

A REPORT ON THE PRESBYTERIAN GA

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I was invited to serve as an official Jewish observer and resource person at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) from July 1-5 in Pittsburgh. It was a difficult and challenging assignment due to the heavy tensions created by the overture to divest from three companies whose products are utilized in the West Bank settlements and by the government of Israel in that geographic area. We all felt that issue looming over us as the GA unfolded.

On Monday evening, Rev. Charles Wiley and I led a discussion and critique of our paper, "Christians and Jews: People of God," that has been several years in the making. We met with the Interfaith and Ecumenical Committee and fielded questions and suggestions. It went very well and Charles and I were quite pleased. We both hope it will be adopted as an official study resource in the near future.

But the big issue was yet to come as harsh and often acrimonious debates marked the sessions of the Middle East Committee which was debating divestment. Rabbi Alvin Berkun, Rabbi Noam Marans of the AJC and Ethan Felson of the JCPA really did yeoman's work in presenting our case against divestment and all that implies. We were all heartened by the wonderful support of Presbyterian clergy and lay leaders, particularly from the Philadelphia Presbytery. Shalom Akhshav representatives and J Street representatives supported our position in opposing divestment. But it was painful beyond words to watch the Jewish Voices for Peace savaging Israel and urging the adoption of the overture for divestment, in league with the powerful and articulate Middle East bloc of anti-Israel clergy and lay leaders.

I was slated to speak on Thursday morning and bring five minutes of greetings to the plenum. When we realized that the vote would probably go *for* divestment, colleagues from all over the country urged me to cancel my talk as a sign of protest. The word must have gotten out because I received a call from the associate to Gradye Parsons, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, to meet with him privately on Tuesday. We met for forty minutes and I explained to him why we Jews were so disturbed. He said that he felt my pain and wanted to know what he might do to alleviate it. I replied: "Tell your colleagues that the divestment overture would seriously harm relations between the Presbyterian Church and the Jewish community." "I am only the conductor of the train," he responded. He urged me not to cancel my talk. Subsequently I was informed that the key vote would not take place on Wednesday but had been postponed to Thursday afternoon—after my talk to the plenum. Now my colleagues reversed their earlier view and urged me to speak to the plenum and use the opportunity to exhort the delegates to reject the divestment overture.

I scrapped my original talk and composed a new one. I opened by extolling the wonderful relationships we had established over the past years and I noted the paper, "Christians and Jews: People of God," that Rev. Charles Wiley and others had worked on together with the NCS and commended it to the delegates' attention and approbation. I also mentioned the volume, *Let Us Reason Together*, which I co-edited with Rev. Joseph Small of the Presbyterian Church, which comprises papers and addresses delivered at our several conferences over the past eight years. Then I shifted gears and suggested that all of these wonderful efforts could be in jeopardy if the divestment overture is adopted. Such an action would cast a pall on our relations and might fracture them irreparably. I noted that Jews are rarely united over any issue, but when it comes to the State of Israel, the vast majority of Jews of all religious stripes as well as secular Jews are keenly supportive of a free, safe, and secure Jewish state. I also noted that that overwhelming majority of American Jews as well as Israelis favor the goal of two independent states, living side by side in peace and justice. I insisted that the passage of a divestment overture would not advance the cause of peace one iota but would only harden the lines and embolden the opponents of peaceful coexistence. I cited the charter of Hamas as well as the speeches of Iran's president and vice president as illustrative of their goal to wipe the Zionist state off the map. This,

plus the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons, explains the sense of existential dread Israelis feel. If we learned anything from the tragedy of the Holocaust it is this: Take threats very seriously. I suggested that the Presbyterian Church should not be the only mainline church to advocate divestment but should use its powerful influence to convince the parties to return to the table and negotiate a peaceful resolution of their issues because *people who don't speak to one another do unspeakable things to one another*. I concluded by imploring the delegates to vote divestment down.

The afternoon debate was marked by acrimony but the final vote turned down divestment by a mere two votes, although the plenum voted to boycott products produced on the West Bank, much as the Methodists had decided a few weeks before. So even though the Committee had voted by 36-11 to recommend divestment, the plenum finally did reject it—by a razor-thin margin.

This is not, I fear, the end of the matter, and I am certain we shall hear it again in two years at the next GA of the Presbyterian Church as well as in other quarters. All the more reason why we must be vigilant, united, maintain good relations with our Presbyterian (and other Christian) neighbors and determined in our mission to seek justice and peace rather than one-sided, skewed approaches to the terribly complex muddle that is the Middle East.