



GAZA, A REFLECTION

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On Dissent

Why is it so difficult, even impossible, to accommodate Palestinians in the Jewish understanding of history? Why is there so little perceived need to question our own history and the one we have given others, preferring instead to embrace beliefs and sentiments that remain unchanged?

Why is it virtually mandatory among Jewish intellectuals to oppose racism, repression, and injustice almost anywhere in the world, but unacceptable—indeed, for some heretical—to oppose it when Israel is the oppressor?...

...I tried to remember my first real encounter with the occupation. One of the earliest was a scene I witnessed standing on a street with some Palestinian friends. An elderly man was walking along leading his donkey. A small child of no more than three or four, clearly his grandson, was with him. All of a sudden some nearby Israeli soldiers approached the old man and stopped him. One of them went over to the donkey and pried open its mouth. "Old man," he asked, "why are your donkey's teeth so yellow? Don't you brush your donkey's teeth?" The old Palestinian was mortified, the little boy visibly upset.

The soldier repeated his question, yelling this time, while the other soldiers laughed. The child began to cry and the old man just stood there silently, humiliated. As the scene continued a crowd gathered. The soldier then ordered the old man to stand behind the donkey and demanded that he kiss the animal's behind. At first, the old man refused but as the soldier screamed at him and his grandson became hysterical, he bent down and did it. The soldiers laughed and walked away. We all stood there in silence, ashamed to look at each other, the only sound the sobs of the little boy. The old man, demeaned and destroyed, did not move for what seemed a very long time.

I stood in stunned disbelief. I immediately thought of the stories my parents had told me of how Jews had been treated by the Nazis in the 1930s, before the ghettos and death camps, of how Jews would be forced to clean sidewalks with toothbrushes and have their beards cut off in public. What happened to the Palestinian grandfather was equivalent in principle, intent, and impact: to humiliate and dehumanize. In this critical respect, my first encounter with the occupation was the same as my first

encounter with the Holocaust, with the number on my father's arm. It spoke the same message: the denial of one's humanity.

<https://rumble.com/embed/v3tq3z4/?pub=4>

...the Holocaust and the Palestinian issues in a sense are related. Among the many realities that frame contemporary Jewish life are the birth of Israel, remembrance of the Holocaust, and Jewish power and sovereignty. And it cannot be denied that the latter has a critical corollary: the displacement and oppression of the Palestinian people. For Jewish identity is linked, willingly or not, to Palestinian suffering and this suffering is now an irrevocable part of our collective memory and an intimate part of our experience, together with the Holocaust and Israel. This is a linkage that informs the core of Ellis's work.¹ How, he asks, are we to celebrate our Jewishness while others are being oppressed? Is the Jewish covenant with God present or absent in the face of Jewish oppression of Palestinians? Is the Jewish ethical tradition still available to us? Is the promise of holiness—so central to Jewish existence—now beyond our ability to reclaim? For the answers, at least in part, I look to Gaza.

... Gaza is a place, Israel argues, where innocent civilians do not exist. The presence of such civilians in Gaza is suspect, they say, because Palestinians elected a terrorist organization to represent them. Retired Israeli Major General Giora Eiland stated, "[T]hey [Gazans] are to blame for this situation just like Germany's residents were to blame for electing Hitler as their leader and paid a heavy price for that, and rightfully so." The goal is to use "disproportionate force," said another official, thereby "inflicting damage and meting out punishment to an extent that will demand long and expensive reconstruction processes." According to this logic there is no such thing as a civilian home, school, hospital, mosque, church, or playground in Gaza; all these places are therefore legitimate targets of Israeli bombs since every home is a non-home; every kindergarten a nonkindergarten; and every hospital a non-hospital.

During Operation Cast Lead (OCL), Israel's 2008–09 offensive against Gaza, Reserve Major Amiran Levin similarly stated, "What we have to do is act systematically with the aim of punishing all the organizations that are firing the rockets and mortars as well as the civilians who are enabling them to fire and hide," while the IDF spokesperson Major Avital Leibowitz argued that "anything affiliated with

Hamas is a legitimate target." Not surprisingly the UNcommissioned Goldstone Report whose mandate it was to investigate all violations of international human rights and humanitarian law that might have been committed during OCL found that the "humiliation and dehumanization of the Palestinian population" were Israeli policy objectives in its assault on Gaza, an assault that was nothing less than "a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population, radically diminish its local economic capacity both to work and to provide for itself, and to force upon it an ever increasing sense of dependency and vulnerability."

That the area being bombed was urban, with over 20,000 human beings per square kilometer, does not weigh on the majority of Jewish people. That my friends and their children were among those being bombed, people who have always welcomed me as a Jew into their homes in Gaza, is of no consequence. "22 members of my family huddled under the stairwell," describes Hani, who lived in the heart of Shejaiyeh, one of the areas that witnessed the greatest destruction that summer.

For General Eiland, Majors Levin and Leibowitz, and too many others, there are no parents in Gaza, there are no children or sisters or brothers; there are no deaths to mourn. Rather, Gaza is where the grass grows wild and must be mowed from time to time. The desolation inflicted on Gaza is powerfully seen in the almost complete destruction of Khuza'a, a village once known as Gaza's orchard.

...

This begs the question, can Jews as a people be ordinary, an essential part of our rebirth after the Holocaust? Is it possible to be normal when we seek remedy and comfort in the dispossession and destruction of another people, "[o]bserving the windows of [their] houses through the sites of rifles," to borrow from the Israeli poet, Almog Behar?

How can we create when we consent so willingly and with such complacency to the demolition of homes, construction of barriers, denial of sustenance, and ruin of innocents? How can we be merciful when speaking out against the wanton murder of children, of whole families and of entire neighborhoods is considered an act of disloyalty and betrayal rather than a legitimate act of dissent, and where dissent is so ineffective and reviled? How can we be humane when, to use Jacqueline Rose's words, we seek "omnipotence as the answer to historical pain?"

Instead we condone the cruelty, even celebrating the murder of Palestinians while remaining the abused, "creating situations where our victimization is assured and our innocence affirmed" as seen in the words of General Eiland: "Because we want to be compassionate towards those cruel people [in Gaza], we are committing to act cruelly towards the really compassionate people – the residents of the State of Israel." In this way, Gaza speaks to the unnaturalness of our own condition as Jews.

Will we one day be able to live without the walls we are constantly asked to build? When will we be obliged to acknowledge our limits?

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