

## **Gaza at the Crossroads: The History of My Family's Hometown**

Philip Farah

Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

February 22, 2009

Al Salamu Alaykum. Shukran to...

I was born in Jerusalem in 1952. However, I'm  $\frac{3}{4}$  Gazan—my father's family and my maternal grandmother's family both have centuries old roots in that City. Most people are surprised when I tell them about the many Palestinian Christian families that come from Gaza, like mine does. In the minds of most people in the West, Gaza is the home of Muslim Hamas, which has been vilified to no end in the Western Media. But the anger that Hamas represents is the anger of those who are oppressed, those who have been under the boot of a brutal occupation for over forty years, and it is an anger that is shared by the many Christian families that call Gaza their hometown, as mine does. One of the largest neighborhoods of the old part of Gaza is al-Zaytoun (meaning the Olive Grove) and it was known for centuries as the Christian Quarter.

However, I believe that anger will not help solve Palestinian-Israeli conflict. What I hope to present in this introduction are a few examples of glorious periods in Gaza's 5,000 year history, and illustrate that these were possible because of the City's tolerance of diversity during those periods. When one group sought dominance over all others in Gaza, the result was death and destruction and long periods of stagnation. I will start by showing you this photograph—the only one that I have of members of my family in Gaza before 1948.



This is my Mother's family and the photo was taken in the mid-1930s in the vineyard that my Grandpa owned. My grandma is seated in the middle and my Mom is standing next to the two young boys on the right. She was a teenager back then. (She turned 89 last month.)

In what follows, I will tell you a little more about Gaza's diversity, and also—by the way-- about the Gaza grapes that you see in this photo. I'll do so by taking you many centuries in the Past and then back to around the time the photo was taken. But, very importantly, I want you, while listening, to contemplate a sentence that you've probably heard scores of times in your life—Israel has made the Desert bloom. Let me start with a quote from Abba Eban, considered one of Israel's greatest statesmen and intellects:

- He's talking about the origins of the Philistines, who are thought to have come to Southern Palestine from the Aegean Region starting around 1200 BC: "Failing to penetrate into Egypt, they obtained a foothold on the Palestine coast where they consolidated their strength around five cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath. The Philistines occupied some of the most fertile country of the region, and their resources were abundant."
- (Another Israeli writer describing the Fall of Gaza to the Persians in 538 BC wrote:) "Gaza [became] a terminus for caravans of incense, myrrh and exotic animals from Yemen, ..., Indian spices, [and] Chinese silks ... Greek and Cypriot ships [came to buy its] olive oil and wine."
- (The same Israeli writer re the period of Byzantine Rule (3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) : "Gaza was regionally famous for its vegetables, dates, dried fruit and fish exports. But [most of all] Gazan wine was renowned throughout the region and further."
- Records of exports of high quality Gaza wine extend back to antiquity. Distinctive Gazan amphora (the ancient large ceramic jars with two handles and a narrow neck, used to hold oil or wine) have been dug up all over Europe and the Meditr'n Basin. By the fifth century, the writings of several Latin historians in Western Europe mention the high quality of wine imported from Gaza (paraphrased from Gerlad Butt.)
- In 1154, the great Muslim geographer al-Idrisi (who lived in what was then the predominantly Muslim city of Palermo,) wrote about Gaza "it is a very populous city and in the hands of the Crusaders." (The Crusaders had conquered Gaza from the Muslims who had earlier conquered it from the Byzantines.) Around the year 1300 AD, the Syrian geographer, al-Dimashqi, described Gaza, now back under Muslim rule, as a "city so rich in trees it looks like a cloth of brocade upon the land."
- Now back to twentieth century, the British colonial High Commissioner wrote in a letter to the Foreign Office describing the need to revive the Gaza economy, which under previous Ottoman rule had been "a major supplier of barley for the brewing industry in Europe." (G. Butt, p. 120)
- In fact, Gaza did experience an economic revival, with new neighborhoods being built in the 1930s and 1940s in the southern and eastern plains, and along the Coast, with its verdant palm and orange groves.

Clearly, Gaza like the rest of Palestine, was not a desert which Israel made to bloom. Under a multiplicity of cultures that came and went, all of them leaving an imprint on Gaza's personality, the city was generally known for its agricultural exports all over the Middle East and beyond.

Next I want to turn to some of Gaza's periods of tolerance, particularly towards Jews, to provide a contrast with Israel's attitude towards Palestinians at the present time. I will again rely on quotations from Abba Eban's book, *My people: the story of the Jews*. In listening to these quotations I ask you to think about the "paradigm" of the Jewish state, as articulated by Chaim Weizman, one of its leading Founding Fathers: When Chaim Weitzman was asked about the goals of Zionism, his response was: "To build up something in Palestine which will be as Jewish as England is English."

But here is what Abba Eban wrote to contrast the tolerance which Jews experienced under Muslim rule, with the harsh conditions that Jews had experienced under the former Christian Byzantine masters in the Middle East : "Under Muslim rule, world Jewry entered into a new period of physical and intellectual expansion....The rejuvenation of the [Jewish] community [in Palestine] under Muslim rule was ...swift. Oppressed and numerically decimated by its Byzantine sovereigns, the [Jewish] community in Palestine now rose to such heights that it seemed ready to regain its authority over world Jewry" ....[Jews were allowed to return in large numbers to Jerusalem for the first time in centuries.]

- "Jerusalem was not the only city to experience a [Jewish] renaissance under the Muslims.... [O]ther centers of [Jewish] learning were Gaza, Ashkelon, and Haifa."
-

Centuries later, according to Eban and other Jewish historians, Jewish communities were thriving among majority Muslim Arab populations in the Ottoman Middle East.

While preparing for this presentation I came upon several references to Jewish minorities living and thriving in Gaza under majority Muslim rule. One such reference was actually from a website of hardline Israeli settlers that referred Jewish barley merchants in Gaza .

Gaza flourished under Ottoman rule. The Jewish community was once again flourishing and prosperous during the 16th and 17th centuries.... In the 19th century ... [and in 1665, on the occasion of Shabbatai Zevi's visit to Gaza, the city became a center of the messianic movement in Judaism.... [Later] in the 19th century, the Jews that were concentrated there were mostly barley merchants. They bartered with the Bedouins for barley which they exported to the beer breweries of Europe.

(The last sentence struck a chord with me. My own family, several generations back, included prosperous barley merchants in Gaza.)

Numerous other historical accounts validate the fact that Christians, as well as Jews, not only were able to continue practicing their religion under Muslim rule, but also witnessed periods of great prosperity and cultural achievement.

---

Contrast this tolerance with Chaim Weitzman's Zionism which called for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, effectively on the ruins of the indigenous Arab Muslim and Christian population.

My own family in Gaza, and many other Christian families were not only very large, but played leading roles in the city's commerce and administration under Muslim rule.

Sadly, in less than two generations, the brutality of Israel's occupation has all but wiped out Christian presence in Gaza. Only a few of my relatives remain there, and there are hardly any youth among them. The other speakers will tell you about the terrible conditions which have driven young Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, to flee Gaza.

Not all of Gaza's history was rosy—not by a long shot. In fact, Gaza, being at the crossroads of civilizations has had more than its fair share of war and man-made calamity. Not a single group one of its many historical creeds and ethnicities has been free of blame. As has been the case elsewhere, Gaza's periods of greatest prosperity were those when its leaders recognized that its diversity was a source of strength. On the other hand, the people of Gaza, at times, experienced untold massacres and near-complete destruction of their city. But Gaza has always risen from the ashes, and I'm confident that it will do so again. And, when it does, it will again defy the myth that military domination of one group over another brings security to the conqueror.