

**Just Cause, Just War?**  
Eastrose Fellowship UU  
November 12, 2023  
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

The misunderstanding about my Grandma Raisa's departure from Ukraine around 1912 has reached near legend status in my family. It turned out (as I discovered when she was in her mid 90's) that her family didn't flee with jewels hidden in jars of schmaltz. They left because another family (the Levys) moved into their village and opened a competing dry goods store....across the street! My great-grandfather declared that, in his words, "If they were going to have competition, they might as well live in America." So, they left and settled in Pittsburgh. And yet another myth exploder – they didn't come steerage in babushkas. They were educated and middle class. My grandmother recalled: "Steerage? What steerage? We had dinner, we had dancing!"

Raisa Unickel Landerman was a Ukrainian, from the village of Rogi, due South of Kyiv in the region of Cherkasy Oblast. I am part Ukrainian. And if I resided there now, I'd be among 200,000 Jews living in a country under siege. It is a chilling thought on many levels, to consider whether I would be crouching for safety in the gleaming Chabad Jewish Community center in Kyiv, or hiding in a root cellar in Rogi. But I would be scared...I know that, and I'd want to defend my homeland. I'd pray for peace while brandishing whatever weapon I might acquire, perhaps one of the Molotov cocktails common citizens are learning to create, and I'd hope the majority of humanity was with me.

Hypothetically, Grandma Rae and her family could have chosen instead to emigrate to Palestine in 1912. At the time, large numbers of mostly Sephardic Jews had been living there for generations, with origins in Northern Africa, Spain and the Middle East. The tidal wave of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jews landed in Palestine after WWII in the wake of a devastating holocaust. The American Jewish community is comprised mostly of Ashkenazis, including my family. It follows, then, that with this alternate history, I could be sheltering in Tel Aviv or on a kibbutz right now, caught between an age-old anxiety over safety and a desire to live in peace.

Even so, I am here with you this morning in Gresham, Oregon, not in either of those war-torn places, as we find our way through these conflicts which ask us to question our role as potential protesters and peacemakers. My colleague, the Rev. Dan Schatz, implores us to be mindful about how we engage with the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Gaza.

He writes: "If we talk about this war as a conflict between "Jews and Muslims," or even "Jews and Palestinians," we're not being careful or caring in our speech. If we equate opposition to Israeli government policies, or concern and anger on behalf of the innocents

killed in Israel's attack on Gaza, with antisemitism, we're not being careful or caring in our listening. If we equate anger at the brutality exhibited by Hamas on October 7th and a lack of trust in Hamas, with Islamophobia, we're not being careful or caring in our listening. At the same time, if we equate ignorance of history and the context of words with hatred of one group or the other, we're also not be careful enough."

We can apply these same principles to Ukraine, although the ongoing war there is not especially complicated. Putin views the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a tragedy and intends for his legacy to be reunification. Many have drawn comparisons to Hitler's invasions of Poland and Czechoslovakia; a blatant violation of international law with no justification.

As we've seen on many occasions, Putin is a paranoid and seasoned liar and manipulator, and now he qualifies as a war criminal, too, according to Geneva Convention of 1949. This is what the convention document would call a "war of choice." He wants the full bread basket of the former Russia empire and he doesn't want a democratic Ukraine to exist. He even claims Ukraine is not a nation. The conflict has simmered for years...this is not new. He claimed, with incrediblechutzpah, that his objective was to "de-Nazi-fy" the country. A statement made even more offensive by the fact that the Ukrainian President is a Jew who lost relatives in the Holocaust. (There it is again)

The ever-escalating conflict in Gaza is far more complex. Jews are living in their ancestral Biblical homeland and so are Palestinians. Exile and return live in the very soul of both peoples. I encourage you to research the history of the region before leaning into false equivalences, specious narratives, or slogans. When we repeat slogans like "from the river to the sea," which sound poetic and woke, do we actually know what we are saying? Do we realize this has been a rallying cry to destroy Israel and with it, the Jewish population? And also a rally cry to return to the multi-national Palestine in 1948?

Are we aware that Hamas was given the keys to Gaza by Gazans in 2007? Or that they intentionally headquarter themselves on civilian sites like schools and neighborhoods? Does this justify the death of more than 11,000 people there since October 7? No. Does this cancel out the 1400 brutally hunted and murdered in Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>? No. It's all ghastly and heartbreaking, cruel and insane.

I've learned so much myself this week in my research. Most notably, that Palestine has never been its own state. In 1948, when Israel was founded, the British had been in charge. Before that, the Ottoman Empire, before that, the Empire of Ayubid, before that the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem...and we flow backwards through the Roman, Slavic, Babylonian and Persian Empires to the Judean kingdoms of the twelve tribes of Israel. And even before that, independent Canaan cities.

Why does this matter? Primarily because a claim to the land undergirds the narratives of the combatants and asks us to decide which has the more just cause and whether this conflict or any conflict, for that matter, can be deemed a “Just War.”

Putin claims that his assault on Ukraine is a justified aggression. Netanyahu makes the same claim for Israel. But the designation of a “just war” has pretty much gone the way of the dodo bird, according to most political scientists, and even among the Catholics who created the doctrine in the first place. The notion of any war being “just” is obscene in my view, although many argue that WWII was a “just war,” and I can see their point to an extent, given the facts and circumstances.

In his piece, entitled It's Not Personal, it's Just War, the writer Jeremy Myers notes that when people and nations march off to war, it's common to believe their cause is righteous (even in denial), that they are defending themselves against tyranny and that God is on their side. (which God, I wonder?) He writes: “Go ask a Muslim Jihadist and he will tell you that the violence they engage in against others is holy, right and just. The truth is, he concludes, is that all wars are Just wars or none of them are. And since we know that most wars are not Just wars, we deceive ourselves into thinking that our war is just while their war is evil.

Just war theory originated with Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was further developed by Francisco de Vitoria in the 15<sup>th</sup>. It seemed like a useful idea at the time...an attempt to curtail warfare and stop evil and violence. The criteria is strict. Consider whether any of these requirements match the conflicts we are now witnessing.

1. A just war can only be waged as a last resort.
2. A war is just only if it is waged by a legitimate authority.
3. A just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered.
4. A war is only just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success.
5. The ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace. (but it's still a war, I might add)
6. The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered.
7. The weapons used in the war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Civilians are never permissible targets of war.

Such calculus is chilling. Does any of that sound like what's happening in the Ukraine or Gaza right now?

It's important to remember that all wars are wars that disproportionately impact children. Parents in Ukraine are sewing tags with their children's blood types into their clothing. Israeli and Gazan mothers have wept over small lifeless bodies. Let that sink in. We grieve for another country being reduced to rubble, for more innocents terrified and potentially

bombed out of their homes... and for what? We must stop this, but how? Is it possible? Has humankind become so addicted to armed conflict and numb to the destruction it causes?

The veterans we honor this weekend pay the price every time for these deadly gambits. They've left their American cities and towns to fight, be injured or die in conflicts that were deemed "just" by the powers that be. Where is the justness that justifies the loss, the trauma, the shattered lives, the zero sum outcomes in places like Vietnam and Afghanistan?

Are we simply hard wired for war? Writing in Scientific American magazine in 2018, Brian Ferguson asks this question in his article entitled, "War is not part of Human Nature." Hawks and doves in this scholarly endeavor disagree. Some claim that the roots of modern wars and genocides go back tens of thousands of years and that they've found evidence of war in small scale societies throughout the prehistoric period. They argue that it was a form of conquest, and also natural selection with the fittest prevailing to acquire mates and resources.

One evolutionary theory posits that the instinctual tendency to protect one's tribe morphed over time into group inclinations towards xenophobia (othering). If wars are a natural eruption of instinctive hate leading to the killing of outsiders, then we can grasp why wars continue to proliferate. But doves challenge this view – they argue that humans have an obvious capacity for warfare, but their brains are not hardwired to identify and kill outsiders. It was a consequence of societies expanding and becoming more complex beyond the hunter-gatherer cohort. A transition to agriculture formed the basis for the development of political states. It was a social circumstance, and it was about dominance.

As we've seen throughout history, once established as a norm, war has the tendency to spread, with violent people replacing less violent ones...in some cases, dictatorships replacing democracies. We've seen this, we see it today...and we must stand as peaceful and steadfast sentry against it. As Aristotle wisely noted: "It is not enough to win a war, it is more important to organize for peace."

Humans learned to make war and they can learn to make peace, too. And peacemaking starts in your own heart, not in the halls of the UN. Gandhi put it well, when he said: "Strive to become an expert at living. Be good to those around you in concrete ways. Create an island of peace in your own life. If you do, it will spread. If enough of us do this, our islands will meet, ceasing to be islands and becoming whole continents. World peace exists literally in the actions each one of takes in our own lives."

So, is Pacifism the answer, then? Some scholars argue that pacifism is inherently as self-defeating as Just war theory. Of course, we must stand up for what's right and against evil. The "third way" (between pacifism and war) is non-violent resistance – the way of Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Han, among others. It stands up to evil where it is found, but with a commitment to do so non-violently. It's just so hard to do this in a world bathed in violence, especially as there are no proven strategies for non-violent resistance like there are in warfare.

How do we show the world a different and better way to harmony and peace than the way it knows? All the sermons and breathing meditations, prayers, and joys and sorrows stones in the world won't make a difference unless we take some sort of action afterwards. We might ask ourselves – How can I connect to these crises as a Unitarian Universalist? I'd point us towards our 6<sup>th</sup> principle...the goal of world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all...and ask us to make it real. There are UU justice organizations you can connect to and dozens of international organizations striving to establish a beachhead for peace in the world. Look online, learn and activate. And while you do, please be mindful of the narratives you embrace and the causes you espouse as "just."

This week, I am uniquely aware of my Ukrainian and my Jewish roots. And I'd like to believe that if I was under siege in Kyiv, I would exemplify the kind of Ukrainian that Margaret Wheatley describes in her poem, and recognize my imperative to be that person now, remotely, actively, from right where I stand:

"That in my maturity, I will be glad to teach you the cost of acquiescence,  
the price of silence, the peril of retreat.  
That I will teach you all that I have learned,  
the strength of fearlessness, the peace of conviction,  
the strange source of hope,  
and that I will die well,  
having been a Ukrainian."

Blessed be. Blessed we. Blessed be the people of Ukraine, Israel and Gaza.  
Shalom, Saalam, Peace, and Amen.

© 2023 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.