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A Jewish Plea

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We have nothing to lose except everything.

Albert Camus

During the summer my husband and I had a conversion ceremony for our adopted daughter, Jess. We took her to the mikvah, a Jewish ritual bath where she was totally submerged in a pool of living water—living because it is fed in part by heavenly rain—and momentarily suspended as we are in the womb, emerging the same yet transformed. This ritual of purification, transformation and rebirth is central to Judaism and it signifies renewal and possibility.

The day of Jess's conversion was also the day that Israel began its pitiless bombing of Lebanon and nearly three weeks into Israel's violent assault on Gaza, a place that has been my second home for the last two decades. This painful juxtaposition of rebirth and destruction remains with me, weighing heavily, without respite. Yet, the link deeply forged in our construction of self as Jews, between my daughter's acceptance into Judaism and Israel's actions—between Judaism and Zionism—a link that I never accepted uncritically but understood as historically inevitable and understandable, is one that for me, at least, has now been broken.

For unlike past conflicts involving Israel and the Palestinian and Arab peoples this one feels qualitatively different—a turning point—not only with regard to the nature of Israel's horrific response—its willingness to destroy and to do so utterly—but also with regard to the virtually unqualified support of organized American Jewry for Israel's brutal actions, something that is not new but now no longer tolerable to me.

I grew up in a home where Judaism was defined and practiced not so much as a religion but as a system of ethics and culture. God was present but not central. Israel and the notion of a Jewish homeland were very important to my parents, who survived Auschwitz, Chelmno and Buchenwald. But unlike many of their friends, my parents were not uncritical of Israel. Obedience to a state was not a primary Jewish value, especially after the Holocaust. Judaism provided the context for Jewish life, for values and beliefs that were not dependent upon national or territorial boundaries, but transcended them to include the other, always the other. For my mother and father Judaism meant bearing witness, raging against injustice and refusing silence. It meant compassion, tolerance, and rescue. In the absence of these imperatives, they taught me, we cease to be Jews.

Many of the people—both Jewish and others—who write about Palestinians and Arabs fail to accept the fundamental humanity of the people they are writing about, a failing born of ignorance, fear and racism. Within the organized Jewish community especially, it has always been unacceptable to claim that Arabs, Palestinians especially, are like us, that they, too, possess an essential humanity and must be included within our moral boundaries, ceasing to be “a kind of solution,” a useful, hostile “other” to borrow from Edward Said.¹ That any attempt at separation is artificial, an abstraction.

By refusing to seek proximity over distance, we calmly, even gratefully refuse to see what is right before our eyes. We are no longer compelled—if we ever were—to understand our behavior from positions outside our own, to enter, as Jacqueline Rose has written, into each other’s predicaments and make what is one of the hardest journeys of the mind.² Hence, there is no need to maintain a living connection with the people we are oppressing, to humanize them, taking into account the experience of subordination itself, as Said would say. We are not preoccupied by our cruelty nor are we haunted by it. The task, ultimately, is to tribalize pain, narrowing the scope of human suffering to ourselves alone. Such willful blindness leads to the destruction of principle and the destruction of people, eliminating all possibility of embrace, but it gives us solace.

Why is it so difficult, even impossible to incorporate Palestinians and other Arab peoples into the Jewish understanding of history? Why is there so little perceived need to question our own narrative (for want of a better word) and the one we have given others, preferring instead to cherish beliefs and sentiments that remain impenetrable? Why is it virtually mandatory among Jewish intellectuals to oppose racism, repression and injustice almost anywhere in the world and unacceptable—indeed, for some, an act of heresy—to oppose it when Israel is the oppressor, choosing concealment over exposure? For many among us history and memory adhere to preclude reflection and tolerance, where, in the words of Northrop Frye, “the enemy become, not people to be defeated, but embodiments of an idea to be exterminated.”³

What happens to the other as we, a broken and weary people, continually abuse him, turning him into the enemy we now want and need, secure in a prophecy that is thankfully self-fulfilling?

What happens to a people when renewal and injustice are rapturously joined?

¹ Edward Said’s favorite poem by Constantine Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” says, “they were, those people, a kind of solution.” See Alike Barnstone (trans), *The Collected Poems of C.P. Cavafy: A New Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

² Jacqueline Rose, *Suffering and Injustice Enough for Everyone—On Empathy and the Complexity of Political Life, Essay in Honor of Edward Said*, Draft, May 2004.

³ Parts of this introduction, which are slightly rewritten, first appeared in “Preface: Humanism, scholarship and politics: writing on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” in Sara Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), xi-xxiii.

A new discourse of the unconscious

We speak without mercy, numb to the pain of others, incapable of being reached—unconscious. Our words are these:

◆ “. . . [W]e must not forget,” wrote Ze’ev Schiff, the senior political and military analyst for the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*, “the most important aspect of this war: Hezbollah and what this terrorist organization symbolizes must be destroyed at any price. . . . What matters is not the future of the Shiite town of Bint Jbail or the Hezbollah positions in Maroun Ras, but the future and safety of the State of Israel.” “If Israel doesn’t improve its military cards in the fighting, we will feel the results in the political solution.”⁴

◆ “We must reduce to dust the villages of the south . . .” stated Haim Ramon, long known as a political dove and Israel’s Minister of Justice. “I don’t understand why there is still electricity there.” “Everyone in southern Lebanon is a terrorist and is connected to Hizbollah. . . . What we should do in southern Lebanon is employ huge firepower before a ground force goes in.” Israel’s largest selling newspaper, *Yedioth Ahronoth* put it this way: “A village from which rockets are fired at Israel will simply be destroyed by fire. This decision should have been made and executed after the first Katyusha. But better late than never.”⁵

◆ “[F]or every katyusha barrage on Haifa, 10 Dahiya buildings will be bombed,” said the IDF Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz. Eli Yishai, Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister, proposed turning south Lebanon into a “sandbox”, while Knesset member Moshe Sharoni called for the obliteration of Gaza, and Yoav Limor, a Channel 1 military correspondent, suggested an exhibition of Hezbollah corpses followed by a parade of prisoners in their underwear in order “to strengthen the home front’s morale.”⁶

◆ “Remember: distorted philosophical sensitivity [sic] to human lives will make us pay the real price of the lives of many, and the blood of our sons,” read an advertisement in *Ha’aretz*.⁷

◆ “[A]ccording to Jewish law,” announced the Yesha Rabbinical Council, “during a time of battle and war, there is no such term as ‘innocents of the enemy’.”⁸

◆ “But speaking from our own Judaic faith and legal legacy,” argued the Rabbinical Council of America, “we believe that Judaism would neither require nor permit a Jewish

⁴ Ze’ev Schiff, “Analysis/For Israel, the conflict in Lebanon is a must-win situation,” *Ha’aretz*, July 26, 2006 and July 30, 2006.

⁵ Harry de Quetteville, “You’re all targets, Israel tells Lebanese in South,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, July 28, 2006.

⁶ Gideon Levy, “Days of Darkness,” *Ha’aretz*, July 30, 2006.

⁷ The advertisement was placed by Israeli neocons, *Ha’aretz*, July 30, 2006.

⁸ Yesha Rabbinical Council, *During time of war, enemy has no innocents*, July 30, 2006.

soldier to sacrifice himself in order to save deliberately endangered enemy civilians. This is especially true when confronting a barbaric enemy who would by such illicit, consistent, and systematic means seek to destroy not only the Jewish soldier, but defeat and destroy the Jewish homeland. New realities do indeed require new responses.”⁹

◆ The Israeli author, Naomi Ragan, after learning that many of the war dead in Lebanon were children, wrote “Save your sympathy for the mothers and sisters and girlfriends of our young soldiers who would rather be sitting in study halls learning Torah, but have no choice but to risk their precious lives full of hope, goodness and endless potential, to wipe out the cancerous terrorist cells that threaten their people and all mankind. Make your choice, and save your tears.”¹⁰

Many of us, perhaps most, have declared that all Palestinians and Lebanese are the enemy, threatening *our*—Israel and the Jewish people’s—existence. Everyone we kill and every house we demolish is therefore a military target, legitimate and deserving. Terrorism is part of their culture and we must strengthen our ability to deter. Negotiation, to paraphrase the Israeli scholar, Yehoshua Porat, writing during the 1982 Lebanon war, is a “veritable catastrophe for Israel.” The battlefield will preserve us.

The French critic and historian, Hippolyte Taine, observed: “Imagine a man who sets out on a voyage equipped with a pair of spectacles that magnify things to an extraordinary degree. A hair on his hand, a spot on the tablecloth, the shifting fold of a coat, all will attract his attention; at this rate, he will not go far, he will spend his day taking six steps and will never get out of his room.”¹¹

We are content in our room and seek no exit.

In our room, compassion and conscience are dismissed as weakness, where pinpoint surgical strikes constitute restraint and civility and momentary ceasefires, acts of humanity and kindness. “Leave your home, we are going to destroy it.” Several minutes later another home in Gaza, another history, is taken, crushed. The warning, though, is not for them but for us—it makes us good and clean. What better illustration of our morality: when a call to leave one's home minutes before it is bombed is considered a humane gesture.

Our warnings have another purpose: they make our actions legitimate and our desire for legitimacy is unbounded, voracious. This is perhaps the only thing Palestinians (and now the Lebanese) have withheld from us, this object of our desire. If legitimacy will not be bestowed then it must be created. This explains Israel's obsession with laws and

⁹ Rabbinical Council of America, “RCA Solidarity Mission to Israel Expresses View of “Tohar Haneshek” in Light of the Unprecedented Realities of Recent War with Hezbollah,” August 17, 2006, www.rabbis.org.

¹⁰ Leonard Fein, “Was There Really No Other Way?” *Forward.com*, August 11, 2006.

¹¹ Cited in Maxwell Taylor Kennedy, *Make Gentle the life of This World: The Vision of Robert F. Kennedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 74-75.

legalities to insure in our own eyes that we do not transgress, making evil allowable by widening the parameters of license and transgression. In this way we insure our goodness and morality, through a piece of paper, which is enough for us.

What are Jews now capable of resisting: tyranny? Oppression? Occupation? Injustice? We resist none of these things, no more. For too many among us they are no longer evil but necessary and good—we cannot live, survive without them. What does that make us? We look at ourselves and what do we see: a non-Jew, a child, whose pain we inflict effortlessly, whose death is demanded and unquestioned, bearing validity and purpose.

What do we see: a people who now take pleasure in hating others. Hatred is familiar to us if nothing else. We understand it and it is safe. It is what we know. We do not fear our own distortion—do we even see it?—but the loss of our power to deter, and we shake with a violent palsy at a solution that shuns the suffering of others. Our pathology is this: it lies in our struggle to embrace a morality we no longer possess and in our need for persecution of a kind we can no longer claim but can only inflict.

We are remote from the conscious world—brilliantly ignorant, blindly visionary, unable to resist from within. We live in an unchanging place, absent of season and reflection, devoid of normality and growth, and most important of all, emptied—or so we aim—of the other. A ghetto still but now, unlike before, a ghetto of our own making.

What is our narrative of victory and defeat? What does it mean to win? Bombed cars with white civilian flags still attached to their windows? More dead and dismembered bodies of old people and children littered throughout villages that have been ravaged? An entire country disabled and broken? Non-ending war? This is our victory, our achievement, something we seek and applaud. And how do we measure defeat? Losing the will to continue the devastation? Admitting to our persecution of others, something we have never done?

We can easily ignore their suffering, cut them from their food, water, electricity, and medicine, confiscate their land, demolish their crops and deny them egress—suffocate them, our voices stilled. Racism does not allow us to see Arabs as we see ourselves; that is why we rage when they do not fail from weakness but instead we find ourselves failing from strength. Yet, in our view it is we who are the only victims, vulnerable and scarred. All we have is the unnaturalness of our condition.

As an unconscious people, we have perhaps reached our nadir with many among us now calling for a redefinition of our ethics—the core of who we are—to incorporate the need to kill women and children if Jewish security required it. “New realities do indeed require new responses,” says the Rabbinical Council of America. Now, for us, violence is creation and peace is destruction.

Ending the process of creation and rebirth after the Holocaust

Can we be ordinary, an essential part of our rebirth after the Holocaust? Is it possible to be normal when we seek refuge in the margin, and remedy in the dispossession and destruction of another people? How can we create when we acquiesce so willingly to the demolition of homes, construction of barriers, denial of sustenance, and ruin of innocents? How can we be merciful when, to use Rose's words, we seek "omnipotence as the answer to historical pain?"¹² We refuse to hear their pleading, to see those chased from their homes, children incinerated in their mother's arms. Instead we tell our children to inscribe the bombs that will burn Arab babies.

We argue that we must eliminate terrorism. What do we really know of their terrorism, and of ours? What do we care? Rather, with language that is denuded and infested—*give them more time to bomb so that Israel's borders can be natural*—we engage repeatedly in a war of desire, a war not thrust upon us but of our own choosing, ingratiating ourselves with the power to destroy others and insensate to the death of our own children. What happens to a nation, asks the Israeli writer David Grossman, that cannot save its own child, words written before his own son was killed in Lebanon?

There are among Israelis real feelings of vulnerability and fear, never resolved but used, intensified. Seeing one's child injured or killed is the most horrible vision—Israelis are vulnerable, far more than other Jews. Yet, we as a people have become a force of extremism, of chaos and disorder, trying to plow an unruly sea—addicted to death and cruelty, intoxicated, with one ambition: to mock the pauper.

Judaism has always prided itself on reflection, critical examination, and philosophical inquiry. The Talmudic mind examines a sentence, a word, in a multitude of ways, seeking all possible interpretations and searching constantly for the one left unsaid. Through such scrutiny it is believed comes the awareness needed to protect the innocent, prevent injury or harm, and be closer to God.

Now, these are abhorred, eviscerated from our ethical system. Rather the imperative is to see through eyes that are closed, unfettered by investigation. We conceal our guilt by remaining the abused, despite our power, creating situations where our victimization is assured and our innocence affirmed. We prefer this abyss to peace, which would hurl us unacceptably inward toward awareness and acknowledgement.

Jews do not feel shame over what they have created: an inventory of inhumanity. Rather we remain oddly appeased, even calmed by the desolation. Our detachment allows us to bear such excess (and commit it), to sit in Jewish cafes while Palestinian mothers are murdered in front of their children in Gaza. I can now better understand how horror

¹² Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance*, Pre-publication manuscript, Verso, Forthcoming, May 2007.

occurs—how people, not evil themselves, can allow evil to happen. We salve our wounds with our incapacity for remorse, which will be our undoing.

Instead the Jewish community demands unity and conformity: "Stand with Israel" read the banners on synagogues throughout Boston last summer. Unity around what? There is enormous pressure—indeed coercion—within organized American Jewry to present an image of “wall to wall unity” as a local Jewish leader put it. But this unity is an illusion— at its edges a smoldering flame rapidly engulfing its core—for mainstream Jewry does not speak for me or for many other Jews. And where such unity exists, it is hollow built around fear not humanity, on the need to understand reality as it has long been constructed for us—with the Jew as the righteous victim, the innocent incapable of harm. It is as if our unbending support for Israel’s militarism “requires putting our minds as it were into Auschwitz where being a Jew puts your existence on the line. To be Jewish means to be threatened, nothing more. Hence, the only morality we can acknowledge is saving Israel and by extension, ourselves.”¹³ Within this paradigm, it is dissent not conformity that will diminish and destroy us. We hoard our victimization as we hoard our identity—they are one—incapable of change, a failing that will one day result in our own eviction. Is this what Zionism has done to Judaism?

Israel’s actions not only demonstrate the limits of Israeli power but our own limitations as a people: our inability to live a life without barriers, to free ourselves from an ethnic loyalty that binds and contorts, to emerge, finally, from our spectral chamber.

Ending the (filial) link between Israel and the Holocaust

How can the children of the Holocaust do such things, they ask? But are we really their rightful offspring?

As the Holocaust survivor dies, the horror of that period and its attendant lessons withdraw further into abstraction and for some Jews, many of them in Israel, alienation. The Holocaust stands not as a lesson but as an internal act of purification where tribal attachment rather than ethical responsibility is demanded and used to define collective action. Perhaps this was an inevitable outcome of Jewish nationalism, of applying holiness to politics, but whatever its source, it has weakened us terribly and cost us greatly.

Silvia Tennenbaum, a survivor and activist writes: “No matter what great accomplishments were ours in the diaspora, no matter that we produced Maimonides and Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn and hundreds of others of mankind’s benefactors—not a warrior among them!—we look at the world of our long exile always in the dark light of the Shoah. But this, in itself, is an obscene distortion: would the author . . . Primo Levi, or the poet Paul Celan demand that we slaughter the innocents in a land far from the snow-clad forests of Poland? Is it a heroic act to murder a child, even the child of an

¹³ Letter to the author by a colleague and friend, July 2006.

enemy? Are my brethren glad and proud? . . . And, it goes without saying, loyal Jews must talk about the Holocaust. Ignore the images of today's dead and dying and focus on the grainy black and white pictures showing the death of Jews in the villages of Poland, at Auschwitz and Sobibor and Bergen-Belsen. We are the first, the only true victims, the champions of helplessness for all eternity."¹⁴

What did my family perish for in the ghettos and concentration camps of Poland? Is their role to be exploited and in the momentary absence of violence, to be forgotten and abandoned?

Holocaust survivors stood between the past and the present, bearing witness, sometimes silently, and even in word, often unheard. Yet, they stood as a moral challenge among us and also as living embodiments of a history, way of life and culture that long predated the Holocaust and Zionism (and that Zionism has long denigrated), refusing, in their own way, to let us look past them. Yet, this generation is nearing its end and as they leave us, I wonder what is truly left to take their place, to fill the moral void created by their absence?

Is it, in the words of a friend, himself a Jew, a "memory manufactory, with statues, museums and platoons of 'scholars' designed to preserve, indeed ratchet up Jewish feelings of persecution and victimhood, a Hitler behind every Katyusha or border skirmish, which must be met with some of the same crude slaughterhouse tools the Nazis employed against the Jews six decades ago: ghettos, mass arrests and the denigration of their enemy's humanity?" Do we now measure success in human bodies and in carnage, arguing that our dead bodies are worth more than theirs, our children more vulnerable and holy, more in need of protection and love, their corpses more deserving of shrouds and burial? Is meaning for us to be derived from martyrdom or from children born with a knife in their hearts? Is this how my grandmother and grandfather are to be remembered?

Our tortured past and its images trespass upon our present not only in Israel but in Gaza and Lebanon as well. "They were temporarily buried in an empty lot with dozens of others," writes a *New York Times* reporter in Lebanon. "They were assigned numbers, his wife and daughter. Alia is No. 35 and Sally is No. 67. 'They are numbers now,' said the father. There are no names anymore."¹⁵

"They were shrunken figures, dehydrated and hungry," observes the *Washington Post*. "Some had lived on candy bars, others on pieces of dry bread. Some were shell-shocked, their faces blank . . . One never made it. He was carried out on a stretcher, flies landing on lifeless eyes that were still open."¹⁶

¹⁴ Silvia Tennenbaum, "Why doesn't Israel work for peace?" *Newsday.com*, August 4, 2006.

¹⁵ "After Bomb Kills Loved Ones, Life Turns Ghostly in Lebanon," *New York Times*, August 8, 2006.

¹⁶ Anthony Shadid, "Survivors Rise From Rubble of Battered Lebanese Village," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, August 1, 2006.

As the rightful claimants to our past we should ask, How much damage can be done to a soul? But we do not ask. We do not question the destruction but only our inability to complete it, to create more slaughter sites.

Can we ever emerge from our torpor, able to mourn the devastation?

Our ultimate eviction?

Where do Jews belong? Where is our place? Is it in the ghetto of a Jewish state whose shrinking boundaries threaten, one day, to evict us? We are powerful but not strong. Our power is our weakness, not our strength, because it is used to instill fear rather than trust, and because of that, it will one day destroy us if we do not change. More and more we find ourselves detached from our past, suspended and abandoned, alone, without anchor, aching—if not now, eventually—for connection and succor. Grossman has written that as a dream fades it does not become a weaker force but a more potent one, desperately clung to, even as it ravages and devours.

We consume the land and the water behind walls and steel gates forcing out all others. What kind of place are we creating? Are we fated to be an intruder in the dust to borrow from Faulkner, whose presence shall evaporate with the shifting sands? Are these the boundaries of our rebirth after the Holocaust?

I have come to accept that Jewish power and sovereignty and Jewish ethics and spiritual integrity are, in the absence of reform, incompatible, unable to coexist or be reconciled. For if speaking out against the wanton murder of children is considered an act of disloyalty and betrayal rather than a legitimate act of dissent, and where dissent is so ineffective and reviled, a choice is ultimately forced upon us between Zionism and Judaism.

Rabbi Hillel the Elder long ago emphasized ethics as the center of Jewish life. Ethical principles or their absence will contribute to the survival or destruction of our people. Yet, today what we face is something different and possibly more perverse: it is not the disappearance of our ethical system but its rewriting into something disfigured and execrable.

As Jews in a post-Holocaust world empowered by a Jewish state, how do we as a people emerge from atrocity and abjection, empowered and also humane, something that still eludes us? How do we move beyond fear and omnipotence, beyond innocence and militarism, to envision something different, even if uncertain? “How,” asks Ahad Haam, the founding father of cultural Zionism, “do you make a nation pause for thought?”¹⁷

¹⁷ See Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

For many Jews (and Christians), the answer lies in a strong and militarized Jewish state. For others, it is found in the very act of survival. For my parents—defeating Hitler meant living a *moral* life. They sought a world where “affirmation is possible and . . . dissent is mandatory,”¹⁸ where our capacity to witness is restored and sanctioned, where we as a people refuse to be overcome by the darkness.

Can we ever turn away from our power to destroy?

It is here that I want to share a story from my family, to describe a moment that has inspired all of my work and writing.

My mother and her sister had just been liberated from concentration camp by the Russian army. After having captured all the Nazi officials and guards who ran the camp, the Russian soldiers told the Jewish survivors that they could do whatever they wanted to their German persecutors. Many survivors, themselves emaciated and barely alive, immediately fell on the Germans, ravaging them. My mother and my aunt, standing just yards from the terrible scene unfolding in front of them, fell into each other’s arms weeping. My mother, who was the physically stronger of the two, embraced my aunt, holding her close and my aunt, who had difficulty standing, grabbed my mother as if she would never let go. She said to my mother, “We cannot do this. Our father and mother would say this is wrong. Even now, even after everything we have endured, we must seek justice, not revenge. There is no other way.” My mother, still crying, kissed her sister and the two of them, still one, turned and walked away.

What then is the source of our redemption, our salvation? It lies ultimately in our willingness to acknowledge the other—the victims we have created—Palestinian, Lebanese and also Jewish—and the injustice we have perpetrated as a grieving people. Perhaps then we can pursue a more just solution in which we seek to be ordinary rather than absolute, where we finally come to understand that our only hope is not to die peacefully in our homes as one Zionist official put it long ago but to live peacefully in those homes.

When my daughter Jess was submerged under the waters of the mikvah for the third and final time, she told me she saw rainbows under the water. I shall take this beautiful image as a sign of her rebirth and plead desperately for ours.

¹⁸ Marc H. Ellis, *O, Jerusalem! The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).