

# Time to Break the Silence on Palestine

Martin Luther King Jr. courageously spoke out about the Vietnam War. We must do the same when it comes to this grave injustice of our time.



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On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stepped up to the lectern at the Riverside Church in Manhattan. The United States had been in active combat in Vietnam for two years and tens of thousands of people had been killed, including some 10,000 American troops. The political establishment — from left to right — backed the war, and more than 400,000 American service members were in Vietnam, their lives on the line.

Many of King's strongest allies urged him to remain silent about the war or at least to soft-pedal any criticism. They knew that if he told the whole truth about the unjust and disastrous war he would be falsely labeled a Communist, suffer retaliation and severe backlash, alienate supporters and threaten the fragile progress of the civil rights movement.

King rejected all the well-meaning advice and said, "I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice." Quoting a statement by the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, he said, "A time comes when silence is betrayal" and added, "that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam."

It was a lonely, moral stance. And it cost him. But it set an example of what is required of us if we are to honor our deepest values in times of crisis, even when silence would better serve our personal interests or the communities and causes we hold most dear. It's what I think about when I go over the excuses and rationalizations that have kept me largely silent on one of the great moral challenges of our time: the crisis in Israel-Palestine.

I have not been alone. Until very recently, the entire Congress has remained mostly silent on the human rights nightmare that has unfolded in the occupied territories. Our elected representatives, who operate in a political environment where Israel's political lobby holds well-documented power, have consistently minimized and deflected criticism of the State of Israel,

even as it has grown more emboldened in its occupation of Palestinian territory and adopted some practices reminiscent of apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow segregation in the United States.

Many civil rights activists and organizations have remained silent as well, not because they lack concern or sympathy for the Palestinian people, but because they fear loss of funding from foundations, and false charges of anti-Semitism. They worry, as I once did, that their important social justice work will be compromised or discredited by smear campaigns.

Similarly, many students are fearful of expressing support for Palestinian rights because of the McCarthyite tactics of secret organizations like Canary Mission, which blacklists those who publicly dare to support boycotts against Israel, jeopardizing their employment prospects and future careers.

Reading King's speech at Riverside more than 50 years later, I am left with little doubt that his teachings and message require us to speak out passionately against the human rights crisis in Israel-Palestine, despite the risks and despite the complexity of the issues. King argued, when speaking of Vietnam, that even "when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict," we must not be mesmerized by uncertainty. "We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak."

And so, if we are to honor King's message and not merely the man, we must condemn Israel's actions: unrelenting violations of international law, continued occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, home demolitions and land confiscations. We must cry out at the treatment of Palestinians at checkpoints, the routine searches of their homes and restrictions on their movements, and the severely limited access to decent housing, schools, food, hospitals and water that many of them face.

We must not tolerate Israel's refusal even to discuss the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, as prescribed by United Nations resolutions, and we ought to question the U.S. government funds that have supported multiple hostilities and thousands of civilian casualties in Gaza, as well as the \$38 billion the U.S. government has pledged in military support to Israel.

And finally, we must, with as much courage and conviction as we can muster, speak out against the system of legal discrimination that exists inside Israel, a system complete with, according to Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, more than 50 laws that discriminate against Palestinians — such as the new nation-state law that says explicitly that only Jewish Israelis have the right of self-determination in Israel, ignoring the rights of the Arab minority that makes up 21 percent of the population.

Of course, there will be those who say that we can't know for sure what King would do or think regarding Israel-Palestine today. That is true. The evidence regarding King's views on Israel is complicated and contradictory.

Although the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee denounced Israel's actions against Palestinians, King found himself conflicted. Like many black leaders of the time, he recognized European Jewry as a persecuted, oppressed and homeless people striving to build a nation of their own, and he wanted to show solidarity with the Jewish community, which had been a critically important ally in the civil rights movement.

Ultimately, King canceled a pilgrimage to Israel in 1967 after Israel captured the West Bank. During a phone call about the visit with his advisers, he said, "I just think that if I go, the Arab world, and of course Africa and Asia for that matter, would interpret this as endorsing everything that Israel has done, and I do have questions of doubt."

He continued to support Israel's right to exist but also said on national television that it would be necessary for Israel to return parts of its conquered territory to achieve true peace and security and to avoid exacerbating the conflict. There was no way King could publicly reconcile his commitment to nonviolence and justice for all people, everywhere, with what had transpired after the 1967 war.

Today, we can only speculate about where King would stand. Yet I find myself in agreement with the historian Robin D.G. Kelley, who concluded that, if King had the opportunity to study the current situation in the same way he had studied Vietnam, "his unequivocal opposition to violence, colonialism, racism and militarism would have made him an incisive critic of Israel's current policies."

Indeed, King's views may have evolved alongside many other spiritually grounded thinkers, like Rabbi Brian Walt, who has spoken publicly about the reasons that he abandoned his faith in what he viewed as political Zionism. To him, he recently explained to me, liberal Zionism meant that he believed in the creation of a Jewish state that would be a desperately needed safe haven and cultural center for Jewish people around the world, "a state that would reflect as well as honor the highest ideals of the Jewish tradition." He said he grew up in South Africa in a family that shared those views and identified as a liberal Zionist, until his experiences in the occupied territories forever changed him.

During more than 20 visits to the West Bank and Gaza, he saw horrific human rights abuses, including Palestinian homes being bulldozed while people cried — children's toys strewn over one demolished site — and saw Palestinian lands being confiscated to make way for new illegal settlements subsidized by the Israeli government. He was forced to reckon with the reality that these demolitions, settlements and acts of violent dispossession were not rogue moves, but fully

supported and enabled by the Israeli military. For him, the turning point was witnessing legalized discrimination against Palestinians — including streets for Jews only — which, he said, was worse in some ways than what he had witnessed as a boy in South Africa.

Not so long ago, it was fairly rare to hear this perspective. That is no longer the case.

Jewish Voice for Peace, for example, aims to educate the American public about “the forced displacement of approximately 750,000 Palestinians that began with Israel’s establishment and that continues to this day.” Growing numbers of people of all faiths and backgrounds have spoken out with more boldness and courage. American organizations such as If Not Now support young American Jews as they struggle to break the deadly silence that still exists among too many people regarding the occupation, and hundreds of secular and faith-based groups have joined the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

In view of these developments, it seems the days when critiques of Zionism and the actions of the State of Israel can be written off as anti-Semitism are coming to an end. There seems to be increased understanding that criticism of the policies and practices of the Israeli government is not, in itself, anti-Semitic.

This is not to say that anti-Semitism is not real. Neo-Nazism is resurging in Germany within a growing anti-immigrant movement. Anti-Semitic incidents in the United States rose 57 percent in 2017, and many of us are still mourning what is believed to be the deadliest attack on Jewish people in American history. We must be mindful in this climate that, while criticism of Israel is not inherently anti-Semitic, it can slide there.

Fortunately, people like the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II are leading by example, pledging allegiance to the fight against anti-Semitism while also demonstrating unwavering solidarity with the Palestinian people struggling to survive under Israeli occupation.

He declared in a riveting speech last year that we cannot talk about justice without addressing the displacement of native peoples, the systemic racism of colonialism and the injustice of government repression. In the same breath he said: “I want to say, as clearly as I know how, that the humanity and the dignity of any person or people cannot in any way diminish the humanity and dignity of another person or another people. To hold fast to the image of God in every person is to insist that the Palestinian child is as precious as the Jewish child.”

Guided by this kind of moral clarity, faith groups are taking action. In 2016, the pension board of the United Methodist Church excluded from its multibillion-dollar pension fund Israeli banks whose loans for settlement construction violate international law. Similarly, the United Church of Christ the year before passed a resolution calling for divestments and boycotts of companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories.

Even in Congress, change is on the horizon. For the first time, two sitting members, Representatives Ilhan Omar, Democrat of Minnesota, and Rashida Tlaib, Democrat of Michigan, publicly support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. In 2017, Representative Betty McCollum, Democrat of Minnesota, introduced a resolution to ensure that no U.S. military aid went to support Israel's juvenile military detention system. Israel regularly prosecutes Palestinian children detainees in the occupied territories in military court.



Relatives of a Palestinian nurse, Razan al-Najjar, 21, mourning in June after she was shot dead in Gaza by Israeli soldiers. Hosam Salem for The New York Times

None of this is to say that the tide has turned entirely or that retaliation has ceased against those who express strong support for Palestinian rights. To the contrary, just as King received fierce, overwhelming criticism for his speech condemning the Vietnam War — 168 major newspapers, including The Times, denounced the address the following day — those who speak publicly in support of the liberation of the Palestinian people still risk condemnation and backlash.

Bahia Amawi, an American speech pathologist of Palestinian descent, was recently terminated for refusing to sign a contract that contains an anti-boycott pledge stating that she does not, and will not, participate in boycotting the State of Israel. In November, Marc Lamont Hill was fired from CNN for giving a speech in support of Palestinian rights that was grossly misinterpreted as expressing support for violence. Canary Mission continues to pose a serious threat to student activists.

And just over a week ago, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama, apparently under pressure mainly from segments of the Jewish community and others, rescinded an honor it bestowed upon the civil rights icon Angela Davis, who has been a vocal critic of Israel's treatment of Palestinians and supports B.D.S.

But that attack backfired. Within 48 hours, academics and activists had mobilized in response. The mayor of Birmingham, Randall Woodfin, as well as the Birmingham School Board and the City Council, expressed outrage at the institute's decision. The council unanimously passed a resolution in Davis' honor, and an alternative event is being organized to celebrate her decades-long commitment to liberation for all.

I cannot say for certain that King would applaud Birmingham for its zealous defense of Angela Davis's solidarity with Palestinian people. But I do. In this new year, I aim to speak with greater courage and conviction about injustices beyond our borders, particularly those that are funded by our government, and stand in solidarity with struggles for democracy and freedom. My conscience leaves me no other choice.



The Said al-Mis'hal cultural center in Gaza was hit by an Israeli airstrike in August.  
Khalil Hamra/Associated Press

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