

Response to Alain Epp Weaver, “Theological Cartography and the Arboreal Imagination in Israel-Palestine”

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Author of a work which interweaves experience with astute theological and political analysis, States of Exile: Visions of Diaspora, Witness, and Return (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 2008), Alain Epp Weaver served the people of Israel/Palestine for eleven years with the Mennonite Central Committee, gaining an enviable fluency in Arabic. Living with his family in the mixed Christian-Muslim village of Zababdeh in the northern West Bank, as well as coordinating development in Gaza, Alain knows whereof he speaks. Yet in this contribution he features the voice and heart of Elias Chacour, a Melkite priest, now serving as bishop of the Galilee. The focus is on trees as enduring symbols of a people who will to endure, despite forcible exile from their homes and terrain. On my first visit to the Hamad family in their terrain in Beit Hanoun (Gaza), we dined together in their lemon orchard amidst three generations of family. Two years later, after an Israeli Defense Force incursion with bulldozers, I found the seventy-year old father of the family on his knees in their denuded property, trying to turn over the soil to grow vegetables. Was the orchard used to hide rocket launchers? The family assured me that they never would have permitted militants to take over their orchard. Yet they could have, of course, so the IDF had a “security excuse” for wantonly destroying a family’s productive terrain. So ends the official story.

Why can bulldozing trees, especially ancient olive trees, affect us so powerfully and adversely? Does it not represent a raw use of power, a modernist imposition on a

traditional culture, a flat erasure of meaning in the service of hegemony; a veritable affront to history and to memory? (Leon Bloy said the bourgeoisie despised trees and the subjunctive!) Yet anyone who has visited the state of Israel will recognize these negative features as the legacy of Zionism in biblical Palestine. (The distinguished author and jurist, Raja Shehadeh, offers a poignant description without rancor in his Strangers in the House.) For Zionism was a modernist movement—secular, utopian, socialist—displacing a traditional society with all of the certainty and hubris with which Marxism took over czarist Russia. A “globalization” fueled by American economic hegemony threatens the entire world with a similar fate, of course; Israel is but a bellwether of yet more to come; more of the same!

Why do trees offer a counter-witness? Perhaps because of their age, their inherent dignity; redolent, in this case, of the dignity inherent in the Palestinian people, however violently displaced. As Charles Taylor emphasizes in his A Secular Age, this form of “secularity” replaces the rhythms of religious society with a homogeneous temporal cage, much like a terrain replete with trees which have taken decades to grow and mature, denuded in a few hours by mechanical means. Does our horror at the destruction of centuries-old olive trees by bulldozers simply evoke nostalgia, or does it direct our sensitivities in fruitful ways, and galvanize our energies to seek alternative paths?

In the most obvious sense, the damage has been done by Israeli planners, forcibly eradicating the memories of Arab villages in the Galilee and the Golan. Yet to invoke

Alain's and Meron Benvenisti's image of contending maps, what about a palimpsest? Might not such a dual projection offer a way for people to imagine the present animated by a vibrant past? And are not many young people dreaming of something like this in an effort to shed the "sins of their fathers?" Or has violent dispossession eclipsed their capacity to dream? If that be the case, then the original Zionist dream, become a nightmare for many Israelis, could well be replaced by an Israeli young woman's retort to my use of that contrast: "I guess I am too young to have dreamt." Can we help but find that chilling? French may not need a dream; but Americans and Israelis and Palestinians certainly do, and a world empty of dreams reverts instantly to one of crass self-interest, like a landscape denuded of trees and of hope.