

## **On Jews of Conscience and a Just Reconciliation in Israel/Palestine**

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

#### **Reflections from a Jewish Theology of Liberation**

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What everyone knows, few will say: that no matter what proclamations and agreements are signed, the contours of Israel and Palestine have already been set. The map of Israel and Palestinian as we know it today – Israel within its pre-1967 borders, Jerusalem as its capital; Israel occupying major areas of the West Bank; Gaza safely surrounded by both Israel and Egypt – is permanent. Though the yard markers may be moved here and there, slight adjustments to placate this or that constituency, the map of Israel and Palestine has been drawn. Since the 1967 War, with Israel's conquest of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, this map has been in place; the years after have been spent only filling in the details. It may be that this map was already in Israel's future from the time of its birth in 1948, a birth that saw over 700,000 Palestinians expelled from their land.

Israeli commentator Meron Benvenisti and historian Ilan Pappé have called this expulsion the "ethnic cleansing of Palestine." Others have called it Israel's "original sin." Whether calculated or accidental, a sign of Israel's superiority or the Arab world's weakness, is less important now than the facts we face on the ground: Israel controls from Tel Aviv to the Jordan River with millions of Palestinians in between. Though it seems that such a political and human rights arrangement would be impossible to maintain for any length of time, the only possibility of fundamentally reversing this situation is a war that leads either to Israel's defeat or the Palestinians being driven out of the land

altogether. A more likely scenario is a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions where either side may face mass death or a destruction that consumes both.<sup>1</sup>

What nation-state wasn't born through ethnic cleansing in one form or another? Is there any political entity without an original sin? If history, as it seems to be, is a cycle of violence and atrocity, is there any reason to lament the birth and expansion of any political entity, especially those who are the chroniclers are riding the crest of victory? The difficulty is compounded if, as with Jews, an original homeland was lost and a recent cataclysm had just overtaken a people. The exercise of conscience as a judgment on contemporary history is always available and usually difficult. After their long and difficult sojourn, should Jews now exercise their conscience, especially when many see a new Holocaust threatening the state of Israel?

Caught between an original and continuing sin – a sin that seems institutionalized and with the wholesale support of normative Judaism – what is a Jew of conscience to do? In fact a group of Jews – I have called them Jews of Conscience – do exist, though on the margins of the Jewish community. These Jews carry the indigenous of the people Israel, the prophetic, into an uncertain future. Much maligned, even persecuted, and certainly in exile, Jews of Conscience seek a just reconciliation for Jews and Palestinians in the land. Moreover they seek a renewal of the Jewish ethical tradition in a turbulent time. Engaging rather than seeking to transcend the reality of Holocaust, Israel and the Palestinians, Jews of Conscience work toward a world beyond injustice and where Jews, with others, especially Jews and Palestinians, can enjoy a mutually interdependent empowerment.

As is often the case, the devil is in the details, or put another way, reality is a test of ideals. Even Jews of Conscience are caught in between their ideals and the reality on the ground. Still the Jewish question is even more complicated, perhaps uniquely so: chosenness, peoplehood, history, tradition, the covenant, God and the prophetic are all involved so that the movement of conscience one way or another is either buoyed or constrained. Though a way seems clear, an obstacle may yet appear. That obstacle

can be self-involved and in need of critique; it can also be a legitimate constraint on individuality and hope. Can the prophetic demand that the people Israel move into back into danger? After the Holocaust, can the Jewish people afford conscience?

Even the prophetic is limited and, at least historically, is tainted. If after the Holocaust the question of the God of History is difficult, if not impossible, to affirm – Where was the God at Auschwitz? - and the prophets were called by God, how do Jews of Conscience affirm the prophetic? After the Holocaust, the Jewish covenant itself is called into question. After all, the covenant is a mutually binding contract of responsibilities and obligations. For most of the Jewish tradition Israel's suffering was understood as punishment from God for straying from God's commandments. Few if any Jewish theologians affirm this traditional understanding today. Rather the opposite is the case: much of post-Holocaust theology is a confrontation with God. If through most of Israel's history, at least from the perspective of God, Jews are on trial, a monumental reversion has taken place in our time. For the first time in Jewish history the initial and most difficult theological move is to assert a God of History. That is why even those who affirm the continuity of Jewish life in the post-Holocaust era start with the people Israel rather than the God of Israel.

Here Emil Fackenheim's 614<sup>th</sup> commandment is instructive: "The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another posthumous victory." According to Fackenheim, this commandment, issued in the days before, during and after the 1967 War was a response to the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz rather than the Commanding Voice of Sinai. Since the Commanding Voice of Sinai had been lost in the Holocaust, there was only one voice that Jews can hear today, that of survival. This "survival" voice is a response to the absence of God to ensure Jewish continuity after the attempt by the Nazis to annihilate Jews and Judaism. If God and humanity has abandoned us, Jews have only ourselves to command and obey. After the Holocaust, and in the form of Israel the state, Jews have committed themselves to survival. Therefore any action in service to that cause is raised to the highest

level of communal obligation; survival becomes a religious commandment. Coupled with Rabbi Irving Greenberg's admonition that the Jewish critique of power, issued when Jews were out of power and in a unique and devastating way, could diminish Israel's power and thus even unintentionally weaken Israel to the point where another Holocaust could become possible, the prophetic exercise of conscience is relegated to the corners of contemporary Jewish life. Who dares speak truth to power when the result, even unintentionally, might be another Holocaust?<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Irving Greenberg issues a command of his own in relation to speech about God that ultimately challenges his own restraint: "After the Holocaust, no statement, theological or otherwise, can be made that is not credible in the presence of the burning children." While this statement refers to the burning children of the Holocaust, the prophetic implications and extended reach of this statement are difficult to limit. All speech about God is disciplined to the point of near impossibility. Greenberg's "theological or otherwise" points to statements that come with other religiosities, ideologies and political, economic and military policies that impact "burning children" everywhere. Is it possible to resist extending this to "all" burning children, including Palestinian children? While not specifying the Palestinians, Greenberg leaves this open with two other statements: "The victims ask us above anything else not to allow the creation of another matrix of values that might sustain another attempt at genocide"; "The Holocaust cannot be used for triumphalism. Its moral challenge must also be applied to Jews."<sup>3</sup>

On the matrix of values leading to another genocide, Greenberg does not specify the Jewish people in particular. Rather the lessons of the Holocaust apply to the future, for all. To the moral challenge of triumphalism, Greenberg applies this directly to Jews and the state of Israel: "Those Israelis who place as much distance as possible between the weak Diaspora victims and the 'mighty Sabras' are tempted to use Israeli strength indiscriminately (i.e. beyond what is absolutely inescapable for self-defense and survival), which is to risk turning other people into victims of the Jews. Neither faith nor morality can function without serious twisting of perspective, even to the point of the demonic, unless

they are illuminated by the fires of Auschwitz and Treblinka.” Then to make statements about faith and political reality even more complex, Greenberg comments on the possibility of faith after the Holocaust: “After Auschwitz we now have to speak of ‘moment faiths,’ moments when Redeemer and vision of redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of burning children blot out faith—though it flickers again.”<sup>4</sup>

Fackenheim posited the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment in 1968 while Greenberg wrote of burning children, issued his warnings and posited moment faiths in 1974. Nowhere is there a reckoning with Israel’s original sin and though Greenberg tempers Fackenheim’s 614<sup>th</sup> commandment, his call for Jews to recognize the “normalization” of the Jewish condition in the wake of Israel’s crushing of the Palestinian uprising in 1988 – that is though Jews are called to a higher level of morality than others, that “higher” level is dangerous and must be limited lest Jewish morality overwhelm the need for Jewish power – diminishes his own earlier warnings. In Greenberg we see the post-Holocaust Jewish world caught in its own double bind, projecting the lessons of the Holocaust onto Jews and the world, infusing them with Jewish power while applying them and then blocking their application internally and more. Contemporary Jewish life exudes a conscience that is assertive, even militaristic, while reserving a naïveté about Jewish power and its emergence as an empire reality in the Middle East linked with the empire realities of Europe and America.

In this bundle of deep thought and contradiction, where can Jews and others venture in the realm of justice and reconciliation? What is a just reconciliation after the Holocaust and after Israel? Who has the first and last word on a just reconciliation? Do Jews? In this search, do Palestinians have anything to say on their own behalf, independently? Do Palestinians have anything to say do Jews and possibly within Jewish life? What do Western Christians have to say, they being the primary source of anti-Semitism in Europe that historically laid the groundwork for the Holocaust? Is the history of anti-Semitism primarily an internal question for Western Christians? Do Jews and Palestinians have the right

to enter this Western Christian problematic? If Jews and Palestinians speak truth to Christian support for Jews after the Holocaust, including in the empowering Holocaust narrative in relation to Israel, does this just confuse the question of Christian complicity in the historic destruction of Europe's Jews and ongoing destruction of Palestine?

## **Beyond Innocence and Redemption**

As I wrote *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* in the 1980s, I imagined reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians within a two-state configuration – Israel within its pre-1967 borders and Palestine as including East Jerusalem as its capital, the West Bank and Gaza. During the 1990s I wrote about the possibility of revolutionary forgiveness between Jews and Palestinians that would begin in Jerusalem with a confession from the prime minister of Israel to the leadership of the Palestinians, a confession that included a specific – and political – path toward equality and justice between Jews and Palestinians. This would involve a shared Jerusalem – the broken middle of Israel and Palestine – a designation of other areas of Israel/Palestine where Jews and Palestinians would share citizenship and governance, a place where those Jews and Palestinians who wanted to live separately could do so and indeed a competition over time as to which areas would flourish and which areas would ultimately attract creativity, capital and population. Such a move would lead to a demilitarization of Judaism and Islam, thus allowing both religions to become agents of change and inclusion rather than harbor a static sense of oppressor and oppressed, victor and victim – all the while pretending to innocence and redemption. My thought was that if the political could be demilitarized, religion would follow suit. Together politics and religion could defuse injustice, bitterness and aggression. In the end the seemingly unending cycle of violence and atrocity could be mitigated if not ended.<sup>5</sup>

Though I knew that Jews needed to confess to Palestinians for the historical wrongs done in and through Israel, at that time I did not envision Israel's original sin as demanding a reversal of the situation of Israel as a state; the two- state solution would suffice. Was there anything more to be contemplated?

The revolution that characterized forgiveness had to do with the end of the occupation of the Palestinian territories, the granting of a full state for Palestinians, a confession of wrong doing and even reparations for the damage done to the Palestinian people. Yet even with this moderate political path I proposed, the internationally agreed upon two-state solution, there was criticism directed toward me among conservative, moderate and progressive Jews. The criticism among the conservatives is easily understood, since even mentioning a full Palestinian state limited Israel's expansion and might, from their point of view, damaged Israel's security. Yet initially the criticism from moderate and progressive Jews was more difficult to understand, in the end it was more telling.

My first taste of the moderate/progressive criticism came in response to the book I published after my work on a Jewish theology of liberation. Published in 1990, *Beyond Innocence and Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power*, languished in bookstores. An influential review in the Christian journal *Commonweal*, written by a known Jewish progressive, Leonard Fein, carried the title, "Thanks But No Thanks." When Edward Said, the prominent Palestinian intellectual asked if he could review my book along with one they had requested for review, the *Washington Post* declined his request. In the end I understood there was something in my book title that carried ominous tones for many Jews and those who sought to be on good and proper terms within the parameters of acceptable thought. Confronting the Holocaust? Confronting Israeli power? That Jews aren't innocent? That Israel is not redemption for the Jewish people?<sup>6</sup>

Fein's review stated explicitly that the trajectory of my writing was one-state and that Israel would therefore cease to exist. The implication was there couldn't be any more anti-Jewish or self-hating Jewish analysis to be had anywhere, except possibly among Palestinians. Such Jewish analysis was even more pro-Palestinian than Palestinians were and more dangerous since it came from within the Jewish community. Defining such thought as outside the Jewish community from Fein's perspective was important for everyone involved, Jews and Christians. It might even be better for Palestinians. Why

encourage Palestinians to hope for something they wouldn't get and shouldn't desire? The Palestinians were better off to drop their grievances, take what was being offered and accept Israel as the achieved goal of Jews everywhere. In the end only misguided and anti-Semitic Palestinians were intransigent. Perhaps it was due to their leadership. Palestinians were probably descent folks who were being led astray by abhorrent politicians, especially Yasser Arafat. Should self-hating Jews also help keep Palestinian misguided hopes alive?

There is no mention of a one-state solution in *Beyond Innocence and Redemption* as there was none in *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*. As it turns out, Fine anticipated arguments that would flourish in some Jewish and international circles a decade or so later. Rather than the mention of such a one-state destination – a thought that hadn't even occurred to me at the time of my writing – I wonder if it was the radical questioning of the founding and subsequent history of Israel that fast-forwarded Fine's imagination. In this line, three central themes of the book come to mind; my chapters on different ways of looking at the Holocaust, a substantial and evolving tradition of dissent regarding Israel and its policies, and the continuation of a homeland and spiritual Zionism that battled – and in fragments continues to live on - the state Zionism that emerged victorious in 1948.

In all of these themes I catalogued, what had happened and what was ongoing within the Jewish world had either dropped from sight or was being neglected. Certainly from the beginning of the state of Israel there were reports from the front line on the atrocities of war, massacres, expulsion and terror, part of any war to be sure but aspects of the birth of Israel that present-day Jewish commentators wanted buried. Among the reports in 1948 and beyond, including in articles published in Israel's leading newspapers during the Palestinian uprising of 1987, there were consistent references to the Nazis and Jewish behavior in war. Though I stressed that such terminology was not used as a tool of direct comparison, for they pointed to something much deeper, often they were taken as such. Instead I called them historical analogies that contained warnings that Jews were transgressing boundaries that could not

be transgressed to right historical wrongs or for ideological reasons of the emerging state. Something was amiss relating to Jewish history. The historical analogies were making it difficult for the participants and observers to elucidate within a Jewish framework. They were facing a choice: either to commit these acts and cease to be Jewish or refuse these acts as Jews.

Of the many encounters with this dissenting material, three stand out. The first is from the 1948 war recalled within the context of the first Palestinian uprising. The others are from the uprising itself.

After the first Palestinian uprising began, Amos Kenan, a columnist for the Israeli daily, *Yediot Aharonot*, wrote an essay titled "Four Decades of Blood Vengeance." The article presents a dialogue with George Habash, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, whom he met in 1948 when the Israeli army conquered Lydda.

Kenan was a soldier who, as a part of the invading and occupying force, kept Palestinian Arabs at a distance. Habash, whose ailing sister lived in Lydda, managed to avoid security and visit her. Habash's sister was thirty years old, married, with six children, and at that point dying. A medical doctor, Habash diagnosed her disease and prescribed the appropriate medicines, but because Lydda was under curfew with no local pharmacies and no access to the outside, his sister died three days later. With the curfew in effect, it was impossible to bury her properly, and so Habash dug a grave with his own hands and buried his sister in her own backyard. When the curfew was lifted, the survivors of the village, Habash and his sister's six children included, were transferred to temporary prison compounds and later expelled to Jordan.

Kenan recalls his days of guard duty in Lydda as essentially uneventful and in some senses comical, both because of the lack of military preparedness of many of the military personnel, some of whom had recently arrived from Eastern Europe, and the quality, or lack thereof, of the weapons.

Since most of the inhabitants of Lydda had fled before the occupation by Jewish soldiers, there were few people to guard the Arab villagers who remained. In short, they had a typical military life with much standing around, gossiping, and the inevitable boredom. And it was typical in other, more horrifying ways as well:

In the afternoon, those of us who couldn't take it any more would steal off to Tel Aviv for a few hours, on one excuse or another. At night, those of us who couldn't restrain ourselves would go into the prison compounds to fuck Arab women. I want very much to assume, and perhaps even can, that those who couldn't restrain themselves did what they thought the Arabs would have done to them had they won the war.

Once, only once, did an Arab woman - perhaps a distant relative of George Habash - dare complain. There was a court martial. The complainant didn't even get to testify. The accused, who was sitting behind the judges, ran the back of his hand across his throat, as a signal to the woman. She understood. The rapist was not acquitted; he simply was not accused, because there was no one who would dare accuse him. Two years later, he was killed while plowing the fields of an Arab village, one no longer on the map because its inhabitants scattered and left it empty.<sup>7</sup>

Kenan then begins to write about blood vengeance, and about how difficult it is to square accounts. What he does know is that many have sought and taken revenge, and, to his mind, all the vengeance has already come:

Both you and I, George, have already taken vengeance-before and during and after the fact. And both you and I have not taken pity on man or woman, boy or girl, young or old. I know that there is not much difference between pressing a button in a fighter

plane and firing point blank into the head of a hostage. As if there is no difference between a great massacre that was not meant to be and one that was meant to be. There is no distinction between justice and justice or between injustice and injustice, as there is no difference at all in what people-weak, transient beings, assured of the justice of their ways and their deeds-are capable of doing to people who are in sum exactly like themselves.

Tears filled my eyes, George, when I read for the first time in these forty years how your sister died. How you dug her a pit with your own hands in the yard of her house in the city of Lydda. I reach out with an unclean hand to your hand, which also is not clean. You and I should die a miserable natural death, a death of sinners who have not come to their punishment, a death from old age, disease, a death weak and unheroic, a death meant for human beings who have lived a life of iniquity.<sup>8</sup>

Two other events from the Palestinian uprising make this connection between Palestinian and Jewish history in relation to the Holocaust. The first dates from January 1988, one month after the Palestinian uprising had begun, when an Israeli captain was summoned to his superior. The captain was given instructions to carry out arrests in the village of Hawara, outside Nablus. The arrest of innocent young Palestinians is hardly out of the ordinary. However, the further instructions provided to the officer as what to do to those Palestinians after their arrest was disturbing. His conscience would not allow him to carry out these instructions unless he was directly ordered to do so. Having then received the direct order, the captain, with a company of forty soldiers, boarded a civilian bus, arriving at Hawara at eleven o'clock in the evening.

The local Muhktar was given a list of twelve persons to round up, which he did, and the twelve sat on the sidewalk in the center of the village, offering no resistance. Yossi Sarid, an Israeli political analyst, describes what followed.

The soldiers shackled the villagers, and with their hands bound behind their backs they were led to the bus. The bus started to move and after 200-300 meters it stopped beside an orchard. The "locals" were taken off the bus and led into the orchard in groups of three, one after another. Every group was accompanied by an officer. In the darkness of the orchard the soldiers also shackled the Hawara residents' legs and laid them on the ground. The officers urged the soldiers to "get it over with quickly, so that we can leave and forget about it." Then, flannel was stuffed into the Arabs' mouths to prevent them from screaming and the bus driver revved up the motor so that the noise would drown out the cries. Then the soldiers obediently carried out the orders they had been given: to break their arms and legs by clubbing the Arabs; to avoid clubbing them on their heads; to remove their bonds after breaking their arms and legs, and to leave them at the site; to leave one local with broken arms but without broken legs so he could make it back to the village on his own and get help.<sup>9</sup>

The mission was carried out; the beatings so fierce that most of the wooden clubs used were broken. Thus was born the title of the article detailing this action, "The Night of the Broken Clubs."

The second event occurred just months after the beatings had begun, when Marcus Levin, a physician, was called up for reserve duty in the Ansar prison camp. When he arrived, Levin met two of his colleagues and asked for information about his duties. The answer: "Mainly you examine prisoners before and after an investigation." Levin responded in amazement, "After the investigation?" which prompted the reply, "Nothing special, sometimes there are fractures. For instance, yesterday they brought

a twelve-year-old boy with two broken legs." Dr. Levin then demanded a meeting with the compound commander and told him, "My name is Marcus Levin and not Josef Mengele, and for reasons of conscience I refuse to serve in this place." A doctor who was present at the meeting tried to calm Levin with the following comment: "Marcus, first you feel like Mengele, but after a few days you get used to it." Hence, the title of an article written about the incident, "You Will Get Used to Being a Mengele."<sup>10</sup>

References in these articles to the Night of Broken Glass, "Kristallnacht," and to the Nazi physician Mengele, as ways of seeing contemporary Jewish Israeli policy and activity, startled me. The resistance on the part of the Jewish community to what one might call the Nazi analogy is understandable and so strong as to virtually silence all such references. Yet, during the brutal attempt to suppress the Palestinian uprising, in fact, from the very beginning of the Jewish struggle for statehood in Palestine in the 1940s and continuing to the present, the connection between the Jewish experience of suffering in Europe and the Palestinian experience of suffering at the hands of the Jewish people in Palestine and Israel has been, and continues to be, repeatedly made by Jewish Israelis.

What are we to make of these references?

First, it is important to see that they are not primarily comparisons between Nazi and Israeli behavior, though some of the behavior may in fact be comparable. Second, these references are not attempts to further political objectives, such as promoting one political party over another or challenging the legitimacy of the state of Israel, though clearly they subvert both partisan and bipartisan policies of Israel that lead to these incidents.

Rather, the force of the Nazi reference involves and moves beyond comparison and politics to represent an intuitive link between the historic suffering of Jews and the present suffering of Palestinians. It further represents an implicit recognition that what was done to the Jews is now being done *by* Jews to another people. At the same time, the connection of Jewish and Palestinian suffering is pre-political and

pre-ideological; that is, it operates in a terrain filled with images of Jewish suffering, which remain untouched by the "realities" of the situation, with the need to be "strong," or even in the face of communal penalties for speaking the truth.

We might say that the Nazi reference represents a cry of pain and a plea to end a madness that was visited upon Jews for millennia and now is visited by Jews upon another people; thus, the vehemence with which such analogies are met when spoken, as if a blunt instrument is needed to repress the memories and aspirations of the Jewish people to be neither victim nor oppressor.

Could it be said that it is impossible today to understand the Jewish liturgy of destruction, the burning of the Temple, the death of the martyr, and the pogrom, the events of exile and Holocaust, unless Jews include as their intimate partners, those expelled, tortured, and murdered, those who, for most Jews, exist without name and history, the Palestinian people?

Here, in an inclusive liturgy of destruction, lies the possibility and the hope of moving beyond the peripheral and superficial into an engaged struggle on behalf of the distinct and common history of the Jewish and the Palestinian peoples. Might Jews be liberated from policies and attitudes that, when understood intuitively, betray Jewish history, but have been seen as weakness, lack of political maturity, or even self-hate? Jews would then be released from theologies that now serve as ideologies to close off critical thought and favor the powerful at the expense of others.

Could these points toward a just reconciliation? Indeed, in the first instance Amos Kenan is addressing his "enemy" George Habash in frank terms. There are no lies, complicated arguments, protestations of innocence or pretense to heroism. In Kenan there is no way back, only a way forward, a confession that might bring something in the future beyond the life of "inequity" they have lived. What was, still is. Could a mutual confession and solidarity rescue the dead and pillage – indeed rape - of that

war from infamy or oblivion? Kenan's life is without a happy ending. Still there is history to atone for and more time to live in a different way.

## **Revolutionary Forgiveness**

The heady times of the early 1990s are very far behind us now. During the first Palestinian uprising there was hope for a two-state solution and a mutual respect even between those who were clashing. Across border and boundary solidarity between Jews and Palestinians flourished as never before – and never since. There are those who see this former hope as naïve; regardless it was there, in the air, the possibility of revolutionary forgiveness.

Revolutionary forgiveness has at its heart justice. With confession and the willingness of the oppressor to cease his oppression, and with the path toward equality opening before us, memory, drenched in the blood of dislocation, atrocity and death, may have a space to breathe, reconsider not the past but what it means, or, depending on the future what the past *might* mean retrospectively. No matter the future, the pain of suffering and loss remains; its memory is crucial to the understanding of past sacrifice. Though no future can justify can transcend past injustice, the possibility of a different future allows meaning to that suffering. When meaning can be attached to suffering, then forgiveness is then possible. Not forgiveness for the deeds themselves, but for the tragic circumstances that oppressor and oppressed alike were caught up in. With Palestinians a new life is created: can their memory of suffering change in this new context where, once anchored in solitude and vengeance, may now become rooted in a just and compassionate order that binds Jews and Palestinians. A shared life in community and equal citizenship binds old wounds together in a new fabric. Sometimes, especially as the generations pass away, old wounds are forgotten or rewoven to such a degree that a joint history is recognized from the beginning. Though injustice was at the heart of the old, reconciliation allows both the former oppressors

and the former victims to view that history as a mutual evolution. By that time they are bound together in a way that could not have been foreseen, and in this new time, will not be unbound.

I have seen this in my teaching of the Holocaust in various settings, including among Christian conservative and evangelical students. The introduction of Christian history regarding Jews is enormously difficult for them for a variety of reasons, the first being their naïve view of Christian history itself. Yet even with this caveat, the idea that Christians despised, denigrated, harassed, ghettoized and murdered Jews throughout European Christian history, the history to which they are heirs, is too shocking, too disconfirming of their own upbringing and thoughts about Jews to be coherent to them. Though once naïveté is dispensed with, denial remains, and the reality is that there has been a decade's old process of revolutionary forgiveness in the West that these students inherit. Even the desire for Jews to become Christians, an age-old Christian desire, and today considered in many Jewish and Christian quarters as a holdover of anti-Semitism, may be functioning on a different plane. It may be less a disdain for the limits of Judaism than a positive sense of Christian redemption.

What happens when the prospects of revolutionary forgiveness fail or become so distant as to be relegated to another historical horizon completely? In that case, is revolutionary justice still called for?

Certainly in the case of the death camps, a revolutionary justice was needed. It is only after justice that revolutionary forgiveness can be contemplated. In the case of Israel and the Palestinians, now rather than in the 1980s, can we say that the prospect of confession and justice is so distant that only the defeat and dismantling of the state of Israel should be envisioned, if not at least hoped for? If this is the case, does this mean that Jews who won't argue for the dissolution of Israel can be trusted when they proclaim to be on the side of justice for Palestinians?

When discussing revolutionary justice as a way toward a mutual and interdependent empowerment, the question is first whether interdependence is indeed a desired result. Clearly the

position from which one is arguing is crucial here. If, for example, Palestinians want a Palestine – here defined as historic Palestine rather than the limited land of the idealized two-state solution, let alone what is left of Palestine – devoid of Jews, who could argue against their case? Of course, if that could be achieved, it is unlikely that the resulting state would live up to the ideals of the Palestinians that might legitimately argue this point. In the free-for-all that would result from the fall of Israel, it is impossible to predict what government would survive or be established. Though some Palestinians would be involved in the ensuing governing power, it is likely that a power struggle would commence that would hardly be limited to the various Palestinian factions themselves. Outside actors and influence should be expected and the forces that would be unleashed in the Middle East are unpredictable.

So revolutionary justice might become injustice within the Palestinian community itself. Would at least justice have been meted out to the Jews of Israel who caused so much havoc, taken so much land and so many lives in building their state over and against Palestine and Palestinians? Would that reversal be enough to justify revolutionary justice no matter the outcome?

If in fact Jewish anti-Zionist groups are correct, that Israel is a colonial project and as such must be dismantled and replaced with Palestinian sovereignty, does that mean that any Jew who recognizes Israel's original sin must *per force* become anti-Zionist? The situation becomes even more complicated when Jews of Conscience recognize that Israel's victory itself has made a two-state solution impossible and that *de facto* a one-state solution has been imposed on the Palestinians by Israel. If Jews keep arguing for a two-state solution that will never arrive, isn't that perpetuating a lie, one that allows Israel's oppression of the Palestinians to become even stronger? Here Jews of Conscience are caught in the conundrum of Jewish history and power. Are not Jews of Conscience thus in the same vice as those Jews who use Holocaust and Israel as a lever of power?

This was another discovery I made as I researched the Jewish tradition of dissent regarding the formation of Israel and its subsequent policies toward Palestinians. Even Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt could not escape their Judeo-centric and - much more troubling - Orientalist perspective when it came to Palestine and Arabs. Though both argued for a bi-national state in Palestine, Jewish homeland for Jews alongside a homeland for Palestinian Arabs in one unified Palestine, thereby opposing the formation of a Jewish state, Buber and Arendt were Western in their views toward Arabs. One of their arguments for Jewish settlement in Palestine is that Jews would help a backward Arab region develop technology and social structures for the modern age. As agents of development, Jews should be welcome in Palestine as partners rather than being seen as the last vestige of a colonial age. Unlike Arendt, Buber also argued for the Jewish right to settlement based on ancient Jewish history. In that sense, the economic and political development of Palestine would also escalate with the Jewish “native” presence having returned to their land. For Buber the land responded to Jews because of this indigenous connection.<sup>11</sup>

There are so many twists and turns in the Jewish connection to Palestine historically, to Jewish history in the present and in the complexities of Israel as a state with now close to five million Jews, that it is difficult to see an argument about the future of Israel and the Palestinians being untainted with Jewish bias. Can there be a just reconciliation of Jews and Palestinians with that bias intact? Of course, Palestinians also have their bias; all arguments and struggles have biases attached. But here the Jewish bias is shored up by the superior power of Israel, the backing of the United States, and with the decided advantage of a Western narrative that twins the Holocaust and Israel. If the power shifted toward Palestinians, they would have a similar array of powerful levers at their fingertips, though coming from a different direction, that of the narrative of a decolonizing Pan-Arab world, Islamic attachments to Jerusalem and a more than fifty year negative experience of Israeli power. Without specifying the details, this may have been exactly what Greenberg was arguing when he wrote about even unintentionally undermining Israel’s power as an invitation to another Holocaust.

Is there a time when partisans on one side of a dispute lose their right to speak about “solutions” to questions of justice and injustice? Clearly if an objective observer looked at the maps of Israel and Palestine – over time and now – they would see a seamless and relentless pattern of Israeli expansion and Palestinian diminishment. That same objective observer would see the ongoing peace process as having failed to halt this movement and perhaps even providing cover for it. They would also judge Jewish normative discourse about Israel and the Palestinians as part of the reason for the ongoing problematic; even progressive Jewish discourse would be judged as seeking to halt aspects of Israeli expansionism while covering up other aspects of Jewish hegemony in the area. In defining what is and what is not possible to say and advocate by defining the acceptable and unacceptable parameters of discourse on the issue of Jews, Israel and the Palestinians, progressive Jews would be judged harshly. What seems to be obvious from a Palestinian perspective - that Israel is a colonial project bent on the destruction of Palestine with the backing of the American empire and an empowered Jewish discourse within the United States - is obviously unacceptable speech in the West still dealing with the legacy of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. If one side’s speech about what it would take for a just reconciliation is declared *ipso facto* as out of bounds – and is seen as a genocidal assault on a people just emerging from the prospect of annihilation - can there be a way forward? And where should Jews of Conscience stand on this issue of speech, bias and power?

### **Jews of Conscience Journey into Their (un)Jewish Future**

Jews of Conscience journey into a future defined by a violent Constantinian Judaism. In many ways the time has already arrived. In a deep sense, Jews of Conscience are defined as (un)Jewish, at least in the normative definition of the term. However, Jews are not alone. Many Christians and Muslims are also defined as normatively (un)Christian and (un)Muslim. In this grouping, there are also Israeli and

Palestinians who are in exile from the normative definitions of what they should be and what future they should work toward, and also struggle within a variety of religious and national Constantinian formations. In the larger arc of history, should these sub groupings be seen as disparate or aligned? Do they belong to the communities that define them as outside, or are they themselves a community? Here we can see the Constantinian formations of various peoples and nations as joining together. Should we not also see people of conscience from wherever they hail as belonging to a distinct community?<sup>12</sup>

Those in exile always feel alienated and separated from their birth identities, as indeed they are. But since identities are constructed and reconstructed over time, should Jews and others be reluctant to construct their identities anew or accept the new construction as they find it? The question of what it means to be Jewish at any particular time lies with historians; the challenge for Jews of Conscience today is to live their Jewishness with others who are also in exile. In this lived exile, another way of being Jewish – and Christian and Muslim – is being forged. What these new identities will be called and who will recognize them as heirs of previous identity constructions or as pioneers of a new identity is also for historians to trace. What Jews of Conscience need to do today is live their reality with other people of conscience wherever they are found. The essence of Jewish fidelity today is to embrace the Jewish prophetic as a particular *and* universal identity. What the children of these Jews of Conscience will call themselves and how they will identify themselves is anyone's guess. If they embrace the indigenous of the people Israel, the prophetic, can they be far off the mark?

At the heart of revolutionary forgiveness is the prophetic tempered with compassion. The prophetic judges injustice; it also provides a way back to right relation. In Israel/Palestine we have some sense of a past within Palestine before the birth of the state of Israel where over hundreds of years and more Arabs and Jews lived ordinary lives together. Of course we also have the witness of Jews who are Arabs, within and outside of the contemporary state of Israel. This past is very different than the sojourn of European Jews, and yet it might provide a model of a future in a reconfigured Middle East.

But here we are back with hope for a future different than the present. The question is whether hope is crucial to commitment in the present or whether hope itself presents a series of illusionary possibilities than might prevent giving all to the present.

Israel is now defined by some as a colonial and imperial state that needs to be dismantled. Recent conferences in the United Kingdom, Norway, Canada and the United States illustrate this shift in tone. If recent discourse on the Jewish and Palestinian Left is heard and affirmed, there is also a return of the question of one-state for Israel/Palestine in which Jews and Palestinians would be citizens of the state without reference to ethnic or religious background. This one-state understanding would eliminate the discriminatory and “racist” laws of Israel and would allow Palestinian refugees to return to their home in what today has become the state of Israel. This, then, would mean the end of a “Jewish” state.<sup>13</sup>

What do Jews of Conscience say to this prospect? Can they make this argument after the Holocaust and after Israel - meaning after what Israel has done and is doing to the Palestinian people – that in the long run Jews would be safe in a democratic secular state in the Middle East? At the same time, the disappearance of a Jewish state would have a deep impact on Jewish identity. Since most of contemporary Jewish identity revolves around the Holocaust and the state of Israel, the dissolution of the state of Israel as a Jewish state would mean as well the end of the significance of the Holocaust for Jewish identity.

Here we move beyond the contemporary political and religious constructs of identity into the future of Jewishness itself. Without the Holocaust and Israel, is there any future for Jewish identity? Rabbinic Judaism, as defining of Jewish identity for almost two thousand years, was found wanting after the Holocaust. The Holocaust and then Israel were replacements for a failing Rabbinic Judaism; in the remembrance of the Holocaust and support for Israel, was born a new definition of Jewishness. Some even believe that the Holocaust and Israel have become a new religion for Jews, in essence a

Holocaust/Israel Judaism. If Israel ceases to be a Jewish state and the Holocaust becomes less and less defining of Jewish commitment, what would take their place?

It is in the crucible of this possibility that revolutionary forgiveness takes on variegated meanings and layerings, making such a movement more difficult and more important. For if a just reconciliation means so much, it carries with it what may have prompted the conflict in the first place. Jews of Conscience may have to jettison these multiple layers to see clearly and do what needs to be done. Jews of Conscience might then be a catalyst for creating a future that, though difficult for them to accept, might force others to a deeper realization of alternatives to the physical and verbal violence that permeates the Israeli/Palestinian crisis today.

Are Jews of Conscience therefore condemned to agents of change, forcing a future compromise that they themselves would refuse? If this is the case, is it worth the harsh exile Jews of Conscience are forced to endure? And does this compromise ensure the ultimate triumph of Constantinian Judaism? This prospect forces Jews of Conscience to think more deeply about the principles they uphold and the values that come within the creation of a matrix, however insufficient and unjust, for ordinary people to live ordinary lives and be free at last of extraordinary violence and insecurity. Is this what the exile of Jews of Conscience is ultimately all about?

Here, then, we reach the beginning of the end, balancing justice and reconciliation, in almost every situation having to abandon parts of both, but never more so than in the reality of Israel and the Palestinians. The question is rendered more complex by the fact that as time passes, there may be so little left of justice or reconciliation that Jews of Conscience may be in an exile without end, never reaching that bittersweet taste of the end of the cycle of violence and atrocity.

So it is, if history continues as it has, at least in our lifetime. Perhaps here we are reduced to a witness for a just reconciliation, seemingly infinitely postponed.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: One World, 2007) and Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> For my analysis of Holocaust Theology and its early emergence see *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 3<sup>rd</sup> expanded edition (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), pp. 15-74.

<sup>3</sup> See Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: KTAV, 1977), 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> For my ideas on here and in the rest of the essay see my *Revolutionary Forgiveness: Essays on Judaism, Christianity and Religious Life* (Waco: Baylor University, 2000),

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Fein, "Thanks but No Thanks," *Commonweal* (January 1991):

<sup>7</sup> Amos Kennan, "Four Decades of Blood Vengeance," *The Nation*, February 6, 1989, 155.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>9</sup> Yossi Sarid, "The Night of the Broken Clubs," *Ha'aretz*, May 4, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Gideon Spiro, "You Will Get Used to Being a Mengele," *Al Hasismar*, September 19, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> For Buber's understanding of the Jewish connection to the land see.....

<sup>12</sup> I develop these understandings of Jews of Conscience more fully in my *Israel Does Not Equal Judaism* (New York: New Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> For a book length treatments of this subject from a Palestinian perspective see Ali Abunimah, *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli/Palestinian Impasse* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).