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The Problem of Israel in the Modern World

Can the Unspeakable be Spoken?

by MICHAEL WELTON

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The mood of our uneasy times is incredibly bellicose, dark, apocalyptic and vengeful. The “war on terror” is like a virus that infects everything it touches. And it does seem to touch everything, from our popular television shows, to getting across borders, travelling overseas somewhere. You can’t read the Sunday paper without feeling queasy, a sense of dread tingling our nerves and spoiling our lovely morning coffee. Everyday brings a new jolt. And if terror doesn’t do the trick, fear of global warming, or running out of oil will spoil your day for sure.

I am particularly interested in probing the role that religious belief and mythological systems play in dividing us from one another, fuelling irrationality and hatred of others, and dampening any spirit of radical self-criticism. To illustrate the incendiary nature of religious belief, I will focus attention on the Israel-Palestinian conflict in the context of the Middle East. Perhaps no topic—Israel’s fate and role in the Middle East—is itself so incendiary and symptomatic of the failure of our global civilization to act justly.

The horrific Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006, the continuing assault on Palestinians in the Gaza strip, now virtually a prison, and the building of settlements in the West Bank, has revealed to the world the stark inadequacies of the old axiom, that “might is right”. I am fascinated

with why Israel, particularly, believes that might is right, that war is the only message the Arabs understand and why Israel refuses to talk with their enemy. What belief system underpins the aggressions of Israel against the Palestinians and its Arab surroundings? Why is it so hard for us to criticize Israel in the west? Are there mythic underpinnings and reasons operating here, too?

September 11, 2001 set me on a pathway to understand what was behind this ghastly act of flying hijacked airplanes into the very heart of the American military-industrial complex. Why was it so easy for George W. Bush on a Sunday afternoon, Sept. 16, 2001, on the south lawn of the White House—to utter these words: “We need to be alert to the fact that these evil doers still exist. We haven’t seen this kind of barbarism in a long period of time. No one could have conceivably imagined suicide bombers burrowing into our society and then emerging all in the same day to fly their aircraft—fly US aircraft into buildings full of innocent people—and show no remorse. This is a new kind of—a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take awhile.”

Commentators of the day observed that Bush’s remark about crusade had come in an off-the-cuff comment to a journalist. Actually, he had struggled hard to find the right word. This was the word that came from his gut. It signified the struggle between Good and Evil. On January 29, 2002, Bush announced that: “States like these (Iran, Iraq, N. Korea), and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” Unwittingly, Bush was dragged back to the century’s old world of malediction—cursing one’s enemies.

One of the deep reasons why the West is open-hearted to Israel and hard-hearted towards Palestinians (and increasingly all Arabs) is the pre-eminence of “Israel” in the western, Christian imagination. Let me tell a personal story to illustrate my point. The Diary of Anne Frank has taken its place in the western religious imagination from its publication after the war until the present day. I can remember reading an expurgated version of the diary when I was a teenager. The excruciating drama of her hiding from the Gestapo, and her family’s eventual murder, was cut into my youthful memory. I somehow took on her suffering as my own. In my twenties, I read Holocaust narratives by the likes of Elie Wiesel (*Night*) who captured the horror of trains carrying Jews to the death-camps, Jews who didn’t know what was in store for them as they shuddered down the rails. I read the works of Jewish theologians who taught me that The Holocaust was the most horrific form of human suffering.

When I gradually made the journey from pietistic evangelicalism to liberation theology, like so many others, I read Gustavo Gutierrez’s *Liberation Theology* text with amazement. There, the Exodus narrative was claimed as a paradigm for the liberation struggles of the oppressed everywhere. The spirituals of Black slaves incorporated Old Testament, Jewish imagery as they longed for “Moses” to lead them to the promised land of freedom, away from Pharaoh’s crushing contempt. “Israel” existed as a powerful metaphor—the Jews appeared to be the paradigm of profound suffering. Those suffering from the depredations of South African apartheid, or sugar plantations or the brutality of Latin American dictatorships—could find comfort in the story of the Exodus.

But I didn’t think about the real state of Israel that was forged through violence and terrorism in the 1940s on the historic land of Palestine. Nor did I pay any attention to what actually happened

when the ancient Hebrews ventured into the “promised land”, instructed by their tribal sky-god to eliminate the Amalekites. What happened to them? Didn’t Yahweh tell the Israelites to murder, plunder and rape its inhabitants? When I think about Israel now, and the Diary of Anne Frank, I realize the power of Edward Said’s remark that Israel’s “other”, the Palestinians, have never had permission to possess their own narrative. It is not that Anne Frank’s diary ought not to be read. But the fact that we keep telling, and re-telling this story and its variants, leaves little room for other narratives. It contributes to the idea, I think, that Jewish suffering is unique, different from other forms of suffering, mysterious and resistant to rational understanding.

A diary for our time would, perhaps, be entitled *The diary of Asthma al-Mughhayr*, a 16-year old Palestinian, an account of what happened to his fellow and sister kids and family and community members in and around Rafah. Scribbling among the ruins, would Asthma write of watching his brother, Ahmad, 13 years-old, shot with a single bullet through his head while taking clothes off the drying line and feeding pigeons? Apparently the shot came from a house nearby, which been taken over by Israeli soldiers shortly before. Would he write by candle late at night, amidst the rubble, about the thirteen year old girl who was shot while she was walking to school? What would this teenage boy think about the Israeli commander who emptied his gun into the school girl?

What would Asthma think about the Occupation—a system of military check-points splitting towns and villages into ghettos, curfews, closures, raids, mass demolition and destruction of houses and land expropriations? How would he characterize daily life, and the grotesque wall, that, when completed will total 400 miles—four times longer than the Berlin wall. Would Asthma write youthful poetry about being caged or displaced? Would this young man be driven mad? Would he confess to a concealed desire to be a suicide bomber?

Maybe Asthma would keep a record of just how many children have been killed. Two-thirds of hundreds of children killed at checkpoints, in the street, on the way to school, in their homes, died from small arms fire, directed in over half of the cases to the head, neck and chest—the sniper’s wound. Would these young men wonder why the Palestinians are always terrorists? Would he have taken his own life? Why is it almost unspeakable to speak of the suffering of the non-Jew in the west? Why is the suffering of Palestinian people of so little concern and interest to the western mind and politicians? One answer surely is that both Christians and Jews share a common mythology: that Yahweh created the world, that the Jews are a chosen people, that they have been promised a land. Christians and Jews obviously differ regarding the significance of Jesus. But those who embrace him become part of the universal “people of God” who will inherit the earth when the redeemer returns to Zion. Islam has no place in the great purposes of God.

But there is something else. The United States and Israel have fused into a single entity in global politics and world history. Both are uniquely chosen to be redeemer nations, a light unto the nations. They have special status in the cosmic story. Israel is the US, and the US is Israel. The early Puritans were the “new Israel” and America was the Promised Land. America has never forsaken its historical sense of specialness before God, to be a redeemer nation. And, as we will now see, Israel’s imagined destiny was not only to be a homeland for dispossessed Jews. It was to be beacon of civilization in savage Arab lands, a light unto the nations.

We cannot understand the current crisis in the Middle East without understanding the religious mythology and historical circumstances underpinning the creation of the Jewish state of Israel. I can only highlight these. All of us, if asked, probably immediately link The Holocaust perpetrated in Germany with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 in historic Palestine. Getting their own state was Europe's payment for their suffering in the 1930s and 1940s. Now, they will be safe and less subject to anti-Semitic attacks or assaults. Many of us might even assume, without thinking too much about it, that God gave the land to the Jews. The Palestinians are Amalek. If they will not submit to Jewish rule they must, or will be, destroyed. The basis for this is the Old Testament, the shared sacred text of Christians and Jews. One cannot argue with sacred texts! Indeed, in 1971, Golda Meir told Le Monde that Israel existed as "the fulfilment of promise made by God Himself. It would be ridiculous to ask it to account for its legitimacy."

Yet those of secular mind might want to ask some questions and probe into history deeply. At the dawn of the twentieth century, historians tell us, Europe's 'subject peoples' (Poles, Czechs, Armenians, Serbs) dreamed of forming their own 'nation-states'. Places where they might live free from fear. These states privileged particular ethnic groups—defined by language, or religion or antiquity. The Zionist movement originated in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The land of Zion, the ancient homeland (Israel actually existed for only 60 years in the thousands of years of life in historic Palestine) was an exultant space of hope for some Jews. Zionists dreamed of the restored 'lost fatherland'. This was a powerful dream that turned into hard fact at the end of World War II.

Zionism coincided with the period of European imperialist expansion and acquisition of lands in Africa and Asia. Lands, including lands in Canada, were acquired and occupied in the name of a higher power, God, and a higher civilization. There is something very interesting here for our understanding of Israel and the crisis in the Middle East. Zionist ideologues like Moses Hess and Theodor Herzl (as did all Israeli leaders from Ben-Gurion onward) believed that they had a divine right to occupy the land that was plainly occupied by others. If they were soft on 'divine right', they simply accepted that they were going to lands that were empty. Not empty of real live people, but empty of civilization and proper cultivation. In other words, those who colonize, or steal, other peoples' lands (be they in Africa, Asia or in the Nass River Valley in BC) carry ideas in their heads about their right to do so. They, the colonists, will cultivate the untended gardens and settle the savages in orderly, moral communities.

The Zionist project, Edward Said has argued, participated in the "great dispossessing movement of modern European colonialism, and with them all the schemes for redeeming the land, resettling the natives, civilizing them, taming their savage customs..." The natives are, to put it bluntly, irrelevant to begin with! They are inferior and marginal. Herzl admitted in his diary that "both the expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly." He thought that they had to be spirited across the border and denied employment. They existed, but not as full human beings. These inferior beings could be put on reservations, on compounds, on native homelands. They could be taxed, counted and used profitably. Then, the new society could be built in the vacated space. Thus, 'empty' actually means 'uncivilized'. Now we can understand the slogan of Israelis who saw Palestine as a "land without people, for a people without land."

Those are Ben-Gurion's words. In 1937 he had argued that "we must expel the Arabs and take their places. He acknowledged the presence of Arabs on the land, but denied the presence of Palestinians. In her famous statement to The Sunday Times in 1969, then Prime Minister Golda Meir said: "There is no such thing as a Palestinian people. It is not as if we came and threw them out and took over their country. They didn't exist." During that same year, Zionist leader Menachem Begin told Kibbutz members the importance of denying the existence of Palestinians. "My friend, take care. When you recognize the concept of 'Palestine', you demolish your right to live in Kibbutz Ein Haboresh. If this is Palestine and not the land of Israel, then you are conquerors and not tillers of the land. You are invaders. If this is Palestine, then it belongs to a people who lived here before you came."

But the Palestinians were there, weren't they? At least 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes, and villages were destroyed or pillaged. Israeli propagandists used to push the story that the Palestinians just ran away, saying, "Here, Israel, take our homes, here's the key, and don't forget to look after our olive trees." Contemporary Israeli historians like Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé have dispelled this farcical story. The Israeli armies and terror squads expelled the villagers through terror and massacre. This the Palestinians call the Nakba, "the original sin." The process of ethnic cleansing began in the mid-1940s and has never ceased. Border raids, massacres, settlements, slaughter of 20,000 in Lebanon, expulsions, demolitions, arrests, torture, and assassinations, chicanery and all the tricks of road maps that never materialize. Israel is a big problem in the modern world. Perhaps even an anachronism.

Zionist strategy has always been to seize the moment when they can take-over all of Palestine. In 1947-8, under cover of conflict, 78% of historic Palestine was transformed into "Israel." In 1967, Israel seized the opportunity to take-over the remaining 22% of Palestine. Israel justified the 1967 war as self-defence; thus they are blameless; just as they are in the recent disproportionate destruction of civilians in Palestine and Lebanon. Israel is the perpetual victim; the little David facing the Arab Goliath. Israel never initiates; it only responds.

There is little historic or contemporary evidence that the Israeli military, which runs the country and shapes its mental outlook, has a shred of commitment to a Palestinian state. Liberal critics who rail against the "occupation" of the West Bank or the Gaza and the settlements and the capture of Jerusalem are correct, but only from the Palestinian point of view. Israel is doing everything in its power, day after day, minute after minute, and one stone at a time, one olive grove, one goat at a time, to destroy the possibility of a Palestinian state. If it did exist, it would be tiny, fragmented, weak—an act of Palestinian surrender and humiliation.

Don't we see through Israel and US games? Hamas was elected in democratic elections. US-Israel and the EU have done everything possible, short of utter starvation of the people, to destroy Hamas (and Hezbollah). They keep telling Hamas that they have to lay down their arms, and recognize Israel. But what are Israel's borders to be recognized? Where are they drawn? Hamas might well agree to return to the 1967 borders with all settlements dismantled. This is just a wicked charade being played out on the international scene, and many fall for it, including Canada's right-wing Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

We in the west have a hard time seeing what is before our eyes. Another logical error, which we see committed all the time, is to talk of the “cycle of violence” in the Middle East. From our vantage point in Canada, we imagine both are to blame, tanks and F-16s on one side, suicide bombers on the other. Aren’t human beings violent creatures—we mutter to ourselves: just an endless cycle of violence. But the Israel/Palestine story is not one of moral equivalence. It is a story of brutal dispossession and oppression of one people by another; it is not simply a sort of Greek tragedy. The idea of a cycle of violence leaves Israel once again not guilty. Everyone is not an innocent victim.

At this point, one can see where the idea of enemies talking it out can be premature. You feel my pain, I will feel yours. If only we could listen. I’ve suffered, you’ve suffered. Let’s talk. But it is not true that Palestinians have not heard the Zionist story. They have heard it *ad nauseum* and have heard enough about Jewish suffering. Both sides do not need to listen. It is Israelis and Jews who need to listen. There is lots of evidence—from Jewish Israeli commentators—that most Israelis scarcely give two hoots about the sight of a white-scarfed women scrubbing through the rubble of a bombed out building for a trace of her child.

Can you imagine both sides in apartheid sitting down to talk and listen to one another? What form would the suffering of the white perpetrator of apartheid take? That’s the point, isn’t it—there is a perpetrator, there is a victim; there is an oppressor; there are the oppressed.

Funerals, observes the great Palestinian poet, Mourid Barghouti, are an “integral part of the lives of Palestinians wherever they were, in the homeland or in exile, in the days of their calm and the days of their Intifada, in the days of their wars and the days of their peace punctuated by massacres.” Thus, when Yitzhak Rabin spoke so eloquently of Israelis as absolute victims, and the eyes of those in the White House and the whole world grew wet, Barghouti said that he “knew that [he] would forget for a long time his words that day: “ We are victims of war and violence. We have not known a year or month when mothers have not mourned their sons.”

Barghouti says that Rabin “knew how to demand that the world should respect Israeli blood, the blood of every Israeli individual without exception. He knew how to demand that the world should respect Israeli tears, and he was able to present Israel as the victim of a crime perpetrated by us. He changed facts, he altered the order of things, he presented us as the initiators of violence in the Middle East and said what he said with eloquence, with clarity and conviction.”

Rabin told his story of soldiers returning from war, covered in blood, and funerals where those in attendance could not look into the eyes of grieving mothers. In a remarkable passage in the brilliant book, I saw Ramallah, Barghouti argues compellingly that it is “easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic trick: start your story from “Secondly.” Yes, this is what Rabin did. He simply neglected to speak of what happened first. Start your story with “Secondly,” and the world will be turned upside-down. Start your story with “Secondly”, and the arrows of the Red Indians are the original criminals and the guns of the white men are entirely the victim....You only need to start your story with “Secondly”, and the burned Vietnamese will have wounded the humanity of the napalm, and Victor Jara’s songs will be the shameful thing and not Pinochet’s bullets, which killed so many thousands in the Santiago stadium. It is enough to start the story

with “Secondly”, for my grandmother, Umm ‘Ata, to become the criminal and Ariel Sharon her victim” (pp. 177-78).

Zionism has been a beautiful dream for many Jews. But Zionism from the ‘standpoint of the victim’ is not a pretty picture. My conclusions may be troubling and disconcerting. But I think that the cause of global justice and world peace, and particularly peace in the Middle East, demands that we understand that the state of Israel is at the crossroads. Israel, the first modern ‘democracy’ to conduct full-scale ethnic cleansing as a state project, can continue towards an “ethnically cleansed” Greater Israel, or transform into a single, integrated, bi-national, multicultural state of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. In my view, the ferocity unleashed in Lebanon and the Gaza—laying sieges, causing electricity blackouts, bombing and shelling, assassinating and imprisoning, killing and wounding children and babies—can only be comprehended in terms of the Zionist project to eradicate any opposition to their goal of total domination in historic Palestine and the surrounding Middle East. Hezbollah was being taught the Zionist’s elementary lesson: we have the right to abduct, you do not.

Israel is an anachronism in our increasingly cosmopolitan world order in that Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privilege from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded. This is a “separatist project” in a world of individual rights, open frontiers and international law. Thus, in the Jewish state, one community, the Jews, is set above others, in an age when that sort of state has no place.

The wall being erected between Israel and Palestinian occupied territories is a symbol of the moral and institutional bankruptcy of the regime it is intended to protect. You cannot build pathways towards others if you believe they are inferior beings, or that you, and not they, are superior, chosen ones, with your suffering privileged above and beyond everyone else’s. Israel’s actions in the world towards and against the Palestinians—curfews, check points, bulldozers, public humiliations, home demolition, land seizures, shootings, targeted assassinations, and the separatist fence—indicate a state that appears to have lost its moral centre, and is possibly facing its own Nakba.

I believe that the United States’ unconditional support for Israel, and the adoption of an Israeli approach to foreign policy, is undermining the hopes and possibilities for peace in the Middle East and the rest of the world. The US’s catastrophic loss of international political influence and the degradation of its moral image has much to do with their bizarre approval of, and financial support for, Israel’s actions in the Middle East. Israel embraced the “war on terror” when the smoke was still rising from the Towers, immediately identifying the Palestinians as “terrorists” who had to be eliminated. Thus, Israel’s wars, now and in the past, are always presented to the world as wars of necessity, of self-defence.

The compelling question before Israel and the rest of the world is simply this: will Israel reinvent itself and dissolve the exhausted Zionist political project in favour of building a truly bi-national state in historic Palestine for everyone? We have reached a moral crossroads. In the new Middle East defined by the US, only Israel and the US may dominate, only they may be strong, only they may be secure. But in the just world that lies on the other side of the crossroads, this is unacceptable.

