

‘The One-State Solution’, by Edward Said, *NY Times Magazine*, 10 January 1999.

Given the collapse of the Netanyahu Government over the Wye peace agreement, it is time to question whether the entire process begun in Oslo in 1993 is the right instrument for bringing peace between Palestinians and Israelis. It is my view that the peace process has in fact put off the real reconciliation that must occur if the hundred-year war between Zionism and the Palestinian people is to end. Oslo set the stage for separation, but real peace can come only with a binational Israeli-Palestinian state.

This is not easy to imagine. The Zionist-Israeli official narrative and the Palestinian one are irreconcilable. Israelis say they waged a war of liberation and so achieved independence; Palestinians say their society was destroyed, most of the population evicted. And, in fact, this irreconcilability was already quite obvious to several generations of early Zionist leaders and thinkers, as of course it was to all Palestinians.

"Zionism was not blind to the presence of Arabs in Palestine," writes the distinguished Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell in his recent book, "The Founding Myths of Israel." "Even Zionist figures who had never visited the country knew that it was not devoid of inhabitants. At the same time, neither the Zionist movement abroad nor the pioneers who were beginning to settle the country could frame a policy toward the Palestinian national movement. The real reason for this was not a lack of understanding of the problem but a clear recognition of the insurmountable contradiction between the basic objectives of the two sides. If Zionist intellectuals and leaders ignored the Arab dilemma, it was chiefly because they knew that this problem had no solution within the Zionist way of thinking."

David Ben-Gurion, for instance, was always clear. "There is no example in history," he said in 1944, "of a people saying we agree to renounce our country, let another people come and settle here and outnumber us." Another Zionist leader, Berl Katznelson, likewise had no illusions that the opposition between Zionist and Palestinian aims could be surmounted. And binationalists like Martin Buber, Judah Magnes and Hannah Arendt were fully aware of what the clash would be like, if it came to fruition, as of course it did.

Vastly outnumbering the Jews, Palestinian Arabs during the period after the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate always refused anything that would compromise their dominance. It's unfair to berate the Palestinians retrospectively for not accepting partition in 1947. Until 1948, Jews held only about 7 percent of the land. Why, the Arabs said when the partition resolution was proposed, should we concede 55 percent of Palestine to the Jews, who were a minority in Palestine? Neither the Balfour Declaration nor the mandate ever specifically conceded that Palestinians had political, as opposed to civil and religious, rights in Palestine. The idea of inequality between Jews and Arabs was therefore built into British, and subsequently Israeli and United States, policy from the start.

The conflict appears intractable because it is a contest over the same land by two peoples who always believed they had valid title to it and who hoped that the other side would in time give up or go away. One side won the war, the other lost, but the contest is as alive as ever. We Palestinians ask why a Jew born in Warsaw or New York has the right to settle here (according

to Israel's Law of Return), whereas we, the people who lived here for centuries, cannot. After 1967, the conflict between us was exacerbated. Years of military occupation have created in the weaker party anger, humiliation and hostility.

To its discredit, Oslo did little to change the situation. Arafat and his dwindling number of supporters were turned into enforcers of Israeli security, while Palestinians were made to endure the humiliation of dreadful and noncontiguous "homelands" that make up about 10 percent of the West Bank and 60 percent of Gaza. Oslo required us to forget and renounce our history of loss, dispossessed by the very people who taught everyone the importance of not forgetting the past. Thus we are the victims of the victims, the refugees of the refugees.

Israel's *raison d'être* as a state has always been that there should be a separate country, a refuge, exclusively for Jews. Oslo itself was based on the principle of separation between Jews and others, as Yitzhak Rabin tirelessly repeated. Yet over the past 50 years, especially since Israeli settlements were first implanted on the occupied territories in 1967, the lives of Jews have become more and more enmeshed with those of non-Jews.

The effort to separate has occurred simultaneously and paradoxically with the effort to take more and more land, which has in turn meant that Israel has acquired more and more Palestinians. In Israel proper, Palestinians number about one million, almost 20 percent of the population. Among Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which is where settlements are the thickest, there are almost 2.5 million Palestinians. Israel has built an entire system of "bypassing" roads, designed to go around Palestinian towns and villages, connecting settlements and avoiding Arabs. But so tiny is the land area of historical Palestine, so closely intertwined are Israelis and Palestinians, despite their inequality and antipathy, that clean separation simply won't, can't really, occur or work. It is estimated that by 2010 there will be demographic parity. What then?

Clearly, a system of privileging Israeli Jews will satisfy neither those who want an entirely homogenous Jewish state nor those who live there but are not Jewish. For the former, Palestinians are an obstacle to be disposed of somehow; for the latter, being Palestinian in a Jewish polity means forever chafing at inferior status. But Israeli Palestinians don't want to move; they say they are already in their country and refuse any talk of joining a separate Palestinian state, should one come into being. Meanwhile, the impoverishing conditions imposed on Arafat are making it difficult for him to subdue the highly politicized inhabitants of Gaza and the West Bank. These Palestinians have aspirations for self-determination that, contrary to Israeli calculations, show no sign of withering away. It is also evident that as an Arab people -- and, given the despondently cold peace treaties between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Jordan, this fact is important -- Palestinians want at all costs to preserve their Arab identity as part of the surrounding Arab and Islamic world.

For all this, the problem is that Palestinian self-determination in a separate state is unworkable, just as unworkable as the principle of separation between a demographically mixed, irreversibly connected Arab population without sovereignty and a Jewish population with it. The question, I believe, is not how to devise means for persisting in trying to separate them but to see whether it is possible for them to live together as fairly and peacefully as possible.

What exists now is a disheartening, not to say, bloody, impasse. Zionists in and outside Israel will not give up on their wish for a separate Jewish state; Palestinians want the same thing for themselves, despite having accepted much less from Oslo. Yet in both instances, the idea of a state for "ourselves" simply flies in the face of the facts: short of ethnic cleansing or "mass transfer," as in 1948, there is no way for Israel to get rid of the Palestinians or for Palestinians to wish Israelis away. Neither side has a viable military option against the other, which, I am sorry to say, is why both opted for a peace that so patently tries to accomplish what war couldn't.

The more that current patterns of Israeli settlement and Palestinian confinement and resistance persist, the less likely it is that there will be real security for either side. It was always patently absurd for Netanyahu's obsession with security to be couched only in terms of Palestinian compliance with his demands. On the one hand, he and Ariel Sharon crowded Palestinians more and more with their shrill urgings to the settlers to grab what they could. On the other hand, Netanyahu expected such methods to bludgeon Palestinians into accepting everything Israel did, with no reciprocal Israeli measures.

Arafat, backed by Washington, is daily more repressive. Improbably citing the 1936 British Emergency Defense Regulations against Palestinians, he has recently decreed, for example, that it is a crime not only to incite violence, racial and religious strife but also to criticize the peace process. There is no Palestinian constitution or basic law: Arafat simply refuses to accept limitations on his power in light of American and Israeli support for him. Who actually thinks all this can bring Israel security and permanent Palestinian submission?

Violence, hatred and intolerance are bred out of injustice, poverty and a thwarted sense of political fulfillment. Last fall, hundreds of acres of Palestinian land were expropriated by the Israeli Army from the village of Umm al-Fahm, which isn't in the West Bank but inside Israel. This drove home the fact that, even as Israeli citizens, Palestinians are treated as inferior, as basically a sort of underclass existing in a condition of apartheid.

At the same time, because Israel does not have a constitution either, and because the ultra-Orthodox parties are acquiring more and more political power, there are Israeli Jewish groups and individuals who have begun to organize around the notion of a full secular democracy for all Israeli citizens. The charismatic Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Knesset, has also been speaking about enlarging the concept of citizenship as a way to get beyond ethnic and religious criteria that now make Israel in effect an undemocratic state for 20 percent of its population.

In the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza, the situation is deeply unstable and exploitative. Protected by the army, Israeli settlers (almost 350,000 of them) live as extraterritorial, privileged people with rights that resident Palestinians do not have. (For example, West Bank Palestinians cannot go to Jerusalem and in 70 percent of the territory are still subject to Israeli military law, with their land available for confiscation.) Israel controls Palestinian water resources and security, as well as exits and entrances. Even the new Gaza airport is under Israeli security control. You don't need to be an expert to see that this is a prescription for extending, not limiting, conflict. Here the truth must be faced, not avoided or denied.

There are Israeli Jews today who speak candidly about "post-Zionism," insofar as after 50 years of Israeli history, classic Zionism has neither provided a solution to the Palestinian presence nor an exclusively Jewish presence. I see no other way than to begin now to speak about sharing the land that has thrust us together, sharing it in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for each citizen. There can be no reconciliation unless both peoples, two communities of suffering, resolve that their existence is a secular fact, and that it has to be dealt with as such.

This does not mean a diminishing of Jewish life as Jewish life or a surrendering of Palestinian Arab aspirations and political existence. On the contrary, it means self-determination for both peoples. But it does mean being willing to soften, lessen and finally give up special status for one people at the expense of the other. The Law of Return for Jews and the right of return for Palestinian refugees have to be considered and trimmed together. Both the notions of Greater Israel as the land of the Jewish people given to them by God and of Palestine as an Arab land that cannot be alienated from the Arab homeland need to be reduced in scale and exclusivity.

Interestingly, the millennia-long history of Palestine provides at least two precedents for thinking in such secular and modest terms. First, Palestine is and has always been a land of many histories; it is a radical simplification to think of it as principally or exclusively Jewish or Arab. While the Jewish presence is longstanding, it is by no means the main one. Other tenants have included Canaanites, Moabites, Jebusites and Philistines in ancient times, and Romans, Ottomans, Byzantines and Crusaders in the modern ages. Palestine is multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious. There is as little historical justification for homogeneity as there is for notions of national or ethnic and religious purity today.

Second, during the interwar period, a small but important group of Jewish thinkers (Judah Magnes, Buber, Arendt and others) argued and agitated for a binational state. The logic of Zionism naturally overwhelmed their efforts, but the idea is alive today here and there among Jewish and Arab individuals frustrated with the evident insufficiencies and depredations of the present. The essence of their vision is coexistence and sharing in ways that require an innovative, daring and theoretical willingness to get beyond the arid stalemate of assertion and rejection. Once the initial acknowledgment of the other as an equal is made, I believe the way forward becomes not only possible but also attractive.

The initial step, however, is a very difficult one to take. Israeli Jews are insulated from the Palestinian reality; most of them say that it does not really concern them. I remember the first time I drove from Ramallah into Israel, thinking it was like going straight from Bangladesh into Southern California. Yet reality is never that neat.

My generation of Palestinians, still reeling from the shock of losing everything in 1948, find it nearly impossible to accept that their homes and farms were taken over by another people. I see no way of evading the fact that in 1948 one people displaced another, thereby committing a grave injustice. Reading Palestinian and Jewish history together not only gives the tragedies of the Holocaust and of what subsequently happened to the Palestinians their full force but also reveals how in the course of interrelated Israeli and Palestinian life since 1948, one people, the Palestinians, has borne a disproportional share of the pain and loss.

Religious and right-wing Israelis and their supporters have no problem with such a formulation. Yes, they say, we won, but that's how it should be. This land is the land of Israel, not of anyone else. I heard those words from an Israeli soldier guarding a bulldozer that was destroying a West Bank Palestinian's field (its owner helplessly watching) to expand a bypass road.

But they are not the only Israelis. For others, who want peace as a result of reconciliation, there is dissatisfaction with the religious parties' increasing hold on Israeli life and Oslo's unfairness and frustrations. Many such Israelis demonstrate against their Government's Palestinian land expropriations and house demolitions. So you sense a healthy willingness to look elsewhere for peace than in land-grabbing and suicide bombs.

For some Palestinians, because they are the weaker party, the losers, giving up on a full restoration of Arab Palestine is giving up on their own history. Most others, however, especially my children's generation, are skeptical of their elders and look more unconventionally toward the future, beyond conflict and unending loss. Obviously, the establishments in both communities are too tied to present "pragmatic" currents of thought and political formations to venture anything more risky, but a few others (Palestinian and Israeli) have begun to formulate radical alternatives to the status quo. They refuse to accept the limitations of Oslo, what one Israeli scholar has called "peace without Palestinians," while others tell me that the real struggle is over equal rights for Arabs and Jews, not a separate, necessarily dependent and weak Palestinian entity.

The beginning is to develop something entirely missing from both Israeli and Palestinian realities today: the idea and practice of citizenship, not of ethnic or racial community, as the main vehicle for coexistence. In a modern state, all its members are citizens by virtue of their presence and the sharing of rights and responsibilities. Citizenship therefore entitles an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Arab to the same privileges and resources. A constitution and a bill of rights thus become necessary for getting beyond Square 1 of the conflict because each group would have the same right to self-determination; that is, the right to practice communal life in its own (Jewish or Palestinian) way, perhaps in federated cantons, with a joint capital in Jerusalem, equal access to land and inalienable secular and juridical rights. Neither side should be held hostage to religious extremists.

Yet feelings of persecution, suffering and victimhood are so ingrained that it is nearly impossible to undertake political initiatives that hold Jews and Arabs to the same general principles of civil equality while avoiding the pitfall of us-versus-them. Palestinian intellectuals need to express their case directly to Israelis, in public forums, universities and the media. The challenge is both to and within civil society, which has long been subordinate to a nationalism that has developed into an obstacle to reconciliation. Moreover, the degradation of discourse -- symbolized by Arafat and Netanyahu trading charges while Palestinian rights are compromised by exaggerated "security" concerns -- impedes any wider, more generous perspective from emerging.

The alternatives are unpleasantly simple: either the war continues (along with the onerous cost of the current peace process) or a way out, based on peace and equality (as in South Africa after apartheid) is actively sought, despite the many obstacles. Once we grant that Palestinians and Israelis are there to stay, then the decent conclusion has to be the need for peaceful coexistence

and genuine reconciliation. Real self-determination. Unfortunately, injustice and belligerence don't diminish by themselves: they have to be attacked by all concerned.