

An Israeli's Overture to His Palestinian Neighbors

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COMMENTARY



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Last month, dueling guest opinion pieces marking the 70th anniversary of Israel's birth (according to the Hebrew calendar) appeared in the United States' two most influential newspapers. The opposing spirits in which the articles were written reflect a recurring asymmetry in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On April 18 in the New York Times, Knesset member Ayman Odeh mourned the suffering that the founding of Israel inflicted on his people. Head of the Joint List, a coalition of Arab parties that represents the third-largest bloc in Israel's parliament, Odeh asserts that "self-determination for Jews" meant "a catastrophe — 'nakba' in Arabic — for Palestinians."

Odeh's enumeration of grievances is unrelenting, and all-too-typical of Palestinian leaders in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza. He writes that as a result of Israel's War of Independence—during which, Odeh declines to mention, the Jewish state fended off five invading Arab armies that sought its destruction— "in the area around the Mediterranean

city of Haifa, where my family has lived for six generations, only 2,000 Palestinians of a population of 70,000 remained.” He adds, “My grandparents, A’bdel-Hai and A’dla, were among them. Their neighbors were expelled and dispossessed, and never allowed to return.”

In all, he claims, “more than 400 Palestinian communities were destroyed entirely.” He blames Israel for imposing military rule on its Arab citizens until 1966. He condemns a 2011 law that, he states, undertakes to “erase the painful truth of the Nakba” by creating financial penalties for any institution receiving public funding that “mourns the Nakba on the same day as Independence Day.” Moreover, “the Israeli educational system perpetuates the Nakba by refusing to teach about Palestinian society before 1948.” The government adds to the catastrophe, he asserts, by denying critical infrastructure to Palestinian villages and by imposing “unbearable” travel restrictions on West Bank Palestinians.

To end the Nakba, declares Odeh, Israel must “fully accept” Palestinians’ humanity; establish a Palestinian state; acknowledge and rectify the crimes it has perpetrated against Palestinians, which includes justice for Palestinian refugees; and teach Palestinian history and culture in Israeli schools.

Odeh’s highly tendentious rendition of the facts is to be expected. That he ascribes all fault for the conflict to Israel, identifies no actions that the Palestinians must take to improve their condition, and does not have a good word to say about his country—leaving the impression that his prominent position in the Knesset is an inexplicable aberration from Israel’s remorseless oppression of his people—underscores the rancor and intransigence of his position.

In contrast, a spirit of compromise and reconciliation—which, while not the norm in Israel, reflects a distinct political tendency—suffuses a Wall Street Journal [essay](#) Yossi Klein Halevi published a few days before the Times ran Odeh’s op-ed. A senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Halevi laments the “maximalist ambitions” on both sides of the conflict. Many Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip dream of a Palestinian state governing all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Many right-wing religious Jews who live in the West Bank dream that Israel will one day extend its full sovereignty over the same territory.

Both dreams, Halevi stresses, are sustained by powerful moral, political, and historical claims. Both dreams, he insists, are ruinous.

Halevi himself agrees with the many Jewish residents of the Israeli-built villages and towns in the West Bank—the Israeli right uses the biblical names of Judea and Samaria to refer to the territories that include the heart of ancient Israel—who maintain that the land on which they dwell is theirs. At the same time, Halevi knows that Israel’s rule over the West Bank’s nearly 3 million Palestinians—however beneficent and indirect it may one day become—threatens Israel’s character as Jewish and democratic. So, Halevi writes, “[r]eluctantly,

painfully, I am ready to trade parts of my homeland for a peace that would include recognition of Israel's legitimacy and of the Jewish people's indigenusness in this land." These are, he observes, "concessions that no Palestinian leader has been willing to offer."

In his new book, "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor"—available online in [Arabic](#) for free downloading—Halevi continues his search of many years for common ground. "One of the main obstacles to peace is an inability to hear the other side's story," he writes. Accordingly, his book "is an attempt to explain the Jewish story and the significance of Israel in Jewish identity to the Palestinians who are my next-door neighbors." Stemming in part from his excursions into his neighbors' world to hear the Palestinian and Islamic story, it offers an "invitation to a conversation, in which both sides disagree on the most basic premises." It is a daunting invitation because the interlocutors, Halevi is acutely aware, "are intruders in each other's dreams, violators of each other's sense of home."

Not presuming to speak for anyone other than himself, Halevi also offers an implicit invitation to conversation with fellow Jews in Israel and abroad and, indeed, with all those who—whether out of humanitarian, geopolitical, or religious concerns—wish to understand the prospects for easing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (Disclosure: Halevi's book tour is supported by The Paul E. Singer Foundation, as is The Public Interest Fellowship, for which I serve as dean.)

Halevi's letters charm, inspire, and illuminate. They embody his religious faith, his imaginative sympathies for the yearnings and fears of a neighbor who is, he knows in many cases, an adversary, his bracing sense of justice, his unbending commitment to the flourishing of the Jewish people and the Jewish state, and his calmly realistic assessment of the complex imperatives of Israeli national security.

With gentle pride he explains to his Palestinian neighbor the basics of Jewish history, belief, and practice. He examines the similarities between Judaism and Islam—the two Abrahamic religions built around sacred laws—and major differences, not least Islam's focus on submission to God and Judaism's encouragement of wrestling with His commands. Halevi recounts his journey from Brooklyn, where he grew up to be a strident, right-wing religious nationalist; his decision as a 20-something in the 1980s to immigrate to Israel; and his gradual realization as an Israeli citizen that the holy land that he loves and which he believes by right belongs to the Jewish people must be divided not only as a demand of justice but also for the sake of the Jewish people whom he loves still more than he loves the land.

He warmly conveys his desire to one day host in his home the Palestinians who live just beyond and below his apartment in Jerusalem's French Hill neighborhood and whom he hears at prayer and glimpses from above the security barrier that separates them. He admiringly tells of his encounters with Islam and Muslim religious leaders. He describes with awe contemporary Israel's contradictory longings: to be a normal nation like all other

nations, and to be an exceptional nation, a light unto the nations. And, the son of a refugee from Hitler's war to exterminate the Jews, he elucidates the Holocaust's profound influence, even as the last survivors pass away, on Israeli hearts and minds.

A single overriding political purpose informs Halevi's eloquent overtures to his Palestinian neighbor. It is to convince both sides that despite the conflicting claims each people has to rule over the entire land, each must accept "heartbreaking concessions" such that each will "exercise national sovereignty in only a part of the land."

Which concessions exactly? What parts of the land precisely?

Halevi does not say. The answers depend on the conversation that his letters aim to foster.

And the conversation depends on both sides summoning the spirit of compromise guided by principle and of reconciliation rooted in strength that Halevi's book exemplifies.

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