



*United Network*

*for Justice and Peace*

*in Palestine and Israel*



## Peace Requires Justice

### A Response to the Centre for Israel & Jewish Affairs *Seek Peace* Initiative

April 2014

In early April the Centre for Israel & Jewish Affairs (CIJA) sent a letter and brochure to United Church clergy that asked them and their congregations to consider supporting a “constructive alternative” to the UCC’s [Unsettling Goods](#) campaign.

CIJA, which describes itself as “the advocacy arm of the Jewish Federations of Canada,” has been a vociferous opponent of the UCC resolution on Palestine/Israel which passed with a strong majority at the 41<sup>st</sup> General Council meeting in August 2012. The *Unsettling Goods* campaign is the UCC’s response to and implementation of the 2012 resolution.

The gist of the CIJA letter is that *Unsettling Goods*, which it narrowly portrays as a “boycott campaign,” (*Unsettling Goods* includes several components, including [trust-building initiatives](#), [economic action](#), and [pilgrimage](#)) is not a genuine peace initiative. The accompanying brochure lists eight organizations that are working in areas such as trust-building and dialogue, almost exclusively between Palestinians and Israelis living in Israel.

Our response:

#### 1. The CIJA initiative ignores the biblical mandate to “do justice”.

The Hebrew scriptures common to both Jews and Christians use the Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, more than 200 times. In its essence, *mishpat* means treating people equally, and ensuring that vulnerable and disempowered groups in society are accorded justice. CIJA talks about “creating conditions where trust can be nurtured” but true mutual trust and respect is built on the foundation of human rights and justice.

In their cover letter, CIJA quotes Psalm 34:14: “seek peace and pursue it.” However, there is an important clause that precedes this phrase. The full verse reads, “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.” The first part of the verse speaks to the imperative of doing justice. Justice requires us to understand and address the roots of inequality and conflict.

In the context of Palestine/Israel, there are at least three things to consider when it comes to doing justice:

- a) the injustice and mistreatment of 4.3 million Palestinians living under oppressive military rule, occupation, and blockade in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza.
- b) the injustice facing approximately 5 million Palestinian refugees living outside of Palestine/Israel who are both the original refugees forced to flee from their homes during the wars of 1948 and 1967, and their descendants. Their current living situations vary but many have been living in refugee camps for more than 50 years and have limited civil rights.
- c) the injustices and discrimination faced by the 1.4 million Palestinians living in Israel.

The CIJA ‘*Seek Peace*’ initiative ignores the first two considerations and only tangentially addresses the third.

Taken in isolation, the work of some of the organizations being promoted by CIJA could be a helpful contribution to one dimension of the struggle for equality between Palestinians and Israelis living in Israel (note that none of the organizations promoted by CIJA make any mention of Israel’s military occupation of Palestinian land, or of Palestinian refugees outside of Israel/Palestine).

There are approximately 1.4 million Palestinians in Israel comprising nearly 20% of the total population. The Basic Law of Human Dignity and Freedom, passed in 1992 by the Israeli parliament, ensures that Israel is a state of “the Jewish people”. There are many laws in Israel that privilege Jews over Arabs. The 1950 Law of Return, for example, grants automatic citizenship rights to Jews from anywhere in the world but Palestinians are not afforded this right. The Israeli government has recently attempted to create another set of rules for a new category of Israelis, namely Christians in Israel.

As a minority, Palestinians face discrimination and second-class treatment; government resources are heavily skewed towards Jews. Palestinians have the lowest living standards in Israel and [Human Rights Watch](#) has found, for example, that government run schools for Palestinian children “are a world apart from government-run Jewish schools.”

Unfortunately, most of the organizations being promoted by CIJA do not take a rights-based approach to the problem of Israeli-Palestinian equality within Israel. Building trust and understanding between Palestinians and Israelis, the approach taken by these eight organizations, does not address the systematic and fundamental discrimination Palestinians face in Israel. Only one of the organizations, the Citizens’ Accord Forum between Jews & Arabs in Israel, makes any reference to the language of “rights”, pointing out for example, that “actual government expenditure on Arab citizens is, on average, 35% lower than that expended on Jewish citizens.”

**2. Doing justice requires advocacy to change power relations and policies to ensure human rights are accorded to those suffering injustice.**

Acting in the long tradition of United Church civic engagement, the *Unsettling Goods* campaign challenges unjust power relations between Palestinians and Israelis. The occupation results from the military subjugation of one people by another. Creating trust and understanding between people is a worthy goal, but unless those who wield power change their policies and actions, justice continues to be denied.

It is somewhat ironic that CIJA, which describes itself as an advocacy organization, is attempting to remove political advocacy as a tool in the campaign for a just peace in Israel/Palestine. They know that systemic change involves speaking to governments and decision-makers. And yet their own ‘*Seek Peace*’ initiative attempts to remove the conflict from the political arena and limit it to the personal realm.

In fact, both are important elements that are built into the *Unsettling Goods* campaign. The advocacy/boycott element of *Unsettling Goods* is critical because it shines a light on Israel’s illegal settlements and adds to the global pressure for Israel to comply with international law and human rights conventions. Boycott is a peaceful means of advocacy that is having a growing impact as more people become aware of the serious obstacle to peace posed by Israeli settlements.

### **3. Reconciliation is based on justice and the full implementation of human rights for all people—Palestinians and Israelis.**

The CIJA initiative frames the conflict as one that can be solved by reconciling Palestinians and Israelis on a personal level. These are “genuine opportunities” to promote peace, it claims in its letter to United Church ministers. However, our biblical traditions affirm that reconciliation and justice are inseparable concepts. Reconciliation is based on “right relationships”. The Hebrew Testament word for peace is “shalom”, a word that implies both healing and well-being. Well-being cannot exist under occupation, where human rights are denied to an entire people and where military might is used to preserve “well-being” for one people at the expense of another.

Justice in Palestine/Israel will flourish when all people are accorded equal human rights: the right to self-determination, the right to water, the right to mobility, the right to freedom from arbitrary detention, the right to cultivate one’s own land, the right to live in your house without fear of it being demolished or confiscated, and all the rights that are enshrined in international law. These are not concepts present in the CIJA “constructive alternative.”

#### **So what is genuine peace?**

There is another Bible passage that reads as follows: “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). Palestinians and Israelis need genuine peace, peace based on justice.

In 2009, Palestinian Christians issued a document called [\*A Moment of Truth: Kairos Palestine\*](#). “Our message to the Jews tells them: Even though we have fought one another in the recent past and still struggle today, we are able to love and live together. We can organize our political life, with all its complexity, according to the logic of this love and its power, *after ending the*

*occupation and establishing justice.*” These words from our Palestinian colleagues reaffirm the message that true reconciliation and trust must be built on the foundation of justice.

We cannot afford to delay justice any longer. The wounds that have been caused to Palestinians living under occupation, living without equal rights in Israel, living without homes and severely restricted in their daily lives as refugees—these are deep wounds that cannot be treated lightly. As UNJPPI members, we recommit ourselves to the struggle for justice, to the work of building a just society in Israel/Palestine that will create the conditions for reconciliation and trust which must follow.