



**DIALOGUING ABOUT FREEDOM, JUSTICE AND PEACE:
BLACK PEOPLE, PALESTINIANS, ISRAELIS AND JEWS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THE DECISION OF 900 BLACK CHRISTIAN faith leaders to call, in a full-page *New York Times* ad, for an immediate ceasefire in the war being waged in Gaza by Israel as a morally minimum demand speaks to the terrible and inhumane toll it has taken on the Palestinian People of all ages and conditions of health, and thus, the morally compelling urgency to end it. This total war being waged against the Palestinian People of Gaza has cost by current count over 12,000 dead, over 2,000 missing and perhaps presumed dead, 30,000 wounded, mangled and maimed, over 102 UN workers killed, and 40 journalists killed. Indeed, a UN commissioner has stated that 1 in every 57 people living in Gaza have been killed in the first 5 weeks of this ruthless and relentless war. At least 70% of those killed are children and women. It is in this context that also all around the world people are calling for a ceasefire and end to this genocidal campaign, including Jewish people who are often in the vanguard of the demonstrations and activities to oppose this war.

My criticism and condemnation of this total war against the Palestinian People is rooted in our ancient and modern ethical traditions as African people that teach us that we are morally obligated “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place especially among those who have no voice”, the devalued, dispossessed, downtrodden, vulnerable and oppressed, not the powerful and oppressors. And no one can deny that the Palestinians in this moment of their history are most vulnerable and in need of the support of the world.

This position drew the attention of Messrs. Russell Schwartz, regional president, and Richard S. Hirschhaut, the Los Angeles director of the American Jewish

Committee who wrote a column, (11/16) in this paper titled “Do Jewish Lives Matter?” They answered this rhetorical question by saying “Not according to Professor Maulana Karenga in his essay ‘The Moral Savagery of Israel’s ‘Self-defense’ ” (11/9). I took this as a rhetorical question for there’s nothing in my essay or in my prior writings to suggest that Jewish lives do not matter. The question I was raising was shouldn’t Palestinian lives matter in the same way Israeli and other lives matter. Clearly, no one can read my writings and not notice that one of the recurring and central themes in my writing, teaching and activist work is the equal rights and dignity of every human being. Indeed, in the ancient African ethical tradition of my ancestors of *Kawaida Ma’at*, the very concept of the dignity and divinity of the human person is first introduced in human moral discourse in our sacred text, the *Husia*, which teaches that all humans are the images of God (*senen netcher*) and bearers of dignity (*shepesu*) and worthy of the highest respect.

Messrs. Schwartz and Hirschhaut also state incorrectly that “Dr. Karenga expresses no sympathy for the 1400 Israeli civilians massacred by Hamas on October 7”. For some reason, they count 1400 Israeli civilians horribly killed by the Al Qassam Brigade, a military unit of Hamas, but the current count, according to Israeli sources, is 1200, approximately 850 civilians and 350 soldiers. Actually, both in my column under discussion and my first column on the issue (10/19), I have condemned killing and harming civilians and noncombatants anywhere. I stated that “We should offer rightful and necessary condemnation of the killing in mass or singularly innocent and unarmed civilians whether Israelis, Palestinians or others, but the key question is one of moral

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consistency and inclusiveness in our concern. In a word, we know the consideration Israel has, but where do the Palestinian People fit in this arc and agony of moral concern and care?" And I also ask "are we to mourn Israeli losses and celebrate the suffering of Palestinians or have *an inclusive empathy for all*? Moreover, I ask, then and now, "can we morally condemn indiscriminate killing of one people and tolerate, justify and support it against another people without any sense of moral contradiction, hypocrisy or concern?"

Also, they seek to deny what they interpret as my calling Israeli Jews "colonizers of the land". Again, they misread me, for I was not referring to the founding of Israel. My reference was limited at this point to the false claim that Israel had left colonized Gaza in 2005 and conceded their right to self-determination and security in their own place. Schwartz and Hirschhaut, themselves, say that Israel "withdrew from the Gaza Strip dismantling its settlements and military installations". This is a classic expression of neo-colonialism, for Israel still controlled Gaza by air, sea and land, imposing a siege that was commonly called by international and Israeli sources "the world's largest open air prison or concentration camp" and a war crime.

Likewise, both international and Israeli sources state that the West Bank section of Palestine is also a clear example of apartheid which is a crime against humanity and a form of settler colonialism in which settlers are rampaging and murdering unarmed and defenseless Palestinians, dispossessing them and creating, as in Gaza, ethnically cleansed areas. To say this is not to hate Israel as they claim or to excuse or overlook the indiscriminate killing by the Al Qassam Brigade of Hamas on October 7. But it is important not to begin and end at October the 7th. For there is a history of indiscriminate and mass killing of Palestinians in every raid and war

waged against the Palestinian People and a brutal denial of their right to freedom and security.

Finally, my article was not on Hamas, on which Messrs. Schwartz and Hirschhaut chose to focus. My interests are focused on the lives, protection and welfare of the Palestinian People. And I criticize, condemn and reject Israel's concept of self-defense, as expressed in the total war against the Palestinian People. I cannot nor can any moral person equate self-defense with starving a people, denying them water, medicine, medical equipment, fuel and electricity to sustain their lives and the lives of babies in incubators, people on dialysis machines and ventilators, and people needing operations. Nor can Israel use the moral shield of self-defense for its indiscriminate bombing, killing mainly civilians, claiming contrived hospital command centers.

It's important to note also, if there is one thing that 9/11 and 10/7 taught the U.S., Israel and the world, there is no military solution even with the most advanced weapons and that only full freedom for everyone and a just and good peace can yield the security everyone wants and deserves. This will take radical rethinking about the other and also about ourselves. Israel must accept the fact that Palestine and the Palestinian People have as much right to exist, to be free and secure as they do and that they will never have security in any real sense until this is achieved. In the meantime, it is important for us to work tirelessly for an indivisible freedom, a shared justice and an inclusive good for everyone and the well-being of the world and all in it.

IN THIS RADICAL RETHINKING, CRITICISM and self-criticism are indispensable. As the distinguished Palestinian author, Dr. Edward Said, affirmed, "even in the midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be

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criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for... Criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom". I think here too of the celebrated and much-quoted Jewish rabbi, Hillel, who said "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?" And I reflect on and reaffirm the

ancient and current ethical tradition of my own, remembering the teachings here of Nana Dr. Martin Luther King who counselled us, saying "We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls 'enemy', for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers" and our sisters. And as we say in our organization, "if not this, then what? And if we don't do it, who will?"▲

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