

Chapter 10

The Myth of Redemptive Violence

I live on the ruins of Palestine.

—Rachel Tzvia Back, *On Ruins & Return: Poems 1999–2005*

In the summer of 2004, I visited Israel for the bar mitzvah of my cousin Rachel's oldest son. Rachel emigrated to Israel at the age of twenty. She became a citizen, completed her military service, finished her education, and married the son of Jewish South African immigrants. They settled in Jerusalem, later moving to the Galilee. I'm fairly certain that Rachel and her husband, Yonatan, would agree to be described as belonging to the Israeli Left. They work hard to connect with their Palestinian neighbors in the villages and towns surrounding their Jewish village in the Galilee.¹ In her work as a poet, translator, and critic, Rachel has both embraced and advanced the movement among Jewish Israeli writers devoted to grappling with the psychological and ethical consequences of statehood. Many of Rachel and Yonatan's Jewish Israeli friends are on the left as well. At this family gathering, I struck up a conversation with one of them.

Oded is a man in his forties, Israeli-born of European stock. We got around to talking about politics. Oded wasted no time in

1. In 1948 when armistice lines were drawn setting the borders of Israel, most of the Galilee became part of the new state. Although many Jews live in the Galilee, it remains predominantly populated by Palestinians, who are citizens of Israel.

confronting me about my government's unconditional support of Israel's militarist and colonialist policies. "Why are you doing this?" he demanded, adding, using Israeli street language, "*Atem dofkim otanu!*"—a Hebrew expression that translates (somewhat delicately) into English as, "You're screwing us!"

At the time, I only vaguely perceived what he was talking about. But Oded's challenge helped wake me up, not only to a reality that I needed to understand, but to the fact that there were Israelis with whom we needed to make common cause. We, the citizens of the United States of America, were a big part of the problem.

Looking back on this conversation, I recall a similar encounter that took place two years later. It was the summer of 2006. Events, Oded's outburst perhaps among them, had brought me, in the company of a group of Americans, to the tiny Palestinian village of Tuwani in the hill country of the southern West Bank. Tuwani is a village of 150 souls, farmers, and shepherds who draw their water from wells and graze their sheep in the surrounding pastures. This village is centuries old. Its inhabitants are now beset by the occupying Israeli army that blocks their access to pasture land by concrete blocks, citing "military necessity," and by constant harassment from the residents of the nearby Jewish settlement of Maon.

Since 1982, more than fifteen hundred dunams (one dunam is equivalent to one-quarter of an acre) of land have been confiscated from the village by the settlers of Maon, at the rate of approximately seventy to one hundred dunams per year. While the people of Maon are equipped with plentiful water and electrical power from newly installed water pipes and power lines, all such services are denied to the villagers. The taking of land and denial of services has been only the prelude to the systematic campaign to rid the land of its historic inhabitants. Tuwani's flocks have been sickened and their milk spoiled by rat poison spread in their pastures by the Maon settlers. Tuwani's wells have been fouled by carcasses. Tuwani's children have been forced to take a circuitous route to the regional school, escorted by international peace workers and a reluctant Israeli army presence, because the settlers have physically assaulted them on the way to school.

Arriving in Tuwani, we visited with the villagers, drinking tea with them, listening to their stories, and meeting the international peace activists who live there as a constant presence to protect the human rights of the people. As we prepared to leave, the villagers thanked us for coming and witnessing their situation. One man, however, stepped up and said to us, “It’s fine to come and visit, but you must do something, you must speak up. Go home and tell your president to stop killing our children.” I was struck by this statement. He did not tell us to call on the *Israeli government* to let his people live in peace. He directed us to *our* government, which he understood to be the source of the evil he was experiencing. Indeed, the rest of the world, with the exception of the great majority of the American people, understands this.

We in the United States are called to make common cause with these Palestinians and the Israelis and internationals who support the rights of these villagers to live, farm, and raise their children free of harassment and the confiscation of their land. We need them to see us as not only courageous bands of peace activists and the occasional delegation of visitors—although these activities are crucial. Rather, those in the villages and cities of Israel and Palestine who seek a peace based on justice and coexistence must come to know us as part of a broad-based movement of Americans who are committed to changing the central role that our government has played in prolonging the conflict. We in America are called because it is our government, through its unconditional political and financial support of Israel’s policies, that is enabling the violations of human rights and international law that are the root cause of the conflict.

God’s Sword Cuts Both Ways

That we respond to this call is a matter of urgent political necessity, but there is an equally urgent religious and spiritual dimension to this as well. There is a fundamental transition in religious life underway. It is the transition from religious belief and practice devoted to the preservation of group boundaries

and differences to a religious life that emphasizes community life across these boundaries and a commitment to common values and shared mission. It is the transition from religion based on ideological certainty to belief open to change and responsive to the challenges of current events. It is, above all, a transition from religion allied with, in Walter Wink's term, "The Powers"—the forces of conquest and empire—to religion that fosters a community of believers committed to working for social justice.

Contemporary religious thinkers liken this transition to the reformist revolution undertaken by the early followers of Jesus in the first century CE. They urge a return to the fundamental principles of social justice and community-based faith, a faith that was subverted by the Constantinian "takeover" of Christianity. Bishop John Shelby Spong has announced his own liberation from the exclusivist claims made by Christianity and has called for the barriers between the faiths to come down (Spong 2005). For over two decades, Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis has invited his fellow Jews to join him in exile from the Constantinian creed that has taken control of the Jewish establishment of our day, and into the evolution of a shared faith based on community. Palestinian liberation theologian Naim Ateek gives voice to this same need in emphasizing the connection between the universal messages of the Old Testament prophets and the struggle for human dignity and freedom articulated by Jesus. Ateek calls on Jew and Christian alike to share in a vision of justice based on the prophetic tradition stretching from the Jewish into the Christian scriptures.

The key to peace is discovering what is contained in our shared traditions that will unite us in the cause of universal justice. Theologian Walter Wink joins other progressive theologians in pointing out that the roots of such a movement are to be found in the early biblical tradition, articulated first by the Old Testament prophets. In his description of Jesus's "Third Way" of nonviolence, Wink observes that Jesus's mission of nonviolent resistance to oppression and his championing of social justice was a "logical development" of the early Israelite concept of God's "holy war" against injustice (Wink 1992, 188). In his formulation, Israel's liberation from

slavery and its conquest of Canaan was achieved not by military might but by the hand of God. During the ensuing period of the monarchy, however, Israel became confused, demanding human warrior-kings and alliances with imperial powers. In this way, the survival and welfare of the nation became the ultimate good, justifying all acts of conquest and violence. It was out of this social and political context that the powerful reformist vision of the prophets arose.

With its defection to monarchy Israel began waging political wars that the false prophets tried to legitimate as holy. Israel came to trust in military might rather than God (Hosea 10:13)...The unique contribution of the true prophets was their refusal to turn holy war into political war. This led them at times to declare that God was waging holy war *against* faithless Israel. They recognized the impossibility of maintaining a standing army and concluding treaties with foreign powers while still preserving Israel's utter reliance on God alone to fight for them. The prophets turned to a kind of "prophetic pacifism." Holy war came to be seen as a contest fought not with the sword but with the divine word: truth against power. In a new twist on the warrior asceticism of old, *the Hebrew prophets waged solitary moral combat against virtually an entire people who were convinced that wars of national defense, liberation, or conquest were their only hope of salvation. Israel had succumbed to the myth of redemptive violence, but the prophets had discovered that the word of God was a mighty sword that cut both ways, for and against God's people* (cf. Hebrews 4:12). (1992, 188–189; emphasis added)

God's sword cuts both ways. The imperative for justice will not be denied. And the true prophets are not silent. Here is Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, reporting in *Haaretz*, the Israeli daily newspaper, on December 19, 2008:

The Israeli national flag flies high, defiant and arrogant over the Palestinian home in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem. This flag has never looked as repulsive as it does in the heart of this Palestinian neighborhood, above the home of a

Palestinian family that suddenly lost everything. The head of the house, Mohammed al-Kurd, died 11 days after the eviction. Now his widow lives in a tent. The house is reached via a narrow alley: Here Moshe and Avital Shoham and Emanuel and Yiska Dagan live happily. They are the settlers who managed to expel the Palestinian tenants and take over another outpost, in the heart of East Jerusalem.

Israeli greed knows no bounds: It sends its tentacles into the homes of refugees who already experienced, in 1948, the taste of expulsion and evacuation and being left with nothing. Now they are refugees for a second time. Another 27 families here can expect a similar fate, and all under the aegis of the Israeli court system, the lighthouse of justice and the beacon of law, which approves, whitewashes and purifies deceptive and distorted ways of evicting these children of refugees from their homes for the second time. The family keeps, as an eternal souvenir, the keys to the house in Talbich that was stolen from them and the banana warehouse in Musrara that was taken from them. Now they have another key that opens nothing: the key to the home in Sheikh Jarrah, which they received decades ago from the Jordanian government and the United Nations as compensation for their lost home.

The right of return: The original owners of those houses, the Sephardic Community Committee, has this right forever. There is no judge in Jerusalem who can explain this double standard, this racist right of return for Jews only. Why is the Sephardic Community Committee allowed, and the committee of Palestinians not? What are the tycoons and the politicians who stand behind this hostile takeover thinking to themselves? What is going through the minds of the judges who permitted it? And what about the policemen who violently evicted a sickly man in a wheelchair in the middle of the night, without even letting him remove the contents of his house? And what are the Jews now living in these stolen houses feeling?

The drive to possess all of Jerusalem through the theft of Palestinian neighborhoods and the construction of the land grab wall will result in unending war. It will destroy any hope of a

Jewish homeland shared with the other peoples of the land. If Israel is to survive, it must change. And, because Israel's birth and its sixty-year history as a state is so tied to the history of the Jewish people and its relationship with the Christian world, we outside of Israel who are locked in this embrace with the Holy Land must change also. The path to that change is articulated in the Gospel of Mark: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister." This powerful principle is echoed by Israeli peace activist Nurit Peled-Elhanan: "My people are those who seek peace." If Israel is to survive—if, indeed, the Jewish people itself is to survive—we must decide to join the community of humankind, because this is where our future lies. Placing ourselves squarely in our prophetic tradition, we must do this, not reluctantly out of fear for our survival, but joyfully, knowing that it is God's sword of truth that comes to cut away our bonds of insularity and separateness.

We must take a hard look at the history of our struggle for survival over the 110 years since the First Zionist Congress and realize that the drive to legitimize and intensify our separation from humankind has led—so predictably!—to the building of a wall. It is a wall that is destroying, for both peoples, the land they are meant to share. It is a wall that is destroying, with the setting in of each concrete section, the chances for peace.

I appeal to my Christian brothers and sisters: do not enable us in this self-destructive behavior. Help us tear down this wall.

By joining us in community, by tearing down not only the wall that separates our communities—you have already travelled far down that path—you help us tear down the walls that separate us from the rest of humankind. As Christians, you understand too well the damage that results from religious exceptionalism. Bishop Spong lists it as one of the Christian "sins of scripture." He terms it "religious imperialism," relating it to fundamentalism and the concept of the "one true God" (2005, 237). Clearly, it is our version of this sin that plagues us now as Jews. The original covenant bestowed upon the Jews enormous benefit and enormous privilege—albeit conditional on obedience to God. But it also powerfully conveyed the identity of being a "people dwelling

apart” (Num. 23:9). The implications of this for Jewish identity have been profound. Author Joel Kovel has cautioned us that “being apart and being chosen as exceptional became one and the same...if one’s ethical reference point is the tribal unit, then all others are devalued, and one no longer belongs to humanity but sets oneself over humanity” (2007, 21).

Help us tear down this wall.

Although Kovel is one of the fiercest contemporary Jewish critics of Zionism and those elements of Judaism that, in his view, have given birth to and nourished the movement, his is not a blanket condemnation of Jewish tradition. Judaism, asserts Kovel, was always headed in the direction of universalism. It has within it the potential to overcome the human tendency to seek certainty, exclusivism, and privilege. Along with virtually every other commentator, Kovel credits this quality to the Old Testament prophets: “Judaic being can conduce to universality and bring forth emancipation. We should regard this as its priceless potential...However, emancipation has always, indeed necessarily, occurred in reference to a critique of, and a standing away from, the established order, including the order of Judaism itself...The prophet is of the people but stands outside the city and reminds it of its falling away from the universal that is God’s true being” (22).

Jesus stands in that prophetic tradition. We find in both the Christian and Jewish prophetic traditions the impulse to gather together “outside the city”—outside the walls and boundaries of national, religious, and ethnic identities, in solidarity with those who struggle for justice. Doing so was Jesus’s own revolutionary—and intensely Jewish—way of calling for fundamental change in the face of a brutal and dehumanizing sociopolitical order.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence

Walter Wink, citing activist Saul Alinsky’s principles for nonviolent community action, reminds us of the importance of presenting a “constructive alternative” when one opposes an oppressive system: “Jesus’ constructive alternative was, of course, the Reign of

God...long-term structural and spiritual change requires an alternative vision...Jesus established a new community that developed universalistic tendencies, erupting out of his own Jewish context and finally beyond the Roman Empire” (1992, 45). This alternative, according to Wink, this Reign of God—as urgently required now as it was in Jesus’s time—is nonviolence. It is the alternative to war, including the “just wars” of our times: “In his nonviolent teaching, life, and death, Jesus revealed a God of nonviolence. The God who delivered an enslaved people in the exodus was now seen as the deliverer of all humanity from oppression. The violence associated with God in the exodus was centrifuged away, leaving as its precipitate the image of God as loving parent. The violence of the Powers was exposed, along with their blasphemous misappropriation of God as legitimator of their oppression” (217).

How sad it is for me to read these words in these early days of 2009, as the violence of the Powers stands so clearly exposed. How heartbreaking and prophetic are Wink’s words as the State of Israel, in its ruthless and self-defeating invasion of besieged and suffering Gaza, calls down the rage and horror of the entire world. Tens of thousands demonstrating in the capitals of Europe and Asia and mounting calls for the isolation of Israel in the world community appear to have no effect on the stubborn will of Israel’s leadership in pursuing this course.

Palestinians wonder what will become of an entire population of Gazans for whom this war has been the continuation of years of trauma. Their leaders, international aid workers, and observers throughout the world contemplate the loss of an entire generation who have known only horror, terror, and despair. They fear for what this means for the dream of coexistence in a historic Palestine shared with the Jewish people.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Israel consume a sanitized version of a heroic war of defense. Its sons are sent into a battlefield where the civilian population is the enemy and the objective is the destruction of a society. We in America, who grew up with the Vietnam War and are now living through the occupation of Iraq, understand the impact of such a war on soldiers, who return home

deeply scarred, some beyond repair. This is the calamity that the State of Israel has brought upon itself, with the full support of our government in Washington. This is what has been brought about by the unexamined myths that underlie the birth of the state and the continuation of its militarist policies.

“We trust violence,” writes Wink in his appeal for its alternative. “Violence ‘saves.’ It is ‘redemptive.’ All we have to do is make survival the highest goal, and death the greatest evil, and we have handed ourselves over to the gods of the Domination System. We trust violence because we are afraid. And we will not relinquish our fears until we are able to imagine a better alternative. What if we were attacked by muggers? What if robbers break into our house?... What if another nation threatens our very existence?” (231).

Do We Have a Choice?

This cry of fear, victimhood, vulnerability, and justification for war has been both the mantra and the rallying cry of Israel. The outrage of the world over the Gaza invasion mobilized those institutional Jewish voices in America that defend and uplift Israel’s commitment to redemptive violence. As ever, Israel is the victim, and only violence will save. In typical fashion, these same voices invoked the specter of the Enemy that Seeks to Destroy Us. On January 9, 2009, at the height of the Israeli invasion of Gaza and as the death toll of Palestinians was approaching nine hundred, an estimated half of whom were women and children, David Harris of the American Jewish Committee decried the comparisons of Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto and the displays of swastikas in demonstrations against Israel’s invasion of Gaza.

Shame! Israel seeks to defend itself in a highly complex environment, where the adversary, Hamas, cravenly uses civilians as shields and mosques as armories. For that right to protect its citizens, which any sovereign nation would exercise under similar circumstances, it is labeled as the successor to the demonic force that wiped out two-thirds of European Jewry, including 1.5 million children.

How many times does it need to be said?

Israel left Gaza in 2005. Israel has repeatedly renounced any territorial ambitions there. Israel gave Gazans the first chance in their history to govern themselves.

Israel has a vested interest in a peaceful, prosperous, and developing Gaza. This point cannot be stressed enough. After all, the two are destined to share a common border.

Israel has only one overarching concern in Gaza: Does it pose a security threat to neighboring Israel? The answer, tragically, is clear. That was the result of a decision taken in Gaza, not Israel. Hamas was chosen to rule, and choices have consequences. After all, Hamas denies Israel's right to exist. (Harris 2009)

Here, neatly listed, are Israel's myths: We, the seekers of peace, are a nation besieged, the victims of eternal hatred. We bear no responsibility for the violence directed against us. Above all, we must fight if we are to survive; *we have no choice*. Translation: there is a forced choice between victimhood—which we experienced for millennia and which culminated in the Holocaust—and being warlike conquerors. There is no other way. We cannot be weak. Furthermore, our taking up of arms is unlike that of other nations or resistance groups. Our wars are pure: *Israel has the most moral army in the world*.

Harris raises the key issues with stunning accuracy: "...there is such a thing as a just war," he feels compelled to assert. "War should be the last option, but there are times when it must remain an option." According to Harris, it is not war that is the problem when we are talking about Jewish survival, but its absence: "Defenselessness is no strategy. Jews were defenseless against the Nazi onslaught. They had no army, no recourse to weapons, and few who sought to defend them. Jews learned, at high cost, never to permit such vulnerability again. So, as January 27th approaches, and we recall the six million, spare us the lip service and the crocodile tears from those who would accuse Israel of Nazi-like crimes" (2009).

But the issue is not whether Israel is like Nazi Germany. To react in horror to the comparison is a comfortable tactic, one designed to demonize and invalidate critics by branding them

as either openly anti-Semitic or naively foolish enough to once again offer the Jews' throats to the slaughterer. But why are we bound to this comparison? Why not compare Israel to the forces in the world today who feed on fear, who support the escalation of violence across the globe, who sold the invasion of Iraq to the American people in 2003? Rather than living in the past, and looking always for the next mortal enemy, why not gaze into the mirror instead?

A January 11, 2009, *Washington Post* article reported on how the Gaza invasion was covered by Israel's news media. The article presented an Israeli media industry resolutely dedicated to delivering a sanitized, heroic version of the war. It showed how Israel's victimhood and "right to defend itself" were emphasized, with the heroism and humanity of its armed forces held up as an example to the world of Israel's righteousness. Post reporter Grif Witte described how the Guernica of Gaza was removed from view. Panoramic photos of bomb plumes replaced the close-up shots of grieving mothers and the burned and shattered bodies of children, which regularly appeared in newspapers and video throughout the Arab world and other non-U.S. media. The article quoted from Gideon Levy, an Israeli journalist and a minority voice in Israel's press, a voice raised up in prophetic protest against Israel's glorification of war and the damage done to Israeli society. Witte quoted from an article by Levy in *Haaretz*: "There was a massacre of dozens of officers during their graduation ceremony from the police academy? Acceptable. Five little sisters? Allowed. Palestinians are dying in hospitals that lack medical equipment? Peanuts," he wrote. "Our hearts have turned hard and our eyes have become dull. All of Israel has worn military fatigues, uniforms that are opaque and stained with blood and which enable us to carry out any crime" (Levy 2009).

"But Levy's view is in the minority here," the *Post* article commented, "where polls show that 80 to 90 percent of Israeli Jews support the war. Far more common is the sentiment expressed by columnist Guy Bechor, writing in *Yedioth*

Ahronoth, Israel's largest daily, who declared a few days ago that 'we have won. No one in the Arab world will now be able to say that Israel is weak and begging for its life. The images of the past two weeks have been imprinted for years, and Hamas's bravado and arrogance have gone into the tunnels along with their frightened leaders.'"

That week, I wrote a letter to the *Post* editor in praise of the article. "The story of the coverage in Israel is the untold story, and highlights the real, ongoing damage to Israel and the deeper tragedy for Israeli society" I wrote, "far worse to my mind than the issue of terror from the Hamas shelling." Indeed, in the *Haaretz* piece quoted in the *Post*, Levy exposed what is really happening to Israel and issues a call for change:

In this war, as in every war, an evil spirit has descended on the land. A supposedly enlightened columnist describes the terrible black smoke billowing out of Gaza as a "spectacular picture"; the deputy defense minister says that the many funerals in Gaza are proof of Israel's "achievements"; a banner headline, "Wounds in Gaza," refers only to the wounded Israeli soldiers and shamefully ignores the thousands of wounded Palestinians, whose wounds cannot be alleviated in the overflowing Gaza hospitals...

This is precisely the time for criticism; there is no time more appropriate. This is exactly the time for the big questions, the fateful questions, the decisive questions. We should not just ask whether this or that move in the war is right or not, not just wonder whether we are progressing "according to plan." We also need to ask what is good about these plans. To ask whether Israel's very launching of the war is good for the Jews, good for Israel and whether the other side deserves it. Yes, to ask about the other side is permissible even in war, perhaps above all in war. (Levy 2009)

Levy points to the Third Way: negotiation, inclusiveness, sharing, and equality, as opposed to self-centeredness, privilege, and force. He calls for openness to what can be different as opposed to stubbornly hewing to the policies of the past.

A Future for Israel

What do we say, then, to the Jewish claim for a state of our own? We have before us the established fact of the State of Israel: indomitable and growing, a vibrant, complex society, full of people hungry for life and suffering from over half a century of conflict. If Israel is to survive, if it is to end the conflict that ultimately will bring about its own end, it must acknowledge its original sin. It must become the state of all its people. I agree with Avraham Burg when he says, leave Zionism behind! Let us move on to the next chapter, which is a state in and of the Middle East, living with its Arab neighbors and embracing its Arab citizens. Would it then be a Jewish state? Perhaps, depending on how you define such a thing. A state that exemplifies the Jewish values of justice and human rights would be a state that perhaps would deserve the name “Jewish.” A state that commits itself to those principles is a state that would *earn* its “right to exist.” But if this is to be so, Israel will have to change. Burg has given us a big piece of the blueprint: the ideology of redemptive violence and the clinging to the suffering of the past must be transcended.

Even Michael Neumann, the philosopher who in *The Case Against Israel* advances perhaps the most unqualifiedly negative verdict on Zionism’s legitimacy, argues that Zionism’s sins, past and present, have no bearing on the question of Israel’s right to exist. States exist, Neumann reminds us, regardless of their actions, right or wrong—could this not be said, for example, about England, France, Sudan, China, Zimbabwe, and the United States? “Israel’s existence is to all appearances an indelibly accomplished fact,” he writes. “No one ought to try to wipe Israel off the face of the earth” (2005, 89). Debates about Israel’s existence are pointless, argues Neumann. I agree. Rather, the question is, now that it is here, where is Israel headed? What is to be the next chapter? Our Jewish history of suffering is clear and is well documented. For that we have museums and books. But reenacting this history, as Avraham Burg has pointed out, in cultural rituals, school indoctrination, and the creation of a cult of military heroism is destroying Israeli

culture and sickening the society. The manifest results of this sickness confront us at every turn: in the refugee camps of Bethlehem and Beirut, the roadblocks of Ramallah and Nablus, the blackened olive trees of Bil'in, the poisoned wells of Tuwani, the desolation of Hebron's Old City, the starvation of Gaza.

Yossi Klein Halevi, an American-born Israeli author and commentator, advocates interfaith dialogue within a multicultural Israel. Yet he is wedded to the Zionist dream and to the myths of Jewish vulnerability. He is trapped in Jewish history. As the Israeli invasion of Gaza began in the early days of 2009, the *Washington Post* published an opinion piece by Klein Halevi, entitled "As My Son Goes to War, I Am Fully Israeli At Last" (*Washington Post*, January 9, 2009). In it, Klein Halevi describes how it felt to receive a text message from his son serving in the Israeli army informing his parents that he had been mobilized to go into Gaza. Is this what I raised my son for? Klein Halevi asks himself. Having served in Gaza himself years before, he knew well the horror and folly of being an occupier. How did we come to this, he wonders, and when will it end?

But instead of using the stark evidence of the present as a springboard to, in Neil Elliot's words, "a different future" (2008, 115), Klein Halevi is drawn back into the past, into a reaffirmation of the beliefs, distortions, and myths that are the root causes of the current catastrophe: Gaza is not a starved prison of Israel's making—rather, we withdrew from Gaza in 2005 to give the Palestinians an opportunity to self-govern, but we got rockets in return. Conflict and occupation continue, not because of our illegal colonization of territory captured in war, but because of Arab intransigence: "Israel was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for peace, uprooting thousands of its citizens from their homes and endorsing a Palestinian state. Israel," he claims, "was even prepared to share its most cherished national asset, Jerusalem, with its worst enemy, Arafat, for the sake of preventing this war." There is here no ability or willingness to see Israel's responsibility for the failure of peace. There is only one story, and it is *all about us*: about our righteousness, about how we, always the victims, always threatened with annihilation, are forced to go to war. The

title of the piece is telling: “As My Son Goes to War, I Am Fully Israeli At Last.” For this is our comfort zone, this is the trap we find ourselves in. “Even now,” writes Klein Halevi, “perhaps especially now, I feel that our family is privileged to belong to the Israeli story. Gavriel, grandson of a Holocaust survivor, is part of an army defending the Jewish people in its land. This is one of those moments when our old ideals are tested anew and found to be still vital. That provides some comfort as Sarah and I wait for the next text message.”

There are signs, however, that the defensive façade is cracking. The 2008–2009 Gaza invasion provoked increasingly direct and urgent confrontations by Israelis about what had become of the Zionist dream. Avi Shlaim, one of Israel’s “New Historians,” reviewing Israel’s record toward the Palestinians in the occupied territories over the previous four decades, finds it “difficult to resist the conclusion that it has become a rogue state with an utterly unscrupulous set of leaders. A rogue state habitually violates international law, possesses weapons of mass destruction and practices terrorism—the use of violence against civilians for political purposes. Israel fulfils all of these three criteria...Israel’s real aim is not peaceful coexistence with its Palestinian neighbours but military domination” (Shlaim 2009). Shlaim looks in the mirror and sees the reality with a chilling starkness. He quotes an Israeli fighter pilot:

I name them (Palestinians) a people—although I do not see them as such. A people is fighting another people. Civilians are fighting civilians. I tell you that we, as sons of Holocaust survivors, must know that this is the essence of our lives, coming from there: no one throws a stone at us. I’m not talking about missiles. No one will throw a stone at us for being Jews. And Yonatan [Yonatan Shapira, a former officer who has refused to serve and founded an organization devoted to nonviolence] is one of the people who have lost their survival instinct. As simple as that. He does not understand that a war of cultures is being waged here between the likes of him and the likes of myself. (2009)

Help us tear down this wall. Join us in a new covenant.

Illusory Threats, Illusory Safety

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Jewish progressives stop short of relinquishing their attachment to a notion of Jewish exclusivism, privilege, and mission with respect to the Zionist project. Hannah Arendt, one of the twentieth century's preeminent political theorists, was a keen observer of the Zionist movement. Arendt grew up as a German Jewish intellectual in the mid-twentieth century. She had already written extensively about anti-Semitism when she escaped from Nazi-occupied Europe in 1941. Given her own experience, Arendt was very capable of understanding Zionism in the context of Jewish history. Here is her profoundly wise insight, dated 1946: "Herzl's picture of the Jewish people as surrounded and forced together by a world of enemies has in our day conquered the Zionist movement and become the common sentiment of the Jewish masses..." (Arendt 2007, 385).

Arendt saw this as a problem. Writing in 1946, she realized that Herzl's dream of a haven for Jews was an illusion—Palestine, she observed, is a real place, and "not a place where Jews can live in isolation" (385). The Jews share the land with the Palestinians, and must maintain themselves, with or without a state of their own, in the community of humankind. Zionism must guard against a dangerous set of illusions: "Some of the Zionist leaders pretend to believe that the Jews can maintain themselves in Palestine against the whole world and that they themselves can persevere in claiming everything or nothing against everybody and everything" (386). Of course, this cannot work; it is a prescription for disaster: "If we actually are faced with open or concealed enemies on every side, if the whole world is ultimately against us, then we are lost" (385).

Sadly, the tendency that Arendt saw and mourned in 1946 appears to be true and even gaining in strength in our time. What she describes is precisely how Israel behaves today. This behavior is based on a tragic illusion: that we can achieve safety and certainty in an unsafe world. It is easy to understand why this illusion persists. Israel is suffering from a form of collective post-traumatic

stress disorder: the trauma remaining unresolved, the victim seeks continually—and fruitlessly—to achieve a sense of safety and certainty. The second result of the unresolved trauma—and a hallmark symptom—is the loss of the ability to trust. The trauma survivor lives in a frozen psychological reality in which the world is always dangerous and disaster continually looms. Palestinian-American literary theorist, cultural critic, and political activist Edward Said, arguably one of our time's most eloquent spokespersons for and interpreters of the Palestinian cause, understood this about the Jewish people. It is interesting to put his observations, those of a dispossessed Jerusalem-born Palestinian Christian and New York intellectual writing in 2002, alongside those of Arendt, a Berlin-born dispossessed German Jew and New York intellectual writing in 1946. Although looking through different lenses, they see the same thing. Said writes:

The problem at bottom is that as human beings the Palestinians do not exist, that is as human beings with history, traditions, society, sufferings, and ambitions like other people. Why this should be so for most but by no means all American Jewish supporters of Israel is something worth looking into. It goes back to the knowledge that there was an indigenous people in Palestine—all the Zionist leaders knew it and spoke about it—but the fact, as a fact that might prevent colonization, could never be admitted.

What is so astonishing is that notions of coexistence between peoples play no part in this kind of distortion. Whereas American Jews want to be recognized as Jews and Americans in America, they are unwilling to accord a similar status as Arabs and Palestinians to another people that has been oppressed by Israel since the beginning.

The intellectual suppression of the Palestinians that has occurred because of Zionist education has produced an unreflecting, dangerously skewed sense of reality in which whatever Israel does, it does as a victim...American Jews in crisis by extension therefore feel the same thing as the most right-wing of Israeli Jews, that they are at risk and their survival is at stake. This has nothing to do with reality, obviously enough, but rather with a

kind of hallucinatory state that overrides history and facts with a supremely unthinking narcissism. (Said 2004, 179)

Said's use of a clinical term here—narcissism—appears judgmental, even damning, but it's a simple concept: in psychology, it means self-absorption and, by extension, an inability to consider the experience, point of view, and needs of others. Arendt was describing the same phenomenon in her analysis, linking it directly to the result of the historical Jewish experience of marginalization and denial of rights. She and Said have both astutely honed in on the same core phenomenon: the persistent experience of the Jew as victim, and the forms in which this self-image manifests in attitudes and behaviors.

We can't seem to work ourselves out of this, and if the analogy to post-traumatic stress disorder holds, this is not surprising. We need help. This to me is not a problem, but is in fact very good news. It is good news because an essential curative element for the condition is the support of others in escaping the hardened shell of the injured self. It is good news because it points us to the answer: community. This is the subject of the next chapter.