

First Unitarian Church

March 10, 2024

If we love justice, and if we are committed to working for peace, two kinds of moral vision are required: moral clarity and moral complexity. Celine Ibrahim, a leading Muslim Islamic scholar in the US, talked about this in the class she co-taught last month about constructive, peace-building dialogue on Israel and Palestine. Bob and I took that class together. When I call a legislator to ask them to vote for a certain bill, she said, that's expressing moral clarity. When I am engaging in dialogue across difference, that requires moral complexity. Moral complexity is based in listening, empathy, and seeking understanding. Ideally, the two are working in tandem.

Moral clarity without moral complexity can ultimately increase and prolong conflict. Calls for an immediate unconditional ceasefire are an example of moral clarity, because they are a response to the moral urgency of stopping the staggering number of civilian deaths in Gaza, especially of children. At the same time, when they are made without any acknowledgment that there was a ceasefire in place on Oct 6, which Hamas violated,

and that Hamas, which targeted Israeli children, has pledged to regroup and perpetrate attacks like October 7th again in the future;

when those calls do not include the release of hostages, or equates them with criminal detainees or combat prisoners of war;

when those calls are accompanied by accusations that Israel intends to commit genocide *and* no mention is made of the fact that Hamas was founded with the explicit goal of genocide, of killing Jews for being Jews and that its charter echoed Nazi propaganda,

and that rape is never an act of liberation,

then that moral clarity lacks essential moral complexity. It addresses one anguishing situation but increases fear, isolation, and entrenchment. Moral clarity without moral complexity can ultimately feed conflict.

On the other hand, moral complexity without moral clarity can fail to address urgent needs. It can become a form of abandonment. A ceasefire *is* urgently needed. Too many civilians have died, especially children. To allow children to die of starvation is unconscionable, whether in Gaza or anywhere else. That is true despite any number of reasons for it, and despite comparisons to other wars being waged now or in the past. A ceasefire is urgently needed.

All of these things are true at once. In the question box sermon, a couple of months ago, someone put in a question about where we ministers stand on the call for a ceasefire. I have just explained where I stand.

Some people will be angry with me for not adopting their justice frames on this issue. They will accuse me of not caring enough because I am not echoing their demands closely enough. Some people are so entrenched on one side, they take offense at the idea that there is another side at all, or any complexity. I don't blame them. This issue is very emotional. It has been polarizing for decades and now with social media we are being pushed into even more polarization. But in the

end, who is served by that? Only those with the most violent agendas. Not regular Israelis. Certainly not regular Palestinians.

It has been said that one of the ways to understand the thousands of years of conflict over the land of Israel and Palestine is to imagine a polygon with an infinite number of sides- an apeirogon. Apeirogon is also the title of a book about Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian, and Rami Elhanan, an Israeli. They are fathers who both lost their children to the conflict. One of my colleagues and closest friends, Claire Feingold-Thoryn, met them when she traveled to Israel and Palestine last summer, just weeks before October 7th. Their stories, which I am about to share with you, are drawn from what she heard firsthand from them and shared with her congregation in Lexington Massachusetts. With her permission, I am sharing most of this account in her and their words. I wanted you to hear her and their testimony in it, rather than a purely third hand account.

Rami is 73 years old, an Israeli, a Jew, and is the 7th generation on his mother's side to be born in Jerusalem. His father survived Auschwitz, and moved to Israel in 1946, where he met Rami's mother. Like all young Israelis, Rami served time as a soldier. At 23, he was fighting in the October 1973 war in Sinai— sometimes called the Yom Kippur war or the Ramadan war depending on what sides of the apeirogon you are looking at.

Rami's job was carrying out the dead and wounded which included many close friends. He emerged from that war angry, sad, craving a quiet life. He studied art, got married, had four kids, three boys and then one daughter, Smadar. Smadar was born in 1983, she was sparkling, vivid, joyful. She loved school, swimming, dancing, playing the piano. Life was good.

It was a Thursday in September 1997, 3 pm. Smadar was 13, wearing a Blondie t-shirt, short hair topped with Walkman headphones, out buying books for school. That day, three Palestinian suicide bombers blew themselves up in the middle of Ben Yehuda Street in the center of Jerusalem. They killed eight people—themselves and five others, including three little girls. Attacks like these are among the reasons the government of Israel gives for its severe approach toward Palestine and Palestinians. Security concerns.

Rami heard about the bombings on the radio. The last anyone saw his daughter, she was near Ben Yehuda Street. After a terrible day of searching for her at one hospital after another, Rami and his wife found her, in a morgue. Rami and his family sat shiva for seven days, the traditional Jewish ritual of mourning.

One of the people who had come to Smadar's shiva was a man named Yitzhak Frankenthal, whose son had been killed by a Hamas bomber. Rami was too angry to talk to him then, and still angry when they connected one year later. But this time he listened as Yitzhak told him about his organization, the Parents Circleⁱ— people who lost their children to the conflict, and were called to work for peace.

Yitzhak understood Rami's rage. He invited him to a meeting. Rami was curious and decided to go. Rami stood outside and watched as members of the Parents Circle arrived. He felt detached

and cynical. He saw Israelis enter. Then he saw Palestinians going in. He had known this was going to happen, but still he did a double take.

Rami went inside. Israeli and Palestinian, Jew, Christian, Muslim, atheist. Together. In one room. Sharing their sorrow. Rami said: "I was completely cleaved open." He was 48 and it was the first time in his life that he had understood Palestinians to be suffering just like him. Rami says this is why he tells his story, again and again: "I am a Jew. I have great love for my culture and my people and I know that ruling and oppressing and occupying is not Jewish. Being Jewish means that you respect justice and fairness. No people can rule another people and obtain security or peace for themselves..." Rami says: "I have been called many things... A fellow Israeli once told me that they wish I had been blown up with my daughter on Ben Yehuda Street...but I'm doing it in order to help try to prevent pain...What else are we going to do? Walk away, kill ourselves, kill each other? That's already happened, it didn't achieve much. I know that it will not be over until we talk to each other."

After Rami told his story, Claire and her group were all quiet. Then Bassam began to speak.

Bassam Aramin is a Palestinian Muslim. He's in his early 50s. He grew up in a small village in Hebron. His father raised goats and other animals, his mother looked after their 16 children. As children, they made a game of raising the Palestinian flag in the school playground. Then Israeli soldiers would rip it down, while the children tossed pebbles and empty bottles at them. The soldiers would fire back with tear gas, rubber bullets, live rounds. At 12 Bassam saw a boy his age be killed right in front of him. He said: "From that moment on I developed a deep need for revenge except I didn't think of it then as revenge, I thought of it as justice, for a long time they were the same thing to me, justice and revenge."

One day, when he was 16, his friend came across some discarded hand grenades in a cave, and tossed them along with the usual stones. They didn't know how to use the grenades properly, so they just fizzled out, no one was injured. But Bassam and his friend were chased down, arrested, and imprisoned by the age of 17.

Listen to what I just said. Let it sink in for a moment. Children taunting soldiers. Throwing grenades at them. Soldiers, most of whom are just out of high school, still practically children themselves, and who have known people killed in suicide bombings. You can see how the cycle of violence and revenge perpetuates and perpetuates. Among children.

One night in prison Bassam watched a documentary about the Holocaust. Until then he had truly believed that the Holocaust was made up, a lie: his enemy could have no feelings. But he kept watching, shaking with horror. Something inside him changed that night. Bassam said: "When you're a kid you always ask why, but adults forget to ask why anymore. You just accept it. They smashed up our homes. Accepted. They herded us through checkpoints. Accepted. They told us to get permits for things they got for free. Accepted. But in prison I began to think about our lives, our identity, being Arab, and that led me to think about the Jews too. And I knew now this Holocaust was real—it had happened. And I began to think, reluctantly first, that so much of

the Israeli mind must have stemmed from that, and then I decided to try to understand who these people really were, how they suffered, and why it was that in '48 they had turned their oppression back on us again and again, stole our houses, took away our land, gave us our Nakba, our catastrophe. We, the Palestinians, became the victims of the victims. I wanted to understand more."

Bassam started reading: Gandhi. Martin Luther King. He learned Hebrew. When he was released from prison in 1992, after getting married and starting a family, he decided to go back to school to get a degree— a degree in Holocaust studies. In 2005 Bassam and some other Palestinians started meeting in secret with former Israeli soldiers. Bassam says, "For us they were criminals, killers, enemies, assassins. And for them, we were the same. One of them was Rami's son, Elik. This is how our two families met. We were meeting as enemies who now wanted to speak. We started Combatants for Peace...We were killing each other, over and over and over. We needed to *know* each other instead. It's a disaster to discover the humanity of your enemy, his nobility, because then he is not your enemy anymore, he just can't be."

Bassam paused and said, "Maybe the story could have ended there. I wish it could have. I wish I could walk out of here now, back to Jericho, to my garden, and not have to tell you anymore."

Bassam's story does not end there. Two years after Bassam founded the Combatants for Peace, Bassam's ten-year-old daughter, Abir, was walking to school. Abir loved drawing, she liked to hold an extra crayon in the corner of her mouth. She liked bears. She wanted to go to the sea, but Bassam had never been able to get a permit to go there, even though it was only a few miles away. She was at the school gates when she was shot by an 18-year-old member of the Israeli border police. She never regained consciousness. The ambulance picked her up but then was stopped by Israeli police at a border crossing checkpoint for hours, and by the time she arrived at the hospital it was too late.

Rami met Bassam at the hospital and held him while he cried. Bassam said: "My child was not a fighter. She was not a member of Hamas. She was sunshine. She was good weather. She told me once that she wanted to be an engineer. Can you imagine what sort of bridges she could have built?" Bassam joined the Parent's Circle only days after his daughter died, still committed to the practice of non-violence. Now he travels the world with Rami, telling his story.

Bassam said he still has hope: "When they killed my daughter they killed my fear. The hero makes a friend of his enemy. That's my duty. Sometimes it feels like we're trying to draw water from the ocean with a spoon. But peace is a fact. A matter of time. Look at South Africa, Northern Ireland, Germany, France, Japan, even Egypt...The Germans killed six million Jews and look, now we have an Israeli diplomat in Berlin and we have a German ambassador in Tel Aviv. You see, nothing is impossible."

Rami left Claire and the others who had listened to their stories with this charge: "Do not be pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. That will not help us. Be pro-peace."

It's hard to maintain hope in the face of so much violence. So much has been lost that can never be replaced. There are wounds that will never heal, generational traumas with no end in sight.

Where I see glimmers of hope is in the places where Palestinians and Israelis do come together in spite of everything: where they are working together to create organizations like Combatants for Peace. Standing Together is another one. It is co-led by Palestinians and Israelis. Another group, A Land For All, envisions a way forward with the peoples sharing one land.ⁱⁱ I'll share links to these and to several other similarly collaborative groups in the text version of this sermon, which you can find on the church website this week.

Isaiah is a prophet in all three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Hebrew scriptures, in Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1-4 it is written:

These are the words that Isaiah saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Could we join together once more in a spirit of prayer?

On this weekend of international women's day, we pray

For the women, who are in captivity and those who are running for their lives, for those who face the inevitability of birth in a war zone, and those who cannot protect their children

For the children- hungry, injured, scared,

For children have who lost their parents, or whose parents are held hostage,

For children who have been turned into soldiers or martyrs

For the children whose futures have been stolen from them

For the children whose futures are being shaped by adults whose violent agendas, of pre-emptive and reactive violence, do not serve them or their lives

For people of all genders, who are all somebody's children;

For those who begin celebrating the holy month of Ramadan today, and those whose holy month is marked by sadness.

For activists who speak with moral clarity

For peacebuilding through moral complexity and good will

For those who reach across difference to make friends instead of enemies

We pray for that day when nations learn war no more,

Let us dedicate ourselves to it

In word and thought and action

That all people may someday live at last in peace.

ⁱ <https://parentscirclefriends.org/> You can find a video interview with the two fathers at this site.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.alandforall.org/>

Additional resources shared in the class co taught by Celine Ibrahim:

- Combatants for Peace – cfpeace.org
- Hand in Hand Schools – handinhandk12.org
- Roots/Shorashim/Judur – friendsofroots.net
- Arava Institute for Environmental Studies – arava.org
- Open House – friendsofopenhouse.co.il
- Parents Circle Family Forum – parentscirclefriends.org
- Women Wage Peace – womenwagepeace.org.il
- Standing Together – standing-together.org
- Alliance for Middle East Peace – allmep.org

US-based projects of note:

- Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom – sosspeace.org
- Seeds of Peace – seedsofpeace.org
- Mosaic Interfaith Youth Action – mosaicaction.org
- Sharing Sacred Spaces – sharingsacredspaces.org