

A Most Unusual Hospital Visit

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I want to tell you about an unscheduled, unanticipated conversation I had with a Palestinian, an encounter that helps explain and put in perspective so much about the mindset that Israel faces, and which makes resolution of the conflict so difficult.

The meeting took place late at night in a patient room at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. My wife's brother, Avraham, had shoulder surgery a few days before I arrived, and so after my sessions were over one night, along with my wife's other brother, I paid a visit to him in the hospital. After speaking for a little while we were about to open a text to discuss and study Parashat Hashavua, a few verses from the weekly Torah portion when his roommate, a well built, muscular young Palestinian Arab returned to the room after spending time with a few of his friends in the lounge. My brother-in-law, Ellie, invited him to join us. He said, "We will teach you something from the Torah, and then we will learn from you something from the Koran."

We never got to the Torah or the Koran.

The conversation quickly veered to a discussion about politics. The roommate, a pleasant and good spirited man, steered the conversation in that direction when he asked a pointed and blunt question. "Why are you Jews here?" followed shortly thereafter by, "Why did you kick out the Palestinians?" So much for our plan or an ecumenical dialogue.

We spoke in Hebrew. Sometimes he grasped for words to better explain himself. My brothers-in-law who were born in Iraq and grew up there, helped out by supplying the missing Hebrew word or expression in Arabic.

I did not feel he was being viscous, vindictive or hostile. Despite the direct and pointed nature of the questions, the tone was not antagonistic or confrontational. He was not well-read, or arguing on the basis of extensive thinking or deep analysis. Rather he reflected attitudes of what he heard and picked up from the media, and his surroundings. In his mind, the Jewish nation displaced Palestinians who were innocent victims forced by the Jews to leave and to abandon their homes. While it is true that there were Arabs who were displaced, this is not the whole story.

His attitude shouldn't be all that surprising. After all Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, Israel's "partner for peace," and the party Israel is called upon to negotiate with to resolve the conflict had just written an op ed piece for the New York Times expressing similar ideas. In his version of history, shortly after the partition plan was adopted by the United Nations in 1947, "Zionist forces expelled Palestinian Arabs to ensure a decisive Jewish majority in the future state of Israel, and Arab armies intervened. War and further expulsions ensued." To say that Arab armies "intervened" as if

they had come in order to protect Arab populations from being slaughtered and that war “ensued” is a distortion of what actually happened. The more truthful description would have been to write, “seeking to destroy the nascent Jewish state, and believing they would be victorious, Arabs residents heeded the urging of Arab nations to flee as they declared war on Israel in an effort to try to destroy the fragile country which they felt was vulnerable and would “not last very long.” His saying that war “ensued” is like saying the Twin Tower’s: happened to fall down on 9/11. I don’t think my friend reads the New York Times, but if this is what Abbas is writing in English in America’s leading newspaper of record, you can only imagine what he says to his people in Arabic and on Al Jazeera.

We tried to correct his misimpressions about Israel’s origins and founding, as well as about its intent and the nature of Israeli society.

Ellie pointed out that Israel did not displace an Arab or Palestinian state, for none existed in Palestine prior to the founding of the state of Israel. He asked, “Was there ever any Palestinian coins or currency?” Unlike Mr. Abbas’ version of history the Arabs rejected the offer to create a Palestinian nation in 1947 because it would have required accepting the existence of a Jewish state alongside it.

Not wanting to go too far back, I said, “Let’s not go back to the time of the Bible and ancient history. Instead let’s start with the Turks in the 1500’s who ruled until the end of World War I in the early 1900’s. After that the British ruled for 30 years, and then Israel was created, so when was there a Palestinian state?”

To respond to the accusation about Israel being antagonistic towards the Arabs, I asked if he had ever read Israel’s Declaration of Independence from 1948, the time of the founding of the State. I was referring to the part which says, “We appeal in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

“We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.”

Needless to say, our friend did not acknowledge being familiar with the document. That was evident by his next line of questions. “Why do you close us in Gaza, like a box?” coupled with the query, “why did you build a wall?” Perhaps the most telling of all his questions, was, “why do Jews go and kill innocent Arab children?”

He clearly had things backward. Missiles were launched from Gaza on Israeli civilians, not the other way around. We pointed out to him that Jews do not go and slaughter or massacre innocent children. Just a month earlier, in the Israeli town of Itamar, the Fogel family was murdered in cold blood at Purim. Jews do not go into Arab schools or cafes and blow themselves up. Ellie also told him something that he had to admit was true, that more Arabs and Moslems are killed by Arabs and Moslems than by Jews.

He was merely expressing what he is told and what he sees on Arab television. Not too long ago, Turkey and Egypt aired shows which perpetrated the blood libel, the accusation that Jews kill non-Jewish children to use their blood to make matzah, (and these shows aired when our relations with Turkey and Egypt were good!) He questioned us out of curiosity, with resentment, but little overt hostility or blatant animosity, as if it were the first time he had the chance to ask questions that had been nagging at him for a long time.

I told our friend that the problem was that he had been raised on lies. He immediately challenged me and was angry that I accused him of being a liar. I clarified and firmly and slowly reiterated what I had said, "I did not say you are a liar. I said you have been raised on lies" as we tried to set the record straight as best we could in the limited time we had together.

Despite the sharp differences the tone of the discussion was good natured. He spoke about how powerful Jews are, and how Jews control everything, which is why America supports Israel and that without that support Israel would be nothing. Feeding into his paranoia Ellie agreed and said he was absolutely correct. He told him that Obama, Bush, Clinton, whoever is president, none of them make a move without first checking with the Jews to be sure it is ok with us.

There was a little bit of an echo of Helen Thomas when he asked why Jews don't just go back to the countries they came from? We told him about how prominent Jews were in Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, as well as in Europe, but that despite our success and integration into the countries where we lived, persecution and anti-Semitism in all its ugly forms and manifestations had forced us to leave. But once in Israel Jews were settled and taken in and not left to languish indefinitely in refugee camps.

He asked about discrimination experienced by Arabs in Israel. "Why is it that if I am pulled over by a policeman when I am driving my car I am treated differently than a Jew?" Ellie told him that was because just the day before three Arabs were pulled over and found to have bombs in their car as they were on their way to carry out some terrorist act.

Noticing that the nurse had come in to check on him as we spoke, and as it was almost midnight, and time to leave, as we were about to conclude I said to him, "let me ask you one last question. Here you are a Palestinian in Hadassah Hospital. My brother-in-law is in the bed next to you. Is there any difference in the way you are being treated and he is being treated?" Reluctantly, he had to admit there was no difference.

We often lament the poor job Israel does at *hasbarah*, at explaining its cause. But how good are we at understanding how to defend Israel? How many of you would have been able to respond to what he said and the questions he asked. Unfortunately, too many of us are not familiar with our history or our narrative. In many respects, theirs is a far simpler one. The problem is that it isn't correct or historically accurate. But since it is repeated often enough people believe it and the debate is framed by their perspective, putting us on the defensive.

We need to know and tell our story, as captured in these stirring words from Israel's Declaration of Independence: "Eretz Yisrael, (the Land of Israel, Palestine) was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood,

created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.”

This is our story, our narrative and our ideals. The equal medical treatment and care extended to all, even to those who may wish to see her demise or destruction, is also part of the story and one of the reasons we should continue to be proud of Israel and her values.

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