THE ASYMMETRY OF PITY

Yossi Klein Halevi

MY MOST INSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION on the Middle East conflict was not with a politician or a journalist but with a soft-spoken Palestinian Anglican minister named Naim Ateek, whose group, Sabeel, promotes a Palestinian version of liberation theology. During a long and friendly talk about two years ago, we agreed on the need for a "dialogue of the heart," as opposed to a strictly functional approach to peace between our peoples. In that spirit, I acknowledged that we Israelis should formally concede the wrongs we had committed against the Palestinians. Then I asked him whether he was prepared to offer a reciprocal gesture, a confession of Palestinian moral flaws. Both sides, after all, had amply wronged each other during our hundred-year war. The Palestinian leadership had collaborated with the Nazis and rejected the 1947 UN partition plan and then led the international campaign to delegitimize Israel that threatened our post-Holocaust reconstruction. What was Reverend Ateek prepared to do to reassure my people that it was safe to withdraw back to the narrow borders of pre-1967 Israel and voluntarily make ourselves vulnerable in one of the least stable and tolerant regions of the world?

"We don't have to do anything at all to reassure you," he said. He offered this historical analogy: when David Ben-Gurion and Konrad Adenauer negotiated the German-Israeli reparations agreement in the early 1950s, the Israeli prime minister was hardly expected to offer the German chancellor concessions or psychological reassurances. The Germans had

been the murderers, the Jews the victims, and all that remained to be negotiated was the extent of indemnity.

"So we are your Nazis?" I asked.

"Now you've understood," he replied, and smiled.

I have thought often of that conversation since the collapse last fall of any pretense of a mutual process of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. With disarming sincerity, Reverend Ateek offered the most cogent explanation I had encountered for why the Oslo peace process never had a chance to succeed.

From the start, Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking was burdened by asymmetry. The gap between Israeli power and Palestinian powerlessness was translated into a political process that required tangible Israeli concessions—reversible only through war—in exchange for Palestinian promises of peace: in essence, land for words. But the deepest and most intractable asymmetry has been psychological: it has been an asymmetry of pity or, more precisely, of self-pity. The Palestinians, as losers of the conflict, continue to see themselves solely as victims, without guilt for helping maintain the conflict or responsibility for helping to end it; indeed, for many Palestinians, the war is not over borders but absolute justice, a battle between good and evil. Because history has been kinder to them, Israelis can afford to concede complexity and, indeed, the Israeli mainstream now perceives the conflict as a competition between two legitimate national movements over the same tortured strip of land. Aside from the hard-right minority, most Israelis acknowledge that both sides share rights and wrongs.

Zionism's Victory over Jewish Self-Pity

The first generation of Israelis after statehood resembled Palestinians today in their simplistic view of the struggle over the land as an absolutist moral conflict. In every generation, as the Passover Haggadah puts it, a new enemy rises to destroy the Jews and, for most Israelis, this was the Arabs' turn. A popular Yiddish pun emphasized the point: Hitler fell into the water, it went, and emerged *nasser*—Yiddish for "wet" and a reference to Egypt's president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Israel's great antagonist during its formative years.

Only gradually did Israelis begin to see the conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab world generally as a fundamental break from the pattern of Jewish history—that Zionism's hard gift to the Jews was to restore to us our collective free will, transform us from passive victims of fate to active shapers of our own destiny, responsible for the consequences of our decisions. A key turning point was the November 1977 visit of Anwar Sadat to Israel. Remarkably, a mere four years after Egypt's surprise attack against Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, Sadat was welcomed as a hero in the streets of Jerusalem. The Israeli notion of the Arab world as an impenetrable wall of hostility began to change. So, too, Israeli certainty about the justness of its cause was subtly challenged: many Israelis, including Ehud Barak, began to suspect that Israel could have prevented the 1973 Yom Kippur War had it agreed to withdraw from the Sinai in the early 1970s. The subsequent invasion of Lebanon in 1982, followed in late 1987 by the first intifada, reinforced for Israelis the moral ambiguity of the Middle East conflict.

At the same time, Israel's sense of siege began to ease. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the repeal of the UN "Zionism is racism" resolution, the post–Gulf War optimism in the Middle East, the mass Russian immigration and resulting Israeli prosperity—all reinforced the same message that Israel had entered a new era and was about to fulfill the long-deferred Zionist promise of Jewish normalization. Finally, a new generation of native-born Israelis that could take Jewish sovereignty for granted no longer saw itself as living in the pathology of Jewish history but in a new Israeli reality.

Indeed, young Israelis became so distanced from the traumas of exile that the Israeli Ministry of Education felt impelled in the 1990s to introduce pilgrimages to Nazi death camps in Poland for high school students, as an emotional crash course in Jewish history. In politics, too, the Holocaust lost its centrality: only the hard Right and the ultra-Orthodox continued to cite the genocide of European Jewry as a potentially recurring threat. Whereas former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin once routinely invoked the Nazi era—and even publicly compared himself, during the invasion of Lebanon, to an Allied commander closing in on Hitler's bunker—his equally right-wing politician son, Benny, confined his traumas to the Middle East. Thanks largely to the effects of Israeli sovereignty on the Jewish psyche, a wound that should have taken generations to heal began to recede into history. By the time of the Oslo agreement in September 1993, a majority of Israelis had been weaned from the self-defensiveness of the victim and educated in the moral dilemmas of the conqueror.

The Weight of Palestinian Self-Pity

It would be unrealistic to expect a similar evolution among Palestinians who, after all, lack fifty years of sovereignty to compensate for their historical trauma. The Palestinians are at a different stage of their national

development, resembling Israel in its early years, celebrating nationalism and self-sacrifice and mistrusting moral complexity as weakness. Yet that psychological gap between Israelis and Palestinians was precisely Oslo's great structural flaw. The problem with the Oslo process, as Ariel Sharon has noted, was not its goals but its timetable, its lack of ample "process." Oslo's implicit expectation was that Israel would return to approximately the June 1967 borders after a mere seven years of tenuous relations with the Palestinian entity, well before the Palestinians could be emotionally prepared to offer Israelis even the most minimal sense of safety and acceptance in the region.

On the Israeli side, a vigorous and successful effort was made by Labor Party leaders to wean the public from its emotional attachment to the biblical borders of "greater Israel." Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres repeatedly told the Israeli people that the dream of greater Israel was unrealistic and self-destructive. That message was reinforced by the Israeli media, often by what we journalists chose to omit as much as to publish. I recall, for example, reading an account in the *Jerusalem Post*'s media column, written by right-wing commentator David Bar-Ilan, just after the White House handshake of September 1993. The column reported on a speech delivered by Yasser Arafat in Amman in which the Palestinian chairman noted that by signing the Oslo Accords he was merely implementing the "stages" policy—that is, the 1974 PLO decision to accept whatever territory Israel evacuated and continue struggling until the demise of the Jewish state. My instinctive reaction was that the account must be exaggerated: Bar-Ilan, after all, was a right-wing ideologue. Despite the devastating implications of that speech, I did not bother checking whether Bar-Ilan's report was accurate, precisely because I feared that it might be. Nor did I want to be tainted by association with the right-wing opposition. That combination of wishful thinking and cowardice characterized most Israeli journalists, at least in the early years of the Oslo process.

In contrast with Israel's contortionist efforts to adapt to Oslo's false promise, no attempt was made by Palestinian leaders to accommodate the Jewish state in their people's mental map of the Middle East. Indeed, the self-justifying myths of the Palestinians have only become more entrenched since Oslo. The Palestinian people are routinely told by their controlled media that the temple never existed on the Temple Mount, that the biblical stories did not occur in Israel/Palestine, and even that the Holocaust is a lie. The consistent message is that the Palestinians are victims of a false Jewish narrative.

Rather than challenging the Palestinians' wholesale expropriation of justice and truth, the international community has encouraged their self-

perception as innocent victims of the Middle East conflict. Every year on May 15, as Palestinians violently mark the *nakba*, or tragedy, of 1948, much of the world's media dutifully replays the Palestinian version of that event. Few journalists challenge Palestinian spokesmen with the fact that Arab rejectionism was at least partly responsible for their people's uprooting and occupation. Indulging that sense of blameless victimization has only reinforced the Palestinian inability to assume the role of equal partner in negotiations and take responsibility for helping to end the conflict. As Naim Ateek put it, the Palestinians' only obligation to peacemaking is to show up and receive concessions. The Palestinian leadership has felt no moral obligation to fulfill its stated commitments under Oslo—such as curbing terrorism and ending incitement or even the straightforward matter of revoking the Palestinian Covenant that calls for the destruction of Israel. (To this day it is uncertain whether the Palestinians have legally revoked the covenant, and their deliberately created ambiguity has negated any positive impact its revocation may have had on the Palestinian psyche.)

The apologetics offered by much of the international community—and by part of the Israeli Left—for Arafat's violent rejection of Barak's peace offer have reinforced the pathological tendencies of Palestinian self-pity. Especially absurd has been the claim that Barak's settlement-building was a sign of bad faith that undermined Arafat's trust in the process. Nearly all the housing starts begun under Barak were concentrated in areas intended to become settlement blocs—whose permanence the Palestinians accepted during negotiations at Camp David. According to Barak's chief negotiator with the Palestinians, Gilad Sher, settlements—whose total built areas cover a mere 1.5 percent of the West Bank—were not even among the five major issues of disagreement during the Camp David negotiations. Instead, the major issues were the Palestinian insistence that Israel assume full moral blame for the flight of the refugees in 1948 (ignoring the Arab world's invasion of Israel that preceded the refugee crisis) and the Palestinian refusal to acknowledge any Jewish connection to the Temple Mount, Judaism's holiest site.

When confronted with the continued ideological intransigence of the Palestinians, the Israeli left-wing retort was invariably a sarcastic dismissal: "We don't expect them to become Zionists." Even as it successfully compelled a reluctant Israeli public to confront at least some truths of the Palestinian narrative, the Left refused to demand any reciprocity from its Palestinian partner. In so doing, the Left ignored its own argument: that without accommodating the other's narrative, peace would be impossible.

The Israeli Left committed one more fatal tactical mistake: it divorced itself emotionally from Judea and Samaria, even as the Palestinians reinforced their emotional claim to pre-1967 Israel. The moral basis for partition of Israel/Palestine is that two peoples, profoundly rooted in the entirety of the land, must each sacrifice part of its legitimate claim to accommodate the legitimate claim of its rival. But by tacitly rejecting even a theoretical Israeli right to Judea and Samaria, the Left created a moral imbalance: the Palestinians were offering a traumatic concession by ceding parts of historic Palestine, whereas Israel was merely restoring occupied—that is, stolen—land. That imbalance reinforced the Palestinians' refusal to compromise on the 1967 borders, even though no independent Palestinian state had ever existed on any part of the land.

The success of Oslo was predicated on the Palestinians' ability to convince Israelis to trust them enough to empower them. But soon after the White House signing, increasing numbers of Israelis began to suspect they had been deliberately deceived. That process accelerated with Arafat's 1995 speech in a Johannesburg mosque, in which he compared Oslo to a cease-fire the Prophet Muhammad signed with an Arabian tribe he later destroyed. By dismissing that speech as mere rhetoric intended to appease domestic opposition, the Israeli Left made a fatal miscalculation of its devastating effect on the Israeli public. Then came the wave of suicide bombings in early 1996, which further eroded Oslo's credibility among even centrist Israelis and provided a link between Arafat's incitement and intensified terrorism.

The inevitable result was a revolt by the Israeli majority that had initially welcomed the Oslo accords and that had been willing to make far-reaching concessions for genuine peace. The first revolt occurred in 1996, with the election of Benyamin Netanyahu. Apologists for the Palestinians insist that Israel under Netanyahu helped destroy the Oslo process by resuming massive settlement-building, largely frozen under Rabin, thereby eroding Palestinian trust in Israeli intentions. That argument ignores the fact that the election of Netanyahu was a self-inflicted Palestinian wound—a direct result of Arafat's refusal to fulfill his most minimal obligations under the Oslo accords. The erratic voting pattern of the Israeli public throughout the Oslo process—repeatedly veering between Left and Right, from Yitzhak Rabin to Benyamin Netanyahu to Ehud Barak to Ariel Sharon—reflected both the growing skepticism of Israelis and their reluctance to repudiate the hopes raised by Oslo. Only with the landslide election of Sharon, who had warned for decades against empowering the PLO, did the Israeli people deliver its definitive judgment on the Oslo process as one of the gravest mistakes in the history of Israel.

Unchanged Palestinian Goals

By refusing to "partition" justice and insisting that historical right belongs exclusively to them, the Palestinians have preempted the need, in their minds, to revise their long-term goal of undoing the "injustice" of Israel's existence. Indeed, when Palestinian leaders speak of a "just and lasting peace," it is now clear that they mean, in the long term, peace without a Jewish state. Mainstream Palestinian leaders no longer invoke the old crude slogan of throwing the Jews into the sea. Instead, the scenario has become more complex, a gradual eroding of Israel that includes undermining its will to fight and to believe in itself; loss of territorial intactness; a compromising of its sovereignty via international commissions, observers, and "peacekeepers"; increased radicalization of Arab Israelis, leading to demands for "autonomy" and even the secession of those parts of the Galilee and the Negev where Arabs could soon form a majority.

Indeed, the key element in the "stages" plan is the massive return—both through Israeli consent and illegal infiltration—of embittered and unassimilable Palestinian refugees to pre-1967 Israel. By refusing to concede the "right of return," the Palestinian leadership belies its claim that it has recognized Israel in its pre-1967 borders. For Palestinians, the great crime of Zionism was artificially transforming the Jews into a majority in any part of Israel/Palestine—through Jewish immigration ("colonization") and Arab expulsion and flight. In a stunning speech to Arab diplomats in Stockholm in 1996, Arafat laid out his vision of undoing the Jewish majority even within pre-1967 Israel. By overwhelming the land with refugees and expropriating water and other resources, as well as turning a blind eye to ongoing Palestinian terrorism, Arafat would ensure that a large part of the Israeli middle class would emigrate in despair to the west. The remaining Jews would be so disoriented and demoralized by the departure of Israel's most talented citizens that the state would eventually collapse from within.

That this was no mad fantasy on Arafat's part but an accurate reflection of mainstream Palestinian strategy was confirmed by the late Faisal Husseini, long considered by the Israeli peace camp to be among the most pragmatic Palestinian leaders. In an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Arabi,* Husseini made the remarkable admission that the Oslo process was a "Trojan horse." He explained: "When we are asking all the Palestinian forces and factions to look at the Oslo Agreement and at other agreements as 'temporary' procedures, or phased goals, this means that we are ambushing the Israelis and cheating them." The goal, he concluded, was "the liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea"—that

is, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Though it appears that *Al-Arabi*'s claim that its interview with Husseini was the "last" before his death in June is false, the veracity of its substance should not be doubted; Husseini made similar statements in a meeting with Lebanese lawyers in Beirut last March.

In a private conversation I held about two years ago in Gaza with the head of one of the dozen or so Palestinian security services established by Arafat, I was offered a benign vision of that dream of Israel's demise: "This land is too small to sustain two states," explained the commander. "When the refugees return, there won't be enough resources and we will be forced to create one state—a beautiful country that will show the world how Muslims and Jews can coexist, just like in the days of Muslim Spain." That historical model, of course, is based on a Muslim sovereign majority and a dependent Jewish minority.

It is hardly coincidence, too, that the model most invoked by Arafat for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is South Africa. Israeli left-wingers misinterpreted that constant reference to South Africa as proof that the PLO leadership had embraced peaceful reconciliation. In fact, what most appeals to Palestinian leaders in the South African precedent is the transition from minority to majority rule. Though the Jews constitute a slim majority in the whole of Israel/Palestine and an overwhelming majority within the pre-1967 borders, Palestinian leaders believe that this is a temporary aberration. When the refugees begin returning (and Jews begin leaving), the "natural" majority will reemerge, and the Jewish minority, like the white South African minority, will then be compelled to negotiate the terms of its own surrender. This is why Nabil Sha'ath, the PA minister of planning and international cooperation, told a Washington audience on June 21 that the January 2001 Taba negotiations "witnessed significant progress." Of what did that progress consist? "A conceptual breakthrough on the issue of refugees and the right of return," said Sha'ath, who described Israeli negotiators as acknowledging that "Israel was responsible for the initiation of the refugee problem" and as agreeing that "the Palestinians had a right to return to both Israel and Palestine" (quoted from a rapporteur's summary of Sha'ath's remarks to a policy forum of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 21, 2001).

Israel after Oslo

There certainly exist Palestinians capable of accommodating the Israeli narrative into their understanding of the conflict. Some of them are my friends and colleagues—a Palestinian Israeli academic who welcomes Israel's existence as essential for Middle Eastern evolution, a West Bank sheykh who believes it is God's will that the Jews returned to this land, a former leader of the first intifada who has come to realize that Zionism "wasn't just a form of colonialism but the return of a people home." Understandably, it is easiest for Palestinian citizens of Israel to reconcile with Israel, more difficult for Palestinians in the territories, and more difficult still for Palestinian refugees in the diaspora. The tragedy of the Oslo Accords was to impose on West Bank Palestinians—with whom Israel's conflict is potentially territorial rather than existential—the revolutionary leadership of the diaspora, which represents the Palestinian grievance of 1948; that is, the very existence of a Jewish state. The effect has been to suppress those Palestinian voices advocating genuine reconciliation. Even much of the Israeli Left today concedes that Israel gambled on the wrong man in mortgaging the peace process to Yasser Arafat. Many other Israelis would extend that critique to include the entire PLO-Tunis leadership. Israel has empowered a Palestinian leadership that is unwilling to revise its morally exclusionist view of the conflict. Genuine peace is impossible when one partner considers the other's very existence illegitimate.

The growing tendency among Palestinians and Arabs generally to view the Middle East conflict as a battle between good and evil has led to an outbreak of crude Jew-hatred, on both the official and mass levels, unprecedented since Europe in the early 1940s. By insisting that Israel's very founding is immoral, much of the Arab world inevitably finds itself aligned with classical anti-Semitism, which considered Jewish existence itself a crime. The state-controlled Egyptian media has revived the medieval blood libel and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Official newspapers in Syria, Lebanon, and in the Palestinian Authority deny that the Holocaust happened; indeed, Arab countries are the only places in the world where Holocaust denial enjoys mainstream credibility. Ahmad Ragab, a columnist for the Egyptian government-sponsored newspaper, *Al-Akhbar,* disagreed with the growing Holocaust revisionism: he noted that the Holocaust did indeed happen, and he expressed his gratitude to Hitler—"although we do have a complaint against him, for his revenge on [the Jews] was not enough." A recent hit on Egyptian radio was called "I Hate Israel"—and the state censor boasted that he inserted the title line into the song.

Though largely ignored by the international community, this growing chorus of hatred has reinforced the tendency of the Israeli mainstream to once again view the Arab world as genocidally minded. Holocaust terminology has seeped back into Israeli discourse, emerging from unlikely sources. In a recent letter of political contrition written by former left-wing

activist Edna Shabbtai to her friend, right-wing activist Geula Cohen, Shabbtai invoked the Holocaust in her call for a war against the Palestinian Authority: "We need to read again the poster that [partisan leader] Abba Kovner directed at the Jews of Lithuania in 1942: 'Jews! Don't go like sheep to the slaughter.'"

Despite the growing sense among Israelis that we have slipped back into the pathology of Jewish history, Israeli society has not reverted to a simplistic moral understanding of the roots of the Middle East conflict. Most Israelis still perceive the conflict as being fought between two legitimate national movements; if a majority were convinced that a credible partner had emerged on the other side, they would opt, even now, for partition. While sympathy for the settlers under attack has grown, there has been no increase in political support for their annexationist agenda. Israel has repudiated the illusions of the Left, but it has hardly returned to the equally fantastic alternative of the annexationist Right. Indeed, most Israelis would probably agree that, together, both ideological camps share responsibility for the disaster—the Right, by inserting armed Jewish fanatics into Palestinian population centers; the Left, by empowering a Palestinian terrorist army on the border of Jewish population centers. Together, Right and Left have created the conditions for apocalypse in the territories.

In this atmosphere, the option that increasingly appeals to Israelis is unilateral withdrawal—itself an expression of despair in both greater Israel and a negotiated peace. The advantages of unilateral withdrawal would be to extricate us from a pathological process that ties us to a partner whose goal is our destruction, and to allow us to build a fence along borders we ourselves determine as essential for Israel's security. Unilateral withdrawal would grant the Palestinians sovereignty over most of the territories, but preserve Israeli rule over areas of dense settlement, the strategically vital Jordan Valley and, most crucially, over united Jerusalem. The notion of "sharing" Jerusalem with a violent and expansionist Palestinian Authority is now seen by most Israelis—even by many who in principle are prepared to share sovereignty—as an intolerable security risk that would almost certainly lead to the dismemberment of the city. The main disadvantage of unilateral withdrawal would be to magnify the impression created by Israel's hasty retreat from Lebanon—signaling the Arab world and especially the Palestinians that Israel is on the run, thereby inviting further violence and increasing the possibility of regional war.

In theory, only a national unity government—enjoying overwhelming public support and headed by Ariel Sharon, who built most of the settlements—could dare implement a unilateral withdrawal, necessitating

the traumatic uprooting of dozens of Jewish communities embedded deep in the West Bank and populated by the most ideologically committed settlers. In practice, though, Sharon has repeatedly vowed not to initiate any move requiring the massive uprooting of Jews from their homes, and he should be taken at his word. True, there is the Yamit precedent—when Sharon, as minister of agriculture in Menachem Begin's government in 1982, bulldozed the Sinai town of Yamit as part of Israel's withdrawal from Sinai. But Sinai's historical, religious, and especially strategic significance for Israelis cannot be compared to that of Judea and Samaria. Yamit existed for barely eight years; by contrast, the West Bank settlements have already produced a second generation of native Judeans and Samarians.

Moreover, Sharon has repeatedly dismissed separation as an illusion: Jews and Arabs, he believes, are too economically and even geographically entwined. Finally, Sharon has since expressed regret for destroying Yamit: during a pre-election interview I conducted with him, he noted that Israel should have withdrawn to the international border in Sinai only in exchange for genuine peace, while in practice it received only an extended cease-fire. He will almost certainly continue to reject the notion of unilateral withdrawal from Judea and Samaria without a negotiated peace—inconceivable in the foreseeable future.

Still, if the current conflict with the Palestinians deepens and widens into regional war, pressure from within Israeli society and especially the army could induce Sharon to invoke the precedent of 1948, when some isolated and besieged settlements were evacuated. As hatred and self-righteousness increasingly determine the Arab agenda, the ground is being prepared for that scenario.