

Religious Leaders Support Jewish Witnesses for Peace and Friends

February 15, 2010

... the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? — The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." 1963.

Where is it possible to find a group of Jews who are committed to Israel, and whose children are likely to honor that commitment? The answer is, in a synagogue on the Sabbath. —Elliott Abrams, neoconservative and Iran-Contra convict, "Can Jews Survive?" *National Review*. 5/19/97.

[T]he two most vital places of myth [are] the State of Israel and the synagogue. ... As Israel faces difficult times, it is essential that we rally behind her to insure her survival as a Jewish state. —Rabbi Rob Dobrusin, Beth Israel Congregation, "Sermon for Kol Nidre 5764." 10/6/2003. That same week Israel demolished refugee shelters in Gaza leaving 1,240 Palestinians homeless, according to UNRWA.

The Jews took Israel from the Arabs after the Arabs had lived there for a thousand years. Israel, like South Africa, is an apartheid state. —Hendrik Verwoerd, South African prime minister, 1961. Quoted in Chris McGreal. "Worlds Apart." *Guardian* (UK). 2/6/06.

Since September 2003, a small group of determined people of conscience and faith have held weekly nonviolent vigils outside Beth Israel Congregation in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, on the Jewish sabbath. Members of Jewish Witnesses for Peace and Friends stand vigil to protest and draw attention to the synagogue's open and unabashed support for apartheid Israel. As Rabbi Robert Dobrusin said in the *Ann Arbor News* on January 21, 2007: "Beth Israel Congregation affirms without any hesitation or equivocation the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state ..." As with any other supremacist state, a "Jewish state" can never fully include, nor respect the rights of, non-Jews living under its rule, let alone the millions of Palestinian refugees whom Israel prevents from returning home.

We, the undersigned religious leaders, affirm the tactic of protesting outside a place of worship as appropriate and consistent with our prophetic and religious traditions. In the Christian tradition, Jesus chased moneychangers from the Temple. The prophet Jeremiah stood "in the gate of the LORD'S house" and rebuked Israel. The prophet Amos told Beth Israel (literally, "the House of Israel") in the Lord's name: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies"; he commanded them to "Take away from me the noise of your songs." Why? Because Israelites had turned "justice to wormwood" and brought "righteousness to the ground." And because they hated those who rightly criticized them, abhorring "the one who speaks the truth." As the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote, the prophets knew that "Worship preceded or followed by evil acts becomes an absurdity. The holy place is doomed when people indulge in unholy deeds."

Religious people cannot legitimately use their religiosity as a cloak to support evil or to shield themselves from deserved criticism. Publicly holding religious people and their leaders accountable to the high standards that faith and conscience demand is a praiseworthy undertaking. We pray for an end to the idolatry of political power and military might. We uphold Jewish Witnesses for Peace and Friends as an example for people in other communities. We pray and work for the peace and safety of Jewish Witnesses for Peace and Friends, the people of the Middle East, and all humanity -- God's children everywhere. Finally, we join in the call of the prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

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