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The Mural-Covered Wall: On Separation and the Future of Jews and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine and the Diaspora

Marc H. Ellis*

In Memory of Edward Said
“until the end”

Some time ago, the *New York Times* featured on its front page a picture of an Israeli woman walking her dog in a Jerusalem neighborhood. Her dog was on a leash; she walked behind it on a newly paved sidewalk. To her right was the countryside, with the beauty I have often experienced in my journeys to Israel/Palestine. Yet when I studied the picture more closely I felt something was amiss. When I read the caption beneath the story, I discovered what bothered me: “The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has altered lives on both sides. An Israeli woman recently walked her dog in a Jerusalem neighborhood near the barrier separating it from a Palestinian town. Artists painted the barrier to make it blend in with the landscape.” The beautiful landscape existed right behind the wall; it had been replaced by a mural covering the wall.¹

Several pages later, I read a Jewish New Year statement from the Jewish Theological Seminary. It began with an ancient prayer: “May God who makes peace on high, make peace upon us, and upon Israel and all the world.” The statement continued:

In this season of divine judgment, the ancient message of the Jewish High Holy Days rings with relevance. We are judged not in aggregate but individually, one at a time. Each person merits the undistracted attention and boundless compassion of God. To bow our heads in contrition is to affirm life and self-worth. We intone Judaism’s most heartfelt prayer with

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still greater fervor: That God grace us here on earth with the enduring
harmony that reigns on high.²

I was sure that this statement of affirmation included the Israeli woman on
the bench; I was pretty sure that the affirmation included me. Was it also
addressed to the Palestinians on the other side of the mural-covered wall, indeed
all those within the wall that is being built to encircle the Palestinian population
of the West Bank?

The most obvious consequence of the Wall of Separation is that it divides
peoples and communities, but this may not be its most lasting effect. The
separation of Jews and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine is in any case impossible
to achieve. The formative years of the state of Israel saw a resident Palestinian
population invested with citizenship emerge; the Palestinian population now
numbers more than a million persons, and the extensive permanent settlement
blocks and corridors make a clear border closer to a desert mirage than an
achievable policy. Only a massive transfer of millions of Palestinians would
permit Israel and the territories it has conquered to separate the two peoples.
Then a wall of separation would not be needed within an expanded Israel but
around it, the borders now stretching from Tel Aviv to the Jordan River.

Yet in reality, this is not a practical future. Already we have this expanded
Israel with two subject Palestinian populations within those borders: the
remnant Palestinians who were not expelled in 1948—just over a million in
number—and Palestinians on the West Bank who are being walled in as I
write—almost two million in number. Over a million Palestinians in Gaza are
already segmented within Gaza by settlers and the Israeli army and are
barricaded in by two powers hostile to each other—Israel and Egypt.

The impossibility of separation in the expanded state of Israel makes the
wall even more ominous. For a large segment of the Palestinian population is
being walled into a ghetto that is sustained by twenty- to thirty-foot high barriers
with advanced technology and sniper towers functioning as agents of permanent
closure.³ The ghettoization of a people has consequences beyond the act of
physical separation; a ghettoized people suffers, and those who build and
maintain those ghettos suffer. Like the effects of occupation, the particular
histories of the ghettoized and those who ghettoize have less to do with the
long-range effects of such a reality than with the general rules that we can study
throughout history, be they Jews, South Africans, African-Americans, or
Palestinians.

Both Jews and Palestinians have a distinct sense of themselves as
exceptional, and surely to some extent this is true. However, neither can escape

³ Guy Chazan, Israeli Vote on Fence Placement May Strain Relations with U.S., Wall St J A14 (Oct 2,
2003).
the sociological, political, and economic consequences of enforced segregation that uses deprivation and power as tools to maintain an untenable status quo. In short, the cycle of violence and atrocity that we have witnessed over the years can only accelerate. With this acceleration comes the diminution of ethical standards and human compassion that we have already witnessed, and this decline is destined to continue unabated. For those who think further deterioration impossible, think again. Over the last ten years, the situation has become worse and worse. At some point, the spiral downward assumes its own momentum. Indeed, we may already be at such a point.

While the future prospects are difficult to contemplate, the past cannot save us either. The creation of Israel meant the displacement of the Palestinians and, in fifty short years, the end of Palestine. The end of Palestine meant an empowerment of Israel and Jews worldwide; it also brought to an end a chapter of Jewish history that was a complex interweaving of achievement and suffering.

Though Jews pride themselves on their textual and ethical tradition in the diaspora, Jewish empowerment occasioned a testing of that tradition and a failure now all too evident. Ethical failure is, of course, nothing new in history, and there is no case to be made that Jews have failed to any greater degree than the peoples and traditions that Jews once correctly criticized for their ethical lapses. It is only to say that the Jewish argument of historic suffering and innocence in empowerment is increasingly difficult to maintain. The charge that those who argue against Israeli policies toward the Palestinian are ipso facto anti-Semitic has lost its force, as has the charge of Palestinian terrorism against a besieged Israel.

That Jews die in the war in Israel/Palestine is lamentable. But can we say that it is more lamentable than the death of Palestinians? Those in Jewish leadership in Israel and the United States argue that the elimination of Palestinian extremists would pave the way for peace. Yet one wonders what public they address with this argument and who, within and outside of Israel, they can convince. The overwhelming consensus in the world is that Israel is preventing what the world agrees is necessary for peace and stability in the Middle East: a two-state solution with a secure Israel and a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with a shared Jerusalem.

Few believe that it is Palestinian extremists that prevent such an outcome. Nor does the argument that Jewish extremists prevent such a settlement ring true. In Israel's history, political extremism—at least in policies toward Palestinians—has had mainstream acceptance from the inception of that country. The policy of settlements and transfer of Palestinians—"politicide" against the Palestinians as a national entity, recently so named by the Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling⁴—has been pursued consistently, one might say

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relentlessly, by every Israeli prime minister. From David Ben-Gurion to Ariel Sharon, the battle against Palestinian self-definition and empowerment is ultimately the defining objective of Israeli state policy vis-à-vis the Palestinian people and the Arab world in general.

My argument here is not that Israel, in exerting its power to define itself over against others, is exceptional. Rather, the opposite is the case. Real politik is the way of all nation-states and power in general. Nor is Israel exceptional in claiming its innocence in exercising power to expand and flourish. Again the opposite is the case. Nation-states always claim innocence and a kind of benevolent redemptive sensibility.

Yet if Israel is not different in the foundations of its national life, then the charge that Israel is a Western colonial and imperialist outpost takes on a strength that is only further validated over time. The moral argument has carried Israel more than any other country, partly to do with its relative youth and partly with its religious heritage and the Holocaust, an argument that has deflected the charges of colonialism and imperialism. The moral argument, however, an argument that has been and could still be listened to with respect, is totally undermined in the face of those policies that Israel continues to pursue.

I. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE JEWISH NARRATIVE

Similarly, the moral arguments advanced by Israeli politicians critical of government policies toward the Palestinians are undermined by ongoing Israeli practices. Take the recent op-ed pieces from Avraham Burg for example. As a former chair of the Executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization and then Speaker of the Knesset from 1999–2003, Burg’s views carry substantial weight in the ongoing discussion among Jews inside and outside of Israel. In an op-ed in a leading Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot, Burg begins on an alarming note. He posits that the Zionist movement has rested on two pillars, a just path and an ethical leadership, but Burg sees neither as operative any more:

The Israeli nation today rests on a scaffolding of corruption, and on foundations of oppression and injustice. As such, the end of the Zionist enterprise is already on our doorstep. There is a real chance that this will be the last Zionist generation. There may yet be a Jewish state here, but it will be a different sort, strange and ugly.

These strong words are followed by others equally adamant:

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The Jewish people did not survive for two millennia in order to pioneer new weaponry, computer security programs or anti-missile missiles. We were supposed to be a light onto the nations. In this we have failed.

We have grown accustomed to ignoring the suffering of the women at the roadblocks. No wonder we don’t hear the cries of abused women living next door or the single mother struggling to support her children in dignity. We don’t even bother to count the women murdered by their husbands.

Israel, having ceased to care about the children of the Palestinians, should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centers of Israeli escapism. They consign themselves to Allah in our places of recreation, because their own lives are torture. They spill their own blood in our restaurants in order to ruin our appetites, because they have children and parents at home who are hungry and humiliated.  

Burg’s words are almost unprecedented in their anger and sweeping condemnation, especially since they come from a seasoned politician intimately involved in the political life of Israel. They also collapse the consensus shared by Israeli and American Jewish leadership that diaspora Jews can only play a supporting role to Israeli policies. His ending plea is that “Israel’s friends abroad—Jewish and non-Jewish alike, presidents and prime ministers, rabbis and lay people”—should speak and force Israel to radically change direction.  

This plea follows the main theme of his essay that Israel has gone too far and is unable, by itself, to change directions, and is also far reaching in its implications. For Burg, Israel does not stand alone; it makes sense only in the broader tapestry of Jewish history. As significantly, Burg places the responsibility for that history on Jews while also recognizing that Jews alone cannot reverse the course of Israel. Burg’s appeal is unprecedented in its language and scope: anyone, anywhere is called upon to stop Israel from its own destruction.

Yet Burg’s radical statement is itself in need of further interpretation. As controversial as it is, the difficulties in accomplishing his goals are found within the limitations of his own analysis. Is it true that the Zionist “revolution” has always rested on justice and ethics? Certainly the founding of the state of Israel was accomplished by military strength and its Jewish majority was assured through the cleansing of Palestinian Arabs from large parts of what was once Palestine.  

Meron Benvenisiti, former deputy mayor of Jerusalem and author of many books on Jerusalem and the politics of Israel, names the policies pursued in the creation of Israel as “dangerously close to fitting the definition of ethnic

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6 Id.
7 Id.
And before him Yitzhak Rabin, a colonel in the Haganah and later prime minister of Israel, referred in his memoirs to his role in 1948 in that cleansing. Earlier still Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian, referred to the massacre at Deir Yassin, a massacre that has come to symbolize the dispossession of the Palestinians, as a “crime of Jews against the spirit.”

So what justice and what ethics underpin Zionism? Surely, from the perspective of Jewish history, the emergency years after the Holocaust are difficult to judge completely within defined and pure categories. Within the historical moment, as armies clashed and a state was born, the vantage point of the actors is engagement rather than reflection. Events unfold; a changing reality begets another reality. Further action is needed within the new situation. Within a particular history, events are seen as necessary, even redemptive. In this case, Jewish history has been written from the vantage point of Israel as a response to the situation of European Jewry before and during the Holocaust. There was no choice and no place for Jews other than the emerging state.

Yet from the vantage point of Palestinian history—a perspective increasingly recognized both within and outside of the Jewish community—there could be no justification for the dispossession of Palestinians and the creation on their land of an Israeli state. The often belated recognition of this tragedy by Jews within the context of the state is only an affirmation of their own view from the beginning, and it comes within a Jewish empowerment that continues to dispossess Palestinians of their land and national identity. Thus the justice and ethics argued so forcibly by Burg as essential to the Zionist project is more than late: it is fundamentally flawed, after the fact, and only trying to address—and failing at that—the most recent and perhaps last assault on Palestinian sovereignty. From the Palestinian perspective, the latest assault on Palestinian sovereignty is in keeping with the flawed logic of Zionist ethics, and to claim that it is instead an aberration from traditional Zionist principles can only be seen as another example of special pleading and insufficient critical analysis.

This essential flaw in Zionist ethics becomes more obvious in Burg’s follow-up op-ed in the Jewish Forward, which he bills as a letter to his Palestinian friends. Burg’s mother was born in Hebron in 1921, and he begins by asserting his right to return to that city and claim his property. “I believe with perfect faith

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that the entire Land of Israel belongs to me," Burg writes. "So it is written in the Bible, so my mother from Hebron taught me and her grandchildren."12 Thus Burg asserts that the compromise of two states is a spiritual decision rather than a "real estate" deal. If he is to give up the "right" promised in the Bible, Burg demands that Palestinians give up the "dream" of a greater Palestine—to give up the "fantasy of driving us away from here and returning to villages that mostly no longer exist"—and to live in peace with Israel.13

According to Burg, Israelis and Palestinians share a common problem: "The forces of democracy, both Israeli and Palestinian, face an unholy alliance of corrupt autocrats and scheming technocrats who will do anything to prevent the light of democracy from spreading its rays of hope."14 On suicide bombers, Burg is adamant; they are extremist vehicles to destroy the possibility of peace. He knows the claim that without helicopters and jet-fighters, suicide bombers are the Palestinian’s strategic weaponry—this is "your [Palestine’s] truth." But Burg issues a counter-claim—his truth:

The suicide bomber offers himself and me as sacrifices to a false god. The true God hates killing. Suicide bombings leave nothing behind but wounds and scars. No one in the world beyond, not even the greatest supporter of the Palestinian cause, accepts this weapon of suicide. It is a weapon of monsters, not freedom fighters. And until you spit it and its facilitators from your midst, you will have no partner on my side, not me, not anyone else.15

Though the moral question of suicide bombing is real, the assertion of non-negotiables from the perspective of power is too easy. It may be their truth against Burg’s truth, but an asymmetrical situation begs the question of whether the weaker party can be lectured to by the more powerful. Can the occupier dictate how the occupied resist? Does Burg have the right to map out a strategy of resistance to a power that he himself admits is out of control? If he is appealing to those outside of Israel to help reshape Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians, is it appropriate for him to define what is acceptable to Israel and the world regarding Palestinian actions? As for his demand that Palestinians give up the fantasy of driving Israel and its Jewish population into the sea, can Burg guarantee that his own people will not do the same to Palestinians, in this case, driving them into the Jordan River and beyond?

The historical fact of continuing Israeli expansion—from 1948 until today—and Palestinian contraction during that same period suggests the need to separate fact from fantasy. The Israeli experience of the Palestinian fantasy and the Palestinian experience of the Israeli fact are two different things. Yet with

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13 Id.
14 Id.
15 Id.
Burg it seems that the fantasy elicits an anger as much or even more profound as the facts. Is this because Burg’s “facts” begin at a different date, perhaps after the 1967 war and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, facts not addressed bluntly until 2003, while the Palestinian experience of the facts is continuous since 1948, accelerating in 2003, with no end in sight?

The facts and fantasy are no doubt interconnected in a way that eludes Burg, and though he is finally taking responsibility in speaking out, he admits his powerlessness to affect policy. Should he then demand a cessation of a fantasy that may strip away another level of self-esteem to which all peoples who are oppressed desperately cling to stave off utter despair? Suicide bombers may be for Burg a sign of despair and hopelessness, but surely Palestinians must decide how they psychologically survive an onslaught that threatens their very survival as a people.

It seems that Burg has given what amounts to his fantasy, at least as it exists today: that Zionism is guided by justice and ethics. Is he trying to recover that fantasy through outside intervention? Burg’s language is strong but his limited time frame regarding Israel’s sins and his continued claim to a right to live in Hebron seem more like an attempt to recover an innocence of the entire Zionist project than to penetrate the underlying complexities, including the injustice done to Palestinians, that have been present from the beginning.

Of course, Burg’s claim of a right to live where his family once lived should be respected, but when his claim becomes a right from the Bible, then he has confused a religious sensibility with a political right. From the Palestinian perspective this, too, might be seen as a fantasy, especially when that fantasy is accompanied by political power. Though the Biblical narrative is involved with Hebron and the promised land, and though Burg, like other Jews, has a right to live out his religious vision, it cannot come at the expense of another people. Would Burg accept a Christian or Islamic vision as binding politically on him? Or would he reserve his respect for that vision when it is found in an individual or a community that lives peacefully with its neighbors?

In general, Burg seems to compromise his outrage at the actions of Israel—at a deeper level, this is a profound disappointment with his own people and where Jewish history is headed—by asserting a connection with Israel/Palestine that, in his mind, Palestinians do not and, as importantly, cannot have. The Land of Israel was promised to the Jews and therefore the Jewish connection to the land is a prior and indigenous claim. Burg recognizes that Palestinians are in the land and affirms their need to have at least political autonomy in part of the land because—and only because—they exist there in actual fact. This is why the prior expulsion of Palestinians from the land in 1948 is absent from Burg’s critique of Israeli politics and why the state of Israel was in 1948, at least to Burg, on its way to becoming the Biblical light unto the nations. It is veering off-course in 2003, perhaps disastrously so, but that arises out of at
least relatively recent events. Though Burg might admit Palestinian suffering in the creation of the state, Israel's overwhelming significance in history for Jews and others places that suffering in context. It is only when Israel is established and secure and there is no place for Palestinians that the problem attracts his attention. The ability to place Jewish and Palestinian history and contemporary life on an equal plane, both internally and externally, is foreign to Burg; it is almost completely foreign to Jewish intellectuals, religious leaders, and politicians in general. That the displacement of Palestinians in the first place, let alone their displacement since, was a grave, unjustified, even inexplicable and indefensible, offense never seems to cross the minds of Jews. Perhaps this is why questioning Israel's right to exist is considered heretical in Jewish discussions and in the public realm at large.

To claim that there was an “original sin” in Israel’s creation, that at least from the perspective of the Palestinians and the Arab world there is no need for them to accept Israel’s right to exist, rests on the notion of the equality of Jew and Palestinian. Even more, the Arab world asserts a prior right of the Palestinians to the land because—and this more than the fact that they actually exist in the land—they are rooted in the land. This reversal of priority sees the Jews as strangers, late interlopers, and occupiers. In contrast, Burg’s unannounced argument is that Jews have some responsibility for the stranger in the land; this is the outreach commanded by the Bible that promises the land to the Israelites.

Burg’s most volatile statements come within the context of Jewish a priori claims and Jewish responsibility. There is Palestinian responsibility, but this responsibility begins with the guarantee of Israel’s security, for the promise can only be fulfilled through settlement and inclusion of the stranger. The original displacement is not frowned upon in the Biblical account; on the contrary, settlement is commanded by God. The Arab nations have responsibility for the Palestinians in Burg’s analysis, and his wrath is also directed at them:

Up to now you have served as the eternal excuse for all the failures of the Arab regimes. The refugees are abandoned in Lebanon and Syria—and not because of us. During the last 50 years Israel absorbed hordes of refugees from around the world without waiting for anyone. Most Arab states have not lifted a finger for Palestinian refugees. Many have found it useful to preserve your rage and humiliation.16

It is almost as if the primary responsibility for the plight of the Palestinian people rests with the Arab world because they would not simply absorb them into another geography. The unannounced theme is that Palestinians as Arabs can exist anywhere in the region—after all, they are found on the land but are

16 Id.

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not connected to it as Jews are—while Jews are accepted into Israel from around the world precisely because this is their homeland.

The use of the term “hordes” is interesting, as many Jews who came to Israel as refugees after its founding were Jews from non-European background. Do these hordes really become Jews when they arrive in the land that is a priori their own? In Burg’s analysis Palestinians do not become less Palestinian when reduced to a small part of Palestine or when they settle elsewhere. Perhaps for Burg the Arabness of Palestinians is more important than their Palestinianness. Again the connection is different.

II. On Jerusalem and Revolutionary Forgiveness

Burg’s op-eds are short and there is a danger of over-interpretation of themes, assertions, and silences. The very public and general aspect of this writing, even its abruptness and indignation, however, is indicative of broader trends in the Jewish narrative that help Jews and those sympathetic to Jews to understand Israel, the Palestinians, and the world. If Jews and Palestinians are not on an equal level, if there is a difference in the importance of a people’s history and destiny, then an objective stance in terms of right and wrong as well as the grey areas that interpret the complexity of history is always skewed. This has political consequences. Since the American public accepts the Jewish and Israeli narrative, then the assumption of an honest-broker stance is an illusion.

The media and Christian religiosity, to take just two important examples, accept this narrative as well. Therefore they, like the politicians, are biased toward Israel even when they criticize some Israeli policies. There is little sense in the media or the churches that an essential equality can be asserted or even become a reality. The simple idea that the creation of the state of Israel was the offense of all offenses for the Palestinian people is almost never asserted without qualification by either the media or the churches. The idea that from a Palestinian perspective it is quite legitimate to want Israel to disappear is again never considered.

Thus, we remain mired in either a sense that Israel is right but sometimes does wrong or that the Palestinians are mostly wrong but sometimes do right. The anger and confusion among the general public in the United States remains; the inability of the two parties to bury their differences is exasperating. After all, a solution must be found for both parties and it must be the extremists, especially the Palestinian extremists, who are blocking a resolution of the conflict. For what reason do they keep on except for the desire to challenge and end Israel’s existence, a fitting goal for the unwashed and ignorant Arab?

Within the limitations of the Jewish and public narrative regarding Israel/Palestine, where even the forceful, perhaps unprecedented words of a politically engaged Israeli politician fall short, the difficulties of moving forward
are clear. Burg has lost his fight within the political culture of Israel; his victory would have meant a definitive loss for the Palestinian people. The mural-covered wall is more than a metaphor: separation means ghettoization on both sides and a loss of freedom for the victor and victim alike. In a tangible way, the mural-covered wall signals the end of Palestine. It also signals the end of Israel as it was envisioned; the end of Jewish morality and ethics cannot be far behind.

When even a radical debate with the political establishment falls on deaf ears, the momentum of political and military power wins the day. This seems to be the way of the world, and in this sense Israel is no different than other countries where those who protest injustice are marginalized. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that a continuing tension exists between the forces of unjust power and those who seek justice in every country and community. Is the loss of the progressive forces in Israel any more telling or important than the loss of civil rights and liberties in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, as seen post-September 11 and in the protests against the Iraq war?

When we widen our gaze to the global community, it is difficult to argue that what happens in Israel and Palestine is any more significant than events in other regions of the world. In this sense the media focus on the Middle East is exaggerated, perhaps even misguided. Yet life and meaning is more than aggregates and quantitative numbers of geography and population. Certain struggles come to personify an age; they are important well beyond the more pedestrian and obvious reality.

This may be part of the problem and the solution. On the one hand there is no denying the symbolic significance of Israel/Palestine, with the Holy Land and Jerusalem as the birthing and meeting place of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The symbolic significance provides cover for a wide area of geopolitical, moral, ethical, and religious concerns as well: the Cold War, oil, the re-emergence of Jewish life, and the resurgence of Islam. How can such a land be seen as simply ordinary? But how can there be any solution to this conflict without the very assertion of an ordinary that has eluded both peoples for more than fifty years?

One possibility is re-envisioning Jerusalem as the joint capital of Israel and Palestine. On the surface, this is a political statement, one that has been made often during the years of struggle. However, there is a deeper level that may be instructive. If we look at Jerusalem as the meeting place of two peoples that have been broken by history—and that are being further broken today; as the middle of Israel/Palestine that both peoples have religious, cultural, and intellectual connections to; and as a place that provides a center for Jews and Palestinians, then the triumphalism usually associated with Jerusalem is, on the one hand, defused and, on the other hand, broadened.

Jerusalem, as the broken-middle of Israel/Palestine, allows a breathing place for both peoples as they try to work out a structure that supports the
importance of Jerusalem in way that also supports the ordinary life of Jews and Palestinians. Recognition of the importance of Jerusalem to both communities and the need to work out a livable living arrangement may decrease the anger and hurt that both peoples have experienced in history. In this way the brokenness of Jew and Palestinian may be mediated by the creation of a new path.

In meaningful ways this path is ready, prepared by Jewish Israeli and Palestinian historians. Over recent decades, and taking on momentum during and after the first Palestinian uprising in 1987, Israeli historians have been revising their understandings of the origins of the Jewish state. They have come to accept what Palestinians have asserted from the beginning: that the expulsion of Palestinians from what became Israel was neither caused by Arab governments nor an unexpected by-product of war. Rather, the war for Israeli independence allowed a planned removal of Palestinians, and this dispersal continued during the period before the 1967 war, accelerated during that war, and has persisted since that time through settlements, expropriation of land, and the deliberate underdevelopment of the Palestinian economy. All of these policies have had the cumulative effect of contracting land and possibility for Palestinians as individuals and as a national entity. Even Oslo, though heralded in the Western media, should be seen in continuity with these policies.

The increasingly critical sense of Israeli history could lead to the understanding, too late but nevertheless crucial, that the creation and expansion of Israel, no matter how important to Jews, has systematically deprived Palestinians of their legitimate rights as a people and that this deprivation was not random or self-inflicted. Nor can it be assigned to the conservative or right-wing elements of Israeli politics and society. Labor and Likud participated in these governmentally approved and implemented policies; they have formed a general consensus in Israel’s political culture more or less from the beginning. Rhetoric aside, the continuity is clear beyond dispute.

Within Jewish leadership outside of Israel, again aside from rhetorical flourishes, the support for Israel and its policies has also been steady and firm. Any criticism within or outside of this leadership that threatened to oppose those policies in an efficacious way has been muted; the main position of Jewish leadership has been to control and limit debate on Israeli policies so that Israel could determine its own course. Whatever the differences in opinion, Jewish leadership has never confronted the policies of Israel in a public or sustained way. The situation has actually worsened over the years. The criticism that could

17 See generally Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited (cited in note 8).
be found in the initial days of the 1987 uprising is nowhere to be found in the uprising beginning in 2000. Just the opposite; the call for Jewish unity in the face of increasing public discussion of Israel’s policies is omnipresent.

Revisionist history finds Israel culpable; Israeli politics and diaspora Jewish leadership soldier on. This is the dialectical pull of Jewish reality at this moment. As power increases and the expansion of Israel becomes permanent, the moral and ethical foundations weaken. It is almost as if power and historical understandings are moving in diametrically opposed directions. This can only worsen in the future until even Burg’s statements will be read by the relatively uninformed in an unbelieving manner. Moreover, there will come a point when Burg’s anger and rhetoric, no matter how limited, will become unavailable to Jews. In the coming years, the moral and ethical argument by Jews for Israel will not be made because the foundations of such an argument will not exist. At that moment, the only argument will come from the power of Israel to do what it wants to do.

Burg seems to be crying out that at that moment it will be too late. And that time is already approaching; perhaps it is here. He is unable to identify this as deeply as he should, thus Burg’s anger at the Palestinians for arming Israel with the ammunition to keep it from this reckoning. Perhaps Burg understands that the projection of culpability onto the Palestinians is his last attempt to salvage the dream that is dying within him. The death is staved off only by Palestinian intransigence: if only they would behave, then Israel would come to its senses. But at another level, Burg seems to already have admitted that Israel will not stop regardless, that the Zionist revolution has come to an end. Or, perhaps he is pleading with the Palestinians to rescue the Zionist revolution from its own excesses, from its veering from the moral and ethical path in the beginning, in its creation of the state.

Behind the anger is a search for a shared life—a shared broken-middle of Jerusalem could be a beginning—and an underlying reckoning with history. Could this search be found in a revolutionary forgiveness, one that allows the culpability and complexity of history to be wrestled with and embraced within a forward movement of justice and reconciliation? Here Jews and the Palestinians can engage their own histories and their history together, agree and agree to disagree on certain points of view, yet reach an understanding that a negotiated settlement that contains an underlying sense of justice is the only way forward. The recognition on both sides that a terminal point has been reached from which there might be no return could facilitate this inner revolution; the inner revolution might in turn elicit a call for a public policy that features confession and a structured retreat of Israel to its 1967 borders. The contraction of Israel would allow a growth of Palestine; it is the combination that might allow a freeing-up of hope and possibility.
Agreeing to confess that Israel's founding is the dispersion of the Palestinians and that only a new foundation will allow the life of both peoples to flourish might give room for a forgiveness that is revolutionary. Past history remains history; a new history begins that ultimately places the past in a new configuration. What once was a mutual war becomes a warning of what could come again if the new path is not taken seriously and implemented. As the new path is walked, old grievances against one another are transfigured into a new solidarity. Jews and Palestinians are walking together, and that walk is crucial to both in political and ethical terms. It is the way toward a future and a healing.  

The tragedy of Israel/Palestine is that this road—the broken-middle of Jerusalem and revolutionary forgiveness—has disappeared from view. Those who continue to envision such a scenario as right around the corner when both sides come to their senses and realize that their future is tied together are, like Burg, refusing to announce the end that they already know has arrived. It is not that this vision should be abandoned; paradoxically, embracing the broken-middle of Jerusalem and revolutionary forgiveness becomes more important as its implementation becomes almost impossible.

The vision is important precisely because the political reality has gone too far and because the new reality is impossible to maintain forever. The impossibility does not mean a reverse: that one day all will wake up, Israel will return to its 1967 borders, the occupation will end, and Jerusalem will be shared in justice and peace. The opposite is true. The Wall of Separation is already a fact, and the murals, as well as the inevitable graffiti, will abound. The ghettoization of the Palestinians will proceed. Israel's military strength will grow; it will continue to dominate the Palestinians and the Middle East. Jewish leadership has already passed the point of no return on Israel, and when they speak about Israel they will continue to emphasize its innocence.

But the moral and ethical argument will shift. Burg's outburst—his shout that all is about to end—will, in a very short time, disappear. It will no longer be available to Jews, at least to Jews who identify with the mainstream of Jewish life in Israel and the diaspora. A Constantinian Judaism has taken root in the world. Constantinian Judaism is a violent form of Judaism much akin to the violence of Constantinian Christianity. Both religions assimilate to the state and power.

Of course, there are Jews and Christians of conscience who oppose Constantinian religiosity. For the most part they are marginalized, spiritually and politically. However, they carry forth another vision of Judaism and Christianity, mostly in exile. Constantinian Islam also flourishes and there are likewise Muslims of conscience in that community. There will always be people of

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19 For a more extensive view of these subjects, see two pieces of my own: O Jerusalem: The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant (Fortress 1999), and Israel and Palestine Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-first Century (Pluto 2002).
conscience, and in the present case Jews and Palestinians of conscience will increase, even amid the ruins of Israel/Palestine and perhaps precisely because of it.

Can this solidarity between Jews and Palestinians of conscience become a political force able to challenge the Wall of Separation and all that the wall implies? Many who challenge the wall believe that if the wall is stopped, hope is kindled. This is akin to forces that seek to end the occupation. For some reason, they believe that the slogan itself has force. Like Burg, those who protest think that the policies of Israel toward the Palestinians are aberrant rather than longstanding and intentional.

Today we should understand that the Israeli victory is complete and that hope for a reversal, in any meaningful sense of the word, is utopic, a vision to contemplate as a future beyond the horizon of our lifetime. Rather, we should find in the present the broken-middle of Jerusalem and revolutionary forgiveness as a vision that will not be actualized, yet cannot be abandoned. It is a vision that may become rooted in the expanded state of Israel and in the ghettoization of both peoples: one, the ghetto of the affluent and powerful; the other, the ghetto of the subjugated and defeated. The victory will not be rolled back. The defeat is certain, though hopefully not forever.

All occupations provide the seeds of their own demise, though it is less certain this demise will yield two states, side by side. The future is within the expanded state of Israel and the two remnant Palestinian populations; it is within the relation between Jews and Palestinians of conscience within this state and in the diaspora. Over the next fifty years, the Jewish and Palestinian diasporas—at least parts of them—may hold the keys to the survival of Jewish and Palestinian life. In some ways, the real work may happen outside the land rather than within it.

Perhaps it has always been so in the land that many call holy. Ravaged by wave after wave of religious and ideological zealots down through history, the possibility of shared geography characterized by reconciliation has and continues to elude Jerusalem and its surroundings. It may continue to be for our time as well. What we can hope for, then, is the realization of an ordinary life for Jews and Palestinians in the diaspora, an ordinary life that one day may filter back to the confines of Israel/Palestine.