

A Message of Memory and Peace

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About one thousand years ago, a Jewish poet lived in Barcelona, who wrote remarkable liturgical verse, glorifying the universe and celebrating the whole of creation. He was also a Talmudic scholar and a translator from Arabic into Hebrew. The name of that poet was Yitzhak Ibn Reuven Albargeloni, or Yitzhak son of Reuven the Barcelonan. He was born in Barcelona in the year 1044.

What I found fascinating about this poet is the fact that he lived and wrote in the Principality of Catalonia, under the Christian rule of Count Ramon Berenguer. And, while deeply stimulated by the poetic tradition of the Arabs, he still wrote his verse in beautiful Hebrew. His descendants were illustrious Jewish intellectuals, among them Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman, known to Christians as Nachmanides.

The Muslim-Christian-Jewish existence in Iberia has been widely celebrated. We Jews remember that golden age of Spain under the name "Sepharad". Sepharad was our most open, creative and pluralistic cultural era prior to the modern age: open to other faiths and minds, alert to learning and literature, hungry for new ideas. Some of the best-known rabbis and scholars of that period were physicians: Moslem notables and Christian princes employed Jewish medical experts in their courts. This was a time-honored practice with a symbolic significance. Jews were cultural mediators, go-betweens, translators, but also healers. They celebrated the active body as well as the open mind.

Yet it was also a bloody era. Christians and Moslems fought bitterly and brutally over territory and power. Jews were better tolerated under Islam than under Christianity, but nonetheless inferior under every regime. Bearing this in mind, I think we may still cherish the legacy of poetry, philosophy, art, medicine and science inspired by that fertile encounter.

There is a telling similarity between the epos of the Hebrew language and that of the Catalan language. Both Hebrew and Catalan are ancient tongues that had to battle hard to remain alive. Both were besieged, so to speak, or overwhelmed by neighboring, more powerful languages, and both struggled uphill for their survival, sometimes against active suppression.

I happened to be in Barcelona in 1978, shortly after the downfall of the totalitarian dictatorship. I was moved and privileged to witness the euphoria of the revival and rejuvenation of the Catalan language. It unavoidably made me think of the revival and rejuvenation of Hebrew in modern times, a miracle touched upon in my latest novel, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*.

Since then, many years went by until I went back to Barcelona in 2004 to receive the Premi Internacional de Catalunya, which I shared with my dear friend Professor Sari Nusseibeh. Sari and I were both born in Jerusalem, ten years apart and less than three kilometers apart. For too many years an iron wall of hatred, violence and fanaticism has separated my world in

Jewish West Jerusalem from Sari's world across the ceasefire line in East Jerusalem.

Sari Nusseibeh's integrity and courage stand out against this grim background. He and I completely agree on the type of compromise solution, on the kind of surgery requisite for our peoples. Israel must withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territories; otherwise there will be no peace. Palestinian refugees should have a safe and permanent home in the state of Palestine, not in Israel. Otherwise we will have two Palestinian states, and not even one for the Jewish people.

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For more than three decades now, both Sari Nusseibeh and myself have been involved in an attempt to persuade our respective, traumatized and untrusting peoples of the need and of the possibility to find a livable compromise based on a coexistence of two states, Israel and Palestine, next door to one another on decent neighborly terms. Perhaps I should tell you that 35 years ago this compromise solution attracted a very marginal endorsement on both sides. For much too long, the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world treated Israel as a passing infection that will simply go away if they only scratched it hard enough. Many Israelis, for their part, treated the entire Palestinian issue as no more than a vicious invention of a pan-Arab propaganda machine, aimed at undermining Israel's legitimacy in order to destroy it.

Let me be the bearer of good tidings. As I know, you are all sick and tired of the flow of bad news from the Middle East. My good news is that the vast majority of both Israelis and Palestinians know now that at the end of the day there will be a two state solution. Even

people on both sides who resent or hate this solution, know in their heart of hearts that it is impending. Even people on both sides who regard this compromise as an outrageous injustice, know in their heart of hearts that it is unavoidable. I regard this as a great step forward. Gone are the days when Israelis had difficulties pronouncing the word "Palestine", or "Palestinians", and looked for euphemisms in order to avoid it, while Arabs refused to use the dirty word "Israel" and referred to it as "the Zionist entity". In short, the patient on both sides is unhappily ready for the surgery, but, alas, the surgeons, the present political leaders, are cowards. On both sides.

Fortunately, we have recent models to follow, as well as the better memories of the distant past. We ought to turn our eyes to the exemplary, bloodless, fair divorce conducted so successfully by the Czechs and the Slovaks a few years ago, rather than expect a sudden sentimental honeymoon between deadly enemies. Both sides need time to heal. Both sides need physicians wise enough to conduct the operation and tender enough to begin mending the wounds.

The clash between Jews and Arabs, between Israelis and Palestinians, is a tragedy, a clash between right and right. (Although, recently, I sometimes cannot help seeing it as a clash between wrong and wrong.) It is not a Wild West movie with good guys and bad guys, as Europeans tend too often to conceive it. I find it rather amazing that Europeans, who often criticize others for lack of subtlety, for painting the world black and white, are doing precisely that as they relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is emphatically not a story about colonialism and decolonization. Nor is it the Vietnam War riding again, or another version of South African apartheid. Two nations claim one very small country, the size of Sicily or Denmark, as their one and



Western Wall, Jerusalem.

only homeland in the world. And they are both right. Neither Israeli Jews, nor Palestinian Arabs, can find a national homeland anywhere else. The Palestinians are in Palestine for the same reason for which the Dutch are in the Netherlands or the Greeks in Greece. The Israeli Jews are in Israel because most of them were virtually kicked out of Europe and of the Arabic Islamic countries. And because Israel is the only country in their very long history where the Jews, as a nation, have been entirely at home.

My own parents and grandparents, who were devoted Europeans almost before anyone else in Europe was a European, back in the 1920s, were fortunately not among those who

drowned with the *Titanic*. They were the ones who were thrown off the decks of the *Titanic* into the turbulent ocean. Even as the dancing and the singing and the dining on all the decks were still going on. Dancing to the music that my Jewish ancestors helped to compose, dining by a cultural menu to which my Jewish ancestors contributed many flavors, the old Europe, the old Jewish-Christian Europe informed by the rich plurality of Sepharad, sank itself into the dark sea. While my family, and relatively few other Jews, made themselves a life-saving raft in Israel. A life-saving raft that they shared with one million Jews who had fled, by the skin of their teeth, from the Arab countries. When my parents were young, many walls in Europe

carried the hateful graffiti, “Jews go back to Palestine”. Just as today the same walls bear the hateful graffiti, “Jews out of Palestine”.

During the 1920s and 30s, my parents and grandparents, sensing the growth of Eastern European anti-Semitism and the imminent ethnic cleansing openly threatened by Nazism, appealed for six or eight different citizenships, in Europe and elsewhere. No one took them in. Canada claimed that “none is too many”. New Zealand used a more original argument: “We don’t have a problem of anti-Semitism and we do not want the problem to arise.” Zionism, for my family, was not a matter of making a choice at a travel agency. Not a matter of ideology or greedy colonialism. Not a matter of Eurocentric imperialism. It was their only life choice. It offered the only place they could go.

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Perhaps Europe ought to stop wagging its finger like a Victorian governess at this party or the other, and start asking itself, “what can we do in order to help?” Both sides could use right now every ounce of empathy, every iota of human support. Because Israelis and Palestinians alike are nearing a decision that is going to be as painful for each of them as amputation, dividing the small land into two national homelands. Let me offer you some news: you no longer have to choose between being pro-Israel and pro-Palestine. You can simply be pro-peace.

Six or seven hundred thousand Palestinian refugees, who have been living in dehumanizing misery in refugee camps for more than fifty years, are going to need homes and jobs, not in Israel but in the future state of Palestine. Europe could and should help them. At the same time, Europe will have to help the

Israelis by reassuring them that while they give up the occupied territories, and withdraw to the very fragile 1967 line, which is so hard to defend, they will get the necessary moral and material backing from Europe and from the global community. Europe should also show the Israelis that it remembers. That it can recall a thousand years of European-Jewish existence. Israelis and Europeans should be able to employ, together, the best legacies and resources of their common past. Europe itself needs, in the present phase of its history, a strong and positive historical memory.

Europe’s Arab neighbors, too, deserve an honest historical dialogue. Both Jews and Arabs, in two different ways, have been victims of Europe. The Arabs through colonialism, imperialism, exploitation and humiliation. The Jews through persecution, discrimination, and finally a mass murder on an unprecedented scale. It is only too naïve to assume that two victims of the same oppressor, two children of the same cruel parent, develop a sense of solidarity between themselves. Very often they see in each other the image of their past oppressor, which is very much the case in the Middle East today.

But we, Jews and Arabs, have not only been victims of Europe but also its literary inspiration, moral interlocutors, and cultural co-architects. We are not only a stain on European conscience, a cloud on its horizon, but also proud partners of its great cultural history. And potential allies in its newly carved future. This joint legacy should serve us today in the best and finest way. The past is not only horrible. It is also grand, empowering and useful.

Let me conclude this text by returning to my home turf, from history to literature. What can a novelist do when he or she happens to live next door to violence, terror, injustice and oppression? If they wrote nothing but protestations against political evil, they may

end up producing no more than propaganda manifestos. On the other hand, ignoring the suffering and devoting one's pen to the beauty of the sunset and the turn of the leaves, our novelist will be guilty of ethical autism. It calls for a subtle compromise. I have never written a story or a novel in order to make people change their political minds. When I want to tell my government to go to hell, I write an article or an essay, not a story. (For some reason, my present government is not impressed.)

My novels and stories are not apolitical, but meta-political. They deal in a complex way with the complex manifestations of good and evil, in a complex, ambiguous landscape. There are many exclamation marks in my political articles, but almost none in my novels

and stories. There is a wonderful phrase I have heard Sari Nusseibeh say: "Optimism is not an option, it is an ethical duty."

My own way of saying more or less the same is the following. If a huge fire is burning, you can run for your life and let those who cannot run burn. You can wag your finger at the blaze and demand inquiry and resignations. Or you can fill a bucket, a glass, at least a teaspoon of water, and pour it on the flames. The fire is huge, the teaspoon is very small, but every man and woman has a teaspoon. I would like to establish "the Order of the Teaspoon". Each of us, who share this hope, will wear a tiny teaspoon on their lapel. So that we know. Let us not only remember the best and hope for the best, but do our best.