

Searching for words amid unimaginable human suffering



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For several decades the human suffering caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has deeply affected us as members of the Center for Peace Ethics at KU Leuven. The deadly raid by the terrorist organization Hamas on 7 October 2023 took the lives of approximately 1200 Israelis and led to the kidnapping of 240 innocent civilians. Such horror cannot be justified. In retaliation, and with the intent to root out Hamas, the Israeli army has since killed more than 10,000 Palestinian civilians including 4,000 minors, according to Human Rights Watch. That Israel has repeatedly attacked hospitals, boycotted food, water supplies and medical equipment, and cut off energy supplies can hardly be interpreted as anything other than violations of International Humanitarian Law.

The suffering that both sides have inflicted on the other is unbearable for those who continue to plead for a greater humanitarian response to emerge within this armed conflict. Not only indignation but also helplessness prevails. There is no adequate way to express our empathy and solidarity with those who live in total fear, who do not know if they will see their loved ones again, and who are uncertain if they will be able to return to their homes or whether they will ever be

safe again. At the same time, this deadly crisis raises questions about which the Centre for Peace Ethics has long been concerned: How to break the cycle of violence and counter violence? How much counter-violence is justified? What is (dis)proportionate violence? From where does the International Humanitarian Law derive its authority, legitimacy and power in the context of war? What does interfaith dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims mean? How can the extensive trauma (ever) be processed so that listening and speaking to each other becomes possible again? How to work toward a long-term sustainable peace?

The Centre's experience is that this conflict does not and certainly should not lead to a response of indifference. Students in Theology and Religious Studies are affected because they have compassion for the suffering of others; they feel connected to fellow believers; they have family, friends and colleagues who are in the conflict zone. Israel or Palestine may be important within the tradition of some. Finally, for a few, the violence today may evoke the trauma of violence they themselves have suffered before. Wherever there are a lot of attachments, there is a lot of emotion. Those emotions arise from important connectedness. Yet, they can also inhibit critical reflection, which can lead to oversimplified analysis, or even to patterns of thinking that are blatantly false. As a result, some of the problems underlying the conflict are reinforced and perpetuated. It is deeply troubling when religious communities (Jews, Muslims and Christians alike) are confused with political organizations and governments, e.g. when criticisms of Israel are based on age-old anti-Jewish stereotypes or when Muslims around the world are targeted as terrorists because of the (continued) use of violence by terrorist organizations like Hamas.

If we are to preserve even a shred of human dignity, it is necessary now more than ever to refrain from dehumanizing the other and instead see the vulnerable in the other. Without this restraint, anger can escalate to diabolization which can easily derail legitimate indignation about harm done to us. The intractability that then ensues makes any dialogue and conflict resolution impossible.

It is not easy even for academics today to find the right words to speak about this conflict. In classes we try to show students that one perspective is not enough to understand the current violence; we try to elucidate the many historical layers that contribute to it. At the same time, in doing so, we are clear that any act of violence in Israel and Gaza that targets innocent civilians, especially children, is not acceptable, not today, not yesterday, and not tomorrow. The non-combatant principle, which distinguishes between combatants and civilians, is centuries old and applies in all international agreements that govern how wars are conducted (*ius in bello*). It is an unbreakable limit to contain bloodshed and human suffering.

We condemn brutality and the abuse of innocent civilians. At the same time we also want to help ensure that religious ideas are not used to condemn others or to invoke a sense of "moral superiority" over them.

The current chain reaction of ruthless violence has created an untenable path of no return. Ultimately, Israel and Palestine will need to engage by talking to one another. They will need to sit down and work out a political agreement that offers security and justice for both. Only on the basis of dialogue is a peaceful future possible for Jews, Muslims and Christians. That engagement presupposes the "face-to-face" encounter of individuals looking at and addressing each other as human beings, and as equals being frank with one another in dialogue, again and again.

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