

TIMES COLONIST

Comment: War in Gaza affects Jewish community abroad

Dorothy Field , Lynne Marks and Lincoln Shlensky / Times Colonist
August 21, 2014 08:16 AM

Wars are horrific. They cause death, destruction, mutilation, displacement and trauma. Less horrific, but also damaging, is the trauma war can cause to relationships — particularly within families and communities — as differing opinions are brought into sharp relief.

This is happening today in the Jewish community in Victoria, and in Jewish communities around the world. Conflicting opinions are not easily received. Jews who assert Israel's right to defend itself from Hamas's missiles and other attacks are regularly dismissed by their progressive friends as partisans blind to Palestinian suffering. Conversely, Jews who criticize Israel's actions in the ongoing conflict in Gaza are often told by relatives and friends that they are traitors to their people.

We know that the world is not nearly so black and white, and we believe that we have a responsibility to give voice to complexity and nuance where dogmatism has taken hold. We are a group of Jews in Victoria who have come together in bitter anguish over the death and destruction the conflict in Gaza is wreaking on Palestinian civilians as well as the fear it has generated among Israeli civilians forced into bomb shelters.

We abhor the tragic loss of life on both sides. We mourn the Israelis, primarily citizen soldiers, who have died or been injured in this war and also the large number of Gazan civilian casualties, especially the children.

As a response to this ongoing tragedy we have recently formed an organization, If Not Now, When? (ifnotnow.ca), with dozens of supporters in the local Jewish community. Our name comes from the great Jewish sage Hillel's saying: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

We recognize the essential need for Israel's continued existence as a place where Jews can live in peace and security. But we were also raised to believe in the Jewish value of "tikkun olam": the obligation to heal the world. We learned from Jewish history to challenge oppression, not to oppress others in the name of Jewish security nor to relinquish our own defence.

We wish to speak out as Jews for two reasons. We aim to challenge, first, the idea held by some of our progressive friends that Jews who support Israel's defence have abandoned progressive ethics. We are equally troubled, however, that the mainstream Canadian Jewish community is perceived as giving full support to all Israeli government actions. The Canadian government, and Canadians generally, need to hear that there are many Jews who do not reflexively support these actions.

We are motivated by our strong connection to Israel and our concern for its long-term security. We are critical of Hamas, whose attacks spread terror among Israeli civilians. At the same time, the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and the violence of the Israeli military response in Gaza make a viable two-state solution less and less likely, and can only deepen the cycle of hatred.

It is now incumbent on both sides, we believe, to return to the negotiating table to resolve this conflict. We believe strongly that there must be open discussion within the Jewish community on these issues. Judaism has always encouraged dialogue and debate.

We also come together as Jews because, while we share many of the concerns of the broader progressive community about the war in Gaza, we do not always feel comfortable there. The periodic demonization of Zionism among progressives troubles many of us. We are particularly concerned at this time, when acts of anti-Semitism are becoming increasingly common, especially in Europe. The recent attacks on synagogues in Germany and France have frightening echoes for Jews.

The Middle East's history is complex and so are our feelings about the current conflict. We want to progress beyond simply choosing sides: We acknowledge that Israelis and Palestinians are both perpetrators and victims of violence.

We hope that, by coming together and speaking out, we will inspire other Jews to voice their own fears, anguish and concerns. We encourage Canadian politicians as well as our Jewish leaders to recognize that not all Jews, and not all Jewish voters, can be presumed to share a simplistic view of the causes of, or possible solutions to, the current conflict.

We wish, above all, to make room for a plurality of voices and ideas, thereby manifesting in our own community the ideal of peaceful coexistence we ardently hope will take root among Israelis and Palestinians.

Dorothy Field, Lynne Marks and Lincoln Shlensky live in Victoria and are members of If Not Now, When: Canadian Jews for an Open Dialogue About Israel.

© Copyright Times Colonist