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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Challenges of Teaching and Learning about Israel/Palestine after October 7

Martha Moore-Keish, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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Twelve weeks ago, there was a class, who took on an enormous task, of studying the present and the past, Israel and Palestine.

Dr. Breed taught them the history, so that it wouldn't be a mystery, when they set out on their journey, to explore a land where two people are entwined.

All was going great, as the students began to articulate the past, present and current state, of historical sites and holy places,

Then October 7th came, the bombing by Hamas was to blame, all our plans had to change, no longer could we enter these sacred spaces. . .

So began a reflection by Columbia Theological Seminary student A'Keti Mayweather, at the end of a January 2024 trip that was originally planned as a travel seminar in Israel and Palestine. My colleague Brennan Breed and I were scheduled to take a group of students to that land for two weeks, and he was teaching a fall class in preparation for the trip. Everything changed on October 7. As A'Keti put it,

Drs. Breed and Moore-Keish developed a plan, to help us learn from our fellow man, in two of our nation's greatest domestic lands, New York and Washington D.C. . . .

We were concerned about how to do this well; after all, protests were roiling university campuses, colleagues and administrators were being publicly criticized for what they said and did not say about the conflict, and people were being threatened and losing their jobs. All this while real human beings are fighting and dying in Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank.

Quickly, we put together a trip that enabled us to meet with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in these two U.S. cities, to seek understanding of Israeli and Palestinian peoples amid the unfolding conflict. With help from colleagues at the American Jewish Committee, the United Nations, the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness, and others, we attended worship services in synagogues and masjids, shared meals with rabbis and pastors, talked with imams, activists, and aid workers, scholars and students, United Nations representatives and staff at the U.S. Holocaust Museum. As our student Jordan put it,

As we visited more places, it became clear that many of the stories I had heard were true about Palestinian and Jewish suffering. Talking to [our Jewish and Palestinian partners] it was clear that many people were hurt and afraid. That there was much destruction. As we went on, we heard more and more of these stories and each time it seemed as though it got worse as the casualties grew, more disagreement presented itself, hope seemed to dwindle, and the status quo seemed to prevail.

The challenges in this class were real: suddenly planning a new trip on short notice; addressing our shared disappointment at the change; seeking engagement with multiple communities who were themselves in the midst of trauma; trying to cultivate compassion without becoming overwhelmed by the complexity and scale of the suffering. How and what did we learn? How did we seek new understanding amid cognitive dissonance, hearing multiple stories of existential threat to both Jewish and Palestinian peoplehood? How did we keep from losing ourselves in cynicism and despair?

Through many encounters, we learned that we could not reduce any side of this conflict to a caricature. Palestinian Christians and Muslims, Israeli Jews, U.S. Muslims, U.S. Jews—all are real, vulnerable human beings with stories we needed to hear. And each person we spoke with was longing for justice and for peace. As another student, Susan, said,

Every day on our journey, our heads would be swimming and our hearts broken wide open as we heard more and more perspectives, all powerful, all convincing, all urgent. Every person that we heard from needed us to see their perspective and

their story. Every person that took the time to sit with us, share food with us, open their homes to us, open their houses of worship to us, was seeking us out. Every person that we met—Palestinian, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and so much more—felt strongly about their vision of justice. And yet despite the differences, one thing was clearly pulsing through each conversation and that was this palpable sense of urgency and belief in peace across any lines you might imagine.

Even with their clashing perspectives on the conflict, we did not meet any demons—only humans longing to be seen and heard. And so we practiced seeing and hearing stories, again and again and again.

Worshiping with a variety of religious communities also helped us to learn about Israeli and Palestinian people, through embodied singing and praying, sitting and standing, and through being guests in the sacred space of another community. Our student Tony reported:

It was my first time attending Shabbat Services. It was also my first time attending Muslim Jumu'ah Services. Both were enthralling, but for very different reasons. With my Jewish siblings, I was so captivated by experiencing the foundation of my Christian faith. I enjoyed the prayers and songs in the Shabbat services, but what mesmerized me the most was the opening of the "ark" that housed the Torah. . . . Seeing the magnificent image of the ark, and the care and reverence with which they handled the scroll, was absolutely beautiful. Also, seeing the congregants proactively move to touch the Torah with the prayer books, and then kiss the prayer books, was a vivid reminder of how holy and sacred God's word is.

One delightful interfaith twist occurred when we were welcomed as guests to Jumu'ah prayers at Masjid Muhammad in Washington DC. That community currently worships in the basement of Holy Redeemer Catholic church, while their own historic mosque is undergoing renovation. As a result, when we thanked the community leaders for their hospitality in welcoming us, they responded by seeing us as part of the host community, since we were also Christian. We were part of the wider Christian family that was making them welcome while they were temporarily displaced from their own home. As our own self-understanding pivoted from guest to host and back again, we recognized once more that the best kind of learning takes place through building relationships across lines of difference, undoing harmful assumptions, and recognizing our mutual human vulnerabilities.

"This wasn't the trip that any of us planned for and yet I believe that it was exactly the trip we were supposed to take." So concluded Susan in her reflections. And another student, Andrew, reflecting on the challenges of learning about Israel and Palestine in this time said: "When we experience seemingly impossible tasks, we should take small, but measurable steps, to promote change. Education is our tool for making a real and sustainable difference in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—by transforming one heart at a time, one person at a time."

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