

## A Palestinian Christian Evangelical Response to the Holocaust

Sami Awad

I come to you today, claiming no expertise on the issue at hand. Five years ago, if you asked me to speak on such a topic I would completely refused, but now I come with a deep heart and desire to share with you my story, or I can even say my pilgrimage in wanting to look deeper into the core issues that have allowed and continue to allow violence, fear, hatred, mistrust and mass resignation to be the main mechanism of how Palestinians and Israelis are dealing with each other.

I am fully convinced that what we as Palestinians experience is only a product, not the goal, of something deeper that lies in the Israeli Jewish community, especially those who came from Europe. This of course does not mean I justify or excuse it, but declare that when we are able to understand deeply the cause and not the effect, then we are able to develop and engage in the right actions and in speaking the right words that would allow for violence to stop, and for racial and ethnic discrimination to end, for healing to take place and for new realities to be established.

This personal pilgrimage, if I may call it that, took me several years ago to Poland, to the death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. .... I have been there again since that time...

What I experienced....

I went there as part of retreat organized by a group called Peace Maker Circle International. They bring people from all around the world, representing different religious and national group to "Bear Witness" to the catastrophe that did not only affect the Jewish people but many other ethnic and minority groups. In Auschwitz, I came as close as possible to witness this tragedy, to see the death chambers, the bunkers, the cells, the places where thousands on a weekly bases were gazed and the oven where their bodies were burned. I saw the ponds where their remains were thrown in.

I had the opportunity one whole night to spend it with a Jew and a Muslim for prayers and meditation, reflection in what was called the Children's bunker. It was a cold and snow November night and the three of us with all what we needed to stay warm, being in the place where thousands of children were kept because they had some potential for work, until their time came to be killed. It was an incredible experience. Being in that place where children on a similar night had nothing, absolutely nothing to keep them warm other than their bodies. On the walls of the bunker, children had drawn pictures of other children playing and singing. In the midst of their deepest pain, they had hope for a better day...

This experience was a shock; a shock that had a great affect on my life. But the shock was not only of historic proportion. I discovered that in that place of pain something new happening; a shock for the present and for the future.

As we were sitting there for hours a day in prayers and meditation and reciting names of individuals that were killed there, we witnessed hundreds of young Israelis (12-16 years old), come to visit the place in tours organized by Israel. They would wear big Israeli flags on their back and walk on the railway in Birkenau singing nationalist songs. They would take the tour of the site and then sit in circles similar to what we were doing, and then the Israeli guide would begin talking. At this time you imagine how important it is for the guide to tell these children how important it is that something like this does not happen again. Something else was happening. These guides were telling the children, "You see what happened to your grandparents, great-uncles, and great-aunts? Well this is not over. You are living in that same threat and if given the opportunity, Palestinians, Muslims, Arabs will do the same to you."

Just imagine the shock for these children realizing that it is not a historic trauma they have to deal with but a modern threat to be conducted in the same way...

These children come back, graduate from High School and then sent to the army, because they are now taught that the only way, the only means to deal with this potential threat is through violence, through the military. No other way...

Then this 18 year old is handed a machine gun, thrown at a checkpoint in the West Bank that has nothing to do with providing any security for Israel and is now told, deal with the new "Nazi" .... Fear is planted in their heart from day one.

Israel claims security, that is the match face, but in the background it is a process of planting and sowing fear...

This experience transformed my life and transformed even my understanding of Nonviolence... Where it is not just about resisting oppression but also deeply engaging in actions that heal those who cause it from their real or manipulated fear, and I want to say here that I distinguish real and manipulated fear not for the sake of excuses but also for the sake of wanting to develop the right language to address both... How do I deal with a person who is really afraid and how to deal with a person that is manipulating fear are two different questions?

I believe as the world has neglected addressing the real outcomes of the Holocaust by assuming that financial support and political support for Israel is the only way to deal with what happened and by giving Israel political legitimacy to be over-international law and human rights, what a call a "surplus of power."

Then the question, what is our role as Palestinians, what is our role as the evangelical Palestinian Christian community in dealing with this and not allowing this to continue?

What do we need to do in order to bring lasting healing to this land and all those who live in it?

### Language

First, the realizing that we have used a language in the past to describe the issue in way that only creates opportunities for deeper victimization and violence. **“They are doing to us what happened to them”** ... this line, which I have also used in the past only, creates dead ends, allows for both communities to fall into deeper claims of victimization and argumentation it creates bitterness, revenge, anger, excuses and justifications.

Just imagine for a moment that if we create this distinction in our language and say, as Palestinians something like **“they are treating us in a way that was born out of the horrific experience they had.”** In this lies a possibility, recognition, not blaming the victims or the perpetrators, and allow for action that addresses both our and their pain and suffering.

### Truth

Second, speak the truth as the truth... not to allow our ego, interpretations, justifications; even opinions lead us into affecting the truth... We sometimes engage in falsehood because we allow our anger to take over reason and distort our Godly truth. In His letter to the Ephesians, Paul said, “Put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness ... put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” It is vital for us, as the Palestinian Christian community to be a voice of truth in the suffering, not only of our people but all peoples around the world, including Jews who suffered and continue to suffer, as my personal opinion is, they have not also had the opportunity to engage in healing. Let us speak the truth as the truth.

### Healing

Third, We must not let anything or anyone intimidate or lead us to lose focus or be off track with being in and answering to God’s will in our lives and others. We must not create in our words or deeds anything that allows for bitterness or hatred to be planted in the heart of any other human. Paul says in his letter to Ephesians, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another; forgive each other, just as Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:31... This does not mean that there will be no anger and no feeling of being violated, but let us challenge ourselves, through God’s Grace, to always seek the ways that allow our inner healing in order

to engage in words and actions that fully and completely put an end to those actions that cause bitterness and anger and rage....

### Justice

Fourth, seek the justice of God for us and our people and for the Jewish people... “The righteous cry out and the lord hears them, he delivers them from all their troubles” Psalm 34 17... and in our seeking of God’s justice and God’s Kingdom then everything shall be added unto us. We have to be fully aligned in what we seek as justice and how that fits into God’s plan for humanity to live in justice and peace.

### Love

The last point, engage in continuous acts of love to your oppressor for it is not a choice we have as followers of Jesus but a commandment we are to abide in. I will not accept any argument that says that engaging in actions of expressing God’s love to the other undermine or underestimate our goals and aspirations as Palestinians or it makes us look weak or vulnerable.

### Nonviolence

Yes, for me, I do interpret these acts of love through my involvement in nonviolent action and in speaking words that allow for deep healing to take place. We must love and must forgive and must engage in opening real opportunities for the other to love and forgive. Too many apologies and compensations and declarations of guilt have take place and not enough forgiveness and closure has happened. How many apologies do we need to hear from political and religious figures around the world, from the Vatican to German Prime Ministers before we have one Israeli leader say, “we accept, forgive, and are ready to move forward”?

In conclusion, my call and prayer is to the local Palestinian Evangelical community is to take the lead in this work. To develop from within the experience of the Holocaust and our Nakbah (the Catastrophe of 1948) not the undermining or the surrendering of our legitimate aspirations but engage in the actions and words and develop our own theological understanding for the Holy Land that heals and create possibilities for this sacred land to be a beacon for God love, mercy, justice, and thanks to Him, his continues forgiveness ....

I pray this in God’s Grace...