

No place to call home

Israel must acknowledge that “Never again” applies equally to Palestinians, writes Paul Oestreicher, a Jewish refugee who arrived in NZ in 1939.

Many *Listener* readers are perplexed about why Israeli Jews “do unto others” what was done to them. Part of the answer to that question is that etched into the Jewish conscious and subconscious mind are the words “Never again”. As a German-Jewish refugee to New Zealand whose grandmother fell victim to the Holocaust, I can understand that all too well. Fear is, sadly, the enemy of compassion. The tragedy is that Israel refuses to acknowledge that “Never again” must apply to all peoples.

My wife and I are founding members of Jews for Justice for Palestinians, the UK counterpart of the US Jewish Voice for Peace. Both organisations have joined worldwide calls for an immediate ceasefire.

Israel has rightly become a home for Jewish people. But since its formation in 1948, Israel has denied that right to the Palestinians. It drove more than 700,000 into exile in the Nakba catastrophe. Since then, it has illegally occupied Palestinian land and systematically deprived Palestinians of their rights. That is the background to the brutal October 7 revenge of Hamas, held captive for 17 years in the Gaza ghetto, often called the world’s largest open-air prison.

For now, a ceasefire is the only humane, temporary solution. Israel has refused to do so while Hamas continue to hold more than 200 hostages. It has kept up relentless bombing, killing more than 11,000 people, including 4300 children. After a ceasefire, the only way forward requires complex, respectful diplomatic negotiations between equals. All are capable of both cruelty and humanity.

One letter writer to the *Listener* compared what Israel is doing to the Palestinians to what Hitler did to the Jews. This is treading on the sacred ground of the Holocaust, the murder in cold blood of some six million men, women and children. Most Jews, and many others, consider this to be the ultimate, and incomparable, example of inhumanity.

Nonetheless, Israel must acknowledge that “Never again” applies equally to Palestinians, who, like the Jews, have no other homeland to go to. The recent announcement that Israel will introduce four-hour pauses in the bombing to allow people to flee northern Gaza denies the fact that there is no safe space in Gaza for them to flee to.

Hitler, in his pathological hatred of the Jews, backed by German public opinion, initially planned to send them



There is no safe haven in the Gaza Strip.

away, to get rid of this alleged threat. The 1938 international conference in Évian-les-Bains, France to help fleeing Jews could not come to an agreement.

The Australian delegate said his country had “no real racial problem” and did not want to import one through large-scale migration. Many Kiwis at the time sympathised. New Zealand reluctantly accepted 1100 refugees during the 1930s, including my parents and my wife’s parents, but turned away many more.

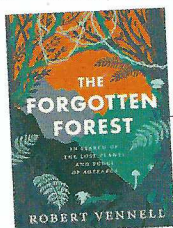
The comparison with Nazi Germany would hold good if the wish to “send them all away” were to be enacted by Israel. Indeed, a leaked Israeli document proposes just this – expelling all Palestinians to Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula – as a potential option. In defiance of international law (nothing new in that), Israel would be carrying out the largest ethnic cleansing since 12 million ethnic Germans were expelled from eastern Europe in 1946-47. What would constitute the completion of the Nakba could still happen.

The greatest error of judgment is to imagine that security for Israel can be achieved by military means when what is needed is a political solution. There is still a fast-shrinking possibility that apartheid Israel could become a nation with equal rights for all of its inhabitants. Against the odds, that is a dream worth pursuing. ■

Paul Oestreicher OBE is an Anglican priest, Quaker, and peace and human rights activist who lives in Wellington.

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