

# Gaza panel calls for freedom from the 'prison' of territorial isolation

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**Rabbi Brian Walt of the United States, president of Jewish Fast for Peace**

By Theodore A. Gill

**What is at stake in Gaza? This was the title question posed to panellists speaking on the morning of Wednesday 29 September before approximately 120 participants in the United Nations Advocacy Week (UNAW) organized by the World Council of Churches. The public discussion was moderated by George Hazou, chairman of the Middle East Council of Churches central committee.**

For panelist Nora Carmi of Jerusalem the answer to the opening question is straightforward: 'What is at stake in Gaza is life.' The puzzling thing, she continued, given the life-and-death situation of Palestinians in Gaza, is this: 'Why don't we care enough for this tiny spot where people are dying?'

Carmi, a staff member of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, argued that the time has come 'to say what is truly in our hearts' and to vow that 'we are going to save the people' whose lives are at risk each day. This is far more crucial than a rehearsal of the content of UN resolutions or further analysis of issues that have been analyzed so often in the past.

She feels that 'the greatest tragedy' to befall Palestinians is found not in events of 1948 or 1967 but in the continuing division of the people into separate territories and fractious parties, and particularly in the isolation of Gaza and its inhabitants from the rest of the world. Conditions in Gaza have been deteriorating for decades, she added, 'and we must share the responsibility for this.'

'We must come out of this UN Advocacy Week with a strategy and the determination to act,' she said. This might mean 'a Selma march in Palestine' to 'end the crime' being perpetrated there.

A pivotal event in the US civil rights movement was a 1965 march led by Martin Luther King, Jr from the city of Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama.

Another speaker, Rabbi Brian Walt of the United States, president of Ta'anit Tzedek Jewish Fast for Peace, focused on the question, 'What is at stake in Gaza for Jews?' His conclusion was, 'What is at stake is no less than the moral core of my faith. Our liberation as a moral people is inextricably linked to justice for the people of Gaza.'

Ta'anit Tzedek, an initiative among US Jews who support the Israeli peace movement, draws inspiration from the words of prophecy in Isaiah 58:6, 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke?'

The rabbi described three principal aims of the Jewish Fast for Peace related to Gaza: break the silence among Jews in regard to the oppression of Palestinians, lift the siege of Gaza which is 'immoral as well as illegal' and pursue peace through negotiations in the realization that there can be no military solution. He indicated that Ta'anit Tzedek may intensify its efforts at lobbying the US government in order to resist 'the confusion of Judaism and the Jewish faith with Israeli national policy.'

Standing for justice and peace is a responsibility for Jews due to calls in Hebrew Scripture for righteous living, Rabbi Walt added, 'but it is also a human responsibility.'

Ramzi Zananiri, executive director of the Near East Council of Churches and the International Christian Committee-Jerusalem, urged the audience to view the 'corporate punishment' of Gaza's population within the wider context of all occupied Palestinian territories. The election of the Hamas party in Gaza serves as a distraction for international observers, he said, but the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza constitute interlocking parts of the one national aspiration of Palestinians. Gaza must not be isolated in our thinking, any more than it should be physically isolated by military blockade.

It is in this context of a united national vision that we appreciate what is at stake today, Zananiri observed. 'The reality on the ground remains explosive. The likelihood of the worst-case scenario remains, and this is keenly felt on the ground in each of the occupied territories.' It must be felt, too, by all who yearn for peace in the Middle East: 'The situation as it stands cannot tolerate any additional injustices.'

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