

A Muslim Spiritual Progressive Perspective on Palestine/Israel: (with a dash of Obama)

by Omid Safi

I BEGIN MY REFLECTIONS ON THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MODERN nation state of Israel, alongside the events commemorated by Palestinians as the *Nakba* (The Catastrophe), with a reminder of an event that at first sight might seem unrelated: Barack Obama's March 2008 speech entitled "A More Perfect Union" that called for addressing racial issues in the United States.

In this speech Barack Obama, a Christian spiritual progressive who would surely find a home among many committed to the *Tikkun* ideals, spoke about how there is no way for us to immediately and magically get beyond our racial divisions. There is, however, a way for us to begin addressing issues of racial justice by confronting systematic injustices inflicted upon black communities as well as the real economic anxieties of white communities. Obama stressed that we can "address our past without becoming victims of our past." It is in this spirit that I wish to address the Palestinian/Israel situation/tragedy.

Jews have historically been persecuted and marginalized as few other communities in the history of the West have been. The rise of Zionism in many ways was a response to this persecution. While Zionism did begin with European Jews, it is in many ways part and parcel of the same milieu that saw the rise of other nationalist movements. For many Jews, the desire to return to what they have seen as their ancestral homeland is also real, and was a joyous cause for celebration after centuries of exile. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the establishment of the state of Israel has had a positive impact on the survival of Judaism—and Jews—in the Western world that for far too long had attempted to eradicate them. Furthermore, the concerns of the Israeli civilian community for genuine and meaningful security are real, and must also be addressed.

And yet part of our attempt to see with two eyes, hear with two ears, and yet feel with one heart is to recognize and remember that the same establishing of Israel is remembered differently, radically differently, by Palestinians. Going back to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, there has been a history of colonial support for the creation of Israel that remains for many Arabs and Muslims a painful reminder of centuries of oppressive foreign occupation and domination. The establishment of Israel in 1948 involved the forceful and violent ethnic cleansing of some 750,000 Palestinians from their

ancestral homelands (see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oneworld 2006). The homes and lands of these indigenous Arab inhabitants of Palestine were confiscated and handed over to Jewish immigrants. In a matter of two generations, Palestinians who had made up 90 percent of the inhabitants of Palestine were forced to become a persecuted minority in their own homeland, or perpetually homeless exiles, much as Jews themselves had been for centuries before. The other major act of injustice on the part of Israel has been the forty-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, combined with draconian measures that inflict collective punishments upon Palestinians, in both the occupied territories and inside Israel itself. These systematic injustices too are real, and the subhuman condition that many Palestinians live in must be addressed if words like justice are to rise above being hollow mockeries of their lofty reality.

All of this is well known. And yet our point is quite simple: if we are to have a common future for all of us in this sacred land, there must be a just and compassionate way to atone for these atrocious realities of the past and the present.

I write these words not as a nationalist, but as a person of faith who remains convinced that the Divine qualities of *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*, the Compassionate and the Forgiving Merciful, are the two greatest Divine qualities that human beings can and should embody. I write as one of many who are certain that forgiveness and reconciliation are indeed possible, as they were in South Africa, so long as the reconciliation is an exercise in Truth and Reconciliation. The truth must be told, as bitter as it might be for some of us to speak it, and as unpleasant for others of us to hear it. Yet if we are understand one another's realities, we have to grant that the same truth that brings joy to some members of humanity has caused immense pain and suffering for others.

I also write these words as a religious humanist, and a historian,



“Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity.” Lithograph by Mordecai Beck

whose issue is not with the existence of Jews, or Muslims, or Christians in this holy land, but with the notion that the state somehow belongs to one ethnic or religious group. It is that arrogance of nationalism that I reject in favor of a pluralistic and historically more accurate vision.

I remember that a thousand years ago, over 85 percent of all Jews lived among Muslims of Arab and Persian backgrounds. I remember that Jews achieved a “Golden Age” in Andalusia, ruled by Muslims. I remember that it was the Muslims who received the majority of the Jewish exiles when they were later expelled from Christian Andalusia. I remember that it was the Muslim Ottomans who provided for the welfare and security of the Jewish community, to the point of voluntarily settling Jewish families in the region, including in Jerusalem. We have lived together in the past, and can live together again.

The problem, therefore, is not that of the presence of Jews in the Holy Land. The issue is an unjust interpretation of Zionism that has sought and seeks to rid the land of Palestine and Israel of its Arab inhabitants, and render them second-class citizens in their own ancestral homeland. Only after addressing these issues can there be hope to realize the creation of a community where Jews, Christians, and Muslims can live side by side with one another in full dignity and equality.

Speaking on behalf of all those who resonate with the dream of such a new Israel, such a new Palestine, I say the following: We too dare to dream, we dream of a place, of land, where Muslim, Christian, and Jew live side by side, where Jerusalem becomes once again the Holy City, the Sacred City, simultaneously al-Quds and Zion. (There are many who share this dream, including Christians like

Elias Chacour, the many Israeli peace organizations, and members of the Jerusalem Peace Makers such as Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari). We too have the audacity to hope and dream that God’s love encompasses all of God’s children, Jewish and Muslim, Christian and others. In that dream, we reject the notion, any notion, that this land belong exclusively to one people, or that others are at best tolerated guests. Rights, if they are meaningful, belongs to all; otherwise they are nothing more than privileges guaranteed to a chosen few, which effectively work as frameworks for oppression.

There are some Jews and some Arabs who if given a chance would no doubt wish to purge the land of the other. We see this hateful wish written into the charters of movements like Hamas, which has responded to the Israeli occupation with its own injustice, by inflicting violence upon Israeli society. And as many Palestinians have mournfully reminded us, the creation of Israel has involved the destruction of their own society not as an abstract dream but as an all too vivid reality. It is vital for us to address these past and present realities, and yet we remain hopeful that by addressing them we can avoid the situation of forever remaining their victim.

We dare to dream of a place where the majority of people want to live together, to co-exist, perhaps initially uncomfortably—but we have no choice today other than learning to live together. And we remain convinced that God creates us in love, that love is natural to our state, and it is in fact hate and mistrust that are unnatural. We are taught to hate one another, and if we have been taught hatred, we can un-teach hatred and replace it with an inclusive love. Our hearts are big enough for all of us.

Martin Luther King taught us that we have a choice: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We have gone down the path of attempting to violently annihilate one another, and it has gotten us nothing but this vortex of pain and destruction. It is time to try the higher path of nonviolent coexistence, illuminated by love.

We dream of a day where our children, Jewish children and Arab children, go to school together, live in the same communities, and work the same fields together. That day is possible, and our coexistence is possible, but only if we dare to rise above our own worst fears, and reach out to others who wish to coexist with us. Dr. King was right: we are all bound up in an inescapable network of mutuality. Buber was right: we achieve our full humanity when the “I” is projected into the Thou. Jesus and Muhammad were right: that which we do to the least of humanity we do to one another. May it be that when the 100th anniversary of Israel is celebrated, it is also a celebration of how the dreams of multiple communities became realized, not one at the expense of another. It is to that common humanity that we appeal. May the path to Truth and Reconciliation begin with each of us, today. ■

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