

Jerusalem: From Tolerance to Compassion

Thank you all for choosing to participate in this workshop and learn more about this cause and what you can do to bring about justice and peace in the birthplace of Jesus. My name is Ghassan Tarazi. Everyone calls me G.J. I'm an Arab-American who was forced to be born in Beirut, Lebanon. You see, my father is Palestinian and my mother is Lebanese. They were living in Jerusalem, where my father grew up and was then working for the British Mandate Government. It was 1948 and my mother was pregnant with me. It was 1948 and the Zionists had just invaded and conquered Palestine. It was not safe for Palestinian Arabs to be in Palestine. Even though the Tarazi family can trace its history in Palestine back to the second century, my father and mother quickly fled to Beirut, my mother's hometown. We spent seven years in Beirut, before we migrated to Brooklyn, New York in 1956. I now teach at James Madison University's College of Education, after spending 33 years in the public school systems in New York, Virginia and Maryland.

We're here to talk about Jerusalem. It's mind boggling to think this dusty and outwardly inconsequential piece of land has had such a significant impact on our world. Throughout history, humans have been drawn to this backwater town, no matter what empire controlled the region. The limited amount of water and arable land didn't keep people away. Being well removed from economic centers didn't keep people away. People are drawn to Jerusalem for different reasons. It's not the way it looks that captures people, even though its panorama is mesmerizing. It's not the physical and financial benefits attract people. It's what Jerusalem can do for people spiritually. As a matter of fact, the Abrahamic religions consider Jerusalem God's address. The famous lament of the Diaspora Jews found in Psalm 137 said it all.

*¹By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

²On the willows there
we hung up our harps.*

³For there our captors

*asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*⁴How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?*

*⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!*

*⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.*

Jerusalem has always been under political and/or military occupation. Jerusalem has always been occupied by diverse groups of people. Power over Jerusalem has changed hands often, even though the people living there have remained the same. Unfortunately, the relationships between the rulers and those they rule have not always been pleasant. There have been periods of tolerance and other periods of intolerance. All three of the religions that consider Abraham as their father have had turns controlling Jerusalem. Let's see what history can teach us about how they've treated each other.

In the year 1009 AD, the Caliph Halifa, the sultan of the faithful, whose name was Al Hakim, ordered the destruction of both synagogues and churches in Jerusalem, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and tried to convert everyone in the city to Islam. Word got back to Rome about the destruction of these churches, and the Pope ordered a "Crusade" to rescue the Holy Sites and the Christians from the "non-believers," or the infidel Muslims. Intolerance was rampant.

However, when Arab Muslims conquered Jerusalem in 638 AD, Halifa, the Caliph Omar, personally went to Jerusalem to celebrate this momentous victory because it was there that Mohammed ascended to heaven on the site of the Jewish Temple according to the Hadith, Islam's second holiest book. Caliph Omar allowed the Jews to reenter the city and gave them freedom to worship there, along with the city's Christian residents. This took place after a long period when the Jews had been forced out and excluded from

Jerusalem for centuries. At first, this covenant, called the Covenant of Omar, excluded the Jews at the request of the Christian leaders of Jerusalem, but fortunately Omar reneged on that condition and allowed the Jews back to come back to Jerusalem. Here we see a time of widespread tolerance by the Muslim rulers toward both Jews and Christians.

Roman and Byzantine Christian emperors and kings were generally very intolerant in their treatment of non-Christians. For example, they prohibited Jews from living in Jerusalem for about 350 years and allowed them to reenter the city only one day a year to weep at the Temple's only remaining wall, known today as the "Wailing Wall". In the year 1099, when the first Crusaders captured Jerusalem, they slaughtered most of the Muslim and Jewish residents of the city, as well as many of the city's local Eastern Christians. Unfortunately, like their Byzantine Christian brothers, these European Christians were generally very intolerant toward Jews, Muslims, and even toward Eastern Christians during their nearly 100-year reign.

Unfortunately, most of the history of Christian control over Jerusalem was characterized by extreme and often very violent intolerance. However, one marked exception was the period between 438 and 460. In 438, Empress Eudocia, the wife of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II, was instrumental in persuading her husband to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem—again after a long, forced exclusion by the Romans and the early Byzantines. Eudocia later retired from the position of Empress, moved to Jerusalem, and played a leading role in expanding the city and building churches, hospitals, and public institutions in Jerusalem.

When David conquered the very small city of Jerusalem around the year 1000 BC, it was still called Jebus after the Jebusites who built the city and lived in it. Actually, David didn't technically conquer the city since he was practically invited in. Under the rule of David and his son, Solomon, Jerusalem experienced a peaceful and prosperous coexistence between the new Jewish population and the original Jebusite inhabitants, as well as the Amalekites of the Bible. In fact, many of King David's top army officers were non-Jews, and King Solomon was famous for entertaining foreign rulers in his palace, most of whom

were non-Jewish from throughout the Middle East. By the end of Solomon's reign, Jerusalem was no longer a minor Canaanite city, but a cosmopolitan capital of the Jewish Empire. This was a period of tolerance by the Jewish rulers toward the non-Jewish inhabitation of Jerusalem.

Jewish intolerance toward non-Jewish residence of Jerusalem can be seen in the current Israeli policies. Between 1948 and 1967, Jerusalem was divided between Israeli control of West Jerusalem and Jordanian control of East Jerusalem. During the 1967 War, Israel occupied Arab East Jerusalem and greatly expanded the boundaries of the city, annexing Palestinian suburbs and villages. Israel built exclusively Jewish settlements on land taken from the Palestinians, in defiance of international law. It severely restricted housing development by Palestinians, and thousands of Palestinian homes were demolished. Under the current Israeli control of Jerusalem severe limitations are placed on Palestinian Muslims and Christians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, essentially preventing them from accessing their holy sites, even during holy days such as Easter and Ramadan. Ironically, this policy has tightened since the beginning of the Oslo peace process in 1993 and has become much more severe with the advent of suicide bombers and the construction of the Separation Wall around Jerusalem.

What lessons can we learn from this long and spotted history of Jerusalem. History screams out at us "Intolerance, no matter how severe, doesn't work!" Intolerance doesn't bring about peace and security. Intolerance isn't part of God's Kingdom. In addition, history whispers to us "Tolerance is not enough." What does tolerance really do? It tolerates and accepts differences – in a condescending way. It permits the existence of others' – as long as it's convenient. Tolerance keeps the status quo – there's the ruler and the ruled. History has taught us that when a particular group of people has harbored the illusion that Jerusalem belonged only to them, then disaster followed. The Jews and Muslims were brutally excluded from Jerusalem by the Christian Crusaders for a very long time. Muslims inflicted terrible pain and suffering on Christians and Jews. In each case, those groups in power were misguided to believe that Jerusalem belonged only to them.

We see the results of the historic shortsighted, selfish behavior of Jews, Christians, and Muslims now. It is heartbreaking to witness the same pattern of behavior perpetuating this cycle of violence. It is sad to see the Jews, whose tremendous love for Jerusalem, which has motivated them for hundreds of years during times of dispersion, now falling into the illusion that Jerusalem can be only for Jews.

There is still no peace in Jerusalem. History is clear, whether it was periods of brutal intolerance or times of quiet tolerance – neither was enough. Where do we go from here? What can we do now? Going beyond tolerance leads us to compassion. Compassion is more than a feeling; it is more than an attitude; it is far greater than a law or a governmental policy. Compassion is about acting with the welfare of others in mind. Compassion is selfless, all encompassing, blind, and persistent. Compassion has one foot in humanity and the other foot with God. The most practical application of compassion is found in the Hebrew scriptures. When the prophet Micah was asked, “What does God expect of me?” He clearly defined compassion in these words “Love mercy; Do justice; and walk humbly with your God.”

Let us work together to bring back compassion to Jerusalem, where it was first defined!