

SHALOM

Jewish Peace Letter

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Stefan Merken

Just Asking

WHEN BARACK OBAMA first campaigned for president, I felt there would be a change in the wars (Afghanistan, Iraqi) in which America had been involved for too many years. My pacifist desire was to see our country sharply reduce our endless involvement in international conflicts. Obama seemed to dislike war as much as I did and wanted to change the course of America. Yet over his two terms, I came to realize that he could not stop the wars or tame our bellicose war lovers for long, though he did keep his promise of scaling them back.

Now a new group of politicians, all but one of whom ever served in the military, hope to capture the presidency. I listen carefully, but in neither party do I hear anyone really resisting our culture of permanent war.

Is it so preposterous to hope that sometime in the near future we will stop flexing our American muscles, policing the world, and believing that more and advanced weapons

can settle any and all disputes? Sadly, I don't think so.

The Iran Agreement has brought to the forefront the misunderstanding of what another war will do to our and other countries. If the rich and powerful would put their own sons and daughters in the front lines of any new conflict, they would surely spend more time considering the cost in human life rather than urging other parents' children be sent to fight in the Middle East or elsewhere.

I believe it is critically important to speak up, individually and as part of coalitions. I did so when, at age eighteen, Selective Service wanted to draft me for a war that should never have been fought and which left a trail of blood and death throughout Southeast Asia and among the US military and their grieving families. Now, more than ever, we need more people to tell those in power how they feel about young men and women dying on the battlefield. We need some courageous politicians and media pundits to say loud and clear: No More Wars.

Is that asking too much? ☆

STEFAN MERKEN *is chair of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.*

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Ivan Eland

US Interventionism

A scorecard

SINCE 9/11, the US has flailed away and attacked or invaded at least seven Muslim countries. (I say “at least” because, in contravention of the US Constitution, American presidents now run secret overseas conflicts, including the latest drone wars, without public knowledge or consent of their representatives in Congress.) Since US (non-Muslim) military presence or intervention in Muslim countries was the original motivator for the 9/11 attacks, doubling down on a failed policy seemed a poor bet among many expert analysts, even during the period of hysteria after the attacks on the Pentagon and Twin Towers.

Of course, the US government has never wanted to focus public attention on its own irresponsible conduct before 9/11, so politicians and government bureaucrats have always told the public that terrorists attack us because of our “freedom” or because “they” are poor and jobless — neither of which stands up to objective analysis. Yet the American public, content to examine the problem only cursorily, is content to see it as an us-versus-them or good-versus-bad phenomenon, never wanting to believe that their government had been part of the original problem. In a democracy, that would then implicate public negligence in correcting the root of the disease: allowing the American governmental elite to conduct profligate and unneeded US

meddling into the affairs of Islamic countries.

So because we can’t tread on this sensitive ground, how about just looking at the counterproductive results of escalated US interventionism since 9/11 — more of the same that motivated the anti-US Islamist terrorist attacks in the first place. The obvious place to start is Afghanistan. Instead of just blasting the central al Qaeda group, the perpetrators of

the 9/11 attacks, in Afghanistan and Pakistan and calling it a day, the US decided it was going to pacify (and democratize) Afghanistan with a nation-building occupation. Never mind that the British failed three times to do this and the Soviets, once, very recently, and that the last successful occupation of untamed and xenophobic Afghanistan was accomplished centuries ago by Persia’s Cyrus the Great. But somehow, American politicians thought, the



US Marines firing at Fallujah, Iraq, during the Second Battle of Fallujah, November 11, 2004.

US experience would be different. Not really.

Most US troops have now been withdrawn from Afghanistan, and the Afghan Taliban have just conducted multiple attacks on the capital of Kabul and have made inroads in the north — not a traditional Taliban area of strength. After more than a decade of fighting — costing more than twenty-three hundred American lives, many more Afghan lives, and at least hundreds of billions of dollars — the US lost the war and Afghanistan’s future still looks bleak. The US war in Afghanistan also destabilized the neighboring nuclear-armed state of Pakistan — perhaps the most dangerous country in the world — leading to the rise of the Pakistani Taliban and that group’s attacks on US targets, including an attempted bombing of Times Square in New York.

IVAN ELAND *is an American defense analyst and author of* ***The Empire Has No Clothes: US Foreign Policy Exposed***. *He is a senior fellow and director of the Center on Peace and Liberty at the Independent Institute.*

Completely overreacting to 9/11 — doing exactly what Osama bin Laden and terrorists historically have wanted — George W. Bush employed the classic Washington trick of taking advantage of a crisis to promote an unrelated policy agenda, and needlessly invaded yet another Muslim country. As a response to the foreign invasion of Iraq, al Qaeda in Iraq — more brutal than central al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan — was created. Al Qaeda in Iraq then morphed into the Islamic State (or ISIS) — even more heinous than both predecessor groups. ISIS has now taken over large parts of Iraq and Syria. When natural borders of culture, language and ethnicity or tribe don't match actual borders, then instability, chaos and civil war may result if the dictator holding the artificial country together is deposed. Most experts on Iraq knew that deposing Saddam Hussein would be folly, but Bush did it anyway — killing about forty-five hundred US military personnel and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and wasting trillions of dollars, only to bring chaos to Iraq and increase terrorism worldwide. Even if the US could have left a small number of troops in Iraq, the ethnocentric centrifugal forces pulling the country apart still would have likely done so.

Learning nothing from Bush's meddling in Iraq, Barack Obama decided to commit the same idiocy in Libya. Evoking false claims that Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was massacring civilians, Obama, pressured by the French, overthrew Gaddafi with a bombing campaign. Like Iraq, Libya is an artificial country. Over the centuries, the eastern half has been oriented more to Egypt, the western part to Tunisia. Since Gaddafi's overthrow, the country has been experiencing a civil war between two rival governments made up of tribal coalitions — one in the east, and one in the west. Even worse, jihadists, using weapons from Gaddafi's vast stockpiles and training received at terrorist bases in Libya, have attacked neighboring Tunisia and Mali. In Tunisia, worsening terrorist attacks against tourists by ISIS- and al Qaeda-related groups have led to a state of emergency being declared in the only country with any hope of a democratic outcome from the Arab Spring. In Mali, French forces had to invade the country to beat back Islamist militants, but recently the

Islamists have advanced their attacks into central Mali from their normal area of operation in the country's north.

In Yemen, another artificial country in civil war, where natural borders don't match actual borders, empirical research has shown an increase in numbers of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) fighters in the wake of US air attacks on that country. When your group or country is attacked and civilians are killed (even if accidentally), a rally-around-the-flag effect usually occurs.

George W. Bush encouraged and aided Ethiopia in its invasion of Somalia, and Somalis perceive the invader as a Christian country. As a result, the al Shabaab Islamist group was formed, which has now taken over most of the country. The US then encouraged Kenya and the African Union to beat back al Shabaab. Al Shabaab has been weakened, but these insurgencies are rarely over. Besides, Somalis from Minnesota who have gone to fight for al Shabaab in Somalia could come back to the US and attack targets here.

As in the US government's original inadvertent creation of central al Qaeda by aiding the Islamist *mujahideen* guerrillas against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the subsequent US record of meddling in Muslim countries has had a load of horrible unintended consequences. Yet after media images of the few Americans beheaded by ISIS, Obama took the bait and went back into Iraq and attacked Syria. And Republicans have egged him on by saying he was a wimp for doing too little or waiting too long to meddle in Syria.

Yet the sickness of militarism and interventionism lies not with the politicians but with the American people. In a democracy, the people can eventually stop stupid and counterproductive wars, as was done in Vietnam. But they first need to admit that their government, in its too public and excessively profligate military overreaction to terrorist provocation, is doing exactly what the Islamist terrorists wish. Occasionally, a military response may be needed to terrorism, but it should be quick, surgical, and done in the shadows so as not to be a recruiting poster for jihadists. However, the US shouldn't needlessly make more enemies by useless meddling in the political systems of Islamic countries. ☆

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Murray Polner

William Pfaff

The pundit who hated militarism and war

WILLIAM PFAFF DIED almost six months ago, on April 30, 2015. His death is nothing less than a serious loss to the shrinking number of American daily newspaper columnists who question and contest American “exceptionalism” and its “unnecessary and unwinnable” wars.

Pfaff was the singular heir of American writers who preceded him in condemning our historic addiction to war. And the more he criticized the US for shooting first and thinking later, the fewer America dailies printed his columns. *The New York Times*, which owns the *International Herald Tribune* (now the *International New York Times*) where his work regularly appeared, rarely if ever published his piercing anti-interventionist columns. He was, after all, an outspoken opponent of the Iraq invasion when the paper went overboard in favor of the war. His few daily newspaper outlets were limited essentially to *Newsday* and the *Chicago Tribune*, though liberal journals like *The New York Review of Books*, William Shawn’s *New Yorker* (which printed some seventy of his pieces), and *Commonweal*, the liberal Catholic magazine, always welcomed him.

Search the major print and electronic media and there aren’t many big-time pundits writing for big-time newspapers who condemned LBJ’s or Bush I and II’s wars and questioned our obsession with a “guns first” approach. There aren’t too many pundits wondering aloud why we remain bogged down in the Middle Eastern quicksand

and have poked our military nose into the Russian-Ukrainian struggle. Pfaff, virtually alone, regularly raised a fundamental question rarely posed: “Has it been a terrible error for the US to have built an all-but-irreversible worldwide system of more

than a thousand military bases, stations, and outposts? This seemingly was created to enhance US national security, but what if it has actually done the opposite, provoking conflict and creating the very insecurity it was intended to prevent?” That was William Pfaff: smarter, shrewder and more razor-sharp than all the rest of the pundits. If you doubt this, please read his last book, *The Irony of Manifest Destiny*.

Russell Baker, another great columnist, said that Pfaff, in “article after article [wrote] what should have been said week after week [in Washington] as Bush’s cheery civilian warriors marched us into the Middle East.” It’s still the same: the Imperial City’s resident hawks, their wealthy donors and bribers, the unaccountable culture of second-hand think-tankers, our “merchants of death” and our rapacious lobbyists for special and foreign interests, are as immersed as ever in the old tough-guy Cold War mythology. War creates a lot of millionaires

and billionaires — it always has. But how many have lately asked who has ordained that our sons and daughters be sent everywhere to intervene militarily in age-old and basically insoluble religious-political conflicts that are none of our business? Pfaff, with a minimum of banalities, practically alone and fiercely independent, would have none of it.

Here are a few of his gems:



William Pfaff (1928-2015).

MURRAY POLNER is co-editor of SHALOM.

“The ‘war of civilizations’ explanation is wrong and dangerously so...it is essential that the West now cease its interference. It cannot reconcile the Syrians or the Sunnis and Shiites, or the conflicts in the Maghreb and the Sahel, mainly produced by climate and history. The West has suffered the delusion that a war on these people would produce modernity and democracy. War is a destroyer, which includes among its victims those who initiate it.”

He took on Israel’s American take-no-prisoner supporters, the “third rail” of American foreign policy. Fortunately for Pfaff, ground had already been prepared for the right of the bravest-of-the-brave of a non-Jew to take on the burden of criticizing Israeli policies. The US, he wrote, has given Israel massive financial, diplomatic and military support, and has the right to tell Jerusalem to settle with the Palestinians and establish a genuine two-state agreement.

The truth is that there are a shrinking number of American Jews who now equate any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism — a falsehood which has silenced non-Jewish critics, but never Pfaff, who was in no way anti-Jewish. (One of his articles appeared in *SHALOM*) As the prescient Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, among the more learned of scholars of Zionism, predicted twenty-five years ago: American Jewry “is an organized and ageing half moving right and a younger, more liberal group increasingly abandoning Jewish organizations and declining to offer financial support” — meaning that the real money for Jewish “causes” comes from relatively few billionaires and millionaires whose wishes determine organizational and Israel Lobby policies. Moreover, the latest polls reveal that only one third of American Jews belong to a synagogue. As M.J. Rosenberg, who once worked for AIPAC, observed, “Politicians think the way to a Jew’s heart and pocketbook is through Israel. Soon enough they will understand that the way is through social justice issues here in America.”

More than all else, an essential theme during the battle over the Iran nuclear agreement was noted by Senator Dianne Feinstein months earlier in her support of Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense, a move which the Israel Lobby opposed: “We cannot let Israel determine when and where the US goes to war.”

That’s pretty close to what Pfaff was implying. “Why should Iran not have nuclear weapons?” he asked about the Iran debate. “Israel has them, India and Pakistan have them. Europe is full of them,” as well as the US, Russia, China and North Korea. But those weapons are all “unusable.” In “Iran and Nuclear Weapons,” he decried exaggeration of the danger and the emotional use of the word “existential,” used repeatedly by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then endlessly and mindlessly by so many others, suggesting that Israel’s very survival is at stake. A better, more rational solution, Pfaff offered, was an equitable and just diplomatic settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which, he predicted

— though could not, of course, prove; who can? — could calm relations between Teheran and Jerusalem.

He was one of a handful (or fewer) of regular columnists to point out that the American love affair in the Seventies with the shah of Iran occurred while Washington’s schemers visualized the shah as “the agent of American power in the Middle East [, which] ended in provoking a fundamentalist Iran that became the most important American enemy in the region. The American invasions of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and Sunni-ruled Iraq turned both into ruined and corrupt puppet regimes.... Whereupon Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab members have once again announced their dependence upon a foreign and interventionist power to defend their own integrity, an admission of impotence,” while their people “suffer the consequences.”

And then there’s Ukraine. In a series of columns — and virtually alone, save for a few historians of Russian history — Pfaff saw the Ukrainian crisis as American-initiated, one which at times created the possibility of an accidental war *à la* Sarajevo. Rather than “a Russian strategy of aggressive expansion into Ukraine,” Pfaff saw its origin in “a bungled and essentially an American attempt to annex Ukraine to NATO and the European Union and to undermine the domestic political position of President Putin — which all has gone wrong badly and dangerously wrong.”

Since America’s military-industrial elites require an enemy every few decades, the US and its generally compliant mass media have routinely demonized Vladimir Putin as an almost-tsarist, not-yet-Stalinist absolute monarch bent on conquest. Putin, with all his faults, has refused to accept NATO’s (really, the US’s and its neocons’) military advance toward the very doorstep of Russia’s borders. NATO and American military hardware are in the Baltic states and Ukraine, and their military maneuvers invite Russian retaliation. American “trainers” are now in Ukraine. Western warships cruise the Black Sea, home port of Russia’s only European warm-water port and its Black Sea fleet. “There is only one possible solution now: negotiated truce on the Ukraine frontier, followed by Russo-American and EU agreement on the permanent existence of an independent and autonomous Ukraine. The alternative could be major war,” wrote Pfaff. He and people like him reminded us that Russia, too, has nuclear bombs. Lots of them.

Pfaff had his critics, both thoughtful and feverish. He was, for example, far too certain that had JFK lived he would never have dispatched hundreds of thousands of troops to Vietnam. A recent critical and credible rejoinder comes from Godfrey Hodgson’s observant new book, *JFK and LBJ*, wherein he expresses his doubts, especially because Washington’s VIPs, including JFK and his advisors (but never George Ball), had always bought into the notion that Moscow was pulling the

ILLUSTRATIONS: Cover & 3 • Lance Corporal Samantha L. Jones, US Marine Corps, via Wikimedia Commons. 5 • Courtesy, *Chicago Tribune*. 7 • Wikipedia. 8 • Ubisoft Entertainment S.A., via Wikipedia. 9 • Wikimedia Commons. 11 • Screen capture, via YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tb3jllkszljA>). 13 • Edis Jurcys, via Wikipedia.

strings of its alleged puppets in Hanoi and had to be stopped.

Pfaff was no outsider, despite his dissenting opinions. Reared in Iowa and Georgia, educated at Notre Dame, he served as an infantry officer and Special Forces member during and after the Korean War, unlike the many hawks who had never worn a military uniform. In addition, he never denied that he had worked for the CIA-funded Free Europe Committee, a Cold War group that sent broadcasts and literature behind the Iron Curtain.

I believe that Scott McConnell, of the anti-neocon *American Conservative* magazine, put it well when he wrote that with Pfaff's death, "Nowhere in the elite establishment newspaper sphere could you find regular, sustained, and well-informed criticism of an aggressive and overly militarized American foreign policy."

What's that definition of insanity? Ah, yes: Failing at the same thing over and over again while expecting a different outcome. ☆

Theme Parks & Shoot-'em-ups

Lawrence S. Wittner

Militarism Run Amok

Russians and Americans get their kids ready for war

IN 1915, a mother's protest against funneling children into war became the theme of a new American song, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier." Although the ballad attained great popularity, not everyone liked it. Theodore Roosevelt, a leading militarist of the era, retorted that the proper place for such women was "in a harem — and not in the United States."

Roosevelt would be happy to learn that, a century later, preparing children for war continues unabated.

That's certainly the case in today's Russia, where thousands of government-funded clubs are producing what is called "military-patriotic education" for children. Accepting both boys and girls, these clubs teach them military exercises, some of which employ heavy military equipment. There, children as young as five years of age spend evenings learning how to fight and use military weapons.

LAWRENCE WITTNER (<http://lawrencswittner.com>) is professor of history emeritus at SUNY/Albany and a *SHALOM* contributing editor. His latest book is a satirical novel about university corporatization and rebellion, *What's Going On at UAardvark?*



Civilians browse military displays at the International Military-Technical Forum "Army 2015," in Patriot Park, Kubinka, Russia, June 19, 2015.

These efforts are supplemented by the Voluntary Society of Cooperation with the Army, Air Force, and Navy, which prepares Russian high school students for military service. This society claims that, in the past year alone, it has held sixty-five hundred military patriotic events and channeled more than two hundred thousand young people into taking the official "Ready for Labor and Defense" test. Government funding of the society's budget is lavish, and has grown dramatically in recent years.

Russia's "patriotic education" also benefits from frequent

military historical reenactments. The head of the Moscow branch of the All-Russian Military History Movement observed that groups hosting such reenactments help people “realize that they can’t spend their whole life playing with Kinder Eggs or Pokemon.”

Apparently sharing that opinion, the Russian government opened a vast military theme park in June 2015, in Kubinka, an hour’s drive from Moscow. Frequently referred to as a “military Disneyland,” President Vladimir Putin proclaimed Patriot Park to be “an important element in our system of military-patriotic work with young people.” On hand for the opening, and backed up by a military choir, Putin also brought the good news that forty new intercontinental missiles had been added to Russia’s nuclear arsenal. According to news reports, Patriot Park, when completed, will cost \$365 million and draw up to a hundred thousand visitors per day.

Those attending the park’s opening found the rows of tanks, armored personnel carriers, and missile launching systems on display, plus the riding of tanks and shooting of guns, deeply moving. “This park is a gift to Russian citizens, who can now behold the full power of the Russian armed forces,” declared Sergei Privalov, a Russian Orthodox priest. “Children should come here, play with the weaponry and climb on the tanks and see all the most modern technology.” Alexander Zaldostanov, the leader of the Night Wolves, a violent biker gang planning a similar park, remarked: “Now we all feel closer to the army” and that is “a good thing.” After all, “if we don’t educate our own children, then America will do it for us.” Vladimir Kryuchkov, a weapons demonstrator, admitted that some missile launchers were too heavy for very small children. But he maintained that smaller rocket-propelled grenade launchers would be perfect for them, adding: “All males of all ages are defenders of the motherland and they must be ready for war.”

They are certainly ready in the United States. In 1916, Congress established the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), which today flourishes in some thirty-five hundred American high schools and enrolls well over half a million American children. Some government-run military training programs even operate in US middle schools. In JROTC, students are taught by military officers, read Pentagon-approved textbooks, wear military uniforms, and conduct military pa-



rades. Some JROTC units even use automatic rifles with live ammunition. Although the Pentagon covers some of the expense of this costly program, the rest of it is borne by the schools themselves. This “youth development program,” as the Pentagon calls it, pays off for the military when JROTC students come of age and join the armed forces — action facilitated by the fact that US military recruiters are often right in the classrooms.

Even if high school students do not participate in JROTC activities, military recruiters have easy access to them. One of the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires high schools to share students’ names and contact information with military recruiters unless students or their parents opt out of this arrangement. In addition, the US military uses mobile exhibits — replete with gaming stations, huge flat-screen television sets, and weapons simulators — to reach children at high schools

and elsewhere. GI Johnny, an inflatable, goofily-grinning doll dressed in Army fatigues, has been a great hit among young children. According to one military recruiter, “the little kids are very comfortable with Johnny.”

In 2008, the US military, recognizing that video arcades with first-person shooter games were far more popular than its dreary recruiting centers in urban ghettos, established the Army Experience Center, a giant video arcade in the Franklin Mills mall just outside Philadelphia. Here children immersed themselves in hi-tech warfare at computer terminals and in two large simulation halls, where they could ride Humvee vehicles and Apache helicopters and shoot their way through waves of “enemies.” Meanwhile, Army recruiters circulated through the youthful throngs, signing them up for the armed forces.

Actually, video games might do a better job than recruiters of militarizing children. Created at times in cooperation with major arms contractors, violent video games played by children dehumanize opponents and provide justifications for “wasting” them. They not only promote a level of ruthless aggression that World War II’s German Wehrmacht might well envy — see, for example, the immensely popular *Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* — but are very effective in warping children’s values.

How long will we continue raising our children to be soldiers? ☆

Patricia Ressler-Billion

Prisoner Visitation and Support

WORKING FOR JUSTICE is how we make Torah truly come alive. *Tikkun olam* — mending, repairing, and transforming the world — is our sacred obligation. We learn in *Pirkei Avot* that while it is not incumbent upon us to complete the work, neither are we at liberty to desist from it (Avot 2:21). One organization that embodies the Torah in its practice is Prisoner Visitation and Support (PVS). Sponsored by two dozen faith organizations, including the Jewish Peace Fellowship, PVS is a nonprofit organization of trained volunteers who visit people in long-term federal and military prisons. Its primary focus is to visit prisoners who do not ordinarily receive visits from family and friends, who want or need supportive human contact, who are in solitary confinement or on death row, or who are serving long sentences.

I am a PVS visitor who goes once a month to visit prisoners at the Federal Correctional Institution in Milan, Michigan.

Founded in 1968, PVS is carrying forward a Judeo-Christian tradition of caring for prisoners. Originally, its primary mission was to provide visits and support to imprisoned Conscientious Objectors to the Vietnam War. It soon became apparent that other prisoners could benefit. In 1972, permission was granted by the Federal Bureau of Prisons for PVS to visit all federal prisons and prisoners in the US, and

in 1975 the Department of Defense granted PVS access to all military prisons. PVS is the only interfaith, volunteer visitation program in the US authorized by both of these organizations to visit all federal and military prisons.



Cell Block 'D' isolation cells, Alcatraz Prison, Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay.

More than three hundred and fifty PVS volunteer visitors see thousands of prisoners a year in over one hundred prisons across the nation. No other organization in the U.S. has achieved the same level of access to the prison system on a nationwide scale. With over forty-seven years of service, PVS continues to play a unique role in the field of prisoner assistance. PVS volunteers offer a kind and listening presence to help prisoners prepare to cope within the confines of their prison existence, and to assume a useful place in society.

Mass incarceration is one of the great plagues of our time. It is the retelling of the slavery of which we speak every Passover; it pricks our collective consciousness, reminding us of when we were “the stranger”; it begs for our attention just as we pray and implore God during the Days of Awe to give us another chance. PVS puts into action the Jewish belief that we deserve another chance. PVS visitors offer this chance to prisoners, for there is no distinction between those of us on the outside and those on the inside of prison walls. We all are capable of *teshuvah*, of changing, of turning ourselves around.

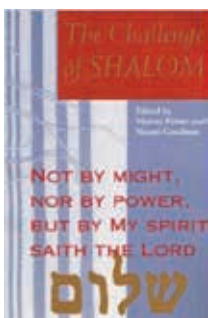
We know that prisoners who receive visits during incarceration are less likely to engage in troublesome behaviors while incarcerated and less likely to return to prison upon release. And we all know the benefits of being treated with kindness and respect by another human being. Many pris-

PATRICIA RESSLER-BILLION is a Prison Visitation Support visitor, at the Milan Federal Correction Institution, in Milan, Michigan.

oners are far from home, and as a result, receive no family visits during the course of a year. *Chesed*, loving kindness, is a sacred obligation in Judaism and a foundation of its values. PVS volunteers personify this value each time they make a visit and offer an encouraging presence and respite from the threatening environment of prison life.

Please help sustain the work of PVS with your contribution of time and financial support. Consider becoming a prison visitor. You can be that kind listener, a person who makes a significant difference in a prisoner's life, one who has long-term positive effects even after a prisoner is released

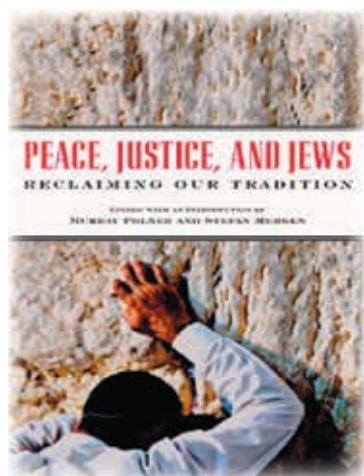
and returns to his/her home community. Invite a volunteer to speak to your congregation, friends, and colleagues, and tell others about the inspiring work of PVS. Donations to PVS help to ensure that prison administrative staff become familiar with our work and that our volunteers are trained to meet the challenge of their work. Learn more at www.prisonervisitation.org. Please contact us with your questions, thoughts, and plans via e-mail (ecorson@prisonervisitation.org); write to PVS, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102; or call (215) 241-7117. A twenty-minute DVD is available upon request. ☆



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Edited by Murray Polner and Naomi Goodman

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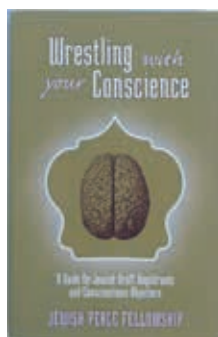
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Philip Bentley

My Selfie

MY FAMILY came to this country long enough ago that I heard no foreign accents, let alone languages, while growing up. My forbears in Europe were not poor shtetl Jews. My birth father's parents came from families of professional musicians. My mother's father's family was an interesting mix of wealth and poverty (on one side, property owners and entrepreneurs; on the other side, tanners). My maternal grandmother's family was descended from a long line of distinguished rabbis and also owned a publishing house.

My birth father had no particular profession. He was politically very conservative. My mother divorced him when I was five and married again two years later. My stepfather was a physicist who had worked on the Manhattan Project and America's earliest missile programs. We moved to Chicago, which is where most of my family lived, and then out to Skokie. There, many of my friends were the children of Holocaust survivors, as was my rabbi. Skokie, before it turned suburban, was largely a German community. Growing up, I faced anti-Semitism on a regular basis. I was that unathletic, bookish kid subjected to frequent schoolyard hazing. I believe my passion for social justice and against bigotry in all forms comes from those nasty childhood experiences. Perhaps my pacifism is also a product of that time.

AT AGE fourteen I awakened. I started reading everything about history and politics I could lay hands on. Someone gave me a *World Book Encyclopedia* for my birthday and I read every page, every volume. I remember standing on State Street and handing out Ban the Bomb flyers. At fifteen I went to my first rally (against the witch-hunting House Commit-

tee on Un-American Activities); and at sixteen I volunteered in a JFK campaign office. I was also involved in interfaith activities, protests against slumlords, and other causes before graduating high school.

After high school I attended an unusual college during



Rabbi Philip Bentley

a remarkable period of its history. Shimer College is a Great Books school that was, at one time, a branch of the University of Chicago. The purpose of its curriculum was to teach critical thinking. No one learned anything about how to earn a living there, but we had the highest GRE scores in the country for eighteen consecutive years. Amazingly, Shimer still exists, but with fewer than two hundred students. It still has the third best record of graduates going on for PhDs. (Only MIT and Cal Tech do better.)

After college I was unsure of what to do with my life. I had thought about becoming a rabbi since I was about sixteen, but in 1966 that just seemed "establishment." I then traveled to Winnipeg, Canada, to study with a truly remarkable teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter z"l (later known as Schachter-Shalomi). It was for me a year rich in learning and experience. Reb Zalman encouraged me to go to rabbinic school, saying, "Play the game, and after ordination you can do it your way." That never really happened. Most of my

Rabbi PHILIP BENTLEY is a fifty-year member of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, served as its chair for ten years, and is currently JPF's honorary president.

career was as a rather conventional pulpit rabbi, but I was really good at it. As for Zalman, he became famous. Take a look at his Wikipedia page (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zalman_Schachter-Shalomi), and a page about him from the movement he founded (<https://www.aleph.org/zalman.htm>).

I did not get into rabbinic school right away, but I found work as a social worker in a Jewish community center, where I acquired more skills. I also found my wife, Phyllis (or maybe she found me). We married in 1968 and moved to New York City, where I began my rabbinic studies. Academic standards were very high — almost all my classmates had degrees from the Ivies, and I was happy to find I could keep up with them. We had our older son, Shanan, in 1971, and our younger son, Josh, was born just after my ordination in 1973.

All during this time I remained very active in civil rights (including participating in the Selma march), peace, and the environment. While in rabbinic school I took on a project devoted to considering traditional Jewish literature on environmental ethics. There were no secondary sources, so this was truly original research. Eventually I put my learning together in an academic paper, which later became part of the basis for an article published in a journal and has since

become a basic piece in that literature. I have since published more articles on the environment and get invited to conferences on the subject.

I also volunteered in political campaigns John Lindsay in 1969 and Representative Gerry Studds in 1972). But not long thereafter I ceased those political activities because I did not think it right for ordained clergy to be involved in partisan politics (a decision I may revisit this year and next).

MY FIRST assignment as a young student rabbi was in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where I began learning how to be a pulpit rabbi. After ordination my first rabbinic position was as Jewish campus chaplain at the University of Denver. Following that I took my first regular pulpit on the island of Curaçao, at the oldest continuing synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, founded in 1651. Back in the States I found myself in Long Island, where I served for thirteen years, and then in several other places. I also worked as a dean at a small rabbinic school, a camp director, and an adjunct professor.

Throughout this time I was active in interfaith activities and projects, human rights organizations, and labor issues. I served for ten years as chair of the Jewish Peace Fellowship,

No Winning Side

By Philip Bentley

WHEN CONSIDERING a conflict, most people find it is easier to pick a side than to consider the causes of the conflict; the role of each side in the conflict; and the harm caused by each side to the other. It comes down to a sports metaphor — my team against your team. This is true of politics; it is true of human rights issues; and it is especially true of wars.

No one, except profiteers, of whom there are always many, wins wars. Every war involves bloodshed, destruction, displacement, and, of course, lies. When one side defeats the other, that usually leads to the start of a path to the next war. The only way to avoid that is to promote reconciliation between the combatants and to remove causes for a new war.

The best-known example is how the Allies won World War I and then, at Versailles, created the conditions that led to the next war and Nazi Germany only twenty years later. The Allies also won World War II, but the US had the wisdom to create the Marshall Plan, create a pacifist constitution for Japan and the vision to organize the UN. But then the US and USSR created the next war, the so-called Cold War, which produced more than four decades of worldwide proxy wars.

In the case of Israel-Palestine-Gaza, what I see is both sides starting and pursuing war because of political considerations, much to the great harm of everyone involved. I love Israel but the demonization of Hamas has made for really bad

Israeli policies. Hamas started as a faith-based social services provider (Israel even helped out at its founding) that then pursued a violent policy on the basis of demonizing Israel.

I have long criticized and worked against human rights violations by Israel against Palestinians, but I have not hesitated to criticize Palestinians, sometimes to their faces, for their human rights violations, often against their own people. The truth is that no one is blameless here and both sides are victimized by the other.

What is the path to peace? The only way I can see is for leaders to arise on both sides to say “enough,” and to acknowledge that their side has wronged the other side. South Africa is the prime example, where Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk worked together to end apartheid and bring reconciliation through the truth-and-reconciliations hearings. Neither wars nor diplomacy will resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It must happen at the grassroots level. Both the Palestinians and Israel need the kind of charismatic leaders who will work to truly end the conflict. Those leaders might or might not be government leaders. Gandhi, King, and Mandela achieved great things by making it possible for governments to do what was right. Of these, only Mandela came to political power. When you read news or opinion about the current war, or any war, remember always that there are two sides — and both are losing. ☆

which led to many exciting meetings and events. I did a lot of issue lobbying in Washington, DC, and organized conferences and meetings in a variety of venues. Along the way I published a long list of articles, ranging from ephemera to academic journal articles, including one in a university law review.

I am still married to Phyllis (forty-seven years and counting), and our two sons are both highly skilled professionals, married and doing well.

My interests include listening to and playing music, writing, rabbinic literature (especially Midrash and Kabbalah), reading (literature, history, economics, and much more), travel, drama and film. I write a blog (pearleafblog.com); have a personal Web site (pearleaf.org), and, if you Google me, you will get a great many hits (every online petition I have ever signed seems to be there, along with several published articles, and the occasional anti-Bentley flaming from the right).

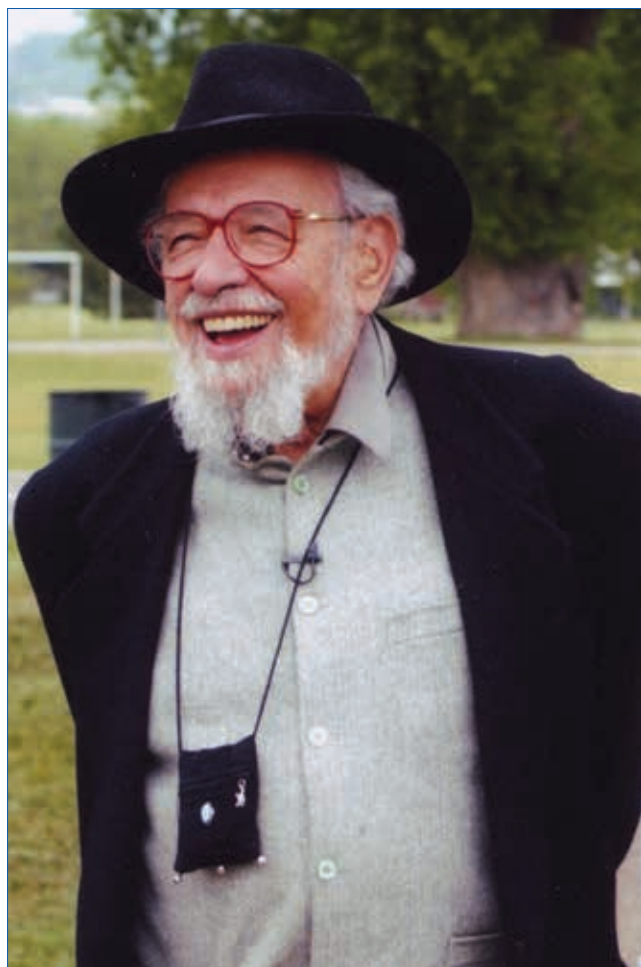
So why do I post?

First of all, I am only active in discussing issues that are important to me or on which I have a long-term interest.

Most of my social and political positions are progressive, but this is not due to any adherence to any ideology. In fact, I distrust ideologies in general when they discourage thinking. Anything or anyone claiming to have all the answers to all the complex questions we encounter is anathema to me. That may sound strange coming from a member of the clergy. But I believe religious faith should be liberating, not constricting. Also my faith values argument. I have no problem arguing with God or even putting God on trial. The most important Jewish text after the Tanakh (which Christians call the Old Testament) is the Talmud. In the Talmud there are many discussions of legal issues — with both dissenting and discarded opinions preserved. Regarding one centuries-long set of disputes, the Talmud concludes that one of the schools represents the law, but “both these and these are words of the living God.” I have actually written a book about this and am still working on it for more than twenty years.

William James said that some people think they are thinking when, in fact, they are only rearranging their prejudices. That is my fear about myself. I do not trust myself to have all the answers, even where I have a strong opinion. I like to test my opinions against opposing arguments.

I have long dealt with the problem of being a rabbinic authority figure. I have taught every level from pre-K to post-graduate; I have a strong personal presence; I have very strong speaking and writing skills; and I have other personal assets based on experiences and acquired skills. Even so, I have always made it clear from the pulpit and in the classroom that I welcome dissent and I do not want people to agree with me solely because I said or wrote something. That I express myself and my opinions vigorously should not be mistaken for thinking I am certain I am right and that you are misguided. As Plato wrote, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”



Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Still, many of my views on controversial issues are derived from my spiritual heritage in which spirituality is closely linked to ethics, including social ethics. I am a religious pacifist; I believe in social justice as taught by the biblical prophets; and I believe that humanity has the obligation to behave as the stewards of Creation rather than as its owner or master. I think all of these views can be expressed in politically conservative terms as well as progressive ones. In my international work especially I have seen the truth of this.

I organized my first discussion group when I was fourteen and have sought or created places for the exchange of ideas and opinions everywhere I could. Here in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where I live, I try very hard not to offend or attack anyone personally. Sometimes my passions get the better of me. Admittedly, I do not always succeed, but I criticize some public or published figures when vital public issues are being debated. But this I believe: I do not like being pigeon-holed or stereotyped. Each of us is unique. I accept people as they are. I do not expect to convert anyone away from their opinions, but I do hope for light to be shed on questions we discuss. ☆