

Public Comment, April 11th Town Council Meeting.
Submitted by Miriam Thompson, Co-Convener
Abrahamic Initiative on the Middle East (AIME)

On behalf of the Abrahamic Initiative on the Middle East (AIME), and the partners who joined us at this afternoon's State Department tour of the State Department tour of 4 Israeli Knesset members, two of whom are members of the dominant right wing Likud government, but all of whom either support or accommodate Israel's decades old Occupation of Palestine, I want to recognize the openness of the Council in letting us speak briefly, and hope we continue the conversation as a human rights city. I want urge the Council to review our past application and acceptance as a "Human Rights City, " – one of a handful across the country, and the standards and principles we agreed to uphold.

As hosts, we understand the effort to "normalize" the controversial visit, by focusing mainly on governance issues – how we tax, how we elect, how our various agencies operate. At the same time, it was important for the Mayor to emphasize that the delegates were visiting Chapel Hill, our human rights city, that struggles to assure every resident decent jobs, affordable housing and health care, quality public education for every student, and a safe, clean and sustainable environment, that struggles to confront our State's defunding of these major entitlements and, most recently the HB2 discriminatory, discredited and reviled legislation.

The letter and fact sheet we shared with the Council and Israeli Knesset delegates drew a heated and often vitriolic response, in which our documentation of the impact of the Occupation was passionately denied and attacked. But we know how painful it is to face our own nation's dark history against oppressed groups – long absent in our textbooks and classrooms. And we have only to look at our current NC State elected leadership and the 2016 political campaign rhetoric that continues to exclude the "other."

I want to emphasize that most every constituent who attended this afternoon's meeting has either visited Israel and Palestine, has family members who have suffered the expropriation of their home in the West Bank, and/or has witnessed mass demolitions of Palestinian homes, expropriation of land, detention and imprisonment of Palestinian children as young as 10. Still others have witnessed the aerial bombing of Gaza by Israel – a major nuclear armed military power in the Middle East, supported by \$3.5 billion in U.S. military aid.... our tax dollars that could be redirected to alternatives to war and critical social programs here and abroad. We were also careful to cite documentation by internationally recognized human rights organizations, including B'Tselem, Israel's own human rights NGO and Breaking the Silence – a program sponsored by Israeli soldiers who have chronicled their military experience and how it has damaged their souls. All seek a just, democratic and secure peace for Israelis and Palestinians in a land in which both peoples can equitably distribute resources among all its residents.

As faith and human rights leaders and as elected officials who represent us, we would like to offer ways in which we can continue the conversation and public education and engagement.

1. We urge the Council review its protocols re hosting outside delegations or visitors. We are a democratically governed city. So if the Mayor or Council members are asked to host political or cultural delegations, let's first spend more time together researching visitors' credentials, how their work honors or violates or challenge our principles. and invite broad community participation and even debate.
2. There are some actions in which we can engage together that can enhance this dialogue, including presentations that provide conflicting narratives, videos and peace and human rights petitions that are featured on the websites of the organizations we cited in our AIME letter and fact sheet that we shared with the Council before the April 11th meeting, and with the Knesset Delegates during the meeting.
3. An immediate event that will help illuminate our conversation is the production of "My Name is Rachel Corrie," that AIME and partners are co-sponsoring. We invite the Mayor and Council to join us on April 29th at 7:30, at the Community Church of Chapel Hill UU. Rachel Corrie was the young woman who volunteered to go to Israel to protect Palestinian families from house demolitions and was run over and killed by an Israeli bulldozer.

We look forward to our work together in helping strengthen our human rights city and making it not only a national but a world leader.