



# This Wall Saves Lives

This is the second of two pieces on Israeli-Palestinian relations. The first, “Un-Silent Nights in Bethlehem,” appeared in the Jan. 1 issue of THE LIVING CHURCH.

By Edward S. Little II

“I yearn for the day,” a retired Israeli colonel said to me, “when I can begin pulling down the wall — when I can personally remove the first block of concrete.” My fellow pilgrims and I stood with him, that day in the late spring of 2010, in the shadow of the 30-foot concrete slabs that grimly dominate portions of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. “But that time,” the colonel, who is highly respected in the Israeli defense establishment, told us with obvious and profound sadness, “is not yet.” Those words, and the hope and the sorrow that undergird them, are seared into my heart.

The Very Rev. O.C. Edwards, Jr., writes powerfully and with deep compassion of the suffering endured by Palestinians who must navigate the barrier every day — hours spent in line, security personnel looming, the air crackling with hostility and suspicion, a daily and dehumanizing experience. I am grateful for his article and his heart for reconciliation. My own pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine in 2010 included an opportunity to pass through the security barrier, and I well remember the sense of claustrophobia as we squeezed through a narrow passageway, concrete on one side, iron bars on the other. What would it be like, I found myself wondering, if I had to do this *every day*?

Perhaps especially during the Advent and Christian season, many Episcopalians prayed for the security

barrier around Bethlehem to come down. And I too pray for the day when the barrier will no longer be necessary. Our hearts reach out to people whose lives are disrupted daily, some of whom are separated from their own agricultural fields, some who wait for hours each day to cross into Israel for their jobs. “But that time,” as the Israeli colonel said, “is not yet.” Why? Because we cannot be assured that suicide attacks would cease if the barrier came down. Until a just and permanent peace is achieved, with a viable state for Palestinians and effective security measures in place for Israelis, the Israelis believe — with justification — that to demolish the barrier would place them once more in grave danger.

The purpose of the security barrier, we must remember, was to save lives — and it has done this. Until the Second Intifada broke out in September 2000, there was no security barrier. Palestinians and Israelis traveled back and forth pretty freely. But by 2002, 659 innocent persons had been killed and many more severely maimed in terrorist attacks in Israel. The casualties included 29 members of a single family at a Passover Seder in Netanya in March 2002, and on Aug. 19, 2003, 23 died in a single bus explosion, including seven children who were returning from a trip to the Western Wall.

All of the terrorists came from the West Bank, crossing virtually unimpeded into Israel, where life



had become impossible. In an attempt to stop the terror without military incursion, Israel made the difficult but essential decision to erect the security barrier. Given the loss of life that Israel suffered after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, what were the alternatives? It is surely the solemn duty of a state to protect its citizens, and that is the sole motivation behind the barrier.

Dean Edwards recognizes that there are two compelling and painful narratives, lived in parallel and in isolation from one another. Both Israelis and Palestinians can tell stories of innocent suffering, and of the ill treatment that they have received at the hand of the other. “The difference between the two sides, then,” he writes, “is not so much in morals as in having almost all of the power on one side.” Yet for two and a half years, until the barrier was erected, Israelis were almost wholly powerless to stop the suicide bombing.

Israel has made some attempts to decrease the profile of the barrier. For example, approximately 95 percent of the barrier is chain-link fence, supplemented by electronic sensing devices that detect intruders. The 30-foot concrete wall, so dramatically portrayed in photographs, was constructed in those areas where there could not be sufficient clearance to prevent potential terrorists from slipping into Israel, or where the primary problem was sniper fire that a fence could not stop. And while the system is far from perfect and may not be well administered, the Israel Defense Forces have erected gates so Palestinians

can cross into their agricultural fields each day.

In the years since the security barrier’s construction, suicide attacks have virtually ceased. People are no longer gripped with fear as they board buses, or sit in cafés, or attend wedding receptions, or send their children to school. The barrier has indeed made some Palestinians’ lives almost unbearably difficult, but the barrier also has accomplished its purpose.

Meanwhile, our role as Christians is to serve as ministers of reconciliation; to hear the pain on both sides; to recognize that Palestinians and Israelis reasonably aspire to sovereignty and to safety; and to make ourselves available as servants of the one whom we worship as the Prince of Peace. And so with Dean Edwards, let us pray for the

peace of Jerusalem — and of Bethlehem. But rather than demanding that the barrier simply come down, Episcopalians should encourage Israelis and Palestinians — with the help of the international community — to negotiate a just and lasting peace: a peace in which Palestine and Israel live side by side; in which each nation affirms the other’s right to exist and flourish; and, ultimately, in which the security barrier will become unnecessary. ■

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