Awakening to Wounds and Fear in the Middle East

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Like many of you, I have been heartbroken by the recent violence in Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon. As the new rabbi of Beit Am, the Jewish Community here in Corvallis, I feel moved to voice my impression of these events. It goes without saying that I do not speak for all Jews. There are even those within the Beit Am community, I am sure, who would offer a significantly different perspective.

In my mind, this situation is anything but simple and straightforward. I have witnessed dozens of editorials and letters to editors demanding a black-and-white analysis in which one party is entirely at fault and another is guiltless. This is far from my perspective.

I feel great love for Israel: its people, its land, and its spiritual and cultural rhythms. I have lived there, and maintain ties with friends and family who call it home. I believe adamantly in the necessity of Israel's survival and security.

I also feel great love for humanity. I am instructed by the Jewish value, emerging from the biblical creation narrative, that all humans are created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. The Jewish people are my people. I act and pray for our survival and grieve for our fallen. However, I view the spilling of Lebanese and Palestinian blood to be equally tragic.

In following Israel's war with Hezbollah, I have struggled to integrate these two commitments—the universalistic and the particular. A fear seems to have swept over much of Israel that hasn't been present for decades. With Hezbollah's seemingly unlimited backing from Iran, a nation whose president has explicitly called for Israel's destruction, how can Israel not be terrified.

The majority of Israelis feel wronged and threatened.

The majority of Palestinians and Lebanese feel wronged and threatened.

Those feelings are all true. I do not intend to propose which party is most wronged or most threatened. There are many people doing that already, and I fear it is getting us nowhere. I come instead to ask you to consider the woundedness and fear that exists throughout the region. When we feel wronged and threatened, our instinct is to lash out. This cycle of violence will never end until one group takes the risk to look at its own wounds and fears deeply enough to understand what it shares with the other side.

I have sat with Israelis and Palestinians, from settlers to residents of refugee camps. Yes, there are many whose fear has turned to anger. And there are those whose anger has turned to hatred. But there are many—the majority I firmly believe—who want nothing more than a house, food, and a way of life for themselves and their children.

We long to divide the world into oppressors and victims. It is easier to make sense of our lives when there is good and bad. Unfortunately, life is almost always more ambiguous than that. The conflicts in the Middle East—in Lebanon and Northern Israel, in the tragically forgotten-for-the-moment Gaza Strip and West Bank, and the region as a whole—will not be resolved through a hierarchy of who is right and who is wrong. If we want to support an end to this violence and create the necessary stability to resume efforts toward genuine peace in the region, we need to consider this ambiguity. By opening our hearts and minds to the fear and wounding that exists on all sides, we might come to new understandings that enable us to locate a more compassionate and effective voice for peace and justice.