



## *The Rainbow Covenant*

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I write on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first day (June 5<sup>th</sup>) of the Six-Day War of 1967. It was Nancy's and my baptism of fire into the real world of the Middle East. Twenty-six year-olds though we were, I was a political innocent. I saw the Arab world through the rose-tinted glasses of my childhood. I reveled in the taste of good food and sweet tea sucked out of a saucer. I loved Persian bread fresh-snatched from the ceiling of a dome oven by a guy with no hair left on his right arm. I knew gluttony as I attacked with my right hand the pungent spiced mutton on top of a pile of garnished rice. I rejoiced in the 'taste' of Arabic on the tongue, the blaze of a desert summer and the smiles of Arab friends who loved what I loved. But in early 1967 I had no politics at all. Lord! How typical was I of our 'Apathetic Generation' of American youth!

June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1967, changed all that. It was a religious experience (as it was for many millions). I suddenly discovered that theology had application, that biblical studies and homiletics were not just tools in an enterprise that vaguely advanced the gospel, that inter-religious relations were absolutely crucial for spiritual maturity, and that ethics in politics mattered. (But God only knows how we're supposed to insert ethics into the mix in these days of *Realpolitik!* Now the American Congress sends a message to Israel congratulating it on pulverizing Arab armies on this day! Death, destruction, outright military occupation and brutal suppression and dispossession we Americans celebrate in the voice of the highest chambers of our putative democracy? God help us!)

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On that day, Nancy (then four months pregnant) and I were deep into our studies at the Synod Language Center near the Beirut College for Women in Beirut along with other fellow-sufferers when our colleague, Len Lee, stormed in shouting, 'War! We've got a war! Everyone go home!' I actually felt a bit nonplussed. On my way up to the center from our really nifty apartment in 'Ayn-m-Mraysî that morning I had bought a kilo and a half of gorgeous Lebanese cherries (and they don't get any better anywhere!) from a sidewalk vendor, washed them when I got to the center, and distributed them to each classroom. We had all hunkered down to another day of grueling Arabic studies, munching cherries and spitting out the pits. And now ... *this?* War! How *gauche!* But all our tutors agreed with Len and off we trooped (after polishing off the cherries, of course) much to the delight of our Druze taxi concession at the bottom of the alley.

Nancy and I dropped our books in our apartment and immediately went to the Synod office on the edge of downtown Beirut. And there we found Joe Owens, the Presbyterian treasurer, saying, "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be studying Arabic." "Are we going to evacuate?" we asked. "Evacuate?" exclaimed Joe, "*we never* evacuate!" When we explained our situation further, he directed us to Mr. Samâhah, the

actual and *functional* treasurer. Mr. Samâhah, always droll and efficient, opened his safe to reveal a king's ransom in virgin traveler's checks. (They *had* thought ahead!) He plunked down a bundle of them in front of Nancy and me. "Sign them on the front before you cash them," he advised dryly as he made meticulous notes on who had taken what.

There's a tale to tell about our being 'exported' from Lebanon to Turkey and then on to Geneva in Switzerland on June 7<sup>th</sup> and the days that followed, but we'll hold that for a 'slow news day' hereafter. The point is that we were on a steeper learning curve than either of us had bargained for. And when we finally returned to Lebanon, we fell into the thick of it. I was even asked by the Arab Cultural Club (the most venerable of Lebanon's leftist cultural-political stewpots) to speak in Arabic about our experience. (That one I'll never forget!) We also joined 'Americans for Justice in the Middle East' (AJME) that published a monthly newsletter, editor and president of which I eventually became.

Once I had serendipitously become president of AJME, we gave an interview to a Swedish journalist. An intensely blond square-faced activist type, he dove right in and asked me about the doctrine to which AJME subscribed. I looked at him blankly, and he hastened to explain, "What doctrine do you subscribe to — Marxist, Leninist or Trotskyite?" I was dumbfounded. Eventually, pulling my chin off of my chest, in my gross naiveté I answered, "Well, actually, we're an *American* organization and we have no ideological position. All we seek want is to promote justice in the Middle East. That's all. The issues of justice are clear." He said to me with equal amazement (and I'll never forget this either), "But Americans *never* talk about justice! That's a leftist agenda."

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," said the prophet. Is that purely a leftist agenda? If it is so, God is definitely both a leftist and (dare I say it?) un-American.

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I really don't know how to sort this out even to this day. I don't like party tags and I'm not a willing 'joiner' in any cause no matter its virtue. What I do know is that, in the forty years since the Six-Day War, we're more in the thick of it than ever. Is the word, 'justice', still the exclusive catchword of the ideological left? I certainly hope not, because 'justice' *is* the issue, and as far as I know it is still a non-ideological American ideal. But the Six-Day War is the split point of the Middle East's experience and also for American foreign policy.

Those six days were the last days of serious conventional warfare in the Middle East (the Iraq affair notwithstanding). Thereafter, having swallowed the acidic bulk of the Palestinian people, Israel was bound to have serious gastric distress. Israeli voices of conciliation notwithstanding, after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, nobody has come into power with the force of personality, foresight and vision to affect the policy of the Jewish state in a constructive direction. And, as it were, 'where there is no vision, the people perish.' It's hard to think that we aren't witnessing the denouement of the so-called 'Jewish State'. It is a byproduct of Jewish extremism and the evangelical Christian Zionists who've 'bought' Washington. Brinkmanship can be a dicey style, and the

settlements along with the dividing wall snaking through the West Bank make for brinkmanship in spades. 'Over-the-brink' is now much more likely than it ever was. And, in a sense, that's so sad. So much better could have been anticipated forty years ago.

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What is so sad is that, more than any other motivating factor, the 1967 war brought fanaticism out of the closet — Jewish, Christian and Muslim. We used to think of these folk as a freak sideshow, but they're now front-and-center, well-healed and stridently confident (though no less freakish). What is truly depressing is that main-line folk have signed on. I'll never forget when I heard that Abraham Heschel, among the true giants of Jewish theological and philosophical thought, had joined the ranks of the 'Zionist faithful' in his eleventh hour. My very faith was shaken.

At the time I was working on my masters thesis at the American University of Beirut. I was plowing through a mountain of Arabic text about the 'disaster' (*nakbah*) or 'setback' (*naksah*) of 1967, and was trying to analyze the whys and wherefores of it all. The so-called 'intellectuals' whose works I was reading were almost all second-rate, but the conservatives among them loudly called for a revival of Islamic values, mores and practices. And, quite amazingly, Muslim *women* signed on and took up the point position. 'We have abandoned God,' they cried, 'therefore God has abandoned us!' And the solution was obvious: Turn the clock back! And, with sinking hearts, we watched it happen. It's all been a study in how to manipulate and manipulative god.

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We now know, of course, that the Six-Day War, far from solving anything, was the spark igniting the tinder of the current world conflagration, the so-called 'War on Terror'. I wish I could say that, like a nightmare, it'll all go away. Eat a banana and have a glass of milk, go back to bed and let Mother rub your back and tuck you in. Sleep on it. Tomorrow will dawn with bright sunshine, fresh air and the prospect of good things. We'll go out to the sandbox and build marvels of imagination. But that's not going to work in the same way it did when we were young and innocent.

Irrepressible optimist that I am, however, I still hitch my star to the truth-speakers of this world (and they are legion in number — Jew, Christian, Muslim and secularist). They 'beaver' away to make things better for others than themselves (true altruists and lovers), and work at opening up minds to the prospect of working with integrity at the truly intractable problems (the Israeli-Palestinian problem and the problem of Iraq among them).

Among these folk I find reconciliation (*tasâluh*) and mutual forgiveness (*tasâmuḥ*). In them I find the reaffirmation of God's grace expressed to Noah. The rainbow, sometimes so faint and distant, still says that total disaster will not again overtake the human race. I hold God to his pledge.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.