

EXCERPTED VERSION

Reconsidering the Israel Narrative, Renarrating How we Speak, Listen and Act in Community A Kol Nidre Sermon at Kehilla Community Synagogue, 2002/5763

by David J. Cooper (spiritual leader, Kehilla Community Synagogue)

[Kehilla's High Holyday services were conducted in 2002 on a theme of the reconsideration of the narratives by which we live our lives. The following is excerpted from that sermon delivered within the context of that theme.]

A few months ago, we sat down to work out who was doing what sermons at High Holydays. Now, I have a list of High Holyday sermon topics that I think could last me enough years to get me to retirement. Talking about an issue as controversial as Israel and Palestine is not high on my list. So when I suggested in the leaders meeting that perhaps it was necessary for me to address this issue at Kol Nidre, I was a bit disappointed that everyone so readily agreed with me. But we knew that it would be totally unthinkable for Kehilla in *this* year to leave this topic off the High Holyday spiritual agenda.

As I sat down to prepare this talk, I had to consider that I serve as a rabbi for a community that describes itself as politically progressive and which has officially upheld the idea of a two-state solution for Israel-Palestine well before it became popular in Jewish and Israeli circles. Kehilla is within a narrow band of a spectrum of American synagogues. Even within that narrow band, we still contain some variety of thoughts concerning Israel and Palestine. I serve as rabbi to people who believe that Israel should withdraw from the occupied territories. *And* I serve as rabbi to people who believe that such a withdrawal would lead to Israel's greater insecurity and possibly its destruction. I am the rabbi of people who believe that the Palestinians and their leadership are responsible for the violence both sides have suffered. *And* I am the rabbi of people who believe that Israel's leadership is primarily responsible. But I am also a rabbi who feels that it is my job to be honest and not to reduce what I have to say to a pleasant common denominator. I'm not sure that there is one.

It is not my aim tonight persuade you to take my position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because it's *not* my aim to persuade you that my position is right and that if you disagree, then you are wrong. For one thing, I am *not* totally convinced that I am correct, and I know that I—like everyone else on this planet—am not in possession of all the necessary information. In fact, my point this evening is quite the opposite. Ultimately, I want us each to act as the still small voice within reveals what each of us needs to do, and I want us to find a way for us in this community to hear each other, bless each other and feel safe with each other with whatever differences we have, and then to provide a model of such openness to those around us especially in the larger Jewish world. That would certainly create a new narrative about handling controversy within community.

BREAKING THE FRIEND-FOE NARRATIVE

And so the first narrative that I want to consider tonight is the story we have internalized about what it means to disagree on important issues. In our society we are quick to label folks as friend or foe, good or evil. We consider those who agree with us to be good; they are correct; they are allies. Those who disagree are—at best—misguided or duped, and—at worst—are to be regarded as malicious, as enemies, perhaps evil. The American Left, both the Old Left and the New Left adopted this narrative. As you may recall: “They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals there/ You either are a union man or a thug for J.H. Blair.” And perhaps it does serve a purpose to ask at the picket line: “Which side are you

on?” But that may not be a good guideline for dialogue within a community. In the left, we often asserted that either you agree with our party’s correct line or—regardless of your intentions—you are objectively serving the interests of the imperialists, or the sexists, or the homophobes, or the racists. In the 30’s, the old Communist Party vilified socialists who disagreed with the CP line as “social-fascists.” The effect of all of this was division and more division until people could not talk to each other or work together even for those things on which they agreed.

I see the same process at work in the larger Jewish community. For example, I went to a Jewish community-wide conference and at a workshop on dissent in the Jewish world, one of the panelists talked in a manner reminiscent of the Stalinists. He characterized the people who demonstrate their opposition to the Israeli occupation as quote “objectively serving the cause of our enemies,” thus impliedly lumping principled criticism of Israeli policy with support for suicide bombings.

I think that unless we try to renarrate this process, we may repeat it, especially in the current situation so filled with nuance, with palpable feelings of vulnerability and grief, and especially where so many of the parties are neither fully right nor fully wrong. We need to be able to be compassionate where deep sensitivities are involved and where life and death are at stake. Listening to each other, respect for feelings, willingness to see the situation from within the reality of the other’s narrative is not only necessary for us in this room, it is probably a necessary component for peace and justice on the planet.

So I want us to turn and consider two of the major narratives about the State of Israel and the situation of the Palestinians. These are narratives, not histories. Both of these narratives reflect reality, and both narratives contain distortions.

THE ISRAELI NARRATIVE:

In the year 70, The Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, and with it ended Jewish sovereignty over our own lives. Jews lived as an oppressed minority in Asia, Africa and Europe, usually unwelcome in the larger society, considered outsiders even after living in a country for generations. Jews were not allowed to own land and to farm it. Jews were largely confined to enclaves, some larger, some smaller. Exile and constant humiliation was our lot. We awaited our rescue by *mashiach*, the Messiah, and until then we would live under the codes of Jewish Law derived from Torah and Talmud.

In the 19th century, the role of Jews in European and American society completely changed. Now, instead of being Jewish resident-aliens of France, for example, we became French citizens of the Israelite faith. This was the century of growing nationalism, and Jews joined in with enthusiasm for several decades, and yet—despite our best efforts to fit in as citizens—anti-Semitism, both official and popular developed in virulent new forms. When the French military scapegoated Alfred Dreyfus because of his Judaism and sent him to Devil’s Island, the promise of emancipation showed its limitations. Even liberal Europe could no longer be depended upon as a haven of safety. Thus, at the turn of 20th century, modern political Zionism was born as the national liberation movement for Jewish people, with the aim of creating a haven, a place where we could finally be safe in our own land, a state which the Jews could call our own.

Most orthodox Jews did not join in the new enterprise because Zionism had broken with the prior Jewish narrative about our redemption. Zionism said that we had waited long enough for the Messiah and that God was just going to have to help those who helped themselves.

In the early years of Zionist endeavor, Jews began immigrating to Ottoman Palestine. Individual Jews and national funds legally purchased property from the Arabs and Ottomans who owned the land. Jewish immigrants created new institutions such as the kibbutz and the moshav to work the land cooperatively with Jewish labor finally in the service of farming our own land. New cities and towns were born. A barren land was made to flower and swamps were drained. As the British prepared to take over and administer Palestine in the wake of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Lord Balfour put forward a declaration that Britain would support the founding of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In the years following World War I, the Arabs of Palestine repeatedly rioted against the Jews and against Jewish immigration and some of these riots led to massacres such as the one in Hebron in 1929. And the British, rather than helping the formation of a Jewish homeland, restricted Jewish immigration. Some efforts were made to try to work with the Arabs, but they spurned these overtures, and Arabs who cooperated with the Jews were punished by the others in their community.

As the 20th century continued, it became abundantly clear that even Zionism's worst fears about European anti-Semitism were grossly under-estimated. Most of the world's countries, including the US, were closed to the mass of Jewish refugees seeking sanctuary from Nazi Germany. The world had disregarded us. As World War II ended, Jewish Palestine absorbed war refugees and its population grew. The UN agreed to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, but the local Arabs and the surrounding countries disagreed and invaded the Jewish state. During the war in 1948, the Arab leaders encouraged their people to flee their homes until the time that the Israelis were defeated. The Israelis however were not defeated and the Arabs who did not have enough sense to stay had become refugees.

THE PALESTINIAN STORY

For the Palestinian, the story is different. If Jews had sovereignty in ancient Israel off and on for 1200 hundred years, Arabs had been living in Palestine for about the same amount of time but far more recently. When the first Arab Moslems arrived in the eighth and ninth century, Jerusalem was a wasted city; a garbage dump filled the Temple Mount, the *Haram al Sharif*. The Arabs terraced the hills and made the land fruitful, built beautiful mosques, repelled the barbaric and genocidal Christian jihad (or crusades) from Europe, and then for half a millennium found themselves under Turkish Moslem domination. As nationalism spread through Europe and the world, Arabs in the Middle East began to struggle against Ottoman hegemony. During World War I, Britain promised Arabs independence from foreign domination.

Before World War I, Jewish European colonialists began coming to Palestine. They would buy land from landlords and from absentee owners. Tenant farmers who had worked those lands for generations would be forced to leave. What's more, the Jewish kibbutzim would not hire Arab farmworkers and even regarded this discrimination as a source of pride. These Jewish settlers were very clear about their goals. They were determined to make Palestine into a Jewish state. There had been Jews living peacefully in Palestine for centuries, but this was the first time any one had talked about taking over Palestine and making it into a Jewish country. Jewish immigration and land take-overs increased steadily, and even though the Jews constituted a minority, they were growing each year and their aim was clear.

The local Arabs and the Ottomans had absolutely nothing to do with whatever was happening in Europe that was driving the Jews to go to Palestine. Jewish immigration,

even with restrictions, continued during the British Mandate administration. And if the landlords were going to continue to sell land to people intent on displacing the local population, and if Britain was going to allow Jewish domination to replace that of the Ottomans, then Jewish colonial activity would have to be met with the resistance of arms.

After World War II, the immigration became even worse. The UN voted to partition Palestine giving the Jews who had substantially less than 50% of the population, more than 50% of the land. The Jews welcomed the partition, and many of the Jewish leaders were fairly clear that they perceived the partition a temporary step on the way to a Jewish State in all of Palestine. Partition had to be fought. During the war that followed, many villagers fled the fighting. In a number of villages, the Israelis forcibly evicted the people, and in at least one village, Deir Yassin, the Israelis massacred its residents as a warning to all against staying put. Thus began the Palestinian diaspora. And since the time of the Disaster, Palestinians continue to long for their homes and their villages.

STORIES WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY

These are two stories about the same land. These are narratives that ask the listener to understand the deep suffering of each people and also each people's hope, their *tikva*, that they can be a free people in their own country. But each narrative asks that you disregard the pain and the hopes of the other, and each narrative avoids any sense of responsibility for the fears and the suffering of the other.

The extent of responsibility we are often willing to take is followed by the most “un-Yom Kippur” word I know: the word is “BUT.” Yes, my people did this to you, BUT look what happened to us. Yes, we did something violent, BUT there is *no moral equivalence* between what I did to you and what you did to me. To even suggest moral equivalence is to deny my suffering. Yes, we Israelis had to invade an Arab village, and, yes we killed civilians as a result, BUT this was a military action with unintentional collateral harm caused to civilians and which was aimed at preventing terrorism. There is no moral equivalence between this and sending someone into a bat mitzvah celebration with the purposeful intention of killing innocent non-combatants. And the Palestinian says, yes, suicide bombings are terrible, BUT there is no moral equivalence between the systematic humiliation of an entire people, with Palestinian deaths far exceeding Jewish deaths, with the Palestinians facing one of the world's largest military machines against a population with meager means of resistance. To suggest moral equivalence is to deny the Palestinian reality.

All year long I have listened to and have probably said myself “yes but” and “no but.” And all year—on many issues—I have heard the cries of “no moral equivalence.” And I'm NOT here to say, “Yes, there *is* moral equivalence” because I'm an agnostic on the issue. I don't know what is morally equivalent. I don't possess a magic yardstick or the scales that will help me to make the measurement. All I know is that when I hear the word “BUT” and when I hear “No moral equivalence,” I know that the next thing I hear will be an escape from responsibility, a denial of the suffering of the other, a refusal to see the narrative from the other point of view.

And as long as we continue to do so, we will continue to confuse all criticisms of Israel with anti-Semitism and with calls for Israel's destruction. As long as we fail to see the reality of the other, we will continue to hear dismay about suicide bombings and other terrorism against Israeli civilians as denials of Palestinian suffering. And the sad part is that at times this year I *have* seen criticisms of Ariel Sharon actually turn into anti-Semitism and I *have* seen dismay at terrorism turn into anti-Arab racism. And so the

spiral of distrust continues downward, the spiral of refusing to see the reality of the other keeps on going.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Sometimes, there comes a moment in the life of a nation where a Yom Kippur moment arrives, where it is possible for that nation or at least many in that nation to acknowledge its responsibility for injustices caused by its existence. Such an acknowledgement does not invalidate the existence of the nation, but it does mean that it is now a people able to face its own truth. I would be proud to be part of such a *menschlich* people. Consider for a moment how the Cowboys-and-Indians narrative evolved during the course of the 20th century, from Buffalo Bill Cody's portrayal of bloodthirsty Indians slaughtering poor settlers, to *Little Big Man*'s portrayal of the cavalry slaughtering Indian families at Wounded Knee.

Israel began to enter a period of reexamining her origins in the 1990's. It was not without controversy, but it was the beginning of a process of renarration. Tom Segev's book *1949*, Simha Flapan's *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, and Benny Morris's book, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict*, to name just three books by Israeli academics, allowed us to reexamine the narrative and see both sides in their hopes, in their beauty, and in their ugliness. This process has diminished a bit these last two years as people—understandably—have become caught up in their pain and anxiety.

But at least we, who do not have to worry as we put our children on the bus in the morning, we who do not have to face tanks rolling down our street, we at least should be able to begin to acknowledge the reality in both narratives and begin to construct a new narrative that accepts responsibility without exculpatory qualification but also without self-degradation.

In the September/October 2002 issue of *Tikkun Magazine*, there is a wonderful article by psychoanalyst Neil Altman called "On Trying not to get Polarized While Talking About a Polarized Situation." Altman cites an article by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek in the *London Review of Books*. Zizek admits that he could imagine himself torturing someone under certain circumstances. Besides the pain and humiliation caused to the victim of the torture, Zizek is also concerned about the process of *justifying* the torture. If he were to do so, Zizek feels that he would be avoiding a sense of his guilt which he feels is absolutely crucial.

I don't think that Zizek and Altman are saying that guilt should be a motivation for our actions, but rather, that guilt is the acknowledgement of responsibility for an act which harmed another, and that denial of guilt can enable us to act without regard, and to feel ever-freer in doing unto others that which we would never abide being done to ourselves.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

Where does this leave us? I believe that people in Kehilla are not divided from each other as many are elsewhere in the Jewish community. I do worry that the life and death issues at stake in Israel-Palestine could push us into more polarized forms of discourse.

I think that there are two general tendencies around Israel in the Jewish community. I'm going to give these tendencies labels, and giving labels gets me a little worried, I really want stress that each of us contains some combination of these tendencies, so please bear with me and don't take this too literally.

There are those for whom issues of justice are a bit more paramount, who are concerned about the injustice and the violence suffered by people with less power, in this situation,

the Palestinians. These folks largely identify these concerns with the ultimate values of our Jewish heritage. For convenience, I will call this tendency the “Prophets” for short. The Prophets ask: “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

And then there the folks for whom the oppression suffered by the Jewish people in a hostile world is paramount, and Israel represents our haven to them. These folks identify these concerns with the survival of the Jewish people. For convenience, I will call this tendency the “Guardians.” The Guardians ask: “If I am not for myself, who will be?”

When we are at a point of starting to become polarized in discussion, Guardians hear Prophets talking about justice and the Guardians think, “Where is their love of Israel? Where is their concern for the Jewish people?” And when Prophets listen to Guardians talking about security for Israel or questioning Palestinian goals, Prophets think, “Where is their concern for justice and for Jewish values?” Now, I remind you that this is where we *begin to approach* polarizing ourselves. I think that most of the time in Kehilla, we continue to listen and to be open. And I think the reason for this is that mostly the differences between us are only those of emphasis. I believe that most folks here, regardless of emphasis, are open to the narrative of the other. And ultimately both the Guardian part of ourselves and the Prophet part of ourselves know that there will be no peace for Israel without justice for the Palestinians and that there will be no justice for Palestine without peace for Israel.

I asked before where does this process of renarration leave us, this process of allowing ourselves to see both sides? I believe that it should lead us to a place of some humility, of not regarding our own position as the final and correct line and that those who do not share our position are necessarily malicious, mistaken or in denial, rather, we can take our own understanding to be the best approximation that we can make of the realities before us in that moment. Maybe each of us is listening to the voice of God within us, but each of us hear it differently, and we should not be arrogant that I have it right, and you have it wrong.

To approach this with humility and to admit not having the absolute truth does not mean that we cannot act based on our best understanding. In Kehilla email this year, we have let you know about actions in support of Israel and actions protesting Sharon’s policies. People have attended both these kinds of actions, and do so as members of Kehilla.

So I suggest, that when as Guardians we go out and do work in the Jewish world in support of Israel, perhaps it is our job to be Prophets in that context and to raise concerns about justice and about anti-Arab racism. And when we as Prophets go out to support Palestinian justice and oppose Sharon’s policies, perhaps it’s our job to act as Guardians in that context and to speak against anti-Semitism and for some *rakhmonis* for the suffering of the Israelis.

And one of the actions that we can do together here in this community is to create as safe a space as we can for each of us to speak the truth as we see it, and to listen actively and compassionately. If peace begins with us, then let us be a model for others that we *can* listen, that we *can* differ, that we *can* act, and that we can still hold together.

And if not us, then who?

And in a time of so much violence, it is also our responsibility keep hope alive in spite of everything. To hope, to act, to pray, to take responsibility for the reality before us and to transform it the best we can. What could be more Jewish than that?

Shana Tova.