is commissioning His followers to. Let us be reminded that Christ's resurrection is what gives meaning to our faith today. (cf. 1 Cor. 15:14)

We all, at different, multiple occasions, face evil that explodes from our fellow humans' hearts. With Jeremiah, we then exclaim that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9). Wicked indeed when, facing evil doings, one wonders why people act that way? Evil becomes then something absurd. I once asked myself, looking at a picture of a heavily armed grown up man pointing his gun at a small boy who barely had ten years: how would such a small boy be a deadly threat to a man of this age for him to feel so in danger that he needs to protect himself with a weapon of destruction? It is nothing but absurdity. What to do then? Let's remember Jesus' prayer: forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the answer, not because it first liberates the perpetrator, but because it liberates the victim and prevents him/her from entertaining a vicious circle of absurdity and violence. Forgiveness is not undermining the gravity of the evil or just naively forgetting the wrong that was committed. It is engaging on a revolutionary road of a different type of conflict handling mechanism. We cannot hope to live in a world illuminated by God's light if we act like those who are darkening it by their evil

actions.

By forgiving, the Christian faithful is not giving up on the struggle to change the situation from darkness to light. Forgiveness is not weakness, rather it helps one to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2). The freedom we gain by forgiving helps to think and strategize on the ways of the Lord to change the situation.

Forgiveness leads to real discernment which is understood as the interpretation of the motions of the soul, which are inclinations that lead us to either do good or evil. For Christians, discernment is part of everyday life as they are daily confronted by different realities that challenge their faith. In the midst of ongoing conflict, discernment takes them beyond the rhetoric and makes them proactive. Discernment puts Christians in a position of people who are so alert that they fight to change their daily struggles following God's will that all shall live happy.

These appear to be high standards which cannot be attained by mere human efforts. How could a young girl spontaneously forgive someone who has destroyed her life by killing before her eyes her entire family? How could an old man forgive a ruthless armed man who raped and killed his wife before him? In such extreme situations and having pondered on the importance of forgiveness and what it entails, we come to realize how it is only by God's grace in prayer that we can forgive and ask God to do so.

Let us live by the standards of our faith that calls us winners in the midst of evil. May Christians living in conflict zones be what the Good News of salvation calls them: light and salt of the world.

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*Fr. Jean Nyembo, SJ. Arrupe Research and Formation Center, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. A friend and past volunteer at Sabeel Jerusalem.*

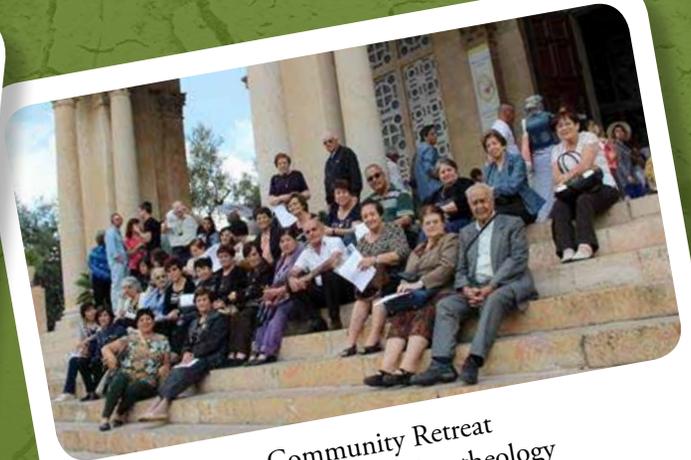
# Glimpses of Our Activities



Clergy and wives' gathering



Jerusalem - the «Prodigal Son»  
through Palestinian eyes



Community Retreat  
Palestinian liberation theology



Clergy and wives' retreat Mt. Carmel, Haifa



Tour Palestinian Heritage Museum



Book launch «Haifa» - Author Johnny Mansour



A trip to Nazareth



Bible study facilitators' training workshops



Evening on the life of Brother Charles de Foucauld and Interfaith relations



Tour of Haifa, remembering 1948

# Jesus Christ Liberator

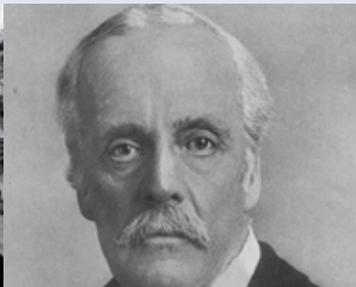
## Then And Now

### FACING THE LEGACY OF INJUSTICE

THE 10<sup>TH</sup>  
INTERNATIONAL SABEEL  
CONFERENCE  
MARCH 7-13, 2017



**30 YEARS** MARKING THE  
FIRST INTIFADA



November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,  
I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.  
"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of other communities in Palestine."

**100 YEARS** MARKING THE  
BALFOUR DECLARATION



**10 YEARS** OF PALESTINIAN  
DIVISIONS



**50 YEARS** OF OCCUPATION  
2017, A YEAR OF JUBILEE



**70 YEARS**  
MARKING THE PARTITION PLAN



Payment: Land cost for the conference is \$1400 + (\$350 single supplement). This cost includes accommodations and meals for 7 nights, all transportation and honoraria during the visit. It does NOT include airfare or travel insurance.

More information: [www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org)

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## PURPOSE STATEMENT *of* SABELL

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.

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