

# Gaza and a Liturgy for Justice

**Exclusive:** The Audacity of Hope, the U.S. boat among a small flotilla seeking to challenge the Israeli blockade of Gaza, was turned back by Greek authorities doing the bidding of Washington and Tel Aviv. However, for ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern, who was among the passengers, the endeavor demonstrated the commitment of Americans from a variety of backgrounds to fight injustice.

By Ray McGovern

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We passengers on the U.S. Boat to Gaza represent a cross-section of America. Yet, if there is an emblematic trait that sets us apart from “mainstream” America, it is a common, radical determination to take risks to bring Justice for the oppressed, in this case, the 1.6 million people locked in an open-air prison on a narrow strip of land called Gaza.

While most of those calling us “radical” hurl the word as a barb, we welcome the label, but radical as derived from the underlying meaning of this word, “root.” Like radishes, we are rooted in soil, the soil of Justice.

“Extremist?” Yes, we confess to that too, as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. did in his Letter From the Birmingham City Jail.

Replying to those who threw the “extremist” epithet at him, Dr. King acknowledged that he was, indeed, an extremist, “an extremist for love.”

He placed this kind of extremist squarely in the tradition of the Hebrew prophet Amos (“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”), as well as Jesus of Nazareth, Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”).

“So,” wrote King, “the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or will we be extremists for the cause of justice.”

## **A Different ‘Liturgy’**

Our kind of extremism can be seen as rooted in a liturgy that rejects pseudo-worship, which prophet Isaiah warned that God finds sickening:

“Trample my courts no more! Your incense is loathsome to me. Make Justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow. I will

strengthen you a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners out of confinement, and from the dungeon those who live in darkness.

“Do not dwell on things of the past. See, I am doing something new. Now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?”

And, finally, another passage from Isaiah typically read on the Jewish high holy day of Yom Kippur, which often is observed by many secular Jews, as well.

“What is the fast God desires of you? To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, break off the handcuffs from the prisoners. ...”

Nice image, no? Breaking off the handcuffs from the prisoners. Whether literally or figuratively, that takes work.

And, as the passages from Isaiah suggest, this is central to a genuine liturgy, the DOING of Justice, not merely rhetoric about how nice it would be.

### **From the Greek Word For**

Even though we were able to sail only ten or so nautical miles toward Gaza, it was good to spend two weeks plus in Athens.

Being in Greece again, after more than three decades, brought memories from the ridiculous to the sublime, from the 2002 film “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” to the lines from Homer memorized during four years of studying classical Greek more than a half-century ago.

I could not find anyone old enough to try out my 2,500 year-old Greek on. But the incessantly repeated dictum of the proud Greek pater familias in the film kept coming back to me: “It comes from the Greek word for”

To the ancient Greeks who coined the term, liturgy meant work in service to others. *Leitourgia* referred to the people and the root *ergo* “do” denoted public service.

In ancient Greece, it was *de rigueur* for “people of means” to use a good portion of their own assets for the common good, “to give back,” as we might put it today.

Whether or not the early Christians were consciously following Isaiah’s admonition against fulsome prancing in ostentatious religious displays, they also applied the word liturgy to the public work of the early church.

And a good thing too: for liturgy/worship should be the Church’s central public activity, the work, the DOING which serves others, while affirming what the

worshippers truly stand for and who they are.

Thus, in its purest and most faithful sense, liturgy requires a lived commitment to Justice, without which it is not true worship.

Jesus poured scorn, too, on the hypocrite religious leaders of his day: "Their words are bold but their deeds are few. They widen their phylacteries and wear huge tassels." (Phylacteries are small leather boxes containing scripture and worn during morning prayers).

In the view of Jesus, these well-adorned religious leaders oppressed, rather than helped, the poor. I'm sure glad that sort of hypocrisy doesn't happen any more!

Tzedakah is a Hebrew word commonly mistranslated as charity. But it is based on the Hebrew word tzedek meaning righteousness, fairness, justice.

Unlike philanthropy, which is completely voluntary, tzedakah is seen in Judaism as a religious obligation to be met by all, rich and poor.

### **Liturgy and the U.S. Boat**

We had no tassels on the boat, nor phylacteries. But in my view, we had lots of authentic liturgy.

Even some of my boat-mate friends may be surprised to see it put that way. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists, all devoted to help bring Justice to Gaza, to break off the handcuffs and open the prison by lifting the Israeli blockade.

For those of us Christians, the spirit, if not the words, of Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, hung in the background, helping to explain why we did all we could to place ourselves "where the battle rages."

"If," wrote Martin Luther, "I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him.

"Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield except where the battle rages is mere flight and disgrace if one flinches at that point."

For me, it was a special grace of the U.S. Boat to Gaza experience to find myself in the familiar company of so many Jews from New York City, some of them fellow Bronxites.

It brought back the companionship, camaraderie, and humor that were an integral part of my first 22 years on Bainbridge Avenue and 194<sup>th</sup> Street. The comfort level was there from the start, and it was not just nostalgia.

The more aware I became of the particular courage it takes to weather the inevitable charges of being “self-hating Jews”, even from one’s family and close friends, the more respect I gained for my Jewish co-travelers, many of whom gave adroit but unflinching leadership to the entire enterprise.

Whether “observant” Jews or not, they personified in a special way the prophetic Judaism that stood for the idea that only justice yields peace, the Judaism that pulses with compassion for “the orphans, widows, and the exploited poor.”

What a wonderful reminder that relying on Israeli kill-power rather than Justice for the Gazans is not truly Jewish. Nor is it safe. As one of my mentors, Daniel Maguire, Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University, has put it:

“A tribal ‘Jewish’ state that ignores the prophet Zechariah’s warning that Zion cannot be built on injustice and bloodshed will, as the prophets of Israel warned, fall into the pit it is currently and frantically digging.”

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