

LET'S WORK TOGETHER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Somerville Journal, Nov 18, 2004

How could it be that the Middle East had come to Somerville? Why were the Aldermen's Chambers packed with over 200 people last Monday night? Why did so many people feel so strongly about this resolution for the divestment of Israel bonds?

As was demonstrated Monday night, what goes on in Israel and the Palestinian territories affects everyone—directly or indirectly. Palestinians, Israelis, Jews and Arabs who live in Somerville feel anguish over the Israeli/Palestinian conflict every day. Christians also feel tied to the Holy Land. Our war in Iraq is strongly affected by and is connected to this conflict. To resolve it, all of us must work to help untie the knot. We all need to try to understand what is going on over there.

I am against the Somerville Israel divestment resolution because it divides people rather than bringing them together. It further inflames a situation that badly needs reason. It makes a tragic situation worse, not better. It singles out Israel as the “bad guy.” Once we've taken sides in this conflict, we've already lost. We've let oppressive forces divide and conquer us.

The intent of the resolution is to isolate Israel and pressure it economically and politically in order to force a change in policy. It will not work. Historically, Israel has already been isolated from most of its potential allies for many years. Isolating a country made up of 80% Jews (the other 20% are Arabs) will not work, because Jews have been persecuted for centuries. This pressure only causes Israel to become more unbending, not less.

I believe that Israel should end its occupation of the West Bank and do everything in its power to help create a Palestinian state—for its own future and for the future of the Palestinians. In the Aldermen's Chambers on Monday night were scores of people like me, who are against the divestment resolution and are actively working for a just peace in the Middle East. Why don't the supporters of this resolution get together with us? Do we have to recreate the Israeli/Palestinian conflict here in Somerville? Or do we have an opportunity for something more constructive?

What people had in common with each other in that room is that we all care deeply about Israel and Palestine. We want the conflict to end so people on both sides can have normal, hopeful lives, without terror and loss. Why can't we, who are not in the middle of the shooting and bombing on a daily basis, figure out a way to learn from each other and then move to act, together?

We all need to listen to each other's stories. As we listen we need to let our hearts melt. It is our deep grief that pulls us to take sides and not listen to others' experiences. It is our grief and fear that make us defensive and unwilling to act in ways that yield real peace. We have to heal from this grief in order to think straight.

We all want to be the ones who are “right” and make the other guys “wrong.” Each one of us is internally pulled to take “sides” based on our prejudices and our own hurtful experiences, rather than looking at the big picture and working to bring everyone together on the basis of workable policies.

I still have much work to do. As a Jew, part of my work is to face any prejudices or fears about Palestinians and Arabs that I carry, including the racism of which I am not always aware. I need to honestly face where I unconsciously dehumanize Palestinians, and how I may use that as a rationalization to go silent when Israel acts inhumanely. Part of my work before me is to take a hard loving look at where my people have missed opportunities to make peace. I need to encourage other Jews to do that as well.

Similarly, I expect Palestinians and Arabs to face their prejudices about Jews and Israelis and to become active allies on our behalf. Palestinians and Arabs must recognize where they have missed opportunities to make peace. They must also face and oppose the anti-Semitism in the Muslim world that makes Jews out to be less than human and is used as a rationalization for hostility and acts of terror towards Israel.

Non-Arab gentiles also have some work to do. They have to face how their prejudices against Jews and Arabs causes them to either sit on the sidelines or take sides. We need non-Arab gentiles to become compassionate and impartial listeners and possibly mediators.

Each of our fates is tied up with each other’s. The liberation of all our peoples has to be a community effort. Let’s start that effort here in Somerville.

Marya Axner
30 Evergreen Ave.
Somerville