

Empathy, Solidarity and Intention

West Asia at a distance, October 2023



This paper recalls some of the ways the world reacted during the first few weeks following 7 October 2023. Most of the observers and authors quoted here are not themselves based in the Middle East/West Asia. Accordingly they seek to reflect and to write with empathy and solidarity, not with practical solutions.

In the history of the English language the word Intention, included in the paper's title, has links with tension, tendency, extend, intense, attend, attention.

This Incredible Tragedy

On 8 October 2023 the Greek **economist and politician Yanis Varoufakis** made the following brief statement:

"Those who try very hard to extract from people like me ... a condemnation of the attack by the Hamas guerrillas will never get it. And they will never get it for a single reason. Those who care about humans without discrimination, who care equally for a Jew and an Arab, must ask themselves a very important question: What exactly is their idea of the cessation of hostilities?"

"That Palestinians are going to lay down their arms and go back into the largest open-air prison in the world where they are constantly suffocated by the Apartheid state? In other words, back in South Africa in the era of Apartheid, what was the problem?"

"Was it that some members of the Black Resistance, including the ANC but not only the ANC, took up arms against the South African regime and sometimes killed innocent people? No, that was not the problem. The problem was Apartheid.

"Apartheid, whether it is practised in South Africa or in Palestine-Israel, is always going to procure violence because it is a violent, misanthropic system. Any human being living on the wrong end of Apartheid will either die a terrible, silent death or rebel and, often, take with them innocent people. The criminals here are not Hamas, not even the Israeli settlers who are killing Palestinians. The criminals are us, Europeans and Americans.

“Every single member of our German society, our French society, our Greek society, the United States society. We have participated in this crime against humanity over the decades by keeping our mouths shut as long as there is no trouble down there. As long as people are dying outside the reach of cameras. As long as it is Palestinians who are dying and not the occupiers.

“So, this incredible tragedy must be converted into an opportunity for us Europeans to wake up and to redeem ourselves by demanding that we collectively take the first decisive step toward Peace. And that is the destruction of the state of apartheid. Just like we did in South Africa.”

The original text of this statement, dated 8 October 2023, can be accessed at <https://www.yanisvaroufakis.eu/2023/10/15/timeline-of-my-tweets-and-interviews-on-israel-palestine-since-7th-october/>

Complex Truths

The Palestinian-Jewish Solidarity Statement was published by *Tikkun Magazine* and *Beyt Tikkun: A Synagogue without Walls* on 12 October 2023. Its authors included both Palestinians and Jews, and also others who, it was said, ‘are committed to holding complex truths and striving to overcome polarisation’. Its closing words were as follows:

“As we watch the violent attacks and rallying of xenophobia on both sides, we are brokenhearted. Although it feels like a time to stand with ‘our people’, we know this is a time to come together. This is a time of great suffering for all; a time of painful emotions. It is only by recognising our shared fears and our shared tears that we will find our way through this nightmare. It is a struggle we need to undertake jointly.

“When we fall back into our separate and distinct identities we risk becoming part of the problem, not the solution. Both peoples suffer from ongoing trauma. We are all on high alert. The fear is palpable. And it is easy for us to objectify the ‘other.’

“We seek a third path that neither perpetuates a xenophobic response nor sustains an unjust status quo. This moment calls us to slow down, sit with the pain and complexity, and grapple with our discomfort. It is a moment for digging deep, seeing across differences, and remembering our deep yearning for peace and justice. It is only through compassion and empathy that we will find a different way.

“We recognize and uplift the humanity of all peoples in Israel/Palestine.

“We call for an immediate ceasefire from Hamas and Israel.

“We demand that basic needs be provided to Gazans.

“We demand that the United States provide only humanitarian support to Israel and Gaza.

“We support the creation of a movement that recognises and affirms the humanity, dignity, and desire of both peoples to live in peace through reconciliation and justice.”

The full Palestinian-Jewish Solidarity Statement, issued on 12 October 2023, can be accessed at <https://www.tikkun.org/statement-of-solidarity-with-israel-palestine/>

Actions You Can Take

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) is an international programme coordinated by the **World Council of Churches**. In the UK and Ireland it is coordinated by **Quakers in Britain**. On 13 October 2023 it published a paper entitled *Five Solidarity Actions You Can Take for Palestine and Israel*. In summary these were:

1. Tell your elected representatives to act now.
2. Donate to Medical Aid for Palestinians.
3. Understand the historical context.
4. Choose your media wisely, including websites and blogs.
5. Show public solidarity – call out hateful and oppressive speech, and extend care and support for your Muslim and Jewish neighbours.

These five points were accompanied by several substantial lists of resources providing further information and details. The full document can be accessed at <https://www.quaker.org.uk/blog/5-solidarity-actions-you-can-take-for-palestine-and-israel-oct-2023>

For Such a Time as This

Subtitled '*Reflections and spiritual practices for peace and to acknowledge the complexity of the Israel/Hamas war*', this was a blogpost authored by **Julie Davies** for the **Spirituality and Practice website**, 14 October 2023



"I am haunted," wrote Julie Davies, "by the news I woke to Saturday morning [7 October 2023]. And I am haunted by a message I received from a colleague Sunday morning, characterising my response to the news as 'a neutral stance'. I had thought my response was an attempt at compassion for all those affected by inhumane violence and injustice. I had thought I was being a responsible and informed voice in a complex situation... the word 'neutral' rattled my sense of self. I spent the weekend practising compassion; in truth, I was also testing it: Do I have compassion for all victims of violence? Am I being 'neutral'? Is the former indistinguishable from the latter? Is complexity possible right now?"

"I ended the weekend virtually attending a vigil for Israeli victims at a local temple. The rabbi called the Saturday attacks a pogrom, and I looked up the word to make sure I understood him. I sensed the Holocaust grief in the room, which I will never fully understand but will always feel moved by. I logged off after a round of applause for the Israel Defense Forces and Israel Defense Forces veterans.

"And then, on Columbus Day, no less, I reflected, and I realised there was one sentiment I saw too often. Voices from different sides of the conflict insisting that, this time, finally, it's simple: 'There is only one side to this story.'

"I want to say that I understand this impulse. It comes from the effects of trauma on the brain and body. It comes from overwhelm. It comes from feeling dismissed on a communal, national, and international scale. It comes from institutional hate, genocide and apartheid.

"And also, I invite all of us to resist the single or one-sided story... Let us commit to holding many truths to be self-evident. And to practise peace as we leverage the smaller mechanisms of our world: peace in the relationships through which all change ... [and] peace in the intrapersonal space of our own hearts, minds and spirits."

The full text of Julie Davies's reflections on 14 October 2023 can be read at <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/29004/for-such-a-time-as-this>

An Effort to Empathise With All

Yuval Noah Harari is an Israeli historian and philosopher, and the bestselling author of *Sapiens: a brief history of humankind* (2011) and *Homo Deus: a brief history of tomorrow* (2015). His article entitled '*The World's Job During the War on Hamas: Save the Space For Peace*' was published in **Time Magazine** on 16 October 2023. It began as follows:

"Aviv Kutz (54), a member of Kibbutz Kfar Aza, is a childhood friend of a very close friend of mine. Aviv and his wife Livnat (49), and their three children Rotem (19), Yonatan (17) and Yiftach (15), have lived in Kfar Aza for years.

"Although the Kutz family has endured many Hamas rocket and mortar attacks on their kibbutz, parents and children continued to hope for peace. Every year the Kutz family organized a kite-flying festival, meant to create a small peaceful space in the

war zone. Colorful kites—some displaying peace messages—were flown near the border fence with Gaza. Livnat's sister, Adi Levy Salma, who participated in the festival in previous years said that 'the idea is to fly the kites near the fence, to show Gaza that we only want to live in peace.'

"This year's kite festival was planned for Saturday 7 October. 'Kite festival 2023,' said the invitation, 'we will meet at the football pitch at 16:00 to decorate the sky.' A few hours before the festival began, Hamas terrorists invaded and occupied the kibbutz. The terrorists went from house to house, systematically torturing, murdering, and kidnapping dozens of kibbutz members.

"All five members of the Kutz family were slaughtered."

Harari's article ended as follows:

"Hamas is different from other Palestinian organisations like the PLO, and should not be equated with the whole Palestinian people. Since its foundation, Hamas adamantly refused to recognize Israel's right to exist, and has done everything in its power to ruin every chance for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Israel and the Arab world.

"The immediate background to the current cycle of violence is the peace treaties signed between Israel and several Gulf States, and the hoped-for peace treaty between Israel and Saudi Arabia. This treaty was expected not only to normalise relations between Israel and most of the Arab world, but also to somewhat alleviate the suffering of millions of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, and to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Nothing alarms Hamas more than the possibility of peace. This is why it launched its attack—and this is why it murdered the Kutz family and more than a thousand other Israeli civilians.

"What Hamas has done is a crime against humanity in the deepest sense of the term. A crime against humanity isn't just about killing humans. It is about destroying our trust in humanity. When you witness things like parents being tortured and executed in front of their children, or toddlers brutally murdered, you lose all trust in human beings. And you thereby risk losing your own humanity, too.

"Hamas's crimes cannot be justified by blaming them on past Israeli conduct. Two wrongs don't make a right. There is much to criticize Israel for holding millions of Palestinians for decades under occupation, and for abandoning in recent years any serious attempt to make peace with the Palestinian people.

"However, the murder of the Kutz family and the many other atrocities committed by Hamas were not meant to restart the peace process, nor are they likely to liberate a single Palestinian from Israeli occupation. Instead, the war Hamas launched inflicts immense suffering on millions of Palestinians. Driven by its religious fanaticism, Hamas just doesn't seem to care about human suffering—either of Israelis or Palestinians. Unlike the secular PLO, many of Hamas's leaders and activists seem to care mainly about their fantasies of heavenly afterlife. They are willing to consign this world to the flames and to destroy our souls in the process, so that their own souls will allegedly enjoy everlasting bliss in another world.

“We must win this war of souls. In its war against Hamas, Israel has a duty to defend its territory and its citizens, but it must also defend its humanity. Our war is with Hamas, not with the Palestinian people. Palestinian civilians deserve to enjoy peace and prosperity in their homeland, and even in the midst of conflict their basic human rights should be recognized by all sides. This refers not only to Israel, but also to Egypt, which shares a border with the Gaza Strip, and which has partially sealed that border.

“As for Hamas, it and its supporters should be excommunicated by humanity. Not only Israel, but the entire human community should place Hamas completely beyond its pale, just as it has previously done with ISIS. Israeli citizens cannot live in places like Kfar Aza with Hamas across the fence, just as Iraqi and Syrian citizens could not live with ISIS on their doorstep. Tens of thousands of Israeli civilians have already fled the border areas, and they cannot go back to their homes until the threat to their lives is removed. At a deeper level, the lives of all humans are devalued and endangered as long as organisations like Hamas and ISIS are allowed to exist.

“The aims of the Gaza War should be clear. At the end of the war, Hamas should be totally disarmed and the Gaza Strip should be demilitarised, so that Palestinian civilians could live dignified lives within the Gaza Strip, and Israeli civilians could live without fear alongside the Gaza Strip. Until these aims are achieved, the struggle to maintain our humanity will be difficult. Most Israelis are psychologically incapable at this moment of empathising with the Palestinians. The mind is filled to the brim with our own pain, and no space is left to even acknowledge the pain of others. Many of the people who tried to hold such a space—like the Kutz family—are dead or deeply traumatised. Most Palestinians are in an analogous situation—their minds too are so filled with pain, they cannot see our pain.

“But outsiders who are not themselves immersed in pain should make an effort to empathise with all suffering humans, rather than lazily seeing only part of the terrible reality. It is the job of outsiders to help maintain a space for peace. We deposit this peaceful space with you, because we cannot hold it right now. Take good care of it for us, so that one day, when the pain begins to heal, both Israelis and Palestinians might inhabit that space.”

The full text of Noah Harari’s article for Time Magazine, published on 16 October 2023, can be accessed at <https://time.com/6324254/israel-hamas-war-peace-yuval-noah-harari/>

In My Name, I Want No Vengeance

This was a blogpost on 18 October 2023 by **Charles Eisenstein**, whose work as a thinker, author, speaker and blogger is internationally well-known. “It is one thing,” he began, “for outsiders like myself to call for an end to the cycle of vengeance that, if it proceeds unrestrained, could very easily soak the whole world in blood. It is quite another thing for someone immediately and directly impacted by violence to repudiate revenge.” He then quoted a video statement by Michal Halev, the mother of a young man who had been murdered by Hamas on 7 October. This ended with the words ‘In my name, I want no vengeance’.

Charles Eisenstein repeated these words, and continued:

“Why? Because she is a mother. Because she doesn’t want any other mothers, whether they live in Israel or in Gaza, to go through the shattering pain she has. The simplicity of her words cuts right through the fog of reason that forever justifies one more war. I want everyone who might be lost in that fog to hear this woman’s words

“If this mother repudiates revenge, then who dares claim a right to it?”

“That’s the kind of leadership we need today. We need leaders who are humbled by the courage of women like Michal. A true leader is someone who sets a new course, not someone who merely presides over the momentum of what already is.

“I want anyone who aspires to leadership to take Michal’s words to heart ... I don’t care how naive, how politically impractical, how impossible it may seem to put out the fire of hate and blame and revenge that is spreading through the tinderbox of West Asia. ... I know I am asking a lot ... but it is not impossible

“We can stop the cycle of vengeance. The situation in Israel/Palestine poses a grave danger to the world, but an equally great opportunity for a turnaround. A peace miracle here will reverberate throughout all creation. If Michal’s words can reach those with their fingers on the triggers, and move them to make audaciously naive choices, then her son will not have died in vain.”

Charles Eisenstein’s blogpost was published on 18 October 2023 and can be accessed at <https://charleseisenstein.substack.com/p/in-my-name-i-want-no-vengeance>

We Belong to Each Other

The following statement was published as a blogpost on 1 November 2023 by the Othering and Belonging Institute (OBI), based at the University of California, Berkeley. The institute is concerned with ‘groundbreaking approaches to transforming structural marginalisation and inequality’ and its members are ‘scholars, organisers, communicators, researchers, artists and policymakers committed to building a world where all people belong’.

“With the death toll in Gaza climbing past **8,500 people**, including more than **3,500 children**, and hundreds more being killed each day in Israel’s relentless bombardment of homes and other civilian infrastructure, we at OBI join a growing global chorus of calls for an immediate ceasefire, as has been **repeatedly demanded by the United Nations**, and a return of the hostages.

“We are heartbroken by the killings and unfathomable carnage suffered both by the Palestinians in Gaza and the Israelis attacked by Hamas on Oct. 7 when some 1,400 were killed and over 200 kidnapped, including children. We believe that all life is precious and that all people belong, and so we mourn every single loss.

“Our work is to build a world of belonging without othering. A feature of othering is drawing lines between those whose deaths are grievable, and those unworthy of our grief and concern. Even in the depth of our anguish, when love propels our tears and rage, we must not succumb to the drive to draw this line. Especially now, when dehumanization is widespread in governments, on the internet, in the news, in our

communities and in our bodies. All of us must vehemently reject it in all its forms and embrace the value and worth of all people. Our very survival depends on it.

"We call, instead, on all of us to hold each other's pain, to listen, and to cross our differences, no matter how seemingly vast, to work together to change the structures of marginalization and domination that harm us all. Even if they harm us in greatly different ways, we must find ways to bridge that distance. When we honor each other's unfathomable grief, we reclaim each other's humanity. It is these calls that have repeatedly held our own diverse and impacted staff together through the most painful of times. They work.

"At OBI, we also recognise asymmetries of power and resources between individuals, social groups, institutions and governments. We see that some groups are 'othered' while some groups may be less othered and at times enjoy greater privileges and power, such as the current Israeli political structure which one of Israel's [leading human rights groups](#), as well as [Human Rights Watch](#) and others, have all called apartheid. We further recognize that these power asymmetries extend to the capacity to inflict violence, including military violence or project force.

"We also distinguish between individual people and the institutions, governments, and structures that we inhabit and too often divide us. For us, this is not fundamentally a story of Israeli versus Palestinian. Nor should being critical of Hamas or the Israeli government or, for that matter, the United States—as we often are—be equated with being either anti-Jewish or anti-Palestinian or un-American.

"This is, instead, a story about globally intertwined structures of othering, such as genocide and settler colonialism, bringing into present time a torturous history and logic of hierarchy of life that has caused an unspeakable swath of death, domination, and trauma among everyday people across the world including Palestinians, Jews, Arabs of all faiths, Africans, indigenous peoples, poor whites, women, LGBTQ people and more. In that sense, we are all enmeshed in these structures, and we all must bear responsibility for transforming them.

"That transformation must recognise our interdependence, and it cannot be achieved through dehumanisation or harming and terrorizing civilians, which is a violation of international law and takes away our humanity. For that reason, we make demands on Israel and Hamas, which have both committed horrific war crimes.

"At the same time, we must recognise the root cause of this violence is Israel's occupation and apartheid system, made possible to an extraordinary degree by the United States' longstanding and overwhelming military support and diplomatic cover. This should not be read as an excuse for violence perpetrated by Hamas and others. We know there is a long history of trauma and pain visited upon all the groups involved. But this does not justify the extension of more pain and killing of the apparent other.

"Put another way, while countless people are experiencing deep pain and fear, with too many paying an unspeakable price, the groups to which we belong are not harmed in the same way. Palestinians have been made refugees and have lived under a dehumanising occupation for decades, and Israeli government policies have long supported ongoing settlements and disregard for Palestinians' basic rights and territory. In Gaza, for decades, the conditions under which now over two million people have been forced to live are even more unthinkable. Now and too often, Jews live under a sense of dread and terror, most recently due to the attacks by Hamas. While it may be understandable at some level for the United States to talk about supporting Israel as a friend of America, this calculus diminishes the humanity and grievability of Palestinians.

“Structural othering, which tolerates widespread killing, can only end when we join efforts to build structures built on belonging and peaceful co-existence under conditions of mutuality, agency, dignity and non-domination.

“We believe all people are of equal dignity and worth, and that all people belong. This is what our future demands. Calls or demands for one people to leave or be expelled from an area they inhabit are utterly incompatible with the ideal of belonging.

“Instead of allowing powerful forces and flattening narratives to pit us against each other, now more than ever, we, the people across the globe and from every community who stand on the side of humanity, who know that Palestinian and Israeli and all life is equally precious, who oppose all forms of supremacy and hierarchy of life, must turn towards each other, if we are to have a future.

“As Palestinians suffer under collective punishment and Gaza is made increasingly unrecognisable and uninhabitable, and Jews suffer from the attacks and worry about loved ones taken as pawns in a political fight, we as a society will also be unrecognisable to future generations if we do not stand up for Palestinian and Jewish humanity and our shared, unequivocal right to belong without othering.

“We know there are complicated military and political concerns that we have not addressed in this statement and may not necessarily be aware of. But we believe our call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza is crucial to respond to the humanitarian crisis impacting more than two million people, and that such a call is not only consistent with any moral position that respects human life but is also consistent with international law.”

The full text of the statement on the conflict in Israel/Palestine by the Othering and Belonging Institute on 1 November 2023 can be read at:

<https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Nov-1-2023-Gaza-ceasefire-statement.html>