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Panel Presentation: Ethics of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
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I believe that we need a new Jewish ethical framework that enables us to grapple with the dilemmas of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one that embodies empathy and responsibility. Like many of us, my thinking has been shaped by particular experiences I've had. I'd like to explore some of these in order to expand our current discourse and offer thoughts on what particular elements we might include in that framework.

Two weeks ago after Shabbat services my 90 year-old congregant, Judith, shared harrowing stories of living through Nazi-occupied Holland. At the age of 15 she joined the Resistance and risked her life so that others could get counterfeit food coupons. Eventually, after starvation, illness, and Nazi brutality wreaked horrific consequences on her community, Allied troops liberated Rotterdam. She described the inexplicable joy she felt when the Jewish Brigade marched in with a large Zionist flag singing Hatikva.

I've heard Judith's stories three times now, and every time she speaks, I sit on the edge of my chair. I make sure my children are with me so they can hear her stories. I want them to know this history. I want them to know that this is a piece of their Jewish identity. Judith's story is the quintessential modern Jewish narrative that continues to dwell in our collective memory.

The metaphor of *hurban* (destruction) to *tekumah* (rebirth) has always been a powerful one for me. It has shaped our people's culture, our politics, our understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Zionism was the foundation of my Jewish identity, giving me a sense of meaning and purpose, leading me into the rabbinate, motivating my love of Jewish history.

When I was in college and spent the year at Kibbutz Malkiya and the University of Haifa in 1994, I came to believe that the Jewish state was inseparable from the Jewish people and that any criticism of Israel was antisemitic. I fell in love with the land of northern Israel. My fondest memories from that year were hiking in the forest on the kibbutz with friends. We had come across an old, crumbling stone structure and spent hours climbing it and hanging out in it. Claiming this land as Jewish land was the Zionist dream, and I felt part of it.

Palestinians were mostly invisible to me that year. They were sort of like a footnote to my Jewish experience. They attended the university, but they were separate, strange, and other.

They became more visible, however, when I returned to Israel for rabbinical school in 1999. I travelled to the West Bank frequently as an intern with Rabbis for Human Rights. I came to understand the value of *b'tzelem Elohim*, that all people are created in the image of God – that home demolitions and the torturing of prisoners was a disgrace to God's image. Even though the peace process was collapsing, I believed that solutions could be found and peace would come soon.

And then I went sightseeing in Gaza.

This was before three wars had pounded that place to rubble, destroyed its economy, water supply, electrical grid, health system, and civil society. Our tour guide took us to an amusement park, the beach, a beekeeping warehouse, archeological ruins, a café, a purse shop, and a refugee camp. I had never been to a refugee camp before. I had never smelled so much rotting sewage. I had never seen such desperation. We sat sipping tea with a Palestinian family in a tiny room where nine people lived. A teenage girl slipped me a scrap of paper with her phone number on it. "Help me get out of here," she whispered.

Something died in me that day. I couldn't fathom how a million people could be crammed into that narrow strip of land, sealed off by the Israeli military in every direction. Where was the outcry? Why didn't anyone care?

The Second Intifada began soon after I returned, and my human rights approach evolved into a belief that the Israeli occupation beginning in 1967 was immoral, that it meant confiscating Palestinian land for Israeli settlements. The occupation meant Jewish-only roads, humiliating checkpoints, and two sets of laws for two different peoples.

I remained ideologically in this place for a decade, and I was comfortable in the Jewish anti-occupation movement. Along with my hope for a two-state solution, I adopted a commitment to a dual narrative approach. We could respect each other's stories from a distance, have our own separate narratives, and remain within a Jewish discourse.

A dual narrative approach has some attractive qualities. It can be useful for helping us understand that both Israelis and Palestinians have multilayered histories, experiences, and understandings of the world they inhabit.

But this framework also has the potential to erase enormous power differences between the two peoples. It might lead us to forget that the Israeli military is one of the most powerful in the world, while Palestinians are living under a military occupation. While our people may feel deep anger towards Palestinians, and Israeli Jews have suffered from much violence, no symmetry exists between the two sides politically, economically, or militarily.

A dual narrative approach could also lead us to focus on our separate, distinct narratives – we have ours and they have theirs – and sidestep the responsibility that a sovereign nation occupying another people must take. It's not that Palestinians are some perfect people who have never made strategic or moral errors; it's that they are living under occupation and inside refugee camps. For this kind of approach to work we must acknowledge the vast disparities in power, create complexity in the stories we tell, and take responsibility for the harm that our people has caused.

Our peoples' histories are so tightly intertwined, and regardless of what kind of political solution is found, our futures will be intertwined as well. Israel has so much more power than

the Palestinians, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza is so dire, so for a Jewish ethical framework to have integrity, it must make visible the Palestinian experience. That does not mean ignoring our own quintessential stories. Just the opposite – we must continue to grapple with Jewish trauma of the past and Jewish fear in the present and address the very real dangers of antisemitism.

But our ethics must demand that we refuse to turn away from Palestinian suffering. To recognize that their people's history is rooted in trauma and loss as well. To never forget that Palestinians in Gaza have four hours of electricity a day, that their hospitals are in shambles, that 97 percent of their wells are too contaminated for human consumption. While it's tempting to blame Hamas, we must remember that Israel controls the borders of the land, air, and sea. Israel decides whether trucks with medical supplies pass through the blockade or whether they are turned away at the border.

Gaza is part of our Jewish story. Our ethics must not simply acknowledge the Palestinian narrative. Our ethics must call on us to wrap ourselves up in the details of Palestinian life – its history, its politics, its poetry. Not to agree or disagree, not to blame or exonerate, but to enter into it, with humility, so we can try to understand the Palestinian experience.

It was only after reading a Palestinian novel that I bothered to look up the history of Kibbutz Malkiya, the kibbutz that had made such a big impact on me in college. I learned that it was built on top of the village of al-Malkiyya, one of the 400 depopulated Palestinian villages, destroyed soon after Israel gained independence so that refugees could not return. It was only then that I realized that that crumbling old stone structure, on which I had enjoyed climbing, was a mosque.

I no longer believe that a Jewish-only discourse is sufficient. Our deliberations must include Palestinian voices – scholars, artists, activists, and others who will challenge our assumptions, disrupt our narratives, and make us uncomfortable.

Last week I gathered with thirty of my congregants in a living room with Ahmed Abu Artema, one of the founders of the Great March of Return, the widespread Palestinian protests in Gaza. My board declined to sponsor the public program but gave its blessing when one of our members organized a private event with him.

Ahmed is a peace activist, poet, and journalist. And like two-thirds of the people who live in Gaza, he is a refugee. In 1948 his family lost everything. "Gaza is unlivable," he told us. "The water is polluted, there is so little electricity. Travel is almost impossible. Gaza is a prison."

He was soft-spoken and pensive. "No Palestinian house is without tears," he explained. "In every house someone has been killed or sent to prison or they have experienced violence." He understood that Israel was a reality. He wanted us to understand that the suffering of millions of Palestinians was also a reality.

The conversation made many of us quite uncomfortable.

I stayed late that night after he left, talking with my community and trying to wrap myself in the details of his experience. One congregant spoke about not being able to imagine being Jewish without a Jewish state. It would make her feel unsafe. But she couldn't reconcile her values of democracy and equality with a state that privileges the rights of Jews over all others. "We would never accept the discourse of black or Latino babies being a demographic threat to white America," she said. "How can we use that language to speak about Palestinian fertility rates as a threat to a Jewish state?"

Another congregant spoke about his discomfort with the Right of Return and with the fact that Hamas had participated alongside nonviolent activists in the Great March of Return. But he wondered what he would do if he lived in Gaza, if his family members had been imprisoned or shot, his home demolished. What would he do if he couldn't feed his children, who were already traumatized by living through three wars? "The world has forgotten about Gaza," he concluded. "No one cares."

These are the questions that we need to ask. These are the conversations that we need to have. As the Israeli political scientist, Uriel Abulof, writes, "...[I]t is precisely our capacity for public moral deliberation that enables us to imaginatively transcend current circumstance and better it."

With public, moral deliberation we can develop a new Jewish ethical framework with empathy and responsibility at its center that can begin to address these complex questions. An ethical framework that enables us to examine Palestinian dispossession alongside Jewish nationalism. One that allows us to broaden the metaphor of "destruction to rebirth" to include the destruction of al-Malkiyya and the humanitarian catastrophe of Gaza. One that presents an honest analysis of power and condemns the abuse of power. One that impels us to break our silence when our people is guilty of causing and perpetuating the suffering of the Palestinian people and to respond with integrity.

This is how we will imaginatively transcend current circumstance and better it.