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Revising Assumptions:

Exploring Narratives of Displacement and Belonging in Israel and Palestine

In this personal reflection I review my general assumptions about the region of Israel and Palestine when the course began in September 2024 and share how through scholarly exploration in a graduate religion and arts course my thinking has changed. First, I share my previous assumptions; then I proceed to discuss how analysis of resources about themes have changed my mind. Lessons include dominant narratives held by Israel and Palestine, methodological and analytical tools, the road to 1948 when Israel was founded, Zionisms and Palestinians' experiences of Zionisms, the relationship between the Holocaust and the Nakba, and the settlement of Israelis. I conclude with summative reflection about my current overall assumptions and what I hope readers take with them. In discussing themes, I have selected certain resources that have enlightened me.

Generally, I held that the Mid-East region has been in conflict a very long time and that what shapes a narrative depends on whose side is narrating. I had binary thinking: Israel versus Palestine with the official stance of the United States government, of interest to me as an American, to largely support Israel despite human rights' violations, especially in Gaza.

Perhaps due to Western news, I assumed on matters of violence regarding the 10/7 Hamas' attack on Israel and its aftermath that Israelis were the victims due to Palestinian

aggression and so a military response by Israel was acceptable. I tended to lean toward the narrative of Israelis more than Palestinians.

As for narrative, I assumed a narrative is a sequence of events, scenes where an actor acts with agency for a purpose. The tension (which I've learned is a more appropriate word than 'conflict' in these matters) is more complex than that simple framework. Stories often overlap.

Regarding religious literacy methodological and analytical tools, I assumed peace is the opposite of war, and in secular democracies religion may not have much impact. I did not know about a typology of violence and peace and never thought one's thoughts about God can contribute to cultural violence and cultural peace.

I assumed the foundation of Israel in 1948 resulted from World War II and the Holocaust. I thought the world owed Jews after the evil they experienced. I did not know the extent of the international community's involvement in political matters or the role of Zionisms leading up to Israel's establishment.

Regarding land, discussed in the road to 1948 and settling material, I long held that land was an important factor in Israel and Palestinian affairs, but I had the mentality, perhaps due to Christian upbringing, that God gave the promised land to Jews and due to others living there land disputes have remained.

With Zionism, I thought it was a modern political leaning of many Israelis. I did not realize it goes back to the nineteenth-century and has played a role in Israel, and in the beliefs, attitudes, and politics of many elsewhere ever since.

Before this course, I did not know about the Nakba. If I had heard of it, I had not studied it. I assumed the establishment of Israel was peaceful. It was violent. I learned the Nakba was catastrophic for Palestinians who experienced it.

I assumed empathy is required to get a sense of someone else's feelings. I had not applied significant empathy toward victims of the Holocaust and the Nakba. Works of Israeli and Palestinian art focused on trauma have challenged me to better sense the trauma others have endured and to recognize how it affects people today.

Lastly, I assumed Israel had always been in favor of settlement. I learned otherwise.

Disrupted Equilibrium

I assumed Israelis were victims on October 7, 2023, and the dominant narrative is for Israel to react militarily to Hamas in Gaza and try to limit casualties. Also, I assumed 10/7, the greatest trauma in Israel's history, revealed a weakness of Israel, particularly with security; but I learned the incident has also brought many Israelis together.

Upon listening to the New York Times podcast "Why Palestinians Feel They've Been Duped," I learned that each side has a dominant demand based on values and a mutual desire to prevent annihilation. For Israel, the dominant demand is security; for Palestinians, it's freedom. Israel and Hamas—the latter an idea and not just a movement—maintained an equilibrium, a shared understanding that they would have regular confrontations, including armed military ones, but the status quo would mostly be calm. Israel had an out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality toward Palestinians in Gaza, causing many Palestinians to feel the Israeli state disregards their existence. The thinking of Israel and Hamas was zero-sum (what is good for one is bad for the other); then October 7, 2023, disrupted the equilibrium, the quiet status quo. The "duped" feeling of Palestinians in Gaza, many of whom are refugees or descend from them, is feeling unsupported by the international community amidst desperation.

As said, I assumed Israelis generally saw themselves as victims, that view following several intifadas, which included suicide bombings, and 10/7/23. The podcast of Ezra Klein and

Yossi Klein Halevi, "What Israelis Fear the World Does Not Understand" has revised my thinking about Israeli's perception of themselves in these matters. According to Halevi, Israelis see themselves as vulnerable, not as victims, and while many see the matter as mighty Israel versus the Palestinians, some see it as vulnerable Israel versus much of the Middle East. Halevi also says while some Jews think Arabs think Jews "cling to life"—which causes Halevi a laugh, saying it's a beautiful side of Judaism—Israelis are also willing to sacrifice, and Israel versus Hamas is a "war to restore the credibility of Israeli deterrence." [36:15].

My previous acceptance of the Israeli narrative has changed. Now I agree with Klein's position that the Israeli and Palestinian narratives must coexist in order for the people to coexist; each side must recognize the others' right to self-determination and self-definition.

Methodological and Analytical Tools

I did not know what exactly is meant by religious literacy, that it has tools, or the extensive impact of religion. I assumed peace is hoped for and thought it is often more ideal than real. I learned that religious literacy is "the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses" (Moore 6). Awareness that religion is woven through social/political/cultural life changes my previous assumption that religion, especially in secular democracies, does not affect many people. I now know that culture has six domains: religion, ideology, art, language, empirical and formal science (Galtung 291) and "religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture" (Moore 4). Religion, and the study of it, is more important than I once realized. Religious literacy can lead toward a just world at peace.

My view of peace has changed. I assumed peace is separate from violence. I learned it's the corollary and, according to Johan Galtung, a typology of violence exists. There is direct,

structural, and cultural violence which are interconnected. The typology has a time relation. Galtung provides an earthquake example: the earthquake (direct violence, the event), movement of the tectonic plates (structural violence, the process), and the fault line (cultural, more permanent). I assumed peace was the opposite of war. I learned by studying Galtung that peace is the satisfaction of the ecobalance in his typology: [survival needs + well-being needs + identity needs + freedom needs] (292).

My assumption that thoughts of God mostly regard peace has changed. When the typology of violence is applied, there is a connection between thinking whether God is transcendental (outside us) or immanent (inside us) and how such thinking contributes to cultural violence and cultural peace. Galtung says in his 1990 paper that Israel's violence toward Palestine is a contemporary example of cultural violence, especially exploitation (297). The violence stems from Chosenness, linked to transcendental thought. That's religious, but Galtung says a type of Chosenness is present in secular societies too in form of Self/Other: "Archetype: nationalism, with State as God's successor" (298). I assumed ideological matters were largely international. They may be, but I'm reminded that "reducing US cultural violence becomes particularly important precisely because that country sets the tone for others" (Galtung 298).

The Road to 1948

I assumed the foundation of Israel in 1948 resulted from World War II and the Holocaust, the world feeling it owed Jews after the evil the Jews experienced. I have learned there was much more to it. The international community, the connection to land, and Zionist efforts for decades played a significant part.

I learned after World War I in 1920 the British mandate was established. It called for a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people and recognized Zionist organizations but not

Palestinian ones. The 1920 mandate, according to Nadim Bawalsa in "The Road to 1948," set a "precedent for how Palestine will be handled at the international level, which is to say as an exception to law" (7). In 1923 the British offered to have a legislative council where the Arabs would have larger share than the Jews, but both parties rejected that.

I assumed land was an important factor in Israel and Palestinian affairs, but I had the mentality that God gave the promised land to Jews and, due to others living there, land disputes have remained. I did not realize the extent to which land, religion, and politics connect, here the focus being years leading to Israel's establishment. I learned Zionists during the Ottoman regime rallied around "a land without a people for a people without a land" (*1913: Seeds of Conflict* video, 16:06), despite Palestinians living there, and Doumani says land was "almost like a living entity;" The ability to pass it on to children "measured self-worth" (video, 4:39 to 5:03).

As for land joined with international politics, 1936 marked the "first proper intifada" (Bawalsa 12) involving not only tension about Palestinians losing land, but also inter-Arab affairs. Palestine saw France sign a treaty for Syria and Lebanon and Britain sign one with Egypt. Palestinian Arabs wanted in. I learned that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Transjordan put down the rebellion and the British Peel Commission recommended partition. I was surprised to learn that in 1947 the Holocaust was not in UNSCOP's brief. This knowledge reinforces for me the notion of the international community's role in working through the establishment of Israel.

My assumption that the world owed Jews after WWII aligns with the view of Leena Dallesheh, but her view goes farther and refines my own. She says the world owed Jews, but fixing the tragedy created a narrative of rejecting Palestinian humanity (18). At the end of 1947 was the Nakba; then Israel declared itself a state in May 1948. Violence was a factor. Israel declared that Palestinian refugees could not return and passed a law appropriating property of

those who left, disregarding UN Resolution 194. Military rule oppressed Palestinians until 1966. I assumed the creation of Israel was not terribly violent. I have learned.

Zionisms

I thought Zionism was a singular movement and a modern political leaning of many Israelis. I did not know Zionism is an ideology and movement, goes back to the nineteenth-century, that several exist, variations continue to influence people to this day, and not all Jews support Zionism. Also, until the Penslar reading "Staging Zionism," I did not think about Zionism as part of nationalism, the belief that humans are divided into nations, which share a territory, language, culture and aspiration. I learned that many scholars think fear is the base of collective feeling, but nationalisms "are not sustained by negative emotions alone but also by the intertwining of love and hope" (Penslar 10).

I learned that "Zionism's differences are different" than other nationalisms because "leaving aside the diaspora of Israeli Jews in North America and Europe, diaspora Jews are not immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from the Jewish state;" Antisemitic accusations of Jewish "dual loyalty" and allegiance to Israel persist, while diaspora Jews bond with Israel in "visible, enduring, and institutionalized" ways (63). This knowledge refines my assumption about the influence Zionism has beyond Israel.

Now I know there are at least eight types of Zionisms, albeit they are heuristics, like models, some overlapping and some more dominant at times (63): Philanthropic, Hebraic, Statist, Catastrophic, Transformative, Ethnic, Sacral, Judaic. I assumed Zionism was singular.

Palestinian Experiences of Zionisms

I assumed Israel was expanding into land occupied by others, but I did not think about it as colonialism driven by Zionism. Rashid Khalidi argues in *Journal of Palestine Studies* that

Israel, along with international and regional powers, have operated with a colonial mentality in a postcolonial age with the US and Europe serving as a metropole (6). In "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victim" (1979), Edward Said claims the negation of Palestinians is "the most consistent thread running through Zionism," and Zionists have acted as if the Palestinians were not native people to the land (11).

My previous view that many Palestinian acts of violence are best classified as acts of terrorism has changed upon reading Rashid Khalidi's "Historical Landmarks in the 100 Years' War on Palestine." I find compelling his argument that ongoing resistance by Palestine is often called terrorism when at times it's more of a subjugated reaction, and some acts of resistance have happened due to the desire for Palestinians to assert their existence (13). I still think many acts of violence are terrorism, but I recognize my view is rooted in a pro-Israel perspective not uncommon in America. The narrative, as Khalidi says and I agree, regards "permission to narrate" (6). Palestinians have largely been denied that, and it's those against them who often shape the narrative. I agree that the Israeli perspective in the U.S. sometimes stands alone while the Palestinian perspective is often "balanced" with the Israeli perspective (6).

The Interconnection of the Holocaust and the Nakba

As said at the outset, I had little knowledge of the Nakba when this course began. Regarding the Holocaust, I believed it is one of the most evil, catastrophic events in human history. I still think that about the Holocaust. What has changed is my awareness that many Palestinians suffered terribly upon the establishment of Israel, and both Jews and Palestinians share the experience of trauma, which has shaped much of their collective identities and consciousness. According to Bashir and Goldberg, the traumas are interconnected. The national

identities of both peoples centralize trauma, revolve around "victimhood and loss," and negate the catastrophe of the other (2).

I assumed empathy is required to comprehend the magnitude of the traumas, but I was unfamiliar with the concept of "empathic unsettlement," coined by Dominick LaCapra. I learned it's psychoanalytic, but the meaning of empathy differs in context of recognizing "otherness and empathy in regard to the Nakba and the Holocaust" (21-22). As it relates to Israel and Palestine, Bashir and Goldberg say, "We obviously do not suggest that the conflict could be resolved by means of empathic unsettlement but rather that the historical narration of these traumas should be empathically disrupted in order to defetishize the traditional redemptive national narratives." Empathic unsettlement "transforms 'otherness' from a problem to be disposed of into a moral and emotional challenge" and leads to binationalism (25).

Three works of art showing the relation between the Nakba and Holocaust catastrophes especially stir my empathy: "Return to Haifa," Palestinian Rashid Hussein's poem "Love and the Ghetto" (1963), and the album of Palestinian artist Abed Abdi.

In Ghassan Kanafani's "Return to Haifa," Said and his wife, Safiya, go to Haifa from Ramallah in 1967 for the first time since 1948 when Palestinians fled. They want to see their old city and house, which challenges them to confront what happened—they left their young son, Khaldun. They meet an old woman, Miriam, who has lived there since she and her husband, Evrat Kushen, migrated from Poland. The surprise is that Miriam and Evrat got more than their property—also their son renamed Dov, who was raised Jewish and learned a few years before about his Arab parents. Dov has no special feelings for Said and Safiya and chooses to stay with Miriam. The father hopes his other son will join the military and fight against Dov and Israel.

The characters' feelings humanize the story, and I am able to empathize with them although I haven't lived their experience. Several times the omniscient narrator says what the characters feel:

Safiya felt "torment;" Said felt "grief" and "defeat" recalling what happened (102). Exodus for them was humiliating (109). Said felt a "helpless bitter anger" (114). Evret, before he got the house, felt "expectation together with a daily anxiety" shared with other migrants (117). Said, angry, of Dov: "They've stolen him" (123). And my favorite instance of emotion is Said's laugh when his son, who doesn't see him as his father, tells Said he's "from the other side":

> He laughed out loud, feeling somehow that with his burst of laughter he was giving vent to all the grief and tension and fear and anguish which he had repressed inside himself. He wanted to go on laughing and laughing until the whole world turned upside down…. (130)

I recognize healing takes time; wounds often last. Said and Safiya have this new ability to travel to Haifa, but circumstances are not all fine or without trace of the violence. Does Dov let go of his adopted parents and return with his natural parents? No. He is attached to his Jewish upbringing, which never would have happened if not for the trauma.

Two lessons stand out. Dov says, "In the end, it's man who is the issue" (131), and Said tells Dov: "One day… you'll understand that the greatest crime any man, whoever he is, can commit is to think, even for a moment, that the weakness of others and their mistakes give him the right to exist at their expense and that this absolves him of all his own mistakes and crimes" (136).

About the second quote, I'm aware that Said thinks Dov sees him as a coward who fled in fear. To maintain pride, Said even lies about his other son being in the military. I think Said is

saying in effect, "Eventually you'll get this. The worst a person can do, whatever his station in life, is to ever have the mindset that others' infirmities and flaws mean he can live dismissing them and that purifies him."

Palestinian Rashid Hussein's poem "Love and the Ghetto" (1963) is the heart of Honaida's Ghanim's "When Yaffa met (J)Yaffa" because it illuminates the "dialectic of the relationship between the Nakba and the Holocaust in the context of the Zionist colonial enterprise" (93). This work also helped me to empathize and better understand the connection between the traumas.

"Love and the Ghetto" has six scenes set in J(Yaffa) after the Nakba. A Holocaust survivor girl named Yaffa [like the city name] has a romantic relationship with a Nakba survivor. The characters stand for Holocaust and Nakba survivors.

I found compelling the oven as a symbol with three meanings—that of the Nazi Holocaust, the body's oven (youthful passion or burning love) and the Nakba oven. Two of the meanings are very dark. I think it certainly takes artistry to connect those dark meanings with the concept of the body as an oven.

I had some confusion about the ending, section six called "The Tomb and the Cross." I thought it was saying that circumstances cause the romance to die, but then the poem offers an open ending suggesting maybe not.

In Tal Ben-zvi's "Culture of Memory: Holocaust and Nakba Images in the Works of Lea Grundig and Abed Abdi" I learned the work of Grundig (painter of the Holocaust and a survivor) and Abdi (maker of Nakba iconography and a victim of the Nakba) concerns trauma and collective memory.

Abdi's work I like. In a social realist style, Abdi presents much art about refugees and the helplessness of Palestinians, partly inspired by his moving between refugee camps as a child (216). In Dresden, Grundig—who focused on refugees, expulsion, and survival—influenced him (209).

I find compelling Messiah references. I had assumed art referring to the Messiah was limited to Christian work. I really like "Revelation of the New Messiah." About it Tal Ben-zvi remarks:

> The religious context of a redeeming messiah is somewhat surprising in the work of a communist, social realist artist. But this messiah is a man of the people, a man who has nothing, the chosen one who comes from the people and spreads out his arms and protection over them, the man who is to lead them to a better future. (217)

Due to "The Messiah Rises" I'm not sure how Abdi uses the word "Messiah." The figure, a lonely man with buildings behind him, is not uplifting. I tend to think Messiah uplifts.

There was good critical reception. Critic Kathe Kollwitz says: "The album is a single totality despite the differences between its subjects. For the subject is but one: identification with the fate of the refugees, nonacceptance of this fate, an expression of hope and emotional turmoil" (218). Perhaps the glimmer of hope is what I like.

Settlement

I find compelling that Israeli settlement in Palestinian land regards religion fused with politics, and Israel has not always supported efforts of the settlers. I assumed Israel had. As explained in *The Settlers* (Dir. Dotan, 2016), a settler has built his home where Israel has no sovereignty; the person is a citizen of Israel who doesn't live in Israel's territory. Meanwhile, Palestinians live under Israeli rule but without the rights of citizens (4:23).

I learned Israel has not always supported settlement. For instance, in 1973 when Arab nations threatened to reduce oil production until Israel would leave occupied territories, Israel wanted settlers to move. There was global pressure. Many did move to Samaria. In 1994 Israel condemned Baruch Goldstein's killings while some settlers called him "righteous" (1:01).

While some settlers seek economic opportunity, many believe the land is promised. One Jewish man says the land isn't their birthplace—it's their destiny, God-given to Jews on Mount Sinai (29:50). Another said some early Jewish settlers thought Palestinians would thank them one day—that the redemption of Israel will lead to universal redemption. (19 min.)

The settler's memory of burying her Jewish baby in Hebron brings together settlers, Israeli government, and Palestinians in a striking scene. Due to the burial, Hebron became settled territory, the only Jewish settlement inside an Arab city, and later a stronghold for Jewish extremists. Here too politics affects the narrative.

Regarding religion and politics, I quote a Jewish professor in the film:

> A religious element is infiltrating politics. Once you say [settlement is] a religious issue, a government dealing with [it] is not making a mistake, it is committing a sin… To put it more strongly, it's not legitimate… You're introducing the possibility of violence in the discourse. (25:14)

Conclusion

I have laid out many of my prior assumptions about the region and shared how through study of the narratives of Israelis and Palestinians I have refined my assumptions and knowledge has grown.

I learned 'tension' is a better word than conflict for the Middle East because the latter may suggest it's binary. 10/7, while the greatest trauma in Israel's history, has brought many

Israelis together. In Western media, Israel's narrative is often dominant. Narratives are not simplistic; often narratives overlap. Peace, which religious literacy can lead toward, is the corollary of violence, which is direct, structural, and cultural. Thoughts about whether God is transcendental or immanent affects cultural violence and peace. The founding of Israel was not a simple matter of the world owing Jews after World War II and the evil Holocaust. The international community had been extensively involved and Zionisms, going back to the nineteenth century, played a significant part. Land was very important and remains so with the expansion of Israel, which some see as reflective of a colonial mentality in a postcolonial age. Zionism is not just a modern political stance in Israel. Zionisms affect the beliefs, attitudes, and politics of many people. The establishment of Israel was not peaceful. The Nakba, literally 'catastrophe,' was for Palestinians a traumatic event, and Palestinians and Jews share a history of trauma, which has influenced the shaping of their collective identities. Empathy, particularly empathic unsettlement, is necessary to grasp the experience of traumatized people. Some of the entry points to empathy are present in works of Palestinian and Israeli art. Also, an ongoing matter is settlement in the West Bank. The Israeli state has not always supported that, which raises the question if Israel's position could change again.

My hope is that readers might have learned something like I have done since starting this course in September 2024. I realize some may have more informed assumptions than I had and disagree with the lessons I think I've learned. Aside from historical lessons and more as a general human matter, I hope it's better understood how empathy can bring people together and how the application of religious literacy can help lead toward a just world at peace.

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