

We Are Entitled to Die the Way We Want to Die

First disclosure: My parents and I barely escaped the Nazi annihilation of Jews, my grandparents and others of their generation did not, and I have Israeli cousins. Second disclosure: I've worked in Muslim and Arab nations as a public health teacher and researcher for over four decades. These twin experiences give me a painful yet 360-degree view of the two 'competing narratives' as told by Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Israelis.

For Jews, the central story is the Diaspora, beginning in the second century when the Romans savaged Judea, which they renamed Palestine. Then followed successive pogroms and expulsions even from lands Jews felt secure in – England, Iraq, Spain, Poland, Germany, Egypt – culminating in the twentieth century Holocaust. Even though remnants of Jewish settlements remained in Palestine, Jews became an uprooted people with a homeland only of the mind: Torah, Talmud, linkages between Jewish communities across the world and, for many, the messianic dream of a return to the lost homeland and Jerusalem. As it was written in Psalm 137, "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning." At the end of the nineteenth century, among other movements of national and ethnic restoration, Zionism was born, its aim to return Jews to a Jewish homeland. In 1948, the State of Israel was declared in the land of Palestine.

For the Palestinians, the story is of rootedness to the soil for millennia, in hundreds of self-ruling villages – until 1948, when seven hundred thousand were expelled or fled, a time Palestinians call the *Naqba*, the Disaster. Sixty years later, although over a million Palestinians remain as Israeli citizens, more than four million exist in camps outside, sustained by the United Nations, still dreaming of a return to a homeland that is, however, irretrievably altered.

Palestinians and Jews: two peoples, laying claim to the same land at the same time. Both with "too much history, too little geography." It should also be said, 'with too much memory.' As Minnesota's Tom Friedman recently wrote in his New York Times column, "The past always buries the future." Even in our personal lives, we tend to solidify memories as a permanent grievance, a buffer against guilt or blame, a defense against change, the narcissism of victimhood: "Our wounds dearer to us than yours to you." National and collective memories are filled with tales of martyrdom, resistance, and violent battle against the 'Other,' leading to racism and eventual attempts to annihilate the 'Other.' Jews should know this better than most.

Both Palestinian and Jewish narratives are true. If there is ever to be a peace between such adversaries, each must treat the Other's memories with respect, dignity, and understanding, even if not fully accepting all the Other's details. Israeli 'new historians' have gone a long way towards vindicating the Palestinian account of the *Naqba*. Israel's founding father, David Ben Gurion, acknowledged that had he been a Palestinian, he too would have resisted mightily the inflow of Jews into Palestine from all corners of the earth to recreate a Jewish homeland. Yet as Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim has said, "Many Israelis dream that when they wake up, the Palestinians will be gone, and the Palestinians dream that when they wake up, the Israelis will be gone. Both sides can no longer differentiate between dream and reality, and this is the psychological core of the problem."

Some severe critics of the Zionist ideal, Jews among them, argue that there should be no homeland exclusively for Jews, no "Jewish State"; and they would apply the same rule to other ethnic and religious movements. Heterogenous nations may be best suited for the challenges of the new

century. The true question is whether there can ever be a soil where Jews can feel finally secure, 'at home'. America now provides a secure home, but not one with a Jewish identity. If there is to remain a Jewish state, it can only come about when there is peace and reciprocal relations between Israelis and Palestinians and, by extension, among all other countries in the neighborhood. The words "apologize, forgive" are rarely heard between nations, but perhaps they would be the start on a real "roadmap" to peace. Jews and Arabs needn't be in love, but they must co-exist.

Sadly, I am pessimistic about the possibility of this happening in my lifetime. I believe the culture of self-pity leading to extreme acts of violence has only embittered both sides too deeply, creating new myths, martyrs and memories. Violence is corrupting and has its own cyclic logic of revenge. It appeals to violent men and extremists on both sides, who need and validate each other. Yet violence fails utterly and irrevocably. Israel is not safer, and there is more anti-semitism in the world; Palestinian suicide bombers and rockets have brought down only the havoc of retaliation on the innocent civilians on their side. All that ordinary citizens of both sides simply want is a life of dignity, security, and a happy future for their children.

Thus if ever there is to be peace, violent acts and those who threaten violence, must stop; the Israeli Occupation must stop. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish expressed it most poignantly: "We are entitled to die the way we want to die."

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