

Forum: To heal the world, start with the truth

By Robert Gelbach and Shelly Altman

Monday, July 7, 2014



The tragic [murder of three Israeli boys](#) has brought anguish to Israelis and to many Americans, in particular American Jews. We count ourselves among them. One New Haven area rabbi counseled his congregation to redeem the lives of the victims by rededicating ourselves to “tikkun olam,” Hebrew for “heal the world”.

As local members of New Haven Jewish Voice for Peace, we welcome that counsel. But what will it take to heal Israel and Palestine? The answer lies in seeing this event in context: facing up to the harsh history of Israel’s nearly 47-year-old occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the systematic policy of ethnic cleansing which Zionists first began against peaceful Palestinian villages in 1947, the year before Israel was declared a nation under the UN partition plan. By 1949, Israel had destroyed over 560 villages and driven over 700,000 civilians from their ancestral homes.

We do not make this point to excuse the murder of the three boys. We make it because this event has been twisted by the current Israeli government, as on so many other occasions over the past 66 years, into a pretext to mobilize hatred and wreak vengeance against utterly innocent people.

We now know that Israeli police had a recording of a phone call for help that ended with gunshots and celebration by the killers. That information was withheld while Prime Minister Netanyahu campaigned to convince the world, without a shred of evidence, that the crime was a deliberate act of Hamas. The Palestinian leader Abbas condemned the kidnapping and murder, but Israel accused him of complicity because he would not disavow a political alliance with Hamas that Netanyahu disapproves. Meanwhile, Israeli troops stormed through West Bank neighborhoods, arresting over 400 people — many of them members of Hamas — trashing their homes, seizing property and finally exploding the entrances to the homes of two Palestinians they consider suspects, although there

were innocent women and children in those homes. Thus a legitimate police matter that could have engaged collaborative efforts of Israeli and Palestinian Authority police, was manipulated politically into a means of mobilizing the most hate-filled fringe groups in each society. These actions have been explicitly noted and denounced by multiple U.S. and Israeli human rights groups.

Then, a few days ago, a [Palestinian child was forced into a car near his own home, burned to death, and his body dumped in a Jerusalem park](#). The Israeli government became suddenly reluctant to suggest that this was a wanton act of vengeance, even though the abduction had been captured on a neighborhood surveillance camera. Next, eyewitness videos documented that a young Palestinian-American cousin, visiting the dead child's family, had been severely beaten, while handcuffed, during an "interrogation" by masked Israeli police in the yard of the grieving family. This child was also denied medical treatment and contact with family members for many hours and would not be brought to a court for several days.

There is no excuse on either side for slaying the innocent. The sad record is that Israeli forces, since 2000, have literally killed over 1,384 Palestinian children, according to the Israeli human rights organization B'tselem. That averages one dead Palestinian child every three or four days. Add to that Israel's illegal colonization of the occupied territories with massive settlements that encroach on the land, arbitrary governmental administration that prohibits Palestinians from building or renovating their homes or community buildings, thousands of house demolitions when building is done without unobtainable permits, new road networks throughout the West Bank that are off limits to Palestinians, limitations on access to water, and erection of a "separation fence" and checkpoints that further reduce the West Bank to a series of ever-shrinking "bantustans." To South African bishop Desmond Tutu the Israeli regime in the West Bank and Gaza is a reincarnation of the apartheid that ended in his country 20 years ago. And in Israel itself, where 20 percent of the citizens are Palestinians, racist policies are in place.

So we, as Jewish Americans agree with the rabbi: we need to embrace tikkun olam; we need to "heal the world." But manipulating the murder of three — and now four — children will not heal anyone. It simply continues Israel's relentless policy of making life unbearable for Palestinians in hopes that they will quit their homeland in despair. To end that policy, of course, Israel would have to face up to its own past. Many Israeli Jews are ready to do just that, but they have too little leverage, partly because too many Americans, including American Jews, are not ready to face up to what Israel has done and is still doing. Our government lavishes over \$3 billion of U.S. aid on Israel yearly with almost no questions asked. And we rarely follow the good example of the Presbyterians, who recently voted to divest from ownership of shares in companies that profit from the occupation.

We Americans, including Jewish Americans, need to take a closer look at the plight of the Palestinians and our own role in enabling it. There can be peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land, but only when there is justice, and justice begins by facing the truth.

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URL: <http://www.nhregister.com/opinion/20140707/forum-to-heal-the-world-start-with-the-truth>

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