The Interfaith Union℠
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A Message to Members
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God's Rifle

by David E. McClean

The death of Yasser Arafat last year and the current political and cultural polarization in the United States call to mind the danger of demonization. A demon is utterly devoid of anything warranting human compassion or empathy. How few demons there are in the world, although there have been some. Yet, how we seem to find them wherever we cast our glance, and especially when we cast it at our fellows.

In the Middle East, the Second World War has not yet ended, the *Shoah* goes on, and Hitler's specter still remains, still lives. It, in turn, gives evil a renewed life in the terrible wounds of those who remember an incalculable suffering. But wounds cannot be the basis for a genuine and sustainable polity and a reasonable disposition toward one's fellow human beings. Wounds cannot lay, or be, the foundation for true and open community. *Shoah,* the Jewish Holocaust, is the great wounding. It gives rise, with the greatest twist of irony, to *Nakba* (the "Great Catastrophe" of the Palestinian people). Wound gives rise to wound, old evil to new evil, and righteous indignation meets righteous indignation on the soil and sand of a worn-out land succoring worn-out peoples – peoples worn-out by the daily news of death and atrocities too horrible to sustain in thought. Both sides carry-on in the name of Divine Justice, and claim the Great God as though a common, earthly possession.

We do not have anything so severe in our land; but it is prudent not to forget our own very recent past. In the United States, where we claim a charitable disposition in matters cultural and political, Reds and Blues are hurling slurs and insults at one another across state lines, each invoking its favorite capitalized noun as the battle cry – God, Church, Justice, Democracy. These words are but meaningless noises when sight of those they serve is lost. Jehovah and Allah are not alone in the pantheon of the Gods, but occupy it with "high" ideals that seem to trump love of neighbor and empathy for one's fellows. So much said after the past presidential election shows little care for how others can think the thoughts they think and live the lives they live. And yet they think their thoughts and live their lives, and yet we all remain Americans, so far. So far, but many of us have, as imperceptibly as ever, placed a foot on the road to demonization. The first brick of that road is a false dualism – Reds and Blues – kilned by so-called leaders who divide by accentuating

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(February 2005 - Vol. 1, No. 3. Welcome to a very special ministry, and a very special effort to, through faith and love, help to heal the wounds and divisions in our world in concert with other like-minded people of faith. The Interfaith Union's project is healing our divisions - divisions of nationalism, divisions of race, divisions of sex and sexual orientation, divisions of class, divisions of culture, divisions of faith, divisions between secular and sacred, divisions between market and family, divisions that chop up our souls, cloud our eyes and bid us to live lives of inner deformity and social distance. *Note on the image: The tree is a ubiquitous image, found in many faith traditions. It suggests life, power, spiritual growth, and insight.* WWW.IUNION.ORG (a New York not-for-profit religious corporation).
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our differences while dismissing the myriad ways we are the same.

The two sides, each, take up God's rifle. God's rifle is embossed with its user's righteous political, cultural or religious imprimatur. Instead of steel, God's rifle is made of gold, or so it appears to the self-righteous soldier who wields it. It fires only golden bullets at a deserving enemy. The bullets travel a moral arc rather than a trajectory, ministered to by the angels on their way to their marks. But gilded or not, the effect is still the same. The blood spilled is not golden, but rather it still flows red in the street. Golden bullets fired by Israeli or Palestinian rifles, the rifles of God, are no less diabolical and lethal than those fired from the ordinary steel muzzles of common killers. Just the same, they pierce the skulls and hearts of young men and women in the prime of life, and we shall never have their souls back to grace our small, wandering world.

When God's rifle is taken up in discourse, its bullets shatter the sinews and joints of dignity and reputations long established, with blithe disregard for the souls and commitments of the victims – one's fellows, one's countrymen. Red States are filled with unthinking, religious yokels, drunk on Jesus – so say many in the Blue States. Blue States are filled with immoral beasts bent on the destruction of America – so say many in the Red States. It is Gomorrah vs. Judea, New York vs. Kentucky. The specter covers America, too, although it has not so utterly darkened the land just yet. But that specter resonates with the same darkness in each of us, wherever we are.

The solution to the problems between Israelis and Palestinians is not convoluted. It is only made to seem so by those who deal in power and know only power. Pundits say there are two possible alternatives which are ready to hand, a notion that I once accepted: continuous slaughter and hatred on the one hand, or autonomous and peaceful coexistence on the other. But there is a third and simpler option than even these. Camp Davids, Oslos and Geneva Accords obscure its simplicity, which is not to be found around *Realpolitik* negotiating tables, but around the supper tables of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, those who bear the brunt of demonization. The failure to achieve peace is not the fault of any political scheme. The failure resides in the hardness and blackness of wounded hearts. Surely, no plan will work where the hearts of Palestinians and Israelis remain so dark when it comes to one another. Create two states, side by side, and without a change of heart the murders may well resume. There must be a pledge, a new *covenant* to look forward and not backward. There must be a new covenant sealed in a mutual, unthinkable, embrace that neither side dare loosen.

Hitler planted the seeds of Jewish destruction and nearly, but for the accidents of history, had his way, at least in Europe. But such was the evil that he unleashed upon the world that its seeds could not all be crushed, and some scattered. *Shoah*, a Hebrew word that can be translated "whirlwind," is not only the Night of the Jews (and of all of us); it is the whirlwind that is still being reaped from the winds of genocide. The best solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is none of the solutions put forward by strategists, but a third and unspeakable option that would turn the words of old texts into living realities. The best solution is the end of the idea of Jewish and Palestinian states, and an embrace of the radical idea of a single state whose citizens are bound by a common brother- and sisterhood and reverence for a shared (or adopted) history, the

history of all “peoples of the book,” of all who claim Abraham as genealogical father of a great theology. All other outcomes will betray the great moral commands of the religions claimed so dear, and reduce Jerusalem and Palestine to mere idols obscuring the vision of the Great God. The present intifada, which it seems might be at an end, may be only one in a string of more to come if the hearts of Israelis and Palestinians remain unchanged.

In the half-century or so of events in the Middle East, we so-called Blues and Reds have a glimpse of what the evils of demonization can visit upon a people. The Jewish *Shoah* and the Palestinian *Nakba* are extreme object lessons of what can await those of us who think that we can demonize our brothers and sisters, our fellow citizens, rather than understand their scars, wounds, fears and aspirations. The “strange fruit” hanging from American trees in various parts of this land remain signposts in the forests of American discourse and politics, and they must be heeded when we think that the specter cannot fully cover the land, that “it can’t happen here.” May the Israelis, the Palestinians and we Americans, in the words of a great American songwriter, “lay God’s rifle down” – while there is still time.