

God of Israel: A Response to the Proposed NH UCC Conference
Resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
First Congregational Church
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Genesis 12.1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

My message to you today is going to be taking a different form than what you're accustomed to. Before I begin, I want to offer two observations to help set this in context for you. The first is that, as your preacher, I believe that one of the great privileges I enjoy is what is known as the freedom of the pulpit. You've called me to be your pastor and minister, and as part of that call, you've asked me to come up here each week and to expound on scripture and the faith and what God is saying to us.

I take this privilege seriously, and I see it as a great trust. It is one that I hope I have not abused in the past. I don't believe I have, nobody has ever come to me and said as much. I have heard through the pastor-relations committee that there are some people who might prefer that I have fewer movie allusions. There are others who have actually asked for more. Not surprisingly, there are occasionally people who ask for shorter sermons. You will be relieved that nobody has been lobbying for those to be increased in length.

That said, I do believe I try to keep things within a reasonable time. Recognizing the freedom of the pulpit and the responsibilities that come with it, I see the call of preaching as something that is meant to involve all of us. As you know, or most of you know, I don't preach with the text in front of me, because my desire is to maintain eye contact with you throughout the whole sermon, and thereby try to create a shared experience. I know that this is not

my soap box. It is not my place to come and tell you what Steve Silver thinks about this issue, or that.

In the more than four and a half years that I have been your pastor, I believe I have preached on topics that would be deemed hotly political just twice. The first time was around the issue of marriage equality, as our church brought its "Open and Affirming" process to a conclusion. The second was with regard to what I believe is the church's call to promote and work for the prevention of gun violence in our communities after the school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut.

Today will be the third instance in which I'm going to wade into waters that many people would deem to be overtly political. I do this not because I have sought out this moment but because of a resolution that is pending before the annual meeting of our Conference, which will take place a week from this Saturday. If you look inside your bulletins, you will see an insert titled, "A Resolution of Witness Regarding Israeli-Palestine Conflict." I did not create this document; it was provided to us by the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ.

This resolution first came to my attention and that of other lay leaders and ordained leaders within our Conference about three weeks ago through the weekly e-mail communication we receive from the New Hampshire UCC office in Pembroke. We were provided with this insert, and the full text of the resolution, and links to supporting documents. The resolution was developed and presented with the support of the Justice and Peace Commission of our Conference. It has now been brought to our attention with the understanding that the Conference Board of Directors has placed it on the ballot at annual meeting, clearly suggesting their endorsement of this resolution. Frankly, I would have preferred that we had learned about all of this six months ago, which would have allowed time to organize a series of classes and conversations and the opportunity to bring in speakers, but we weren't given that time. However, given that these materials were provided to us and that we have been called to discuss this and explore this issue in our congregations, it did not seem unreasonable to infer that clergy were being asked to preach on the subject, and so here we are today.

Now, the best storytellers will try to draw you in and let the suspense mount, build the tale piece by piece, and not let you know how it's going to end until

you reach the final page. I'm not going to do that to you this morning. Instead, I'm going to pop the bubble of suspense right now and tell you that while I'm going to speak about this issue, I'm going to let you know right now that I cannot offer this resolution my support. Were I not going to be in El Salvador on Saturday the 25th, I would have voted against it, and I would have sought to speak from the floor to voice my opposition.

Indeed, so disturbed by the prospect of this resolution's passage was I that I had considered not going on the mission trip. However, I made a commitment to my fellow travelers and our friends in San Jose Villanueva, and I believe that it is actually a gift from God that I will be able to participate in a constructive activity that day, one that will help deepen the ties between differing peoples, that will hopefully lead to greater understanding between two different communities.

Now, before I address specific points in this resolution, I want to share a couple of thoughts with you; here's where we're going to get a little political. But before I do, let me stress that I am happy to talk with anybody at anytime about anything I say here. The first observation I would like to share is that I believe the Palestinians should have their own independent state. They should be able to govern themselves, they should be able to chart their own future, they should be able to dream their dreams and hope their hopes. They should be able to elect their leaders, and they should be able to live in peace with their neighbors.

I also believe that the Israelis are entitled to the same full rights: That the State of Israel should be safe and it should be secure, that the people of that land should be able to dream their dreams and live into their hopes. I believe that the State of Israel should be able to, in fact must, continue as a democratic Jewish homeland. It is hard for us in the Christian church to remember or for us Americans to know, what it is like for us to even begin to understand, what it is to be a people who are persecuted, and have been hunted down and killed for millennia.

I do not believe that the State of Israel is perfect, and I believe that there are policies that the government of that country pursues that are contrary to its own self-interest. I also believe the church is called to work for peace. However, I do not believe this resolution will contribute to the making of peace. Indeed, I think that rather than foster peace, this resolution will

instead impair our ability to be good ecumenical partners with our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community and I believe that it will impede our ability to offer an effective and credible and compelling public witness as a church.

There are four parts to this resolution. The first is a call to study a 2009 document called "Kairos Palestine, a Word of Faith," which is available on the Conference website; alternatively, we can provide you with a printed copy if you would like one. There's also a call to UCC entities to divest holdings from companies profiting from the occupation of the Palestinian territories by the state of Israel, a call to all entities of the UCC to boycott goods produced in illegal Israeli settlements, and a call to request Congress to investigate whether US military aids given to Israel violates US laws.

It is the first part of this resolution, the call to study the Kairos document, that serves as the foundation for the entire enterprise. There is a term that has become popular in academic and political spheres in recent years, and I suspect you have all heard of it: it's called "the narrative." The narrative is what we tell to frame a situation. If we can frame the situation, if we can control the narrative, it is believed, we can control and shape outcomes. To the credit of the authors of the Kairos document, they recognize that there are different perspectives being brought into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that people have different narratives. Unfortunately, this document very clearly tries to present one, and only one, narrative. It does so in a way that makes selective use of facts and history. It does so in ways that are polemical and it does so in ways that, whether intentionally or not, are dangerous.

While we don't have three hours to go through this document with you point by point, I am going to lift up a couple of elements for our consideration. Again, I would be more than happy to meet and discuss any of this with anybody this week, or indeed in the time after the annual meeting, since the goal of presenting this resolution at our conference annual meeting here is to set things up for a resolution of the entire church at next year's General Synod in Cleveland.

A pivotal moment in the history of both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples was May 1948. In the Palestinian and Arab world, this moment is referred to as the *Naqba*, or 'The Catastrophe.' When you read the document, you will see reference to this event and how as a consequence great numbers of Arabs

fled their homes and became refugees. Many of us have seen images of these refugee camps that continue to this day. Some have visited these places, and they are a testament to the failure of humanity to treat one another in a civilized fashion. Strikingly, though, missing from this document is any discussion of how all of this came about. There's no discussion about the 1947 partition plan that was put forward and voted on by the United Nations, nor any consideration of the fact that both Arabs and Jews wanted the entire stretch of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan rivers.

Each side was being offered the proverbial half loaf. Neither side was offered Jerusalem, which was to be set aside as an internationally administered zone. The Jewish leadership decided to accept the half loaf. The Arabs, on the other hand, did not. When on May 15th, 1948 the Jewish leadership declared independence, the Arabs, rather than counter with their own declaration of independence, launched a multi-front invasion of the new Jewish state. They sought to destroy Israel. It was within that context that people fled, people were driven away, people chose to leave their homes. And just as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left their homes in what became Israel, hundreds of thousands of Jews over the next couple of years found that they had to leave their homes in Arab countries.

Partition was a god-awful, ugly mess, in Israel and in Palestine just as it was in India and Pakistan. Failure to recognize this reality, to recognize the entire history of what goes on, means it's impossible to arrive at a true peace, one that is just. The Kairos document, the resolution's foundational document, does not recognize this kind.

Then, there is the use of highly charged language. There are refers to racial oppression. I think one can raise lots of very legitimate criticisms about the way the Israelis administer the West Bank. But the use of the term "racial oppression" to describe the situation is to use a loaded phrase, one that happens to be used by many of those who support the very de-legitimization of Israel. While I'm not saying that's the intent of our resolution's sponsors, there are people who seek to do that and they intentionally use this language. Perhaps you've heard about the Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment movement. Resolutions like the one proposed encourage BDS as its known, the idea and goal being to equate Israel with the one-time Afrikaner government in South Africa.

The Afrikaners lived in South African for four hundred years before Nelson Mandela finally freed his people. Though they'd developed a deep affinity for and attachment to the land, they were, simply, put interlopers. They came from Europe and they colonized. They had no prior claim, and they went on to build an ideology around racial exclusion. The Jews, on the other hand, have a claim to be in the Holy Land that is thousands of years old. That is written in the historical record, and it is written in our holy books. Though imperfect, Israel is a functioning democracy with a parliament and Supreme Court in which Arabs, often critical of the government, are able to serve.

A few minutes ago we heard a promise that God made to Abram. One of the reasons I believe that we keep coming back to church week in and week out is because we believe God is faithful, and that God keeps God's promises. We in the church believe that God has expanded this promise, and has included us. The church teaches that the advent of Jesus and his resurrection and the birth of the Church did not supersede the promises God made to the Jews. This does not mean that Arabs or Palestinians don't also have the right to their land and their homes and their fields and their orchards, but the Jews have a right to be there, and there are movements afoot to argue they do not.

When we call out Israel alone for sanctioned activity when there are governments that are engaged in far more egregious actions, when we call for our government to investigate one recipient of foreign aid but not any of the others, we should be mindful of the possibility that some might argue that it looks like the church is piling on.

The last fifty years have been a remarkable era in relations between Christians and Jews. But it does not undo the 1,950 that came before. I fear that passage of a resolution like this will undermine the healing and the reconciliation that has taken place between these two faith communities, that it will get us no closer to a just peace or a secure future for the Palestinians.

I'm all for the UCC taking an active role in promoting peace in the Middle East. I would love to see a resolution, one that I believe has actually been proposed at Synod, but don't believe passed, that would call for positive investment in the Palestinian territories. Let's help Palestinians build infrastructure, institutions. I'd love to see training for non-violent protest and leadership. I'd be delighted to see us help identify and raise up a Palestinian Mandela.

It's easy for churches and preachers to get up on a soap-box, and it's so easy for churches and preachers to think they're doing the Lord's work, when instead they are actually giving voice to their political preferences. Numerous studies have shown that one of the reasons young people are turning away from evangelical churches is because they feel that these institutions have become too political. Many have come to believe that if one goes into an evangelical church, one is going to get the Republican Party platform. But what happens in our theologically conservative cousins' houses of worship can and does happen here in our moderate and liberal ones too, with the talking points of liberals replacing those of conservatives. The UCC risks being identified with and as a partisan player in this discussion. I believe that as peacemakers, we are called to work to develop ties with and to encourage both sides, to act in ways that are going to promote and bring about real change.

I think a number of you know that I have been involved with our denomination in a different number of capacities over the years. I serve on our association's Committee on Church and Ministry. I've been on our Conference stewardship commission. I serve on the historical council of the national setting of the UCC. Before I was ordained, I was an active layperson. I've given a lot of time to the UCC because I care about it.

I took my ordination vows seriously, and I remember how some of you were present for my ordination in Concord, Massachusetts. The single most powerful faith experience I've ever had was when you laid hands on me. I'm proud of my denomination for many reasons. The UCC was formed at the very high noon of the ecumenical moment, and everybody knows what happens once high noon passes: the sun begins to set. Still, the United Church of Christ was formed around the claim that Christians could join together around the one thing that was truly important, Jesus Christ. I treasure that ambition, I treasure that dream, I treasure that conviction.

Our denomination and its Congregational forerunner has recognized that our understanding of Scripture must be dynamic. Yes, the Bible is Truth, but it is also a fallible human witness to God's work in the world, and so sometimes, new understandings arise. We were out ahead of the curve when issues of marriage equality arose. Indeed, even as we gather now, our denomination has given thoughtful articulation to what it means for us to be good stewards of God's creation. I care about the UCC, and I care about our church, and I care about its ability to minister effectively in the world.

That's why I didn't want to have to preach this sermon today, because it pains me. I can't tell any of you how to think about this issue, and it's not my place to tell our congregation's delegates how to vote. What I can do is seek to have our faith community learn more about these issues, to reach out to our friends and neighbors in both the Jewish and the Muslim communities, and ask that we all pray.

That we pray for Israelis and Palestinians and Muslims and Jews.

That we pray for their friends, we pray for their enemies.

Indeed, that we pray for all of God's creation.

And that we pray that each of us will never stop trying to be instruments of peace and reconciliation and hope and justice and truth.