



2023 Year in Review



Josh Vis and Chris DeBlaay – Israel/Palestine

In July 2020, I was listening to a podcast episode featuring Cornel West, the public philosopher and activist. He said something that has transformed the way I look at my work, at my life: “I think things are getting so bad that we have to focus on what fortifies us.

It’s not even a question of thinking about victory in any serious way, but it’s a matter of how we sustain the struggle. There is a certain victory in sustaining a high-quality struggle that’s founded on integrity, honesty, decency, and service to others.”

This quote inspired the narrative at the end of our documentary, [The Law and the Prophets](#). In a year where I watched the already dim prospects for an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem collapse, I keep coming back to West’s insight. There is so much that I cannot do. In the face of so much pain, loss, and suffering, I am largely helpless. It is demoralizing. It is easy to despair, and there are days in which I do just that. I despair.

I was stunned by the brutality of the Palestinian militants who came into Israel on October 7 and massacred nearly 1,200 Israelis. Palestinian oppression is real and unjust, but such cruelty and inhumanity can never be justified. I continue to be stunned by the brutality of the Israeli military. As I write this, the Palestinian death toll is around 24,000, mostly civilians. It is unfathomable and unconscionable. Israel is on trial for genocide in the International Court of Justice, a case brought by South Africa and supported by dozens of other countries around the world. The United States is complicit in what South Africa alleges to be a genocide on Palestinians in Gaza. Agree or disagree with South Africa’s argument for the application of the term genocide, the case brought to the Hague is not without merit. Not only has Israel killed at least 10,000 women and children in Gaza. Right now, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza are currently at serious risk of starvation. Israel will decide if they live or die. I honestly don’t know what Israel will choose. No one does.

What can I do in the face of such violence, such pain? I can sustain a high-quality struggle rooted in honesty, humility, hospitality, and hope. I can choose to believe in humanity. I want to echo these words from a statement put out by over twenty human rights organizations in Israel, including some organizations that we work with (namely: B’Tselem, Parents Circle-Families Forum, Breaking the Silence, Rabbis for Human Rights, and Combatants for Peace): “Even now—especially now—we must maintain our moral and humane position and refuse to give in to despair or the urge for vengeance. Keeping our faith in the human spirit and its inherent goodness is more vital than ever. One thing is clear: We will never surrender our belief in humanity—even now, when doing so is more challenging than ever.” Let this be your prayer for Israelis and Palestinians, and for the people we work with in Israel/Palestine.

Over the last year, the big highlight was the documentary, *The Law and the Prophets*. It played in three film festivals, two on the East Coast, and one in England. It is also being considered for a festival in Chicago in 2024. I did several other showings in the Midwest throughout 2023, as well as an online showing, which helped raise the profile of the film. You can now watch the film on [YouTube](#), where it has over 10,000 views in three months! Before October 7, it was easier to enjoy the success of the film. That said, I have been so inspired and encouraged by the support the Palestinian people have received around the world. When I began this work in 2016, such support would have been unimaginable. But such support is deserved. The vast majority of Palestinians are non-violent, even in the face of decades of brutal occupation. The current siege of Gaza, whatever you think of it, is representative of Israel's treatment of Palestinians. It is the occupation without mercy.

I am working on a short course on the history of Israel/Palestine, including some information and discussion about Oct 7 and following. I'll be testing parts of it at Christ Memorial Church in January. After I hone it a bit, I will share it more widely. In late September 2023, Chris and I went to Israel/Palestine to interview the individuals in the film. And then, everything changed, and we pivoted to the new reality. We are still hoping to salvage some content from those interviews. We plan to get back to them in February. We are still considering what to do about tours in this new reality. We have not made any decisions yet. If we go in 2024, it will be in November.

I want to end with a part of a poem by author, activist, and organizer, Adrienne Maree Brown. She is lamenting cancel culture, a trend typically associated with the left, though it is a universal human phenomenon. It's scapegoating. We want a world without contradiction, without doubt, without the mess of democracy, and so we project our fears and anxieties onto a person or group. If we just get rid of them, cancel them, put them in their place, we won't feel so scared. It never works, of course. This poem hints at the work that must be done and ends with a longing that I very much share.

"but one layer under that, what i hear is ..."

"we cannot change.

"we do not believe we can create compelling pathways from being harm doers to being healed, and to growing.

"we do not believe we can hold the complexity of a gray situation.

"we do not believe in our own complexity.

"we do not believe we can navigate conflict and struggle in principled ways.

"we can only handle binary thinking: good/bad, innocent/guilty, angel/abuser, black/white, etc., etc.

"cancer attacks one part of the body at a time, i have seen it – oh it's in the throat, now it's in the lungs, now it's in the bones. when we engage in knee jerk call outs as a conflict resolution device, or issue instant consequences with no process, we become a cancer unto ourselves, unto movements and communities. we become the toxicity we long to heal. we become a tool of harm when we were trying to be, and i think meant to be, a balm.

"oh unthinkable thoughts. now that i have thought you, it becomes clear to me that all of you are rooted in a singular longing: i want us to live, i want us to want to live, in this world, in this time, together."

Me too.