Meditations on National Identity

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This essay is about my coming to awareness of my national identity as a Jewish-Israeli while building a friendship with a Palestinian woman, Amal Kawar, and the place of such an awareness in the process of the re-formation of identity. To the extent that it has a conclusion, it is that, at least in the Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian context, a peace that does not reproduce the past necessitates an ethico-politically based self-examination and change.

On September 13, 1993, Shimon Peres, Israel’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s negotiator, signed an agreement that committed Israel and the PLO to work toward peaceful coexistence. This agreement, one of the agreements expected to transform the relations between Israel, its neighboring Arab states, and the Palestinians, and replace hostility with cooperation, is being hailed, as it cautiously should be, as setting the foundations for a new era for the Middle East, or more precisely, Southwest Asia and North Africa.

It would take more than formal agreements to bring about peace, especially in the case of Jewish-Israelis¹ and Palestinians. Our national identities have been co-formed. Peace makes it possible to re-form, hence re-fashion our identities consciously, a re-fashioning that must happen if Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians are to try to avoid the reproduction of a peacetime version of connected national identities that were forged mostly in opposition to each other and in a relation that for the past forty-five years has been one of dominance by the State of Israel and its Jewish-Israeli citizens.

I do not know what kind of process Palestinians have to undertake in order to refashion their identities. My essay is about the process that I have undertaken, thus about my encounters with my Jewish-Israeli identity, a process that I hope is relevant to other Jewish-Israelis if not also Jews who are not Israeli.² The context of the specific encounters that I discuss in this essay has been my friendship with Amal Kawar, a Palestinian woman whom I met in the summer of 1988, at that year’s meeting of the National Women’s Studies Association.

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We were introduced to each other by a mutual friend in a public and thus, for us at that point in time, a rather safe space. Since then Amal and I have seen each other a few times, and we correspond and talk with each other often and regularly. So we, who could have been enemies, have become friends.

If Amal and I were to adopt, for example, Janice Raymond’s view of women as “having no state or geographical homeland,” (1986, 152) our friendship might have been made possible by a realization that our sense of ourselves as belonging to different nations depends on false beliefs. But both Amal and I, like many women who belong to groups for whom national independence is new or not yet a reality, see women as socially multiply marked by, both class and sexuality, for example, and as deeply embedded in national groups and, therefore, as possessing national identities. Women’s national identities may not be conscious, especially for established members of states and societies at the metropolitan core of the world system, where immigrant nationalities tend to turn into the ethnicities of a multicultural nation and create “hyphenated” identities such as those of the Arab-American or Jewish-American. But for some women, even within the metropolitan core, national identities are important. In Amal’s and my case national identities could, but did not, become an obstacle to friendship. And for me the friendship became a space and an incentive for a critical assessment of both my ideas about and my sense of national identity.

I use the term “national identity” in this essay even though I am not certain what an identity is and I am even less certain about what a nation may be. I believe that one may have more than one identity. I think that identity is a product of membership in some imagined community of which the nation is one. I think that phenomenologically it is a sort of a temporary ensemble of both uncritically learned as well as critically adopted mental and bodily dispositions and sensibilities, thus images, beliefs, feelings, emotions, body postures, facial expressions, and movements, many of these connected in patterns that are not necessarily at the forefront of one’s awareness of oneself. What one is aware of as being a part of an identity is probably a function of a pragmatic necessity in either a deliberative context or a context of differences.

It is not only that I think that one is not aware of an identity as such but only of elements of it; I also think that at times one is not aware of any of the elements of an identity and, therefore, has no sense of oneself as possessing that identity. When I sit in my study reading a text, perhaps a text such as Plato’s Symposium, I usually do not think of or feel myself as a Jewish-Israeli. I begin to feel something of this sort in relation to Plato’s Symposium when I contextualize it and think of it as the work of an ancient Greek philosopher, a person whose culture I imagine as both radically different from mine and as familiarly intertwined with my culture, even where the two do not coexist easily.
Because I live in the United States, I have a heightened awareness of myself as a Jewish-Israeli when I am in public. Almost everywhere outside of my apartment I am in the context of differences of a kind that focus my attention on my Jewish-Israeliness. Perhaps the simplest example of my sense of an awareness of my Jewish-Israeliness in a context of difference has to do with language. The language of the U.S. public is American English, which is a culturally entwined English and in some important respects different from other culturally entwined English languages, for example, British-English. Reading a text in English in my apartment, I do something that I began doing in elementary school in Israel when I began studying English. But in Israel, if and when I step into the Jewish-Israeli public, I step into a mostly Israeli-Hebrew-speaking space. To step outside of my apartment in the United States is to step into a mostly American-English-speaking space.

By now I move in the American-English-speaking space with the ease of a bicultural fluent English speaker though, despite my understanding of American culture, not with the ease of a fluent American-English speaker, hence, not effortlessly. In the American-English-speaking space, my English speech is always accented; I pronounce some words and word combinations as an Israeli-Hebrew speaker, my speech sometimes follows the grammatical rules of Hebrew or is peppered with Hebrew words; and I speak according to a version of the Jewish-Israeli public rules of communication and conversation. I am aware of my accent and of its being an Israeli-Hebrew speaker’s accent that does not fit well into the American-English-speaking space though others may just be aware of my foreignness. And being aware of my Israeli-Hebrew speaker’s accent, I am thereby aware of my Jewish-Israeliness.

Being aware of my Jewish-Israeliness in the context of the differences between me and Amal is not the same kind of thing. As a Jewish-Israeli in the United States, I am both an alien, which is what my example above emphasizes, and a member of a minority with a history of oppression, as well as success, including, nationalist success. My relationship with Amal, though occurring in the United States where both of us reside, is a relationship between members of antagonistic groups that are still engaged in the process of nation-state formation but are not at the same place along its trajectory. In this latter context, becoming aware of myself as a Jewish-Israeli, I became aware of myself as a member of a sociopolitical hegemonic and dominant group.

I have been aware of myself as a member of the Israeli sociopolitical hegemonic and dominant group in relation to the Palestinians many times before I met Amal. I was taught not only hegemonic but also counterhegemonic lessons even as a child. For example, while, on the one hand, I studied official stories about Israel according to which it was a state that aspires to egalitarianism, on the other hand, my father took me to visit Arab villages and towns and discussed with me the oppression of the Palestinians following Israeli independence. And yet in the context of the first steps in making an
adult friendship with a Palestinian woman who was personally hurt by the injustices of conquest, curfews, dispossession, and cultural repression, my awareness of myself as a Jewish-Israeli was disquieting. This is particularly so because Amal and I became friends quickly and easily.

Amal and I liked each other from the first awkward moments when it was not yet clear whether we could trust each other, and we have a lot in common. We are women and feminists. We are of approximately the same age. And we are both academics in the United States, where she has been residing since she was eighteen and I since I was twenty-four. We also have something deeper and more atavistic in common. We spent our youth only about 75 kilometers apart in small Middle-Eastern Mediterranean coastal towns. Perhaps as a consequence, we validate for each other that we have a similar sensual connection with our environment, that we are moved quite similarly by colors, smells, and sounds, taking certain combinations as natural and feeling ourselves as strangers when encountering others. We construct our living spaces with what for each other seem like familiar patterns of furnishing and decoration. We consider certain foods, such as the small chopped vegetable salad, eggplant salad, and majadaras, a lentils and rice dish with medieval origins, as home foods. And we move and gesture in ways that resemble each other.

I.

Yoram Binur, a Jewish-Israeli investigative reporter, aware of the similarities between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians, disguised himself in 1986 as a Palestinian laborer from the West Bank in order to approximate the current West Bank or Gaza Palestinian experience of a man his age. When I read about his preparations to present himself in public as a Palestinian laborer, I was struck by how little he had to do. He writes about them in his book My Enemy, My Self:

In order to carry out my project, I first had to give myself the appearance of a typical Palestinian laborer. This was easily accomplished with the aid of suitable clothes and accessories. . . . I purchased several pairs of big, very old black pants as well as a few patched shirts. My new wardrobe was completed when I took down from the top shelf of my father's closet an old striped jacket which had been worn years before the State of Israel was established. I also gathered some of the typical paraphernalia of an Arab laborer. First, I borrowed a cheap plastic shopping basket from my mother, the type of basket elderly housewives take with them to the open market. . . . I then bought several copies of the illustrated weekly newspaper Al Biader Al Siasi. . . . Finally, I bought three cartons of Farid
cigarettes; manufactured in East Jerusalem, they have a strong bitter taste and are never smoked by Jews. To complete the image I left my face unshaven and brought along my worn and trusty red keffiyeh, the traditional Arab headdress. (Binur 1989, xiv-xv)

Binur spent several months in disguise. While fluent in Palestinian-Arabic, his Arabic would not mislead a linguist, and because he is not of Middle-Eastern or North-African Jewish descent, he lacks the darker olive skin and dark hair and eyes associated with the Palestinians, as well as some shared cultural elements. He could pass as a Palestinian laborer and be accepted as such by both Israeli Jews and Palestinians, because while members of the two sociocultures imagine themselves as radically different from each other, in some important ways they are quite alike, and because he had the right props and acted in conformity with the expectations of each group. It is that easy.

But is it really?

Binur did not grow up as a Palestinian. He was not formed and molded by the historically specific Palestinian socioculture, which, even if similar in some important ways to the Jewish-Israeli socioculture, nonetheless, according to some scholars, differs sufficiently from it for them to be considered two distinct ethnicities. The two sociocultures have been developed both separately and in relation to each other. As a modern socioculture, the Jewish-Israeli socioculture developed as a form of, and in relation to, Zionist responses to, first, the European Jewish experience and, second, the Palestinian response to Zionism. This response has as its quest not only to shelter Jews from anti-semitism but also to construct a redemptive utopian future for the Jews, a future for which national autonomy and a life in Israel were seen as necessary catalysts (see Shapira 1992). As a modern socioculture, the Palestinian socioculture developed as a Muslim and Christian Arab culture under Turkish rule. It had growing contact with Europe as Europe began its colonial move into the Middle East and, from the end of the Nineteenth Century, Palestinian socioculture developed in relation to Zionism.

The relation between the Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian sociocultures has been both mutually productive and conflictual. Moreover, since 1948, part of the Palestinian population and, since 1967, an additional part of that population have experienced the Palestinian socioculture not merely in the context of a conflict with but also in the context of subordination to the Jewish-Israeli socioculture, with formative consequences to both groups. Thus, for example, at the extreme, members of both groups have othered each other so much that not being the other has become a mark of one's own national identity, a situation that in the case of Jewish-Israelis may resemble that of whites in the United States as this is described by Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark (1992).
II.

Amal and I do not constitute the negation of each other as a necessary condition of our identities. That would make friendship impossible. But we are aware of our dissimilarities or differences. We had some significantly different growing-up experiences even insofar as our environments were concerned. While her small Middle Eastern Mediterranean coastal town is an old Arab town at the edge of a new Jewish town, built to surround the old Arab town and ensure Jewish-Israeli control of the area, my town is a new Jewish town, which is a market center for neighboring Arab villages and towns. She is from the old part of Acre, a city with roots in the ancient Middle East, which was conquered by the Egyptian sultan in 1291 and was under Arab control (mostly Muslim, either Egyptian, Bedouin, or Turkish) until its conquest by the British in 1918 and by the Jewish-Israeli Hagana forces in 1948. Amal's family moved to Acre from Haifa, another Middle Eastern Mediterranean coastal town, about 25 kilometers south of Acre, with a similar history to that of Acre. I was born in Barkai, a Jewish-Israeli kibbutz that was settled in 1947, and I grew up in Hadera, a Jewish-Israeli town that came into being in 1890.

Thirty-two thousand dunams or eight thousand acres of Barkai's land were confiscated from Abdul Hadi, a local Palestinian landlord, in 1949. Hadera's land was bought from Palestinian, mostly absentee, landlords. It was swampland, and the Palestinians called it El-Hadra, "The Green", the origin of the name Hadera, which makes no sense in Hebrew. Calling their settlement Hadera, the Jewish settlers did not merely name their settlement. They got rid of the Arabic name and renamed the area with a Hebrew-sounding, even if meaningless, name.

Settling is always accompanied by naming, which is among the means that the settler uses to create an environment in which she or he moves connectedly. A conquering-settling seems to be accompanied by a renaming that is a process of both naming and a forgetfulness of the previous names. Due to the forgetfulness involved in the settler-conqueror's renaming, the renaming connects her or him to the environment without connecting her or him to its conquered people.

In The Question of Palestine, Edward Said describes the Jewish-Israeli renaming that occurred in relation to Palestine as a relation between an interpretation and a presence that denies that presence (Said 1980, 3-15). The workings of such a denial and how it facilitates forgetfulness cut rather deep, as the following example by Meyron Benbenishti suggests. He writes:

The tallest mountain peak in Israel is, as everyone knows, Meyron. Its historical name is Germak... But, Germak is an Arabic (or Turkish) name and the “names committee” decided that the tallest Israeli mountain peak cannot have an Arabic
name; so, they renamed it after a [Jewish-Israeli] village at the bottom of the mountain. At the end of a generation everyone has forgotten the old name referring to the mountain by its Hebrew name as if this were a biblical name rather than a new invention. Anton Shmas, a native of a [Palestinian] village at the bottom of the mountain, has no choice but to refer to the mountain by its Hebrew name, even when he translates the poems of a Palestinian poet. (Benbenishti 1988, 133; my translation)

Benbenishti’s example is particularly poignant because it shows how a Jewish-Israeli renaming forces its linguistic reality and implied forgetfulness on the Palestinians. The example becomes even more poignant when one realizes that the settlement of the Jewish-Israeli village of Meyron, after which the mountain is renamed, began in 1949, a year following Israeli independence and the renaming of a portion of Palestine as Israel. In some cases renaming followed the banishing and transfer of the Palestinian population, hence, a physical and not only linguistic erasure of the past. One such case is that of the Jewish-Israeli town of Ashkelon, named after a biblical town of the same name which seems to have existed in approximately the same location. According to a travel guide to Israel which tells the official new geography, Jewish settlers who came to the area after 1948 were placed in the buildings of the deserted Arab village Mag'dal which was renamed Migdal Ashkelon (Israeli Department of Defense 1985, 43). But, the Palestinian villagers did not abandon it. On August 17, 1949, they received an expulsion order and were transported to the border of the Gaza strip (Jiryis 1976, 82).

Acre, Amal’s hometown, was renamed too. In Hebrew it is called Akko, and this is how I, inscribed just like the land and the maps with the Jewish-Israeli conqueror-settler’s new geography, think about it. What this means for us is something that Amal and I have explored together just a little since our first meeting, usually cautiously and very gingerly. This exploration focused on the names “Palestine” and “Israel”—what it means for each of us to have the same piece of land named by the other’s name and possible naming alternatives. Some of the questions that I began to pose to myself are questions about interiorized nationality, about having a subjectivity that was and is constructed in such a way that among the right answers to the question of identity is the one that says “I am a Jewish-Israeli.”

III.

It is because of my conversations with Amal that I have come to think about myself as a Jewish-Israeli. I used to think about myself as an Israeli who also happened to be of Jewish descent and who has adopted some elements of the
Jewish tradition to give a certain meaning to my life. But I also adopted elements of other traditions, both philosophical and political, and they too give my life meaning, directing my actions and helping me make sense of things. My Jewishness, therefore, did not seem essential to my sense of myself as an Israeli. It was more like an herb that flavored my Israeliness, which was flavored by other herbs as well.

From the point of view of the Zionist leadership, especially the Jewish-Israeli Zionist leadership, my pre-Amal perception of myself is something that could be considered a successful outcome of a complex set of policies. This is how I, the daughter of socialist-Zionist Romanian Jews—who immigrated to Palestine in 1947 while it was still a British Mandate yet contained the promise of imminent Jewish national determination, hence, the promise of Israel—was supposed to come to perceive myself. I was supposed to perceive myself first and foremost as an Israeli. Everything else that may give meaning to my life was to be as inessential as a Cartesian secondary quality. It could colorize but not define who I am, because to be defined in any other way meant that I was not defined first and foremost as a member of the new Jewish nation.

Yet, what is it that defined and still defines me? What is it that made and still makes me an Israeli and in that kind of primary fundamental way?

The Palestinian Intifada and its repressive handling by the Jewish-Israeli regime for seven years, a repression involving curfews, the demolition of houses, house arrests, detainments, expulsions, and just daily harassment which, according to Israeli news reports, has continued into the first month of the Israeli-Palestinian Liberation Organization agreement, has brought other Jewish-Israelis around to attempt to make sense of Israeliness. In a 1989 popular song, Chava Alberstein, an established Jewish-Israeli folk singer, uses “Chad-Gadia,” a children’s song that is sung at the end of the first night of Pesach, which is the biblically decreed celebration of Jewish independence, to talk about the confusion she feels about her Israeliness (Alberstein 1989).

The traditional “Chad-Gadia” is about violence and its violent punishment. The violence in question is attributed to animals (who I believe cannot act violently) people, angels, and god. The first act of violence is a cat’s; it consists of the cat’s killing and eating a young goat, a kid. The last act of violence is god’s, who kills the angel of death, that killed the butcher, that killed the ox, that drank the water, that extinguished the fire, that burnt the stick, that hit the dog, that bit the cat, the first violator in this chain of violent events. After singing most of the verses of the traditional “Chad-Gadia,” Alberstein sings:

And why are you suddenly singing “Chad-Gadia”
since it is neither Spring nor Pesach?
And what has changed for you,
what has changed?
I have changed this year.
That each night, each night,
I have asked only four questions
and this night I have one more—
Until when will the cycle of terror continue?

Chaser and chased,
Hitter and hit.
When will this insanity end?

And what has changed for you,
what has changed?
I have changed this year.

I was once a lamb and a quiet kid.
Today, I am a tiger and a hunting wolf.
I was a dove.
I was a deer.
Today, I do not know who I am.

Alberstein's "Chad-Gadia" is a subtle protest song. The first night of Pesach is celebrated with a ritual that is a structured teaching of the young, who are assigned specific questions about the events commemorated by the celebration—the exodus of the Hebrew or Israelite tribes from Egypt, ending in the settling of Canaan and the formation of the biblical period's first federated tribal and later, unified state of Israel, which becomes a divided kingdom after Solomon's death and was ultimately destroyed in 70 CE. Of all the biblically decreed holidays, Pesach is the only one that is celebrated with attention to the first night's ritual by most of the secular Jewish-Israeli population, simultaneously gaining meaning from and giving meaning to the formation of the modern state of Israel.

Though ending as it does with a statement of confusion about identity, Alberstein's "Chad-Gadia" points out two elements that are crucial to Jewish-Israeli identity and are alluded to with a biblically oriented metaphorical language—an innocent peacefulness, like the lamb's, deer's, and dove's, and a violent, possibly merciless, fierceness, like the tiger's and wolf's. These elements were taken by most of the Jewish-Israeli population as capable of coexisting with little, if any, tension. They were exposed as contradictory by the conquest and occupation that followed the 1967 Six Days War and mostly by the conquest and the Intifada and its repression.

IV.

Until 1967, but less and less so since, the tension between peacefulness and violence was muted through a multidiscoursed official, and officially encouraged, presentation of all pre-statehood violent clashes between Jewish settlers
and Arabs and all Jewish-Israeli-Arab wars, as having been participated in against Jewish or Jewish-Israeli will. According to this presentation, which was and still is common to history books, literature and poetry, as well as governmental pronouncements, Jewish or Jewish-Israeli violence had been forced on the pre-state Jewish settlers or on the state of Israel by the Palestinians and other Arabs. It was an extracted response by a peaceful nation to a threat of destruction.\(^{15}\)

After the Six Day War, which, like the War of Independence, was celebrated as a victorious war of defense by a small nation against incredible odds, year after year passed, and the conquered new territories of the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Sinai, and the Gaza strip were not used to negotiate a peace with the neighboring Arab nations. They were connected more and more to the pre-1967 Israel with new roads and telephone and electric lines, and through the confiscation of land and water resources and their distribution among Jewish-Israeli settlers. The exploitative employment of the newly conquered Palestinian population transformed them into exporters of goods produced in Israel, and it was hard not to suspect the official national self-image. It was particularly hard not to suspect this national self-image in the light of growing evidence that the civil rights of the newly conquered Palestinians were being tampered with through the imposition of stiff censorship that made it impossible for Palestinians to voice any kind of nationalist intentions, aspirations, or longings. Other civil rights violations included detention and house arrest for prolonged periods of time and without trial; abusive treatment, including torture, by the military and secret service investigators; and deportation as punishment.

The Israeli (mostly but not totally Jewish) New Left organized to call attention to these growing doubts. Its most extreme factions claimed that the official national self-image was totally fabricated and absolutely false and that Israel was an aggressor state that came into being through aggression (see for example, Bober 1972). These claims resemble the Israeli Communist Party’s position, and moderate versions of these claims have been advanced by the Old Zionist Left. The less extreme factions focused on the Six Days War and claimed that it was initially a defensive war that was transformed into a war of aggression by subsequent Jewish-Israeli governments that have institutionalized the war’s conquests. This analysis has been adopted by most of the moderate Old Zionist-Left and by Liberals and Libertarians, all of whom believe that what has happened since 1967 is a test of the nation’s moral fiber.\(^{16}\)

What has worried most of the moderate old and new Left, Liberal, and Libertarian critics, is that the Jewish-Israeli population would choose to win its peace with the Palestinians, that is, impose a certain kind of peaceful existence for its citizens through domination of and the use of force against the Palestinians, especially those in the areas conquered in the 1967 war. The
moderate old and new Left, consequently, did not celebrate Sharon's 1982 invasion of and war in Lebanon, but rather criticized it from the outset, seeing it as suggestive of the possible future they feared. Still, they expected the war to teach a lesson about the need for a different kind of future. Thus Jacobo Timerman, who at the time was living in Israel and seems to identify himself as a Jewish-Israeli in his book The Longest War, says:

What is actually creating this state of general disgust with ourselves, of nostalgia for something we seem to have lost only a brief while ago, is the realization that the most perfect expression of our national will, our military might, will not resolve the Palestinian problem, which is our biggest national issue. (Timerman 1982, 89)

By the time the Intifada started, on December 9, 1987, twenty years and a half after the Six Day War and five and a half years after the invasion of Lebanon, the lesson about the need for a different future which such critics as Timerman expected Jewish-Israelies to learn, has not been learned. Speaking as always of its commitment to peace, the Jewish-Israeli government of Begin and Shamir, with the consensual support and approval of about half of the Jewish-Israeli population and the acquiescence of more, tried to win its peace, often, with draconian measures. The Israeli Defense Forces' soldiers executed and enforced these measures. Though some objected and even refused to carry out some orders, too many have gone even further than commanded, humiliating, beating, and even unnecessarily shooting at Palestinians. While the last elections in Israel brought in the Rabin government, which has worked out an agreement with the Palestinians, the Rabin government too professed an iron-fist approach to the Intifada. As it attempts to negotiate peace with the Palestinians, the Rabin government seems willing to concede to the Palestinians only as little as it can at a time and refuses to deal with claims about the importance and extreme violations of civil rights by Jewish-Israeli soldiers and civilians.17

Si Hi-Man, a young, popular, Jewish-Israeli rock singer was shocked by the brutal conduct of some soldiers. She wrote "Shooting and Crying" (1988), an unpopular song that was censored by the Israeli Defense Forces radio station. The song laments and protests the soldiers' brutality, seeing it as a direct result of a struggle to win. Si Hi-Man sings:

The street cleaner told me
that in his village everything has changed
and life seems different to me
in the shadow of the filth.
And in my house, the window is broken
Tel-Aviv is bursting in
even its smell has changed
I feel the danger.

Boys playing with lead
girls with steel dolls
life seems different to me
in the shadow of the filth.
And it does not matter to me at all
who will win now,
my world is gone now
and the big light was put out.

Shooting and crying
burning and laughing
when did we learn at all
to bury people alive?

Shooting and crying
burning and laughing
when did we forget
that our children were also killed?

On both sides, people only want to live
in this fear, it is impossible to see
looking for shelter, from the struggle
it does not matter to me, who - is the strongest.

V.

For me, the conquest and occupation that followed the 1967 Six Days War
did not have the myth-expanding quality that it had for some of my peers. As
I pointed out before, I learned both hegemonic and counterhegemonic lessons
when I was growing up. By the time I was drafted, at the end of 1966, I was a
pacifist, in part since I was suspicious of the Israeli government, because I could
not make sense of the official self-image. Failing to see how it is that a
peace-loving nation must always be prepared and ready for war and is unable
to have the peace that it sought, I thought that the Jewish-Israeli story was
incoherent. Nonetheless, I lost my initial pacifism to the Six Days War, and
the conquest and occupation that followed it affected me profoundly. Slowly
I have come to feel and see it as a betrayal, a violation of the trust that as a
critical but not yet too cynical, as well as a rather idealistic, young person, I
had in Israel.

I say “a trust in Israel” because what I believed was that there were Israeli
ethical principles and moral commitments to democracy and social justice that
were and ought to be embodied in the conduct of the national collectivity
vis-à-vis its own members and vis-à-vis other collectivities and their members. I knew that there were many cases in which these principles and commitments were violated. I knew about social, economic, and political discrimination against Jewish segments of the population, the Palestinians, and other minorities, such as the Druze, and against women. I knew about the military rule imposed on the Palestinian population within the 1948 disengagement lines, including the permanent and temporary curfews prohibiting movement between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. I knew about the massacre in Kfar Kassim in 1956. But I construed each case as a case of abuse explainable by the youth of Israel. And Israel, I believed, was a country that had the right kind of ethico-political potential; it was perfectible, just like a Rawlsian reasonably good society.

In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls argues that a reasonably good society, which is, among other things, a society that can change for the better, deserves its members’ loyalty. His argument, developed while the United States was being torn by internal conflicts about race, gender, class, and the Vietnam War, in the midst of talk about revolution and the need for a radical transformation of the United States, and when acts of civil disobedience abounded, provides the most current version of the philosophical underpinnings for what I used to believe. Believing as I did that Israel is fundamentally a just, democratic society committed to the substantive equality and freedom of all its members, independent of national origin, race, religion, or sex, just as its declaration of independence says, I was basically a loyal Rawlsian daughter to Israel.

I am not a loyal Rawlsian daughter anymore, and I have not been one for many years. While I am slightly more optimistic now that Israel is negotiating with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, I am still distrustful of the Jewish-Israeli will to engage seriously in peace-making with the Palestinians, not just those in the areas conquered in and occupied since 1967, but also those who have been living with the Jewish-Israeli population since 1948, as well as the Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian exiles. What I took as discrete cases of abuse were mostly forms of the implementation of policy or cases condoned by policy. By 1967 the national habit with regard to the Palestinians has been one of a won peace, a peace imposed through domination and by force. The official treatment of the Palestinians in the territories conquered and occupied in 1967 has been nothing but a transfer of existing forms, an extension of the just-beginning-to-come-to-an-end official treatment of the Palestinians within the 1948 disengagement lines. The repressive measures that have been adopted since the Intifada began, including the intimidation of the Palestinians within the 1948 disengagement lines, are only the extreme of what has been much too ordinary for the Palestinians under Jewish-Israeli rule.

While I stopped being a loyal Rawlsian daughter because I lost my naive trust as I came to realize how systemic injustice is in Israel, I do not see myself
as disloyal to Israel, at least insofar as my affections are concerned.\textsuperscript{21} I still see myself as an Israeli, trying as I do to learn to see myself as just a Jewish-Israeli, a member of one of the two primary ethnic or national sociocultures in Israel. I still feel emotionally connected to the country. I still miss it as one only misses one’s home.

I do not know if I could ever feel differently. Among the values with which I have been inscribed most thoroughly is the love of Israel, and I was brought up to love Israel in a variety of ways. I was brought up to love it by knowing its geography, topography, zoology, as well as history, and by appreciating its natural and archaeological beauty. But, most important, I was brought up to love it in a very material, physical way, through the work of the land, and through extensive travel throughout the country and especially rigorous hiking in its valleys and on its mountains, at its seashore, and in its desert. These have connected me to the country through my body. It is as if they grafted it onto my body so that I have a feel for the land and its seasonal changes that runs through my hands and my feet and vivid body-memories of adjusting myself to fit the curves of the land while asleep under the open sky just as one adjusts oneself to fit the curves of a lover’s body.\textsuperscript{22}

Talking once with Amal, I found out that extensive travel in Israel was not part of her curriculum, nor part of her extracurricular activities. Knowing what I know, I was not surprised, but I was very sad. I did not want her to have been deprived of the deep body-connected-sense that the whole country was hers and not just the little enclave that she was confined to. I wanted her to have had, through her body, more than the Mediterranean seashore and wind and the sound of the waves breaking during a winter storm. I wanted her to have had everything I had and have.

Wanting this for Amal would make me disloyal to Israel according to official and quite popular Jewish-Israeli dogma, because to want this for a Palestinian is to want to share the country fully, and a fully shared country would not be the Jewish-Israel that the dogma decrees Israel must be.\textsuperscript{23} According to some deviations from the dogma, wanting anything for the Palestinians, even civil-rights, but especially their own state, is an act of treason.

VI.

When participating in some demonstrations against the Jewish-Israeli government and standing with the Women in Black on the northern edge of Tel-Aviv in November 1988, about a week before the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s declaration of Palestinian independence, some of the Jewish-Israeli men passing by yelled at us that we were traitors, called us whores and accused us of sleeping with the enemy. Young soldiers in a military bus added threats to our lives, pointing their automatic rifles through the windows and pretending to shoot.
This was not my first experience of men's violent response to women demonstrating, and members of Women in Black told me that the curses, the anger, and the threats were routine, as I expected, due to my experiences in even "Take Back the Night" demonstrations. Members of other Jewish-Israeli peace organizations say the same. And the harassment of women in Israel, whether women demonstrate on their own or with men, is always in the form of an attack that connects treason with sex. It is always some variation of an accusation of whoring sluttishness and of sleeping with the enemy.

Women who are seen as belonging to one group—for example, Jewish-Israeli women who voluntarily have sex with members of another group that is considered as an enemy group, for example, Arabs in general in the Israeli case, and do not exchange their sex for money—violate a sexual taboo. Violating it, the women indicate that members of the group in question are desirable, that they can be loved and loved erotically, that one could have a shared life with them. Indicating this, they destabilize the idea of the enemy because the taboo does not simply assume the existence of enemies but also constitutes people as enemies. The taboo is essential to the idea of deep animosity, an idea that seems to have become necessary for a strict separation of Israeli Jews and Palestinians and seems needed for the maintenance of Jewish-Israeli control of the Palestinians.²⁴

The separation of Israeli Jews from Palestinians has assured a Jewish-Israeli control of the Palestinians since 1948. It also assured that members of both groups would have mostly book knowledge of each other, which, even if not biased (a rather unlikely case where Palestinians are concerned [see Said 1978, 1980, and Kabbani 1986]) still does not endow the other with a full reality, due to the lack of direct interactions. To the extent that I had firsthand childhood experiences of Palestinian culture it was because my father's politics took him, and he took me with him, to Palestinian towns and villages where I played with children my age, ate with them, heard Arabic speech, and listened and danced to Arabic music. But I never had a Palestinian friend to grow up with, be it a neighbor or a schoolmate.

In the few mixed Palestinian-Jewish-Israeli towns, like Jaffa, Haifa, and Acre, some people do befriend each other across the ethnic divides. According to a 1980 poll, 43.6 percent of the Israeli Jews polled said that they were ready, without any qualification, to be friends with Palestinians.²⁵ But 1980 was before the Intifada, and given my 1993 summer's visit to an Israel that seemed to wish mostly to distance itself from the Palestinians, I doubt that in the seventh year of the Intifada the results of a similar poll would be the same. Even now that an agreement has been signed between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the national aspirations of the Palestinians alarm and frighten Israeli Jews, as is evident from the Israeli newspapers. Fear does not motivate friendship. Fear motivates withdrawal and closure. A Jewish-
Israeli-Palestinian friendship has to overcome this and it must do so on both sides because the Palestinians have their very justified share of fear.²⁶

Amal grew up afraid of the Jewish-Israeli police and soldiers. Sometimes police officers and soldiers still frighten her.

VII.

Sometimes I am frightened by sights and sounds that remind me of the possibility of terrorist/guerrilla attacks or sabotage of the kind that happened while I grew up, like the night attack on a house in a neighboring village which left only one young girl alive, or the mined roads that killed and injured passengers in buses on their way to work. Sometimes I am also frightened by sights and sounds that remind me of the possibility of war. At times I have flashbacks and at other times hallucinations that can transform an American countryside into a silent battlefield. At times, following the siren of an ambulance or a fire truck, I freeze and shake. And I have nights burdened with nightmares in which I am in charge of people’s safety while under attack and am just about to fail.²⁷

In 1979, when I heard about the signing of the Camp David agreements between Israel and Egypt, I suddenly sensed my body with a rifle on my right shoulder feeling so much like a part of me, and I wondered what kind of peace is possible between people whose bodies, like mine, were formed to such a great extent by military training. Though mine was just a woman’s military training, nonetheless, I was trained since I was fourteen, and the training extended the survival training I had in the youth movement and fit perfectly with my childhood tomboyish games.

I still train myself, re-creating some version of the body I was expected to have, a body that belongs to a world if not at war, then prepared for war. I was not aware of the extent to which I had a ready-to-fight body until about ten years ago when Elaine Rubin told me that watching me, even when I am absolutely motionless, she senses me as a ready-to-fight body. I do not know how she sensed it. But I thought then about that minute in 1979 when I experienced the unity of a rifle and my body in the middle of a living room in Columbus, Ohio, and this after seven years in the United States away from Israel where the tension of readiness-to-fight has been a constant of the Jewish-Israeli ordinary life. It was four years later and the peace with Egypt did not advance very far. It has not advanced much further since though the comprehensive negotiations of peace in the Middle-East may change the situation.²⁸

How far could peace with the Palestinians go? In the case of Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians it is not merely ready-to-fight bodies that may be in the way, nor just the fears that engender a mutual mistrust(see Gordon and Gordon 1991). The Palestinians have been dealt with unjustly. They will have to
forgive so much, and they would not want and should not have to forget in order to forgive. But, if they do not forget, how could Israeli-Jews live with our shame?

I feel shame. I feel it about the past and the present. I feel it when I read an Amnesty International report about the use of high-velocity bullets against demonstrators in the West Bank. I feel it when I read in the New York Times about the detention camps in the Negev and the abusive treatment of the detainees, about wounded Palestinian girls and women, about the demolition of houses, and about the destruction of olive groves. I feel it as well when I read a Jewish-Israeli newspaper's account of West Bank settlers who threaten Israel with a civil war as a response to the news about the agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, of Jewish-Israeli demands for revenge as a response to a killing of a Jewish-Israeli by a Palestinian, or of an Air Force general who confesses to be moved more by pictures of destroyed houses in Kiriath Shmone rather than those of Lebanese villages attacked by the units that he commands.

Dalia Elkana, who was assigned to searching Palestinian women crossing from Jordan to the West Bank at the Allenby Bridge, said about her work:

In my first week I was embarrassed, ashamed, and disgusted. I used to speak in a quiet voice. I tried to be kind, but slowly I lost my humanity. . . . Gradually that job takes you over. You have difficulty remembering that these are women like yourself. But there are people who actually enjoy doing it, especially among those who search the men. We, the girls, tried to retain some of our sanity, to observe certain limits whenever possible, but I cannot say that we succeeded. (Elkana quoted in Lipman 1988, 40)

I do not want to lose what Elkana refers to as “humanity,” and what I see in terms of certain dispositions, such as a courage to face the truth, and certain sensibilities, such as the openness to witness another's pain, which I value because of the place that I believe they have in moral psychology, and because they enable me to feel shame. I believe that the experience of shame in the face of wrongdoing, because shame is a certain kind of moral feeling, is an essential experience for maintaining a sense of myself as a moral agent. Uncomfortable as shame is, I need it, and I need it more than I need the anger that I feel at the governments that have formulated and dictated the Jewish-Israeli policy in relation to the Palestinians. Although anger too presupposes horror at what happens, and it too is a moral feeling and thus motivates action, it allows me to separate myself from what becomes posited as the origin of the repression, for example, the Israeli government. In this respect anger is a self assuring and purifying feeling. Shame, on the other hand, does not separate
but includes. It is a feeling entailing the taking of personal responsibility, of seeing oneself implicated in the wrongdoing.

In addition, shame is not only different from anger but also from guilt. Guilt is appropriate where one is personally and actively involved in a wrongdoing; it is not a feeling one can have because of another's wrongdoing. Yet, because of the relation between integrity, dignity, and shame, one can feel ashamed by another's wrongdoing if one sees one's own integrity and dignity as diminished by the wrongdoing. I cannot feel guilty for being a Jewish-Israeli, but I can feel ashamed of the systemic injustice toward the Palestinians. My life has been intertwined with it even if I personally did not contribute to it in any but inescapably complicit ways and even if, as I should, I protest it, and I contribute to its elimination by whatever means I can.²⁹

Perhaps the most important thing about shame is what Zygmunt Bauman points out in Modernity and the Holocaust (1989/91, 210-17) and that is that shame liberates and can aid the process of recovering the moral significance of an event. And if Bauman is right, then for Jewish-Israelis, many of whom have numbed themselves to the injustices inflicted by Jewish-Israelis on the Palestinians³⁰ and would prefer to go along with and even celebrate the agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, yet without acknowledging Palestinian suffering, shame would be a healing antidote to de-moralization.

NOTES

I began this essay in 1990 following an invitation to speak about my friendship with Amal at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Feminist Studies. I read another version of this essay at the Fall, 1992 meeting of SOPHIA, the feminist philosophy graduate student group there. The current version of the essay has benefitted from the comments of Karen J. Warren and the shock of my latest summer stay in Israel in 1993. Amal read this essay with understanding.

1. I use “Jewish-Israeli” in order to emphasize the multinational character of the state of Israel in which Jews are a majority and Palestinians a substantial minority. I believe that the emphasis is important because it disrupts the projected image of Israel as a one people state, something that many have been claiming is far from the reality of any modern nation-state. An early commentator on the subject is Ernest Renan, whose 1888 address “What is a Nation?” is included in Bhaba (1990, 8-23). I also recommend McNeill (1986).

2. I have been criticized by Jewish-Israelis and other Jews for my positions regarding the Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian relation on the ground that I do not live in Israel and consequently do not have certain daily experiences which, according to my critics, are the foundation for the right kind of positions regarding the Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian relation. I do think that not living in Israel has facilitated some of my changes by giving me an opportunity to think and feel away from the local pressures. I do not think that what follows from this is that my position is, therefore, irrelevant to other Jewish-Israelis
and other Jews. The relationship between experiences and beliefs and attitudes is much more dialectical than my critics believe.

3. Feminists in the United States and most of Western Europe have had a hard time understanding the importance of national identity for women belonging to nations that have just gained national independence or have not yet gained it. While I do not want to defend nationalism, I do sympathize with the sense that national independence creates conditions for the production of local and unique feminisms which are a little less colonized. This, at least, is Amal’s sense, and what she always points out to me is that I have a nationally independent state, which is something that may free me to see things differently. For a recent discussion of the relation between feminism and nationalism in the Middle-Eastern context, see Mervat (1993, 29-48). Among earlier responses to the perceived conflict between nationalism and feminism is Jayawardena (1986). For a nonfeminist debate on the subject of nationalism see, for example, Twining (1991).

4. Ann Ferguson offers a theory of an aspectual self that suggests the possibility of a multifaceted yet single identity whose elements are not necessarily bundled in coherent groups. It is one of the few theories of identity I am aware of that promises the possibility of conceptualizing identity not as multiple or fractured (Ferguson 1987, 339-56).

5. I use the term “imagined community” in the way that Benedict Anderson uses it (Anderson 1983) although I do not restrict it to the “nation” as he does because the nation is not the only kind of identity forming imagined community.

6. For the notion of an identity that is a function of pragmatic necessity see Korsgaard (1989). For a context of difference dependent on the awareness of identity see, for example, Reil (1988).

7. Reading, in particular a contextualizing reading that situates the reader and what is read, can be a form of what María Lugones calls “world travelling” (Lugones 1987).

8. Americans respond to my accent by asking me where I am from and attributing a specific foreignness to me as they ask their question, thus saying things such as “Are you from Germany or France?” or “Are you from India?” They correct my pronunciation and grammar as well as my linguistic conduct. They respond to their sense of my foreignness by bonding through the things that seem like a real common denominator to them, such as television programs they used to watch as children, making sure as they do that these are not television programs I had available to me as a child.

9. Neither Israeli-Jews nor Palestinians constitute homogeneous groups. But in our relation with each other the heterogeneous Jewish-Israeli socioculture is hegemonic.


11. See Khaldi (1991) for a description of the Palestinians and their culture prior to the modern Jewish arrival and settling.


13. Franz Fanon’s discussions of this (1967 and 1968) are the classical references for analyses of the formative effects of oppression on the oppressed and the oppressors. Two other classical references are Memmi (1991) and Césaire (1972). But one could use Hegel’s analysis of the master and slave relationship and Marx’s analysis of alienation as well. For documentation of the effects on the Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian relation see, for example, Grossman (1987 and 1992).

15. Shapira (1992), which belongs to Israel’s revisionist history, describes the formation of the Jewish-Israeli official self-presentation. For examples of such a presentation see Eban (1972), Herzog (1982), and Schiff (1985). The extent to which the presentation is a Jewish-Israeli myth is made very clear by Simha Flapan (1987). The book’s chapters address seven myths: (1) the Zionists accepted the UN partition and planned for peace; (2) the Arabs rejected the UN partition and launched a war; (3) the Palestinians fled voluntarily, intending reconquest; (4) all the Arab states united to expel the Jews from Palestine; (5) the Arab invasion made war inevitable; (6) defenseless Israel faced destruction by the Arab Goliath; (7) Israel always sought peace, but no Arab leader has responded.


17. The Rabin government’s “Iron-Fist” commitments have manifested themselves most clearly for outsiders in the deportation of 415 Palestinians as punishment for a murder of an Israeli, the destruction of houses in retaliation for demonstrations, and the violent suppression of these demonstrations. The deportees have returned, but most of them have been put in detention camps.


19. One of the ways in which the question of loyalty has been debated among Jewish-Israelis (mostly men) is by focusing on the issue of a refusal to be stationed in the occupied territories when drafted to the military or called for reserve duty. Examples of some of the discussions of this question can be found in newsletters of organizations such as Yesh Gvul. An Israeli philosophical paper by Royal Netz (1990) articulates some of the questions faced by draftees in relation to Socrates’ conduct and arguments in the Crito, a move that resembles that of U.S. philosophers when addressing questions regarding the draft during and after the Vietnam War. A feminist view on loyalty, which still uses a kind of Socratic/Liberal contractual framework, but does not focus on military service, can be gleaned from Rich (1979, 275-310).

20. For detailed analyses see Benziman and Mansour (1992) and Shehadeh (1985) as well as Benbenishti (1988) and Jiryis (1976).

21. The question of loyalty is particularly hard for Jewish-Israelis like me who have chosen to emigrate, since emigration is considered as betrayal and is stigmatized. For the conflictual emotional life it creates see Shoked (1988).

22. I was both surprised and angry to find out while reading Keren (1989) that the material inscription was intended and built into the Jewish-Israeli educational program from kindergarten to grade 12.

23. One would have expected the Jewish-Israeli peace activists to understand it. Yet while a few do, from the Palestinian point of view the picture is more revealing. In her interview with Penny Rosenwasser, Nabilah Espanioli, a Palestinian-Israeli woman from Haifa, describes herself as fighting for a democratic Israel which cannot be Jewish dominated and says, “I want to be fully a partner....” She goes on to point out that insofar as the Israeli left, Peace Now, and Women and Peace are still uncritical of the Zionist dogma, they do not yet want her as their partner (Rosenwasser 1992, 148-56).

24. The 1990 Israeli film Hide and Seek, which addresses the formation of identity in the case of a young Jewish boy in the just pre-independence days of Israel, uses homosexual erotic connectedness between a Jew and a Palestinian to address the construction of the Palestinian as an enemy, the betrayal that is associated with eroticism, and the violence that the deconstruction of the enemy through love evokes in men. Accad (1990) is an
instructive study of the relationship of sexuality and violence in Lebanese literature which brings out some of the aspects of the relationship between sexuality, animosity, and taboo for Lebanon yet is suggestive for some generalizations on the subject. Another instructive study is Cypress (1991) whose chapter on the nationalist view of La Malinche points out how sexual taboos and their violations worked for Mexico’s nation-building literature. Like Accad’s work, Cypress’ work too is specific, and, it is also suggestive for some generalizations on the subject. A more general yet suggestive work whose specific focus is Latin-American nation-building literature, is Franco (1989). Parker et al. (1992) offers a comparative kaleidoscopic view of possible relations between national identities and sexualities and their constitution by taboos, as well as breakdown through the violation of taboos.

25. Shipler (1986, 277) provides, in addition to statistics, extensive information about Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian personal relations and about the attitudes of the two groups toward each other.

26. Although addressing male friendship, May and Strikwerda (1992) is instructive in its discussion of trust.

27. I have fairly classical symptoms of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). I doubt that many Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian children and adults are free from the trauma of a daily life intertwined with violence.

28. I see the possibility of a better future when I read about economic and cultural agreements among multiple countries in the Middle-East. The latest issue of the Middle-East Report (1993) is careful in its discussion of a possible better future yet optimistic in its vision of a regional kind of economic integration.

29. Authors like Oren (1992) would probably respond to my discussion of shame as springing out of a fear of an Israeli identity. To the extent that an Israeli identity is intertwined in the oppressive ensure of the Palestinians as I believe that it is, I think that it should be feared and reformed.


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