

EDITORIAL: Here is the expanded response from Mark Levenson

We also noted, in our editorial, the absence of Bread and Puppet Theatre in the issue, yet the puppet workshop with Palestinians that Clare Dolan wrote about was, in fact, a Bread and Puppet project. That was also an article that drew a concerned response from former UNIMA-USA president Mark Levenson, and we include his response here, slightly edited for length.

While I very much enjoyed the social justice issue, it also left me troubled. Many problems plaguing the world today have clear villains and victims ... As Elie Wiesel said in the very apt quote you included in your editorial, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

If Wiesel was right about this, perhaps he was also right about the Israel/Palestinian conflict, which is the backdrop to Clare Dolan's "Playing with Dolls in the West Bank." Wiesel expressly did not see this conflict in terms of oppressor and victim, tormentor and tormented. Instead, he wrote:

What we are suffering through today is not a battle of Jew versus Arab or Israeli versus Palestinian. Rather, it is a battle between those who celebrate life and those who champion death. It is a battle of civilization versus barbarism.

Do the two cultures that brought us the Psalms of David and the rich libraries of the Ottoman Empire not share a love of life, of transmitting wisdom and opportunity to their children? And is any of this discernible in the dark future offered by Hamas to Arab children, to be suicide bombers or human shields for rockets?

Palestinian parents want a hopeful future for their children, just like Israeli parents do. And both should be joining together in peace. But before sleepless mothers in both Gaza City and Tel Aviv can rest, before diplomats can begin in earnest the crucial business of rebuilding dialogue... the Hamas death cult must be confronted for what it is.

Moderate men and women of faith, whether that faith is in God or man, must shift their criticism from the Israeli soldiers – whose terrible choice is to fire and risk harming human shields, or hold their fire and risk the death of their loved ones – to the terrorists who have taken away all choice from the Palestinian children of Gaza.

That's a level of complexity and nuance that's missing from Dolan's perspective. The ultimate symbol of oppression in Dolan's article is the ominous separation wall that runs between much of the West Bank and Israel proper. Further [according to Dolan], the wall and Israeli bureaucratic cruelty combine to rob Palestinian children of their very dreams.

Why would the Israelis build such an inhumane monument? Dolan is silent on this point, so let me supply a few names by way of an answer: Shaked Abraham, Shalhevet Pass, Danielle Shefi, and Isaac Rotenberg. ...

[These were all Israelis, murdered by "Palestinian Arabs." –ed.]

Levenson continues:

The separation wall was built not to deny Palestinians their dreams, but to ensure that there are no more Shaked, Shalhevets, Danielles, or Rotenbergs. To the consternation of its critics, the wall has been remarkably effective in reducing the frequency and casualty rates of terror attacks. If this is what's needed to save innocent lives, so be it. Those who would deny Israeli children even this passive means of self-defense would deny them any self-defense at all.

The absolute, villains-and-victims approach of social justice explains or helps little when it comes to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Perhaps the article could have acknowledged this reality, and perhaps it would have been better placed in a different issue.

Perhaps so. While *Puppetry International* does publish scholarship, the article in question was not a scholarly article and Ms. Dolan was not charged with presenting a balanced portrait of a conflict in which, as Wiesel wrote: "both sides share a love of life," but rather to share her experience of leading a puppet-making workshop under the banner of Bread and Puppet Theatre, a group known for using large puppets to protest the actions of authorities since they took on US involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s. For such balance and differing points of view we count on our readers. [--ed.]

In a follow-up email, Levenson writes:

In the case of the Israelis and the Palestinians, I think the constructive role of puppetry is less to protest and more to bring people together. There are puppet programs in Israel in which Jews and Moslems get to know each other through collaboration (and tennis camps and other athletic programs, and even summer camps over here, that have the same goals.) Lasting peace, if it's to be achieved, is a long-term project in which all opportunities for mutual understanding should be encouraged.

With this, we agree. UNIMA is, after all, a worldwide organization, the mission of which is to encourage friendship and understanding among all peoples through the art of puppetry. Our hope is that the more we succeed in this, the less need there will be for walls.