

The Rabbis of Gaza

Friends,

When the orthodox Jewish Rabbi, in his long black coat and wide-brimmed black felt hat held out his arms and hugged Mahmood in the lounge room of his bombed-out house in Gaza , I turned away - to respect their privacy and to hide my tears.

The Rabbi and the Palestinian man embraced under the Zamouni family photo which hung high in one corner of the simple living room. It was not a usual family photo, it displayed the faces of men, women and children, 28 in all - but these were the faces of the family members killed by the Israeli Defence Forces in last year's attack on Gaza . Yes, 28. Yes, all from one family. Babies, children, grandfathers, mothers.

Rabbi Weiss had come to Gaza from the U.S to bring love, solidarity and concern from people of the Jewish faith to the people of Gaza . I confess I was nervous when I first saw the Rabbi's, four of them, board the bus to Gaza : traditional black and white attire, long beards, curls down the side of the face, the full kit and kaboodle. The sight of them left me uneasy, I could only imagine how a little girl in Gaza might feel, considering the fear she would associate with such an image. But as soon as we arrived in Gaza , it was clear who the special guests were amongst delegation. We were all warmly welcomed, but the four Rabbi's were treated like rock stars - as guests of honour, they were fussed over and cared for by their Palestinian hosts with great respect.

During the protest march to the Erez border on the first day, the Rabbi's were the central focus of attention by the media, as well as fellow marchers, not just because of their striking appearance, but also because of their radical message. The group is from Neturei Karta International, which focuses on Judaism as a religion and spirituality first rather than a form of nationalism or Zionism. They oppose the existence of the state of Israel and the doctrine of Zionism, they believe a state of 'exile' is still required and advocate a return to peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians in Palestine . They also consider aggression towards and brutal treatment of Palestinians as a violation of the teachings of the Torah. The speech by Rabbi Weiss was the strongest condemnation of the Government of Israel by all the speakers at the march, and it left the audience, and myself, gobsmacked. So many people who had associated Orthodox Judaism with indifference to Palestinians, indeed a brutal occupation, now had another image. Stereotypes were challenged; here was a different narrative, a peaceful, caring presence.

Amongst mainstream Jews, the Neturei Karta group might be considered to be on the 'fringes' of Judaism and its teaching controversial within the Jewish community world-wide. Nevertheless, the presence of the Rabbi's at the Zamouni family home was powerful. We had been walking through the wreckage of several houses, hearing the harrowing stories of the days of the attack, when one family member after another was killed in various ways over a period of two weeks, by direct gunshot, by Apache fire, by missiles and bombs. I walked through the house which had been occupied by Israeli soldiers and saw graffiti, in English and in Hebrew, written on the walls by the soldiers. I called the Rabbi's in to see it, I thought it might mean more if they responded to it somehow.

The graffiti caused the rabbi's to shake their head with shame: drawings of the Israeli flag alongside phrases such as 'you can run but you can't hide', 'Die you all', 'one down 999,999 to go' next to a Star of David and more messages in Hebrew that I couldn't read. The rabbi's met the householders, heard the stories of the attack, saw the photos, photos of the dead bodies being dragged from the rubble, the little boys and girls, babies, women. And the family photo of the faces of the 28 killed.

"I'm sorry," Rabbi Weiss said as he hugged Mahmood in his lounge room with the faces looking on.

It won't bring the deceased members of Zamouni family back, it won't rebuild the homes, still in rubble one year later, but the sincere sympathy of the Rabbi's might just shift some assumptions, provide a little hope, heal some of the pain.

With the silence of the international community, the rejection of the Goldstone report - seeking justice for families such as the Zamouni's - by many governments (including Australia 's) with the blockade of Gaza continuing to strangle the life of the community, perhaps an apology might be due from all of us. And perhaps more is due - like the Rabbi's of Gaza, some loving action of solidarity with the people of Gaza may provide a little hope, heal some of the pain.

Your pilgrim

Donna Mulhearn