

On Friday the 13th of September I read in the Palestine Chronicle: "According to Gaza's Ministry of Health, 41,118 Palestinians have been killed and 95,125 wounded in Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza starting on October 7. Moreover, at least 11,000 people are unaccounted for, presumed dead under the rubble of their homes throughout the strip. Israel says that 1,200 soldiers and civilians were killed during the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on October 7. Israeli media published reports suggesting that many Israelis were killed on that day by 'friendly fire'. Palestinian and international organizations say that the majority of those killed and wounded are women and children. The Israeli war has resulted in acute famine, mostly northern Gaza, resulting in the death of many Palestinians, mostly children. The Israeli aggression has also resulted in the forceful displacement of nearly two million people from all over the Gaza Strip, with the vast majority of the displaced forced into the densely crowded southern city of Rafah near the border with Egypt — in what has become Palestine's largest mass exodus since the 1948 Nakba." Meanwhile, lives, homes and farms continue to be attacked and destroyed in the West Bank at alarming rates.

There are specifics that come to mind: the dead girl in the pink roller skates, the smashed solar cells of a West Bank Palestinian farmer, the white cloth kite that Refaat Alareer calls on us to construct and fly, if he must die.

Adding to the horror in Palestine/Israel, of course, is the palpable threat that Donald Trump could be elected president again, the existential threat of climate change and the many other crises in the world including Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, to mention just three.

It's hard at this point to keep taking it in.

Two of my relatives of two different generations had the same passage from Deuteronomy as their Torah portion. I cut out the parts about God, since we are a secular group (and because I have limited time here), but the meaning stands clearly. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil...If you obey the commandments...then you shall live and multiply...But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away...you shall perish...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live..."

What does it mean to "choose life"? As I wrote in a published blog entry on the BWC website back in October, it means both to decry the dehumanization of our own ancestors in the Holocaust and to uphold the humanity of all peoples, including the Palestinians. Perhaps I should say especially the Palestinians, because their dehumanization comes from Zionism - a Jewish led political movement that resulted in the founding of Israel which today, at least according to many experts, has become an apartheid state.

In July, on a trip to New York, which included submitting my application for my Austrian passport, a long awaited reclaiming of that right that honors my mother who was forced to leave Austria at the age of 13, I came across a quote from Martin Luther King, written in 1963, at an art exhibit, which reads in part: "Few people realize that even our authentic channels of

information - the press, the platform and in many instances the pulpit — do not give us objective and un-biased truth. Few people have the toughness of mind to judge critically and to discern the true from the false, the fact from the fiction...One of the great needs of mankind is to be lifted above the morass of false propaganda.” Also speaking in 1963, James Baldwin said: “It is the responsibility of the Negro writer to excavate the real history of this country...to tell us what really happened to get us where we are now...We must tell the truth till we can no longer bear it.”

To choose life means speaking truth to power. MLK and Baldwin were speaking from their awareness of white supremacy, the lost cause myth and all the racist systems upon which the US was founded and built. June Jordan recognized that the experiences of Blacks and Palestinians were remarkably similar. (We recently read her book of essays, “Some of Us Did Not Die” in the Anti-Racism Study Group.). Nearly 40 years ago, in her essay, “Life after Lebanon”, she wrote: “...Israel looked a whole lot like yet another country run by whitemen whose militarism tended to produce racist consequences; i.e. the disenfranchisement and subjugation of non-white peoples, peoples not nearly as strong as they.”

Some truths I wish to speak today:

I learned through a reading we did in the IPC Study Group that pretty much every leader Hamas has ever had was assassinated by Israel (sometimes with the direct help of the US). Ismail Abdulsalam Ahmed Haniyeh, Hamas’s political leader who was the chief negotiator for a cease fire and was assassinated in Tehran in July is only one of the most recent. Israel and the US also blocked every attempt by Hamas to build unity across Palestinian groups and to use diplomacy rather than violence to achieve the cause of Palestinian liberation.

Speaking of non-violence, in 2018 and 2019, Gazans held multiple demonstrations known as the Great March of Return, calling for the Palestinian right of return and the ending of the Israeli blockade of Gaza. In the name of crowd control, Israeli forces responded by shooting tear gas canisters, some of them dropped from drones, rubber bullets and live ammunition, mostly by snipers. As a result, 214 Palestinians, including 46 children, were killed, and over 36,100, including nearly 8,800 children were injured. One in five of those injured (over 8,000) were hit by live ammunition.

In another Study Group reading — a historically-based novel called Mother of Strangers that takes place in Jaffa in 1947-1951, along with a book I read years ago, that is also about the City of Oranges, lays bear the details of the Jewish terrorist force, the Irgun, led by Menachem Begin who destroyed a whole neighborhood of Jaffa in April of 1948, using British mortar shells captured through a train robbery. This was an attack on a city that was part of the Palestinian side of the UN-enacted partition. The Jewish militants went house to house, blowing up walls as they went and capturing what was supposed to become part of Palestine. After occupying the city of Jaffa, and scaring most of the population into fleeing, most of the property was declared abandoned, and Jewish settlers took over the homes of Palestinians who had fled. I tell you this story to speak a larger truth - the attacks and destruction of Palestinian homes and

farms by settlers and the IDF are nothing new. What we are witnessing today is a continuation of what started before Israel was founded - an ongoing campaign of ethnic separation and ethnic cleansing.

These are but a very few of the many truths about the oppression of Palestinians that we must seek to hold up. As an Israeli-American and member of the BWC community said to me recently, "there is a racist privilege of not knowing". As we continually speak truth to power, we work to be among those who know.

There's another aspect of choosing life that I want to talk about today, and that's noted prison abolitionist, Mariame Kaba's observation: "When I would feel overwhelmed by what was going on in the world, I would just say to myself: 'Hope is a discipline.' It's less about 'how you feel,' and more about the practice of making a decision every day, that you're still gonna put one foot in front of the other... It's work to be hopeful." I recognize that for blacks in this country and for Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel, there is no alternative to hope. Under the force of oppression, you have to believe that there's a better place and there will be a better time when your struggle will prevail. But for those of us who are supporters in the struggle against oppression, we also cannot afford to give up hope. Out of hope we continue to act - to protest, to write letters, to engage in mutual aid, to build movements. And we have a responsibility, just as Kaba says, to continue to practice the discipline of hope especially in the face of the horrors we are witnessing.

There were many moments during the past few months when I thought about what to say today. As I was kayaking around Center Pond in Maine, I savored many sights- the pitcher plant, discovered by its distinctive blossom, the tiny pink orchid, the two-foot long snapping turtle that suddenly appeared beside my kayak, the green marsh grass, the wild blueberries picked from the boat, the pair of loons with their two babies that I got close enough to photograph, the bald eagle soaring overhead. These small treasures fill me with wonder and, dare I say it, "joy". Experiencing the wonders in the world is another part of choosing life. And there are other, larger experiences, such as a family wedding or the anticipated birth of a grand child (for me coming in March). These joyous events embody our hope for a better world in the future.

Choose life and its blessings: Uphold the humanity of every single person; Tell the truth till we can no longer bear it; Practice the discipline of hope; Savor life's wonders.

In June Jordan's essay, "Some of us Did not Die", she talks about hearing a Holocaust survivor on the radio say: "I guess it was my destiny to live." This reminds me of years ago, when I was just 21 and had nearly died when hit by a car while riding a bicycle. Visiting me in the hospital, my mother, also a Holocaust survivor, said to me, "When you survive something like this, you have to think about why?"

I want to answer that question by quoting June Jordan again, because she's a poet and she said it better than I can. In the aftermath of 9/11, she wrote about her vision of an inclusive secular democracy for the US - a vision that we ought also apply to Israel/Palestine:

“The humane *secular* potential of democracy rests upon the conviction that just because you exist you – male/female/Jew/Gentile/Muslim/poor/rich/smart/beautiful/lazy/scientific/artistic/gay/straight/bisexual/Republican—you are equal under the law and it is the law which reigns as the supreme organizing governance of our experiment, our United States. That is the humane secular basis for a democratic state....I hope we will bestir ourselves to rally around an emergency/militant reconstruction of a secular democracy consecrated to the equality of each and every living one of us.

Some of Us Did Not Die
We're Still Here
I Guess It Was Our Destiny To Live
So Let's get on with it!"

Or in the words of Deuteronomy: “choose life, that you and your descendants may live”.