

# A TALE OF TWO STATES

by Thom Saffold

THE SPIN MOST AMERICANS GET FROM REPORTS on the Middle East is that Israel is trying hard to create peace with the fanatical and unpredictable Palestinians. Nothing Israel does is good enough, and sooner or later those Palestinians are again throwing rocks, blowing up busses or shooting at Israelis.

It is a seductive fantasy. It first grabbed me when I watched "Exodus" as a teenager, one of the most romantic pieces of propaganda ever filmed. Unfortunately, it left out a lot of reality.

This view of Israel was nurtured by many Jews I knew. Like many Americans in the 1960's and 70's, I saw Israel as a plucky little David struggling against an uncivilized and brutal Goliath. Goliath, of course, was the surrounding Arab states and the "terroristic" Palestinians.

My perspective on Israel was shaken a bit in the late 70s by Palestinian students I met while serving as a campus minister. They painted a very different picture of the situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories than the one I had. They made it sound as if they and their families were the victims of apartheid, and I was not willing to hear them or to change my views.

Three years later, I lived in Squirrel Hill, a Jewish enclave in Pittsburgh, PA. My landlord was a retired tailor named Shlomo, a survivor of Auschwitz. Knowing of my interest in Biblical Hebrew, Shlomo often invited me into his dining room where he would read from Torah, from Esther and the Prophets. We also shared a love of the Declaration of Independence and history of the American Revolution. I learned many things from Shlomo, not the least of which was that culture, intelligence and knowledge did not come only through advanced education. This simple tailor was one of the wisest and most learned men I have ever met.

Shlomo also shared stories of the horrors of concentration camp life and of losing nearly all of his family, and of the persecution he had earlier endured at the hands of fellow Poles. His camp tattoo was clearly visible on the wrinkled skin of his forearm. He spoke of Israel with tremendous pride and spoke often and long to me about how important it was for Jews to have a strong nation for themselves so that an Auschwitz would happen "never again", as he often muttered.

Once I asked him why he did not emigrate there from his second homeland, the United States. I will never forget the sudden pained expression that washed over his eyes as he said, "The Palestinians." I thought he meant that he hated them, although unlike other Jews, I had never heard him even mention them. When I queried further, Shlomo said that he

had visited Israel with the intent of becoming a citizen some years before. Somehow, by serendipity, he came to meet some Palestinian Jews who shared his love of Scripture and began studying and worshipping with them. After a time, they told him about the prejudice and persecution they and their Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters endured. Shlomo learned about the lands that the state of Israel had confiscated from Palestinians, of illegal arrests and detentions, and of torture carried out by the Israeli military.

This confused and hurt Shlomo. It sounded similar to his own people's tragic history in Europe, of being periodically persecuted, uprooted, and displaced. The circumstances faced by Palestinians was nowhere near the level of the Holocaust, yet he saw the terrible irony of Jews creating a homeland by doing some of the same things the Nazis had done to his people.

But he was even more confused and hurt when he confided these thoughts to fellow Israeli Jews, and as he increasingly saw evidence of what his Palestinian friends had claimed. He was rebuffed with statements attacking Palestinians as "dogs" and worse, and claims that Palestinians were ignorant, brutish interlopers in the Promised Land. But Shlomo knew that their rationalizations only tried to hide a tragic flaw in, as he put it, "my beloved homeland".

I finally visited Palestine and Israel in 1994, and experienced what Shlomo had witnessed. In an Israeli Palestinian village, in Hebron, East Jerusalem, Gaza and other places, I saw the process and effects of oppression.

After the 1967 war, Israel occupied the part of the United Nations partition plan known as Palestine. This it claimed it had every right to do. But Israel had no right to move its citizens into the West Bank and Gaza as settlers, or to confiscate land or water, or to create a system of apartheid. They had no right to destroy people's homes and villages, or engage in collective punishment, or arrest people under "Preventive Detention", or the other violations of human rights that have been repeatedly condemned by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Israeli Physicians for Human Rights, our own State Department, and other organizations. Our American tax dollars have for thirty years supported them in this oppression.



Israeli kids learn war in West Bank settlement



Palestinian kids learn war in Gaza refugee camp

We need to put ourselves in the shoes of the Palestinians to understand their plight.

Imagine that the government of Ohio invades and occupies the area around Ann Arbor. It annexes huge tracts of land, destroys the homes or buildings on them, builds fifty large settlements filled with fanatical Ohio State University alumni, and outlaws any display of the Maize and Blue. Then, as terms of a "peace process", it allows U of M fans to wave their flags, but the settlements stay.

There would be a lot of resentment, of course. Some of us who lost land or were paid only a pittance for it might even turn to violent acts. The more rabid Wolverine fans among us might also react violently, particularly if this state of affairs went on for thirty years. We can imagine the demonstrations that would occur, demanding justice, demanding that the Ohioans leave. Buckeyes would be in danger of their lives.

We would view all this as an instance of injustice, and the ensuing violence as the expected reaction of an oppressed people. If the occupying government of Columbus acted as does Israel, it would see our protests as a security issue, and feel forced to protect its settlements. It would "get tough" with us. Middle-of-the-night arrests, detentions without trial and torture would be employed against our neighbors. Our children throwing rocks at Ohio State Occupation Police would be roughed up or shot. If a neighbor killed Ohioans, or was suspected of doing so, he would be shot or arrested, and his family's home would be destroyed—and perhaps our house, too, to "teach them a lesson". In times of widespread violence, Ann Arbor and surrounding cities would be under curfew or closure, meaning imprisonment in our own homes or being kept from traveling to the next town or neighborhood.



American kids learn war in Ann Arbor playground

This is not fiction. This is how Palestinians in their own homeland have been and are being treated. Frequently Palestinians are prohibited from traveling freely, even for the sake of their jobs or families or for medical emergencies. People lose their jobs, families are disrupted, and businesses collapse. New houses for Palestinians are strictly regulated in their own land, and homes are frequently bulldozed, while homes for Israelis are constantly built.

Israel has created an economic system over thirty years which effectively makes the vast majority of Palestinians dependent upon jobs from Israeli businesses for survival. Because of the closures of Palestinian cities and towns, unemployment in the West Bank and Gaza has been at least 70% for the past three years. In parts of Gaza, it runs to 90%. This causes poverty, only partly alleviated by help from the many Palestinians driven out of Israel and living in exile. Even more to the point, it produces deep frustration, resentment and rage. At the same time that Israel is shutting off jobs to Palestinians, it is hiring non-Jews from Eastern Europe and Asia as "guest laborers".

Under these conditions, when people are oppressed and harassed to the point of despair, how can we condemn them when some turn to violence? It is disingenuous and cruel to suggest that the Palestinian people should control themselves better. Peace will only come when Israel trades repression and might for justice and restitution, and begins treating Palestinians as the human beings they are. And Americans should stop enabling the oppression by cutting off all military aid to Israel and converting it into humanitarian aid for Palestinians. ☑