

What Good is a “Fringe”?

It is almost 2016! The past year has hardly been a time of Peace on Earth or even progress toward peace with justice. At Jewish Voice for Peace, we focus on the unending oppression of Israel’s occupation of Palestine and mistreatment of Palestinians, but we also note the increasing warfare throughout the Middle East and the enormous numbers of refugees who have been created. We know that these conflicts and their human toll are not caused by any inherent hostility in the populations of that region. Their countries have been the victims of great power politics for over a century, sowing instability and despair. At the very least we want our own country to fulfill its self-image as a place of refuge for “the homeless, tempest-tossed” refugees of war-torn lands.

Earlier this month, we joined JVP chapters in 14 other cities in a Chanukah vigil in support of aiding refugees and in opposition to a rising tide of knee-jerk Islamophobia. Many people came out to join us, and there was positive coverage on Fox61 and in the New Haven Register’s news and editorial columns. Independently, twelve rabbis from the region also wrote a letter to the Register, supporting aid to refugees and rejecting hostile stereotypes about Muslims.

And then came another letter: a member of the local Jewish Federation’s Community Relations Council complained that Jewish Voice for Peace is “a fringe group” that does not speak for the Jewish community, and even asserted that our explicit criticisms of the government of Israel were evidence of anti-semitism. He urged the Register not to cover us, but to rely instead on statements from more mainstream Jewish leaders.

We found this complaint sad and unwarranted on several grounds. First there is no such thing as an official spokesperson for Jewish communities. Jewish communities ideally respect as civic leaders those who most fully express Jewish religious values, including social justice. More importantly, whenever leaders of Jewish institutions fail to recognize injustice or embrace actions to restore justice and peace, Judaism holds that ordinary people should raise the issue themselves. This is the tradition and obligation of prophetic witness, and we are all obliged to speak up when society needs to change.

That is why Jewish Voice for Peace was created years ago in Berkeley, California, and why it has grown at an increasing pace to now embrace chapters in 60 cities and over 200,000 supporters nationwide. We are deeply disappointed that mainstream Jewish leaders, along with our national government, have consistently ignored the injustices of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. We especially disapprove when Israel and many American Jewish leaders claim that Israel is acting on behalf of Jews everywhere and that anyone who opposes Israel’s actions is therefore anti-Semitic.

But one complaint from our critic made us smile, the claim that we are only “a fringe group.” In prayer, observant Jews often wear a prayer shawl, or “tallit”. The most important part of the tallit is the fringe of strings and knots at each end of the shawl. These are meant to remind the wearer of his religious obligations.

So in this regard, our critic has filled us with hope. We may still be few in number, but we want to be there every day, the fringe that calls our fellow Jews, our fellow Americans, and especially our leaders, to take a closer look at what they are supporting and what they are overlooking. Just being “a fringe” that deviates from the conforming group does not, of course, make one worthy. But a fringe that calls us back to our obligations and the deeper meanings of our moral values – that is something to celebrate. We plead guilty.

JVP is grateful to the New Haven Sunday Vigil for inviting us to prepare a flyer each month to promote our common concern for peace and justice worldwide. While we have been here monthly for a year, the Sunday Vigil has been at their station weekly for the past 16 years. They too are a “fringe” group in our troubled world. Vigils will never be enough to move us all toward peace and justice, but only through the focused attention that vigils keep alive will just peace ever be possible.

BY NEW HAVEN JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE CONTACT US AT JVPNH.ORG

***JOIN THIS VIGIL FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE – EVERY SUNDAY 12-1 P.M.,
BROADWAY, PARK & ELM STREETS***

RESIST THIS ENDLESS WAR newhavensundayvigil.wordpress.com 12/27/15