

## A powerful article from a recent 'Tablet' about the Israel-Palestine conflict

A Jewish Israeli adopted into a Muslim Palestinian family and later ordained as a Jesuit priest searches for words that do justice to all those suffering in a pitiless war / By DAVID NEUHAUS

# What can I say?

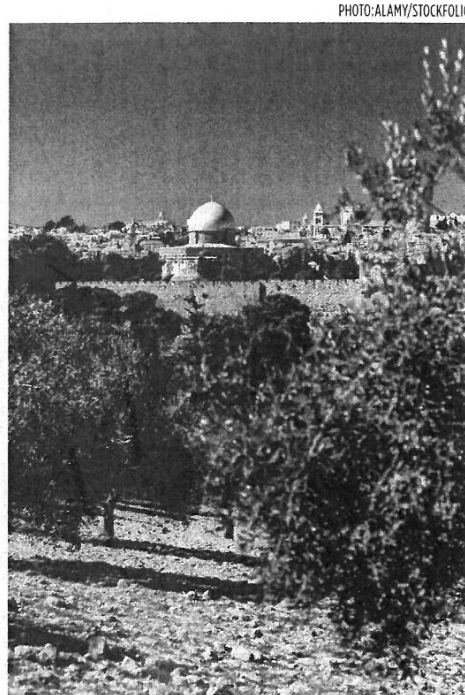
**I** HAVE SPENT much of the war in Israel/Palestine listening. Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Arab friends have come to talk and weep, rage and despair almost daily. Their words communicate the trauma of devastating war and paralysing fear. Some are scared to leave their homes. One Palestinian friend asked me to drive him to his bank, situated in a Jewish neighbourhood, so that he could withdraw money for his family. Armed Israeli men are everywhere in Jewish neighbourhoods, whether in uniform or out. A Jewish Israeli woman friend asked me to pick up her son from his soccer match, afraid to allow him to travel on public transport, remembering Palestinian attacks on bus stops and buses.

Each day, I scour the media, watching live updates and carefully following the analyses of local and international experts. Often, comparing what I hear in Arabic and what I hear in Hebrew seems like discourse about two different realities – except that the same names and places are repeated. It is an active exercise in discernment to try to distinguish truth from the propaganda of both sides of the divide. At the end of the day, the burning question remains: what words can I use to speak of what is going on? Listening empathetically to trauma in all its tragic confusion and troubled incoherence prompts me to open my arms and hug the person in pain. However, this does not suffice when I am asked: what is going on?

In the face of the 7 October murders, rapes and destruction and the ongoing drama of the hostages dragged from their homes, what can I say? In the face of the almost ceaseless bombings since then, entire families wiped out, children's corpses extracted from rubble, the wailing of mothers, what can I say? What words can a Catholic priest, a lover of the Holy Land and all its peoples, a committed citizen, speak? What words can express comfort for the mourning, solace for the wounded and homeless, and, most importantly, open a horizon that proposes a different future? Words, Abraham Joshua Heschel explained, are sacred, God's tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness – or evil – into the world.

Both sides in the conflict try to impose a discourse. Words like "terrorism", "genocide" and "self-defence" are mobilised by one side

**'The life of every human person has equal dignity before God, who created us all in his image'**



Olive trees overlooking Jerusalem

against the other in a context where respect for non-combatants and the principle of proportional response are largely ignored. Language has to be reinvented so that words can express commitment not to one side against the other but rather to justice, peace and equality. Insisting that all have equal rights, especially to life, because all are created in the image of our Father, who weeps over us, sounds increasingly seditious as the war drags on. Speaking truth to military, ideological and political power is a complicated affair.

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, led the Christian community, ripped apart by the conflict, in this search for words, with his 24 October letter to the faithful. At the centre of this letter are three paragraphs that illuminate my search. The first paragraph: "My conscience

and moral duty require me to state clearly that what happened on 7 October in southern Israel is in no way permissible and we cannot but condemn it ... The life of every human person has equal dignity before God, who created us all in his image." The second paragraph: "The same conscience ... leads me to state with equal clarity today that this new cycle of violence has brought to Gaza over

5,000 deaths [now well over 16,000] ... These are tragedies that cannot be understood and which we have a duty to denounce and condemn unreservedly ... It is time to stop this war, this senseless violence." The third paragraph: "It is only by ending decades of occupation and its tragic consequences, as well as giving a clear and secure national perspective to the Palestinian people, that a serious peace process can begin ... We do not have the right to leave this task to others."

These are not words of careful diplomacy. They are a cry for active engagement in speaking truth to power. They resist simple reductions and facile solidarities. They are forged in sorrowful tears and love for all who live in the Holy Land. Pizzaballa was elevated to the rank of cardinal just eight days before the latest outbreak of horror. His words unsettle, stretch, transform. They are based upon authentic relationships with Israeli Jews and with Palestinian Arabs. Unreservedly committed to dialogue with Jews (the cardinal speaks fluent Hebrew and knows Jewish society intimately) and to the welfare of his flock (mostly Palestinians and among them the parishioners in the Holy Family Church in Gaza, which he has regularly visited), his words are forged in a deep anxiety for all in the Holy Land. The Church is committed to root out antisemitism and to justice, peace and equality for Palestine. This is not a choice between two options but a commitment to both, even if the commitment tears us apart.

In my own search for my words, I ask three women whom I have never met to help me. Yocheved Lipschitz is an 85-year-old Jewish Israeli peace activist, dragged from her home in Kibbutz Nir Oz into the Gaza Strip as a hostage, released after 17 days, and now active in the struggle for the release of the remaining hostages, among whom is her own husband. Suha Saqallah is a Muslim Palestinian grandmother, who lost most of her family in the Israeli bombardments of Gaza, and now watches alone over her newborn granddaughter Maryam, struggling for life in an incubator. Ilham Farah was an 84-year-old Christian Palestinian, a church organist and pianist, shot by an Israeli sniper and left to bleed to death in the streets of Gaza. My words must be able to do each one of them justice as I strive to hear what they might whisper to me about what is happening in Israel/Palestine today.

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