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“Standing at the Door”

Words: 1,461

I'm sitting in a small classroom in the middle of Bet Sahour, Palestine. It's week three since we left the United States, and there are three months remaining. We are flooded with the stories of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation; we are caught up and overwhelmed in waves of violence—a seemingly endless cycle; some days it feels like we're drowning.

On this particular day, a Palestinian man shares his story of oppression, the family members he has lost over the years, the sense of fear he experiences almost daily. When he finishes his story, we inquire—"so what message should we take home to our friends and families? What do you want us to remember?" We've asked this question innumerable times—it has been one small way that we attempt to make some sense of all we are being told. But his answer gives us pause. "Whatever you do," he says, "Don't pick one side over the other. Don't pick us over them. And don't pick them over us. We're doing that enough ourselves already."

Psalms 27:14 reads, "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." The Hebrew translation of this verse uses the word "qavah" for the idea of waiting. Qavah means two things: first, to wait, look for, hope, and expect. However, it also means to collect, or to bind together. Qavah is an active way of waiting—it is not passively waiting for things to happen, it is a way to participate by holding space in anticipation of things to come.

Travelling through Israel and Palestine, I explore my place as a third party in the conflict. As a middle-class, white American, I am in no place to create a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I am merely an observer, traveling through, leaving their realities just as soon as I enter them. Beyond that, my country is

actively contributing to the conflict, with our government's adamant support of the State of Israel. As a peace-minded Mennonite, however, I am drawn to stand with the oppressed and marginalized. Over the course of the trip, this mindset led me to a place of witnessing. There was truth and a whole lot of pain on both sides. I could not speak for the Israelis or the Palestinians, but I felt called to hold both collections of stories with grace. "Don't pick us over them, don't pick them over us." Qavah—to gather together, to wait.

This past summer, I attended Mennonite Church USA Convention in Kansas City. I journeyed to Kansas City with the intent of actively participating in Pink Menno events. Pink Menno is a group of Mennonites that are working towards LGBTQ equality in the Mennonite Church. My decision to participate with Pink Menno was met with much hesitation and discomfort from my home church in Oregon. In contrast, my trip was funded by the church I attend at school. I first felt that tension upon arrival in Kansas City. The familiar faces in the crowds of Mennonites looked at me from differing contexts. I was coming from a more traditional Mennonite church, but I was sent out from an openly-welcoming church. My life-long relationships tied me to a conservative way of doing church, but my recent friendships called me to a new way of being church. And so I gathered together the stories—and held the tension. Qavah.

As an ally in the journey towards equality, I recognize my privilege. I also recognize my "otherness" and my safety. Discussions about varied sexualities do not attack my personhood. While these conversations are emotionally draining, they are not about me. Growing up in a small rural town, however, being the "liberal" voice

fell to me. In high school, our Student Advocates For Equality (SAFE) club was often entirely made up of straight kids, because the school environment was not safe enough for LGBTQ youth to publicly align themselves with our rainbow posters and radical t-shirts.

I entered college in the fall of 2013, and set down my bags—my “allyship.” For the first time in my life I was surrounded by individuals who agreed with me. I no longer had to be “on” all the time. There were queer individuals to tell their queer stories—it was no longer my story to carry. I naively lived into my privilege. Upon returning home, I had to be “on” again—I was the voice in my youth group pushing them to talk about sexuality, surrounded by friends who had told me years before that one could not be gay and Christian. But when I was at college, I could relax.

In the second semester of my freshman year, my university was fully engaged in a listening process regarding the hiring of individuals in same-sex relationships. I participated in the conversations that were available, but didn’t seek them out enthusiastically until I was confronted by a friend. “Where are all the allies? Why is it just us queer folk speaking up about this process?” I responded, “This story isn’t mine to tell.” They looked at me. “But you are my friend. And you can tell your truth as it is affected by my truth.”

“Don’t pick us over them, and don’t pick them over us.”

In Kansas City, I stood with the members of Pink Menno, allowing my story to be affected by their stories. I stood and watched as LGBTQ individuals stood on the stage in front of a room of delegates, boldly acknowledging the exclusion of queer folk from the delegate hall. And I watched as a room of Mennonites raised their

voices, singing hymns to drown out the mere presence of these marginalized individuals. I felt the pull between the congregation I grew up in and the people I knew and loved who experience violence within the Mennonite Church. I stood, not as a member of either of these groups, but as a third party, actively engaged in the tension. Qavah—I am actively waiting, actively gathering together the stories of those I love.

“Whatever you do, don’t pick one side over the other. Don’t pick us over them, and don’t pick them over us. We’re doing that enough ourselves already.” And I ask myself—is there a way to hold all stories, even in the midst of power imbalance? How does a pacifist acknowledge violence, but meet it with grace?

I am standing in a church. Your church. The church is crowded, but there are people knocking on the door, asking to enter. I notice murmurings around me—folks are grumbling. The knocking is so loud, they can’t hear the sermon. There is great debate within the building about whether or not the church can hold more people, and still the knocking continues. The tension is palpable—thick and heavy, a blanket over our shoulders. To me, there is no question. There will always be enough room in the church. How can we possibly turn people away at the door? But next to me, the grumbling gets louder. The folks on my left have decided the knocking is too loud, so they’re slipping out the side door. Their feelings are hurt—they feel the congregation hasn’t done enough to silence the knocking so they can hear the sermon. Outside the door, the knocking slows. Knuckles are bloody, the pain is too great, and those waiting at the door turn away, exhausted. I exit the church, and find incredible worship—outside the church are new sacred spaces, full

of bloody knuckles and incredible care for one another. I reenter the church, and find it disgruntled. It is almost empty—the knocking was too loud, and many felt unheard amidst the noise. I am stuck. I would open the church door, but the church that raised me doesn't trust me enough to hand me the keys. And so I exit and reenter. I exit and hold sacred, brave spaces with those who are outside. We are church to one another, even without a roof over our heads. I reenter and keep the church building sacred, dusting the pews and tidying the worship books, singing alongside those who taught me four-part harmony, and reminding them of those who are knocking. I am hoping to open the door one day. Until then, I stand at the door and wait. I am no longer turning on and off depending on where I find myself. I am not stretched by the tension. I actively gather with all those I love, holding their stories and waiting.

Waiting.

Qavah.

Where there is no easy solution, qavah.

Where I do not hold the keys, qavah.

Where I am caring and hoping and holding, qavah.

Waiting.

Qavah.