

Jewish Identity and the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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I feel some sympathy for Jewish-Israelis. Imagine the following scenario. The city council of your town decides to award you someone else's house. Unaccountably the family living there resist this reasonable ruling. You therefore storm in, kill two of the children, chase away two others, keep one as a live-in servant and magnanimously allow the rest to stay in the garage. The dispossessed family still refuses to accept the situation and makes ineffectual efforts to return to your house. You therefore occupy the garage as well and allow some of your rather wild relations to move in alongside your enemies. At last, under pressure from the city council and to deter the family's continuing criminal behaviour, you generously offer it a final settlement. You will retain control of the garage walls, roof, door and water supply, leaving the family in possession of the unoccupied part of the floor. Unbelievably the family rejects this offer and subsequently kills one of *your* children. Now even the servant is getting awkward. You want to eliminate the lot of them, but the city council disapproves. Wouldn't *you* be frustrated and scared?

Israel's increasingly oppressive occupation stems from this frustration and fear. Machiavelli (*Il Principe*; c1514 / *The Prince*; 1961) wrote: '... men must be either pampered or crushed, because they can get revenge for small injuries but not for fatal ones.' Israel has generally inclined towards the latter course, but in a television age it is difficult to replicate the ethnic cleansing which enabled the establishment of a 90% 'Palästinenserrein' (Palestinian-free) Israel in 1948. Ariel Sharon told Amos Oz in 1982, however: 'I will do all I can to expel the Arabs from here,' (<http://www.counterpunch.org/pipermail/counterpunch-list/2001-September/013054.html>) and a majority of Israelis are known to support such a move if it could be achieved peacefully. My fear is that recent events, internationally and in Israel-Palestine, have brought a violent final solution within the bounds of respectable discourse. It is, in this context, ironic to reflect that only a misuse of language prevents us from recognising that half the Jews of Israel are themselves Arabs. Indeed such confusions of terminology are an important part of the Zionist armoury.

Zionist ideology, which underlies the turmoil in Israel-Palestine, combines Jewish religious ideas and nineteenth century nationalism. It asserts a secular Jewish nationhood and incorporates the German romantic notion of national self-realisation in a nation-state. Another irony, in the circumstances, is that the Jewish state is also regarded as a safe haven for Jews in a world represented as being chronically prone to anti-Jewish prejudice. While this argument continues to have propaganda value, it seems to me that the cultural goal is more fundamental.

Akiva Orr believes that '[t]he inability to produce a secular definition of Jewishness was a driving force of Zionist activity,' (Orr; *Israel: Politics, Myths and Identity Crises*; 1994). This suggests that Zionists sought an *inner* sense of security in an age when secularisation, assimilation and marrying out were weakening Jewish identity. The Zionist leader, Theodor Herzl, even welcomed anti-Jewish prejudice as a deterrent to assimilation. Today the disproportionate memorialisation of Nazi atrocities against Jews (Finkelstein; *The Holocaust Industry*; 2000) performs the same function. Yet clearly many Jews *have* assimilated, their Jewishness existing alongside other identities.

It may well be said that, as a non-Jew, I have no right to pontificate on this subject. I do so with three thoughts in mind. Firstly I am a human being who, like all others, faces the enigma of identity. Secondly an outsider can often see things that the insider misses. This has been my

experience working as a counsellor. And thirdly the Israel-Palestine conflict is located along the fault-line which divides The West and what we could call The Rest. If it spirals out of control it is likely, therefore, to embroil all of us.

We live in a world which is increasingly multicultural and in which people are developing more complex group affiliations. This is no less true of Jews, and yet Zionism remains obstinately stuck in a nineteenth century mould which resists this process. It is both nationalist and colonialist. It asserts the primacy of Jewish identity to all Jews and maintains that Israel must be as exclusively Jewish as possible. In view of the latter it is paradoxical that Israel shows every sign of retaining the occupied territories, thus adding three million Palestinians to the one million who are already its citizens. Within a few years, unless there is further massive Jewish immigration, the non-Jewish population of historic Palestine will surpass the number of Jews. Even if the two state solution were adopted Palestinians constitute a substantial and increasing minority in Israel who will demand equal status. One example of the indefensible discrimination they suffer is that 92% of the land of Israel is reserved by law for the exclusive use of Jews.

Zionists see the demography of Israel-Palestine as a problem. For me it is an opportunity. The tendency to cling to group identity is universal but, as Hitler should have taught us, we need to be wary of it. When it threatens to engulf its adherents and others in endless ethnic conflict it is time to think again. If *we* were oppressed like the Palestinians, we would do everything in our power to resist, and would be admired for doing so, just as the suicide bombers in the Warsaw ghetto continue to be revered. Israel and its supporters have, then, a stark choice. Either they go on attempting to inflict 'fatal injury' on the Palestinians, or they recognise their humanity and deal with them on the basis of equality and respect.

Leaders have an interest in glorifying their own group and demonising 'the other.' They play on the illusion that total security (physical and psychological) is possible and that they are its deliverers. It is time we grew up and stopped believing them. I appeal, therefore to Westerners to challenge their leaders' comfortable story that 'we' are good and our opponents are evil terrorists. But more particularly, in the present context, I appeal to Jewish-Israelis to rise up against an immoral élite who, by insisting on an *apartheid* state, are intent on plunging them and the Palestinians into a bloodbath. And I appeal to Jews worldwide to resist the massaging of their *angst* by leaders who then seductively offer to make it all better with a pure and safe Jewish identity guaranteed by Israel.