

Opinion: Some thoughts on conflict . . . and Gaza

Anthony Green

Somewhere, somehow, every conflict must end. But in the polarisations, the seeming chasms that get driven between us, when the other is demonised (a go-to device so often in human conflicts); made to be far less; perhaps not even human, and when there's no pause in the supply of weapons by those who profit from grief and destruction, it's very very hard to see where that ending might come. How do we talk to this?

After the attacks and killings of October 7, 2023, a Jewish man whom I know wrote to me that "vengeance, at least against Hamas, is in my view necessary." How do we hear this sentiment but work far beyond vengeance?

For surely, even rage and the call for revenge must somewhere exhaust themselves. Humiliation and destruction have no historical record of paving the way to lasting peace.

Whoever we are, our sense of self can never be earned through the destruction of the other because in that destruction of the other there is a steady erosion, even a destruction, of ourselves.

I've walked in silence through Auschwitz, seen the rows of staring images and the walls of labelled suitcases and worn shoes behind glass, but I cannot know what it means to be Jewish; what a sense of living with Jewish history might mean. Somehow, though, in conflicts, the conflicted must be able to hear one another's stories. Recognise, accept, where each traces differently the time when those stories began. Palestinians, in this case, must be included as full partners. Something of the awful physical cost on them has been live-streamed to us. The depths of the internal trauma of the mothers and children we will come to learn.

But even when the weapons fall silent and they bring some kind of eeriness, that may never be trusted by those who are disfigured or those who seem victorious. It will not be the end. Because from every military conflict no-one emerges unscathed. No-one. Those who are sent into conflicts see things and do things that they cannot un-see or undo. And as we've been taught, "the body keeps the score."

How do we break through this in the times in which we live? When the words "terrorist" and "terrorism" are used so readily, so casually, as to strip them of any real meaning. These times of which the late Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, spoke in September 2019.

At the Hampstead Synagogue in London he called ours "an unforgiving age":

"In an unforgiving culture the people who survive and thrive are the people without shame. Have a look at who is powerful in the world today. And they are the people without shame. Because those are the only people who survive in a world without forgiveness."

Here in New Zealand, we're far away from the savage contestation in what has been called the Holy Land. Yet I attend a mosque where I'm among Palestinian friends who are personally connected, through family to the lives and deaths back there. And we have Jewish neighbours with their own, intense, direct connections. But you don't have to be Jewish or Palestinian or Arab to feel powerfully affected by what you see on screens large or small, or by what you read.

Very little persuades us to rely on so-called "leaders." "Leadership" is not a necessary outcome of the title "leader." So, in the words of Rabbi Hillel, who lived in the time of King Herod, "In a place where no one is acting in a human way, strive to be a human being." But how to be human? What do our faiths call us to? For a start, never to forget or dismiss the humanity of the other person, whatever faith they follow. The Qur'an enjoins Muslims to never let your anger sway you from justice.

Talking and listening

From 1981 to 1986 the late Avraham Shalom was the head of Shin Beit, Israeli Intelligence. He does not appear to have been anyone's idea of a "soft touch." Instead, he was one of those who, in the course of his work, had given orders about just when and how specific Palestinian leaders should be executed. But in the Israeli documentary "The Gatekeepers" six former heads of Shin Beit reflected, and Shalom spoke of the need to meet with your 'enemy.'

He said, "It's a trait of a professional intelligence operative to talk to everyone. Things get clarified. I see you don't eat glass. He sees I don't drink petrol. That's how it is."

And in that talking no one gets excluded. "There's no alternative to talking. Hamas. Islamic Jihad. Everyone. Even Ahmadinejad (then President of Iran), whoever. I'm always for it."

I recently sent a message to a Jewish lady in London. We were at college together many years ago. She has children. A son is in the Israeli military and a daughter attends pro-Palestinian demonstrations in London.

I wrote that I had thought about them many times over the last almost two years, but had not known what to say; still did not know what to say. "My impotence at what I see and read is staggering."

I said that, in the face of the Palestinian starvation and wholesale destruction and death, and the utter dishonesty of UK and US governments, to say I worried for her son and her family might sound unpalatable to some who I know: a case of misplaced priorities even.

Yet I feared what her son's military orders might be leading him to do and nothing I have read and heard about people in conflict tells me they emerge unaffected. There will be terrible personal reckonings to be paid and trauma addressed for all that is happening and all that has happened and has been seen and heard. As his mother she didn't need me to say this. I did not mention suicide or what actions lead to suicide, but she knew, and in her reply she mentioned the high number of suicides among returning Israeli soldiers.

That reply carried a profound sense of despair – one she said was shared by others around her. Her commitment to Israel is firm and clear but so too seems to be her anger and dismay at its current leaders; at what she feels is being done in her name; and at their deafness to criticism.

And so she limits how much news she reads or watches.

We can, we will, disagree about so much. But the need to create spaces of trust and respect in which to talk and be heard, is clear. For each us to learn of one another that I am not your enemy and that my sense of self will never be based on any lessening of your right to dignity and safety and full personhood.

nb I am a member of the Christchurch Muslim community and a Trustee of the Religious Diversity Centre in Aotearoa New Zealand Trust. I have written this as the start of a personal reflection. We've had provisional conversations about my exchanges with the lady in London but I have not presumed the agreement of my fellow trustees for this opinion piece.