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Uses and Abuses of Memory in the Israel/Palestine Dispute

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I hope that you will forgive me for being old-fashioned and reading my paper, but if I attempted to speak from notes I would almost certainly lose the thread of my argument which is quite complex. I believe that outsiders to the Israel/Palestine dispute, like myself, have a vital role to play in bringing about greater understanding, but ours is a treacherous road to tread, and I want to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings on this emotionally charged subject. I also ask your indulgence for deviating somewhat from the published abstract. This is partly the result of new thinking and partly of the reality that I bit off rather more than I could chew for a twenty-five minute presentation. You may like to ask questions about the matters I did not discuss afterwards.

I want to begin by making my position on what I call the Israel/Palestine dispute explicit. If it is wrong now for Serbian forces to massacre, evict and try to ensure the non-return of a people whom it sees as 'other' (I'm taking reports at their face value), then it was wrong when it happened in the war of 1948, and the continuation of that policy ever since by successive Israeli governments has been equally wrong. I find myself in complete agreement with Edward Said when he wrote:

The US and Israeli line has it that all parties to the Palestinian-Zionist struggle must not dwell on the past since, as some liberal Israelis have put it, it has been a struggle between right and right. This of course is the biggest distortion of all, and has been a central pillar of belief in the tactics of Peace Now and the so-called moderate Labourites. I fail to see how we are supposed to equate the 'right' of a largely European people to come to Palestine, pretend that it was empty of inhabitants, conquer it by force and drive out 70 per cent of its inhabitants, with the right of the native people to resist these actions and try to remain on their land. It is a grotesque notion to suggest parity in such a situation and then also to ask the victims to forget about their past and plan to live together as inferior citizens with their conquerors. The proposition is especially galling since it comes from a movement that claims quite openly never to have forgotten its own history of persecution, and indeed allows itself every crime against the Palestinian people because it says it is living under the shadow of past persecutions.¹

In other words I am not impartial on the question of official Israeli culpability. I am well aware, however, that many Jews have opposed Zionist policies, often at considerable cost to themselves. The question which I set out to answer in this paper is: 'Why are the reminiscences of all those Jews and non-Jews who have been witnesses to the oppression of non-Jewish Palestinians, so ineffective in improving the perception of that people, and consequently in ameliorating their situation?'

I have a particular relation to the landscape of Israel/Palestine because in 1976-77 I walked right across it, from the King Hussain (or Allenby) Bridge to Khan Younis at the bottom of the Gaza strip. This was part of a much longer journey by foot from London to Cairo which by coincidence I completed twenty-two years ago yesterday. Eleven years later, that is also eleven years ago, sitting in a comfortable villa in the Saudi desert, I decided to

¹ Said, E., *Peace and its Discontents*, London, Vintage, 1995, 129.

write an account of that adventure and opened with a description which was based on a photograph of a group of Palestinians near Beit Jala and some rather scrappy diary notes. Ever since I had avoided looking at this evidence of yet another failed literary venture, but when I came to prepare this presentation I thought that it might have some value in conveying something of what I want to say. I was surprised to discover that I liked it and that it rang remarkably true despite the fact that it is a construction and contains dialogue which derives from other similar encounters at different times and in different places. I should explain that this part of the walk was done on my days off while working as a volunteer at a kibbutz. Here is the unedited text:

‘*As Salumu Alaikum!*’

‘*Alaikum as Salam!*’

A group of men and youths, squatting on the rocky ground beside the road, raise themselves to greet me. ‘Peace be upon you!’ ‘And upon you be peace’, I reply. They are all wearing sweaters, shirts and trousers; not one of them dons the kuffieh so characteristic of Yassir Arafat. They are more Greek-looking than Arab. If this had been Poland rather than Palestine, you would have said they were Jews; ironically they are probably closer by ties of blood to the tribes of Judah than the Polish colonists.

‘*Itfadhel!*’ they say, indicating that I should join them for a chat and a cup of tea. I have learnt in Syria that it pays to satisfy apparently idle curiosity, but in any case I am ready for a break after the long uphill slog out of Bethlehem.

‘Mr *Alman?*’ tries one of the youths.

‘No, English, *Inglisi.*’

‘Ah, *Inglisi*, number one’, he exclaims with an appropriate gesture of the thumb. I can sense that some of the older members of the group do not quite share his enthusiasm. After all, it was us who got them into their present mess.

The old primus is pumped up, and a fresh pot of tea put on to boil. This ensures that the maximum tannin and caffeine is extracted from the tea leaves. A large amount of sugar is added to the pot, and the resulting thick brew is poured into tiny glasses which are regularly refilled unless you firmly refuse.

To my amazement, after only a few minutes of broken Arabic and English conversation I have been completely accepted. The perfectly justified suspicion that I might be an agent or a hostile reporter has vanished and they accept me as their guest and friend. Several of the group even invite me to stay in their houses. I feel at home in a way I have not done since I left Jordan.

I reluctantly admit, having failed to invent a cover story, that I am living and working on a kibbutz, but this does not produce the venom I expect. One of the group, who has so far kept quiet, turns out to be a teacher who speaks English well.

‘I used to teach Arabic to the Jews in a kibbutz near Tel Aviv,’ he tells me. ‘They were good people, from Poland and Germany and “Roosia”, and they worked too hard. They were my friends. But now the Jews have become greedy; they want all the land for themselves. It’s not reasonable.’

‘For 2000 year we live in peace with Yahudis; but in Europe you burn them,’ put in another. ‘They never have trouble with us. Now we have big problem because Hitler put them in ovens.’

‘What are the problems you face now?’ I ask, knowing pretty well what they will say, but wanting to hear it anyway.

Suddenly everyone is talking at once in Arabic. A fat middle-aged man manages to subdue the din to tell me his tale of woe.

‘My father and my big brother are killed in 1948, my father’s land is taken by military, two my brothers in Kuwait, my sister she is marry in Saudi Arabia, another sister she is marry in Bourg al-Barajneh camp in Lebanon. I am marry my cousin and I help her father with his land. But the Israelis they don’t allow us build well. So the olive trees dies. They take my son to prison and beat him because he say bad word to soldier. How can we live like this? Why the God he is punish us like this?’

Uproar again, shocked looks of disapproval at his blasphemy, and cries of ‘Allah Karim’ (‘God is benificent’) and ‘Allahu Akbar’ (‘God is great’).

‘Because we don’t defend ourselves,’ puts in a youth of eighteen or so who holds an English dictionary in his hand. “God helps the one who helps himself” isn’t it? But we wait for Yassir Arafat to do something. He will never do anything. He sits comfortable in Lebanon; why should he do anything? We must show the world we want to keep our home.’

Cries in defence of Yassir Arafat and the PLO, while others support the speaker. ‘We make it so easy for the Jews,’ he continues. ‘We fight among ourselves, and they take our land. We should fight the Jews until they leave Palestine.’

‘What can we do against the Israelis, *ya shaikh?*’ protests a school colleague. ‘They have tanks and rockets and fighter planes from the Americans, even maybe nuclear bombs. What have we got except numbers?’

‘Anyway, they will never leave,’ says the teacher. ‘We have to live with them. If we kill them they will hate us. No, we must insist to have equal rights with them. This is not a Jewish state only. We should all have equal rights. But the Americans tell the Jews they can do what they like. We have to convince the Americans.’

Aye, there’s the rub! Why is it so difficult to convince the Americans, and indeed the West in general, of the validity of the Palestinian cause? Part of the problem seems to me to be the categories in which we think and is suggested by that phrase: ‘they are probably closer by ties of blood to the tribes of Judah than the Polish conlonists’.

The concept of race is usually misleading, but when applied to Jews and Arabs it is simply incorrect. I think it wiser to be led by Tolstoy’s dictum in such matters: ‘I make no distinction of race. I am above all else for the human race.’² Jews are people who practise the Jewish religion, or who come from a background where it was practised. While some Jews share an identifiable common culture related to the practice of their religion or to their use, or their ancestors’ use, of the Jewish vernaculars, Yiddish or Ladino, many others, as the Jewish-Israeli writer Akiva Orr has suggested, would have great difficulty defining their Jewishness. Indeed he believes that Zionism was the response of non-religious Jews to their loss of a sense

² Cited in Stekel, W., ‘Wir und die Humanität’, *Die Wage*, 2.7.04, 594.

of Jewish identity.³ Arabs are simply a people who speak Arabic, or whose near ancestors did. There is certainly no such thing as a Semitic race, whether Jewish, Arab, or encompassing other peoples.

I use the expression 'Israel/Palestine dispute' advisedly in order to avoid a further catalogue of confusions which even Ilan Pappé falls into. Pappé is a Jewish Israeli historian who has perhaps done more than anyone else to confirm non-Jewish Palestinian accounts of the period 1947 to 1951; he calls his seminal work *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, implying that there is a clear distinction between Arab and Israeli; there is not. Around one million non-Jews, about a fifth of the population of Israel, have Israeli citizenship, all of them Palestinian Arabs. Moreover, a majority of Jewish Israelis come from what is inaccurately called Sephardic origin. Sephardic means Spanish in Hebrew, but this term is now used with the more general meaning of North African and Middle-Eastern, and the great majority of Sephardis are Arabic speaking or come from an Arabic-speaking background. Thus we arrive at the surprising conclusion that the majority of Israelis are Arabs, and furthermore that the *vast* majority of those who live in the whole of the old mandated territory of Palestine come from an Arabic background. Edward Said's phrase used in the passage I cited, 'the Palestinian-Zionist struggle', is not much less problematical, for clearly the small community of Jews in Palestine prior to the immigrations of the last hundred-and-twenty years, were Palestinians, and it would seem rather arbitrary to deny this description to the more recent arrivals. Many of both of these categories were or became Zionists.

In my view the expression 'Israel/Palestine dispute' comes closer to describing the problem than any other, for the conflict is about a land and different perceptions of that land. The failure of the Oslo accords (this is the only way to describe the present situation, whatever the outcome of the elections tomorrow), and the consequent receding of the possibility that non-Jewish Palestinians might one day achieve a *viable* state of their own, has made us face the problem that Zionism is, at least in its aim, exclusivist, the very opposite of what most people would consider truly multi-cultural. For if the non-Jewish Palestinians cannot have a state then their insistence on equal rights with Jews within greater Israel/Palestine appears irrefutable; but we can be sure it will be refuted vigorously.

I believe that the ideology of nationalism, of which Zionism is one expression, is responsible for most of this confusion. According to this creed, the people of the world can be divided into discrete, often racial or linguistic, groups or so-called nations, each of which needs a piece of real estate in order to achieve its full potential. An extension of this reasoning is the social-Darwinist view that in the struggle between nations the best will emerge by a process of natural selection. The concepts of the Jewish and Arab nations form part of this more general view, the former often misleadingly called 'Semitic', as if Arabs were not more accurately described as Semites than non-Hebrew-speaking Jews. Such ideologies of nationality develop out of, and are supported by, fantasies and narratives of national identity. Jacqueline Rose, turning our attention to the psychological side of this phenomenon, has called them 'States of Fantasy'.⁴ As the successor to religion nationality has the twin aims of providing its members with a sense of identity, and therefore psychological security, and of claiming loyal self-sacrifice in the interests of the corporate whole.

Rose, who resisted the role expected of her when visiting Israel for the first time, describes the problem very well:

There is something bizarre about travelling to a country where you do not belong, in the sense of having no lived connection, not for me, not in my family's past, a country

³ Orr, A., *Israel, Myths and Identity Crises*, London, Pluto Press, 1994, 3.

⁴ Rose, J., *States of Fantasy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996.

to which I was not therefore returning, but where to say that much is already, in the eyes of the country itself, ground for reproach. Not to return as a Jewish woman to Israel, not to feel a sense of belonging, not to recognize the very fact and existence of Israel as in itself a historic return, is on each count to break the symbolic parameters of the nation. It is a willed refusal, a rejection of proffered desire. Going to Israel is to enter a country in yearning, one whose passions flow not only from people to homeland but also and just as powerfully the other way. This is a nation which desires its potential citizens - exiled, diaspora Jewry - to come home, with as much fervour as it banishes the former occupants of its land from their own dream of statehood.⁵

Fantasies and narratives of national identity draw heavily on memories, and it is the fact that nationalism caters to a powerful psychological need that gives its narratives, and the memories used to support them, their extraordinary power and immunity to criticism. The same mechanism ensures that memories which do not contribute to acceptable narratives are at best marginalised.

Take, for example, the narrative according to which a large part of the non-Jewish population of Palestine fled their homes in 1948 following the instructions of their leaders. Ben Gurion claimed in 1961 that there were 'explicit documents' confirming this, but following the declassification of Israeli papers relating to the 1948 war no such evidence was found.⁶ In fact it had been accepted since the early sixties that this was a myth,⁷ but it has remained a remarkably persistent one. For example, it was repeated in two recent plays, *Kfar, the Village* and *The Garden of Habustan*. In reality Jewish forces were ordered in 1948, in accordance with the infamous Plan Dalet, to mount ...

operations against enemy population centres located inside or near our defensive system in order to prevent them from being used as bases by an active armed force. These operations can be carried out in the following manner: either by destroying villages (by setting fire to them, by blowing them up, and by planting mines in their debris), and especially of [sic] those population centres which are difficult to control continuously; or by mounting combing and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the village, conducting a search inside it. In case of resistance, the armed force must be wiped out and the population expelled outside the borders of the state.⁸

I imagine that the Serbian official line on Kosovo would be remarkably similar. There is no doubt that such orders were acted upon by most, but not all, Israeli commanders, resulting in the destruction of around 450 villages. Those Jews who were brave enough to speak out at the time, or to recall these events later, as Uri Davies did, were branded 'Jewish self-haters'. Hanna Braun, who was a member of Haganah in 1948 but who later became an anti-Zionist, was once told that she was old and stupid and that her brain had shrunk with age!⁹

Here is a Palestinian account of a relatively peaceful going into exile, which nevertheless moved me deeply:

⁵ Rose, J., *States of Fantasy*, 2.

⁶ Pappé, I., *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-51*, London, I.B.Tauris, 1994, 89.

⁷ Pappé, I., *The Making*, 89, referring to a correspondence in *The Spectator* in August, 1961, between Erkin Childers, John Kimche and Hedley Cook.

⁸ Sluzky, *Sefer Toldot Hahagana*, Vol. 3, appendix 48, Tel Aviv, ?1977, pp. 1955-9, cited by Pappé, I., *The Making*, 92. The date of publication is that of the first volume. I suspect Vol. 3 appeared much later, perhaps after the 1988 releases of documentation. Unfortunately Pappé omits this source from his bibliography.

⁹ Braun, H., [add details of conference paper on internet]

My father originally refused to leave Jaffa [...]. But the rest of our family insisted because we did not want him to be endangered. We were peaceful people. We did not care very much for politics. We locked the front door of our home just before lunchtime. We carried only suitcases and clothes and we had a case with our jewellery and the registry deeds to our lands inside. We never thought we would not be able to go back. If we had thought that, we would never have left. We thought we were going for a month or so, until the fighting died down. We took our front door keys with us but we threw them away some time ago. They are worthless now ... [...] When we pulled out of Jaffa, I stood on the stern and looked out over the old city [...]. I could see our soap factory in the *serail* on top of the hill and St Peter's church next to it. Then I did ask myself if we would see this place again; and when Jaffa started to disappear to our starboard, I remember I said to myself: 'If this ship could turn round now, I would return to Jaffa.' We were foolish. It was too late.¹⁰

We owe Robert Fisk a debt of gratitude for his work gathering such stories in his adopted home town of Beirut and elsewhere. He should have been here today.

But when I have tried to convince those who are sympathetic to Zionism that they should at least acknowledge such evidence, I am repeatedly asked: 'But don't you know about the holocaust? You must see such and such a film,' and so on, as if the horror of Nazi atrocities completely invalidated Palestinian accounts of their suffering. It has been said that you cannot blame a person who jumps from a towering inferno and lands on an innocent passer-by below. But at least we may permit ourselves the question: 'how long is this "victim of the victim"¹¹ expected to go on saying: "Ok, ok; I realise your sister/your parents/ your grandparents died in Auschwitz. I forgive you for beating me about the head"?' One answer seems to be: 'As long as the Jewish holocaust can continue to be portrayed as a uniquely horrific event in the West, and particularly in America.'

It almost seems a tautology today to speak of the 'Jewish' holocaust. Doesn't everyone know that the holocaust was Jewish, or at least overwhelmingly so? The problem is that this linking has come to exclude all the others who died at the hands of the Nazis. The almost exclusive focus at Holocaust Study Centres, which have been springing up all over the United States, and to a lesser extent in Europe, has been on the victimisation of the Jews. Moreover a cursory review of holocaust literature reveals that most of the books on this subject are written by Jews, and their almost exclusive concern is the suffering of Jews. I ask myself whether this process has more to do with buttressing the 'fantasy', in Rose's sense, of Jewish identity than with understanding the nature of atrocity. The previous speaker, Vieda Skultans, has written in the following terms about a similar tendency among Latvians to record their experience of oppression at the hands of the Soviet regime:

[...] much of the urgency to record lives came from the need to establish a common Latvian identity and life stories were seen as a source of shared ethnic values.¹²

There is no doubt that the Palestinians have also used their *Naqba* (Disaster) for the same purpose.

At the risk of being labled a revisionist, and assuming that there is at least an element of truth in what I am saying, I want to suggest that there is something wrong with the use of the Nazi atrocities for this purpose; it is not only colossally unjust to the memory of the

¹⁰ Fisk, R., *Pity the Nation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, 26.

¹¹ The phrase is Edward Said's.

¹² Skultans, V., 'Remembering Time and Place: A Case Study in Latvian Narrative', *Oral History*, Spring 1998, 55.

largely disregarded *majority* of non-Jews who died, but it also supports the idea that the Jews were uniquely Hitler's victims, and that this justifies a unique solution to the 'Jewish problem' (as Herzl called it), that is the dispossession and oppression of the non-Jewish population of Palestine. It is for this reason I find it better to avoid the word 'holocaust', and to refer instead to 'Nazi massacres', or 'Nazi atrocities'. Primo Levi was in no doubt that his experience of Auschwitz fitted into a universal picture which could not be limited to particular peoples: '[...] by living and then writing about and pondering those events, I have learned many things about man and about the world.'¹³

Once we have freed ourselves from the notion that Israel has a uniquely moral position in the world, and that to criticise its policies beyond points of detail is to engage in so-called 'anti-Semitism' or Jewish self-hatred, we will feel more inclined to listen to those reminiscences, whatever their source, which unsettle our comfortable notions about the reality of the Israel/Palestine dispute. I have for the last year been helping a non-Jewish Palestinian to write his memoirs about his involvement in the *intifada*, during which he was tortured and seriously mistreated in other ways as well. This is undoubtedly partly a therapeutic exercise, but as its objective is a published account, it also has its public side.

I had hoped that 'Mohammed', as I shall call him, would be here with me today, and that he would read some extracts from the material we have already prepared. It is a measure of the gravity of the Palestinians' situation that unfortunately, on reflection, he felt that to do so, or indeed even for me to read out chosen texts, would be too dangerous for him and his family in present circumstances. I can, however, say in general terms that Mohammed's story is immensely moving. This is, paradoxically, to a large extent achieved because of his keen sense of humour and his eye for the absurd. There is no attempt to doctor his story in such a way as to present his fellow Palestinians in any more of a favourable light than they deserve, nor does the account come across as an indiscriminate attack on all Jewish-Israelis. The unexpected is never far away: the Jewish-Israeli who intervenes to prevent yet another beating up, the non-Jewish Palestinian collaborator who makes fun of him to his Jewish guards, the administrative confusion resulting in senseless transportation back and forth across the country, the resistance to resistance among many ordinary Palestinians and so on. Most revealing for me is Mohammed's attitude to physical abuse, including torture. No doubt different people have different breaking points, but it is clear that for him each new abuse arouses an equal and opposite surge of anger which causes him to disregard completely his own safety. 'Go on, shoot me. Do what you like to me. I'll never give in,' he seems to be saying. And indeed, because of this he appears as the victor, and his torturers the victims.

I am never allowed for long to forget that we are talking about a real country in which Mohammed and his family have deep roots, nor that the events he is talking about constitute a continuing injustice which still begs for restitution. Topography plays an important part in his narrative and he is always at pains to describe to me the exact position from which the lights of an approaching IDF jeep could be seen, the nature of the road between this village and that, the position of soldiers on a terraced landscape and so on. Sometimes a video will be produced to make the point. No one who has visited Israel/Palestine with a discerning eye can have failed to recognise the colossal Israeli restructuring of the landscape of that country. As the creeping policy of annexation and ethnic cleansing (I make no apology for using the term) continues, and the perceived birthright of Balfour draws nearer to fulfillment, so a traditional landscape representing a long, if often troubled, relationship between its indigenous population and the land is being eclipsed. Here is how I recalled my impression of the Green Line after the encounter already described:

¹³ Levi, P., *If this is a Man*, [add]

Some way further along the road I cross the invisible line which marks the boundary between the West Bank and Israel proper. Suddenly the landscape changes completely. I no longer see anyone. All around there are scientifically cultivated fields, or battery hen houses. The air is full of the sound of air-conditioners. The Palestinians are as much the victims of this so-called progress as the clansmen were of the clearances, or the American Indians of the American expansion, or the Aboriginies of Australian exploitation, or the Luddites of the industrial revolution. All these people had their relation with the land broken. You can see the same here in Saudi Arabia, where the bedouin and peasant way of life has been almost completely broken by modernisation.

But the Palestinians are still there, and they refuse to go away peacefully, nor are they prepared to mourn as long as their land, however transformed, is still there. Here are a few lines from a poem by Fadwa Toukan, 'I'll never cry', which express this point powerfully even in translation:

Here am I,
Stretching my forehead to the sun, with yours.
Here are you, the solid rocks of our mountains
Here are you, the sweet flowers of our country.
How could the wound then crush me?
How could I cry then in front of you?
I swear I'll never cry again.¹⁴

To sum up, the Palestinians' tragedy is, as Said said, that they are the victims of the victims, with the result that their stories are rarely heard. I suggest that the problem persists, however, because of an obfuscating nationalist rhetoric which continues to portray Jews as unique victims. Bearing in mind Tolstoy's dictum, I want to end by posing another question. Should we not pay more attention to the multi-faceted nature of identity in the modern world, rather than making assumptions about the importance of particular identifications? Then we might more easily traverse the boundary which David Bar-Ilan, one of Netanyahu's spokesmen, sought to reinforce in a remark to Hugo Young recently: 'They [the Palestinians] don't represent the kind of thinking we do in the West.'¹⁵ It's worth thinking about that occidental 'we'.

¹⁴ Touqan, F., 'I'll never cry', seen on a poster published by the League of Arab States.

¹⁵ Young, H., 'Peace Postponed', *The Guardian Weekend*, May 1 1999, 16.