



**Israeli soldiers arrest a young Palestinian boy following clashes in the center of the West Bank town of Hebron, on June 20, 2014. AFP**

**Haaretz20160805 Rethinking the 'banality of evil' theory By Eva Illouz**

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The time has come to reexamine Hannah Arendt's thesis. Not all evil is banal, certainly not the kind that grips a nation with a sense of racial superiority. Israel is neither Nazi nor fascist or apartheid – but its current colonialist regime does bear a family resemblance with other evil regimes.

What makes some political regimes evil? Why do some human beings, especially if they belong to ethnic, racial, religious or national majorities, want to expel others from their homes, take away their work, their land and their property, put them in prisons, torture or kill them – especially if the latter are members of minority groups?

The evilness of the human heart has long preoccupied theologians and philosophers. In the 1960s, a social scientist resolved to use the methods of science to understand the nature of evil, what made people engage in large-scale massacres, of the kind for which Europe had just recently been the theater. For that purpose, he devised what became one of the most influential experiments of all times. This man was named Stanley Milgram, the son of Jewish Europeans who had immigrated to the United States. The brilliant experimental psychologist from Yale University was deeply troubled by the genocide of the Jews. As he himself said, the impulse behind his studies stemmed directly from the Shoah.

The experiment, which began running in 1961, involved recruiting subjects who were made to believe they were participating in a study about how people learn. The subjects were invariably assigned to the role of “teacher,” while all of the “learners” in fact were part of Milgram’s team. The teacher would read a list of pairs of words to the learner, and then go over the list again, asking the learner to recall the second word in each pair. Each time the learner gave a wrong answer, he was administered an electric shock, with the strength of the shock rising each time another wrong answer was given.



Nota: per vedere il video dell'esperimento di Milgram vai a [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.735303](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.735303)

There were 15 levels of shocks, with the highest – marked, “extreme shock: danger” – said to be set at 450 volts. As the shocks became more severe, the “learner,” who was really an actor, began to protest more strenuously, eventually screaming in pain, before going ominously silent. But if and when the volunteer said he wanted to stop, that he was concerned for the welfare of the learner, the person overseeing the trial would respond, with a firm voice, “you must continue” or say, “the experiment requires you to continue.”

What made the experiment particularly brilliant was that before he ran it, Milgram surveyed a wide sample of people and social groups and asked them to evaluate the likelihood that people would administer the maximum shock, if instructed to do so. Almost all the people he polled predicted the percentage would be very low, that most people would refuse to cooperate with the experimenter.

The actual results were stunning: 65 individuals administered the final maximum electric shock of 450 volts. Many expressed great discomfort in doing so (sweating, shaking, trembling, stuttering, etc.), but nonetheless, they continued until the end. As Milgram put it in a 1974 article: “Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process.” He identified obedience to hierarchy as crucial to the process of destroying others.

This experiment resonated with another highly publicized thesis offered by Hannah Arendt, in her book “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.” In fact, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which was covered by political philosopher Arendt, also took place in 1961, getting under way a few short months before Milgram’s experiments, and he could not have been ignorant of the bewildering question Arendt’s report had raised: Was the cataclysm of the Shoah the deed of a monstrous, abnormal, atypical people, or the result of an undiagnosed but latent disease of regular, ordinary human beings?

Rather than being exceptional, claimed Arendt, the Shoah was the ultimate expression of a universal and banal capacity to not ask questions, to fulfill orders, to trust in one’s superiors. In analyzing Eichmann’s own account, Arendt had come to the conclusion that the person who had signed orders to kill hundreds of thousands of Jews had been only a cog in a vast bureaucratic machine of killing.



Hannah Arendt, political philosopher and scholar, smoking a cigarette (1969). AP

Christopher Browning's classic 1992 study of the 101st Reserve Battalion of the Ordnungspolizei (Order Police) provided further historical proof of the thesis: He studied a reserve unit whose members were ordinary working-class German men, who were drafted to serve in occupied Poland, and whose assignment included killing, by bullet, tens of thousands of Jews (some 83,000 in total). They shot at close range, ceaselessly, from morning to night, men, women, children, old people, pregnant women, babies. And because this was a harrowing task – their uniforms quickly became soaked in blood, and they witnessed close-up the growing piles of corpses – their commander gave them the option, during one particularly horrendous massacre, not to participate in the butchery. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of soldiers continued shooting: that is, they preferred to bow to pressure, both from their superiors and from their peers.

Out of 500, only 12 (!) took advantage of the option not to shoot. The very title of Browning's book, "Ordinary Men," emphasized too the normality of men who could execute monstrous acts: The men of Reserve Battalion 101 were not committed Nazis and none had criminal records. They simply did what others did and what they were told to do.

The theses offered by Milgram, Arendt and Browning are strikingly convergent. All arrived at the conclusion that a key explanation of evil, even of its most extreme form, was a latent tendency of all human beings: the propensity to follow orders and to conform. The "banality of evil" thesis – the idea of the crushing power of hierarchical authority or of peer pressure – universalized both victims and perpetrators. In the same way that the Shoah became the universal symbol of all victims of racism and hatred, its perpetrators became the universal symbols of the dormant human propensity to fall into barbarity.

For Milgram, Arendt and Browning, then, a monster need not have horns and a tail; nor does he need to be mentally ill, a deficient father or a cruel husband. Most surprisingly, the monster does not even really need to hate the person he kills. A monster need only have a few banal capacities: to accept authority unquestioningly, to be susceptible to group and peer pressure, and to display a special kind of forgetfulness – of the humanity of the human being he destroys.

The banality of evil thesis became especially influential in academia, probably because its thesis suits well the axioms of social psychology and sociology that say that people's behavior is shaped by a group. This thesis, however, suffers from three flaws, and therefore the time has come to reexamine it.

The first flaw in the thesis is that it makes evil itself banal. If everyone has a Nazi sleeping inside, it makes it more difficult to be scandalized by barbarity. It also makes it more difficult to hold those who perpetuate barbarian acts morally responsible for their acts..

Second, the thesis tends to decontextualize evil: A soldier shooting at an adolescent who throws a stone at a checkpoint becomes equivalent to a soldier releasing hydrogen cyanide into a gas chamber.

Finally, the thesis has distracted our attention from other, perhaps more powerful forms of evil – those that derive from people's deep belief that others are inferior, that they represent a danger to their group and society, that they deserve to be expelled, imprisoned or killed. The banality thesis is blatantly inadequate to address people's readiness to expropriate the property, dignity and freedom of others, not because they have been ordered to do so, but out of a sense of moral entitlement and moral mission. The political leaders of evil regimes are not obeying orders when they incite to hatred against a minority group, when they propose racist laws, when they encourage the army and the police to commit violence acts, or in branding as traitors those who attempt to uphold the rights of members of minority groups. When they do this, politicians are acting according to their perception of what is right. Whence the question: What must happen in a society for a large group of people and its representatives to transform violence into a form of moral behavior?



Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan. Maurits Vink

In a very important book, “*Diviser Pour Tuer*” (“Divide and Kill”), which inspired and shaped my reflections above, the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan rejects the thesis of the banality of evil by inquiring into the conditions that precede genocides. He examined the cultural context and frame of the various nations that massacred so many people during the 20th century throughout the world. An estimated 100 million people, says de Swaan, perished after being targeted by other human beings in Congo, Indonesia, South-West Africa, China, Mexico, Cambodia, Pakistan, Rwanda, Turkey, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Kosovo and of course all those killed by Germany.

Genocides, de Swaan writes, are preceded by two powerful cognitive and emotional features. The first is the capacity of a particular group to create a very high internal cohesiveness, to feel unified by a strong and glorious common historical past and by a shared sense of mission; the second is the capacity to “dis-identify” with other groups, to draw a rigid boundary between “us” and “them” – a process that usually occurs after the minority group has been isolated, physically or symbolically, from the majority. Strategies of isolation can include putting members of the minority into ghettos, having them wear a distinctive mark (like a yellow star), or building fences, literally dividing “us” and “them.” According to de Swaan, these constitute the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for massacres or genocides.

Are groups a source of evil?

Collective identification does not automatically derive from the spontaneous and natural fact of being born into same group. It is actively maintained through beliefs in the uniqueness and greatness of the group. Identification with a group is achieved by telling the story of its creation, often located in a remote past, in which a god (or several gods) assisted. Some groups even have a story of how they were chosen by God to accomplish a special mission on earth. Identification with the group is further maintained by marking out the fundamental differences of one’s own group from other groups.

Nazis excelled at both tasks. They bestowed on Germans a presumably ancient lineage found in the Aryans. The Aryans were at the top of a hierarchy of human beings; they were the HerrenVolk (the master race), which was entrusted with a special mission (to conquer the land and erase the lower races – Slavs, Jews, etc.). The belief in a common ancestry enabled the articulation of a messianic vocation to the group: Nazis believed that their noble origins made them a chosen people endowed with the mission of redeeming the world.



Adolf Eichmann standing in his glass cage, flanked by guards, in the Jerusalem courtroom where he was tried in 1961 for war crimes committed during World War II. AP

German historian Hartmut Lehman has showed, for example, that throughout the 19th century, the camp of conservative, devout and nationalist religious Protestants in Germany came to develop the notion of a special covenant between God and the Germans. That idea became especially strong after the 1870 victory of Germany over France in the Franco-Prussian War. Those Protestants were the most likely to take part in the German national movement and to hate the French (who had invented human rights and the Enlightenment), as well as the socialists and liberals inside Germany. As Lehman put it: “The idea that the Germans were a chosen people and that they should make special sacrifices in order to regain greatness were some of the most dangerous and misleading Nazi slogans after 1933.” The sense of a group’s greatness, of its historic mission, of its superiority, can forge a powerful collective narrative that unifies its members.

That sense of unity, of “group-ness,” is also manifested by the daily and routine exclusion of others – in deeds, in law and in ideology. Nazis were racist, but ironically, they were racist first and foremost because they adopted a racial view of themselves which they institutionalized through the mechanisms of the state. Nazis divided Germans into true and non-true, thus putting a mystique of blood at the center of their nationality. True Germans were now defined, by lineage, as being descendants of Aryans.

Lineage and ancestry transformed German-ness into a race. This is also why Nazis became so preoccupied with preserving the “purity” of their blood and race. Once lineage was crucial to nationality, nationality became defined in biological terms: One was either born German or wasn’t; one either had German “blood” or didn’t. It is this racial conception of themselves that led Nazis to establish a process that would trace the purity of one’s family lineage and prove one’s Aryan ancestry. Beginning in April 1933, this certificate was required from all employees and officials in the public sector. This racial conception of the German nation further explains why Nazis abhorred mixed marriages between Jews and Germans.

If a true German was someone of Aryan ancestry – that is, if citizenship became a matter of biological lineage – it was far easier to turn, overnight, bona fide citizens into non-citizens. Nazis thus illustrated what sociologists know: namely, that groups do not have intrinsic or natural boundaries. These boundaries – between “us” and “them” – can be easily shifted. Jews viewed themselves as full members of the German or French nations until these nations “reclassified” them according to ethnic or racial criteria. The Nazi notion of race divided humanity into un-mixable human groups, making mixing itself a crime, the sign of a degenerate humanity.

A distinctive characteristic of evil regimes in general is the belief in the need to preserve the racial or ethnic or religious purity of the dominant group, with minority groups – be they “Jews,” “Muslims,” “Tutsis” or “Armenians” – becoming a qualitatively distinct group, a compact entity perceived to be radically “other,”

distinct from the majority by dint of some invisible and powerful criterion. Mixed marriages represent a dangerous threat of pollution to the purity of the race.

Such polarization between social groups, de Swaan says, are not born overnight. The capacity to divide sharply between “us” and “them,” and to view the “them” as a foreign element in our midst, is the product of a historical process through which new modes of thought are acquired.

Nazis could instill new habits of thought through a number of factors that had simmered and percolated in German society for a decade. Germany had lost the Great War, and in a country with a long authoritarian and militarist tradition, this defeat represented a blow to national identity and pride. Even though Germany had been an aggressor, many at home viewed it as a victim. The resentment regarding Germany’s military defeat crystallized, in the years following the armistice, around the “enemy within”: Political propaganda, media, academia and religious clergy all concurred to view Jews as inferior and dangerous, and to designate them and their supporters as traitors from within. These fears were compounded by great economic difficulties, which created a general climate of frustration among the working and middle classes. A sharp antagonism between political camps, one internationalist and one hyper-nationalist, was accompanied by a progressive weakening of liberal, democratic forces. All of these explain how the Nazis progressively enacted racist laws in a way that was virtually unhindered.

The Nazi worldviews became acceptable to a wide variety of Germans, not overnight but through a gradual change of norms. Evil political regimes rarely emerge full-blown overnight. They emerge after a period during which violence toward another group becomes gradually normalized, in which violence verbal and physical is a daily phenomenon, is justified, tolerated and progressively unnoticed. According to de Swaan, societies in which violence against another specific group is routinized and tolerated are societies in which the mechanism of civilization has broken down.

“Civilization” must be understood here in the sense that the Jewish sociologist Norbert Elias gave the word: as a historical process in which the state progressively monopolized violence, forbade members of a community to use violence against each other, and came to appropriate, exercise and symbolize law that was universally applied.

As the process unfolds, the state plays the role within its territory of pacifier in relations among its members. Civilization is created as people undergo the slow process of learning to restrain their aggressiveness, of paying attention to others through codes of civility, of spreading respect for the rule of law. Civilization has nothing to do with the presence of Mozart, Heine, high-tech or Google in its midst. Universalism flows naturally from “civilized” societies because once violence is prohibited, it becomes easier to view others as equal and similar to oneself.

De Swaan’s thesis is thus startling: Civilization breaks down when one group inside the collective body starts over-emphasizing its own cohesiveness and unity, thereby excluding other groups, isolating them, spatially and symbolically. It is an excess of unity that facilitates dis-identification from other groups, and thus encourages violence (immediately after the Brexit vote, England saw expressions of such breakdowns in codes of civility and in verbal violence against Polish or Latvian migrants). The paradoxical point here is thus that civilization breaks down through what individuals often experience as positive, warm feelings deriving from membership in a whole greater than themselves, in a unit imagined as eternal and unified.

The elusive power of analogies

The question of what makes a political regime into an evil one has become a burning one in Israel. Israel Defense Forces Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Golan provoked a ruckus earlier this year, when he expressed his fears that Israel of today contained elements that were reminiscent of the dark hours of Europe between the world wars. Former Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon, not known for his left-wing tendencies, has spoken of the country’s “dangerous drift.”

These claims, proffered by people who cannot be suspected of being pacifists, should give pause to any intelligent and responsible Israeli citizen. The political climate and policies of Israel of the last few years

have been variously qualified as “fascist,” “Nazi,” “apartheid” and reminiscent of the Weimar Republic. In this super-game of super-analogies, it has become difficult to know just what, if anything, has made Israel become an evil state.

Let me say from the outset that however much we may oppose the occupation, the analogy between Israel and Nazi Germany must be erased from our conceptual map. A small country recently born, engaged in a prolonged military conflict, dominated by a religious worldview and engaged in a messy colonial enterprise cannot be compared to an old country determined to dominate the world through a secular and racial worldview, engaged in the systematic conquest of land, and in the industrial mass destruction of civilians who were not in any way its self-declared enemies. To draw a direct line between a soldier in a concentration camp and a soldier shooting at a Palestinian attacker lying on the ground, subverts one's intelligence. However revolting both situations are, and however much they may draw on some presumed primal instinct to kill and humiliate – they occur in drastically different contexts.

The “banality of evil” thesis tempts us to such analogies, but obscures crucial differences between historical and other contexts, and ultimately confuses the similarity of our moral outrage with the similarity of contexts. Such confusion ultimately makes it more difficult to understand the nature of what we oppose. Israel is not Nazi (it does not want to conquer the world and has not industrialized its oppression of Palestinians), it is not fascist (Israel has several parties competing for power and a free press); and it is not overseeing a system of South African-style apartheid. (Apartheid was not part of a military conflict, whereas the very group that Israel oppresses and segregates, the Palestinians, are also engaged through a system of regional alliances in a military conflict with Israel through its identification with self-declared enemies of Israel as Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, Lebanon Yet, many in Israel and around the world are growing increasingly uneasy about the political actions and statements proffered by representatives of the government, so much so that we may speak of a new political regime having taken over. So what exactly is the current Israeli regime?

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein offered a concept that may help the perplexed here, using the following example: Such activities as card games, board games, ball games and strategic games are all different (with different rules and objectives) and in fact even have nothing in common (Monopoly, Scrabble and chess games have nothing in common). Yet, Wittgenstein says, we know they are all games and that they bear what he calls a “family resemblance.” We know they are games in the same way we know three people are of the same family when we look at their faces, even if we cannot pinpoint a specific identical trait. There can be a family resemblance between different objects, even if we cannot isolate a common overlapping trait.



An image grab taken from a video released on March 24, 2016 by B'Tselem showing an Israeli soldier aiming his weapon before allegedly shooting and killing a wounded Palestinian in Hebron. AFP

Wittgenstein's analogy was for language but it is an apt one to understand what is at stake here: Israel's current colonialist regime bears a family resemblance with other evil regimes, even if it does not share overlapping features with them. It is not Nazi, not apartheid, not fascist – yet it belongs to that unhappy

family. How do we know that? James Waller – a specialist in the study of the Shoah and genocide in general – gives a hint: “The greatest catastrophes occur when the distinctions between war and crime fade; when there is dissolution of the boundaries between military and criminal conduct, between civility and barbarity ... Such acts are human evil writ large.”

The question is thus the following one: Is the distinction between war and crime fading in contemporary Israel? This question was poignantly illustrated by the act of Elor Azaria, an IDF soldier in uniform who shot to death a wounded Palestinian lying on the ground, in alleged violation of all rules of military engagement. It is not by accident that this affair has shaken Israeli society to the core, sending a competent defense minister home and driving wedges between the political class, the top military brass and the general population. This is because the question that implicitly reverberated through this affair was whether the distinction between crime and war is fading in Israel.

For the distinction between warfare and crime against a population to start fading, the state itself must be the source and origin of ordinary violence directed at ordinary citizens. Moreover, such a state and its representatives must use an ideology to justify violence against the minority group, and must try to enshrine in law to make it look unavoidable, necessary and even moral.

In Israel the rabbinate has played an increasingly powerful role in transforming nationality into a quasi-racial definition, reserved only for a group that meets clear biological requirements (conversion processes are so difficult and humiliating that they are de facto a politics whose purpose is to dissuade non-Jews from joining the Jewish people, thus reinforcing the biological view that a Jew is someone born of a Jewish mother). It is not by chance that religious people in Israel are spearheading racist views. Rabbis on the public payroll call for not employing Arabs and for boycotting shops that do so; these rabbis also call on the population not to rent or sell apartments to Arabs. They frequently cite the Torah to justify the idea that that Jewish and non-Jewish lives are of unequal value. In fact, the view that Jews and non-Jews are both equally the children of God would be, for many religious Jews, sacrilege, a profanation of Judaism. The Lehava organization, that which battles against interfaith marriages and has set for itself the goal of maintaining the racial purity of Jews has been, as revealed in Haaretz in 2011, indirectly financed by the State of Israel.

A legal prohibition on civil and non-Orthodox weddings is preventing 660,000 Jewish Israelis – including 364,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union (or their children) from marrying, because one or two of the partners in the union does not conform biologically to the rabbis’ definition of Jewishness, since the mother is not Jewish. A religiously Orthodox Knesset member proudly declared his wife would not be willing to share a room in the same maternity ward as an Arab mother. His wife had asked the hospital to remove her from the care of an Arab obstetrician because, at the special moment of the birth, she wanted to be surrounded by Jews.

Such an approach is common among a certain section of the Orthodox public, and suggests a racial definition of "sanctity." The minister of education, also Orthodox, ordered the removal of a novel from the required high-school curriculum because it presented a love story between a Jewish Israeli woman and a Palestinian man from Israel (and this against the own recommendation of a panel of professionals). Such a step would have dignified many Southern states in the U.S. when slavery was still in place.

An MK, a settler, who had casually declared in the past that Israeli Arabs that turn against “us” should have their heads chopped off, was promoted to the rank of defense minister. An MK from Habayit Hayehudi declared that Palestinian women and the elderly can be legitimate targets in times of war, in violation of elementary international law. That same woman is now the minister of justice.

The chief rabbi of the Israeli army – someone who is supposed to provide moral and spiritual guidance in situations of extreme moral dilemma – declared in the past that the lives of Jews and non-Jews could never have the same value. In the occupied territories, the army itself turns a blind eye to daily crimes against Palestinians and de facto becomes an accomplice to them.



The State of Israel frequently imprisons Palestinian men, women and children without a stated charge, simply on the basis of vague suspicions. A poet – an Israeli citizen – simply calling on her Arab brothers to resist Israeli colonial rule was thrown in jail.

In this context, it is not surprising that many Israelis have enthusiastically expressed support for Elor Azaria among the general public (82 percent of those commenting on social networks expressed support of the soldier's act) and by senior politicians. In this case, the distinction between crime and acts of war fades, and the army is increasingly dragged into this process.

To dub all of the above as sporadic events or as less significant than the fact that Israel has a “vibrant democracy” is tantamount to moral bankruptcy. These acts constitute a coherent matrix, rooted not in the fundamentals of Zionist theory, but in settler ideology, which, even if the latter reflects some key themes of early Zionism, fundamentally distorted its spirit and intentions by incorporating them into a messianic view of Jewish history and a sacralization of the land.



File photo of Jewish settlers throwing rocks towards Palestinians during clashes near the Jewish settlement of Yitzhar, near Nablus, April 30, 2013. AP

Shimon Dotan's recent film, "The Settlers," is a powerful documentation of this ideology. As the movie shows persuasively, the settlement movement was from the outset both messianic and lawless, driven by a religious, mystical impulse to free Jewish land and Jewish tombs, to allow one to re-immense oneself in the land of the forefathers. Various rabbis (Abraham Isaac Kook and Moshe Levinger, for example) played a crucial role in the inception of the movement and presented these ideas with much pathos, thus transforming the Jewish people from a political entity into a mystical, trans-historical entity, having a natural right to the land promised by God himself. Settlers view themselves as direct heirs to Joshua's project to settle the land, thus reenacting the historical narrative of the Bible. This is why they hold democracy in contempt, and view it as self-evident that Jews are the chosen people, directly elected by God.

More than any other group perhaps, they dread the mixing of ethnic groups and advocate ethnic isolation (except in cases where non-Jews can provide cheap or free labor). Settler ideology is thus at once fundamentalist and lawless: It despises state authority and jurisdiction and aims to restore the kingdom of God, by violent means if necessary. This fundamentalist, lawless, anarchic and messianic ideology has slowly penetrated to the center of the state apparatus. Calls to violence now emanate from the state level, thus generating a breakdown of the rule of law and of civilization among the general population.

Countless ordinary interactions in Israel are negotiated through the violent assertion of one's right and power. Violence percolates through the Israeli social bond, rippling and undulating in many different ways. A hyper-nationalist policy creates a situation of a war of all against all, and no group is spared hatred: Arabs first and foremost, Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, non-Jews, left-wingers, right-wingers, secular people, religious people, settlers. How else should we characterize the dominion of Likud over the state, if not as the subtle normalization of violence, as the slow disintegration of law, order and justice?

A recent survey of Israeli youth, conducted by the daily Israel Hayom, captures these deep trends aptly. Among 11th and 12th graders polled, 59 percent identified themselves as right-wing, 23 percent classified themselves as centrist, and only 13 percent said they considered themselves left-wing. Similarly, 85 percent said they "love" Israel, 89 percent see their future here, and 65 percent said they agree with the line, attributed to pre-state military hero Joseph Trumpeldor, that, "It is good to die for one's country."

The same poll found nearly half of Jewish Israeli high-school students agreeing that Arabs should not have the right to vote. To the question, "Do you think Arab Israelis should be represented in the Knesset?" 48 percent of those polled responded, "no." Asked what they loved most about Israel, the top answers were that the country felt like a family and that Israelis banded together in a time of crisis."

Dotan's movie shows a striking abundance of footage of joyful settlers chanting and dancing, celebrating weddings, bar mitzvahs, births, religious holidays, land grabbing, new illegal settlements, expulsions of Palestinians, victories against the state – and mostly, reveling in the intimacy and joyful communion of the great family of the Jewish people. Even more distressing than the calls to see an Israel that extends from the Nile to the Euphrates, are the indelible images of ordinary men, joyfully chanting and dancing, advancing from victory to victory, convinced they have been divinely elected, on both the personal and collective levels, and indifferent to the thunderous the collapse of the rule of law, of justice, and of humanity itself. Greedy land grabbers have become the moral compass of Israeli Judaism.

Reinhold Niebuhr. Wikimedia Commons

In his provocatively titled "Moral Man and Immoral Society," published in 1932, the great Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argued that there is a "basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives, whether races, classes or nations."

What is this basic difference? For him, groups are inherently selfish and uncaring. He meant that groups have a tendency to close up and to fetishize themselves, and that when they crowd too densely around common beliefs about themselves, they undo the delicate normative fabric that holds diverse human beings together.

I concur with Niebuhr. Closed-up groups are selfish, have a tendency to legitimize their own violence and suffer from a deficit of intelligence. If there is one thing that powerful democracies have learned, it is that collective solidarity and strength are built inclusively rather than exclusively, by mixing different humanities and contemplating the startling outcome of hybridized forms of intelligence. Solidarity built from mythical pasts and from messianism has the fugitive beauty and engineering stupidity of a sand castle, and will be quickly washed away by history.

In the face of the chanting and dancing ecstasy of settlers, we may quote the French, 19th-century thinker Gustave Le Bon: "A group ... accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact ... Whoever can supply [a group] with illusions is clearly their master; whoever attempts to destroy illusions is always their victim."

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