Perceiving Palestinians as ‘Relative Humans’
Israeli Apartheid as a Blend of Settler-Colonial Racism and Jewish Fundamentalism

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“[T]heir nature is like the nature of mute animals, and according to my opinion they are not on the level of human beings, and their level among existing things is below that of a man and above that of a monkey, because they have the image and the resemblance of a man more than a monkey does.”

No, this wasn’t one of the regular sayings of Israeli leaders, although many of them have made shockingly similar remarks, comparing Palestinians to grasshoppers, cockroaches and cancer. This, in fact, is what Maimonides, a uniquely revered, 12th century Jewish philosopher and authority on Talmudic code, wrote about Turks, blacks and nomads in a seminal work on Judaism.

In the same spirit, Rabbi Kook the Elder, the 1st Ashkenazi Rabbi of Mandate Palestine, wrote in the early 20th Century:

“The difference between a Jewish soul and the souls of non-Jews ... is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and the souls of cattle.”

Analyzing the decisive and decades-old influence such founding conceptions of Gentiles have had on Zionism and on Israel’s unique form of apartheid, and reflecting on Israel’s incessant ethnic cleansing, en masse or gradual; its horrific Wall; its regular, indiscriminate killing of Palestinian civilians, particularly children; its incarceration of millions of civilians in fenced and controlled ghettos, denying them access to jobs, schools and hospitals; its categorical rejection of Palestinian refugee rights; and its view of its own Palestinian citizens as a demographic threat that must be resolutely dealt with, one cannot escape the conclusion that the poisonous cocktail of settler-colonialism, fanatic nationalism, and Jewish fundamentalism that defines Israel makes it the world’s most faithful apprentice of 20th Century European fascist thought.

However, deeply cognizant of its relative size, the geo-political reality in the region, and the international balance of forces, Israel has never been at liberty to reach the limits of putting its racist ideology to practice. Instead, and with the exception of the two major waves of ethnic cleansing in 1948 and 1967, Israel has opted for dehumanizing the Palestinians, simultaneously imposing on them calculated and piecemeal policies that relentlessly destroy the very viability of their socio-national existence in the historic land of Palestine.
My assertion is that Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians cannot be attributed solely to Zionism, an ostensibly secular, inherently racist, settler-colonial ideology intent on displacing a native population, despite the fact that Zionism is unparalleled in its centrality to the foundation, existence and every vital aspect of the State of Israel. Jewish fundamentalism should not be dismissed, as it has not only informed Zionism, but has also, independently of Zionism, played a key role in shaping and justifying Israel’s legal, political and moral foundations as a settler-colonial state that perceives and treats its indigenous “non-Jewish” population as relative humans, deserving only a subset of rights to which “full” humans are entitled to.

Since September 11th, we have been inundated with media reports, “expert” analyses and theories about Islamic fundamentalism and its inherent hate of “the other.” Even Christian fundamentalism is now more openly debated. Jewish fundamentalism, on the other hand, remains a taboo topic that is almost entirely censored out of academic and intellectual discourse in the west, despite its substantial weight in shaping the state’s legislation covering land ownership, marriage and divorce, inheritance, burial, conversion, among many other vital social and political domains. It is worth noting that, soon enough, one out of every five Jewish-Israeli school kids will be from an ultra-Orthodox family.

A few recent examples will help elucidate the intertwined and mutually justifying roles of Jewish fundamentalism and extreme colonial-nationalism in Israel’s policies and general outlook.

On July 30th, 2006, during its war of aggression against Lebanon, Israel committed a massacre in the village of Qana, killing dozens of children and women hiding from the relentless bombing. The Rabbinical Council of Yesha, the highest religious authority among settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, defended the massacre in an official statement saying:

"[A]ccording to Jewish law, during a time of battle and war, there is no such term as 'innocents' of the enemy. All of the discussions on Christian morality are weakening the spirit of the army and the nation and are costing us in the blood of our soldiers and civilians."\(^3\)

Before the massacre, Israel’s then minister of justice, Haim Ramon, had advocated indiscriminately bombing southern Lebanese villages to ease the pressure on the soon-to-be-defeated army. “All those now in south Lebanon are terrorists who are related in some way to Hizbollah,”\(^4\) he stated. Israel’s most popular paper, Yedioth Ahronoth, suggested entirely destroying any village from which a Katyusha is fired.\(^5\) It is worth noting that all available evidence points to the fact that no Katyusha was fired by the Lebanese resistance from Qana before the bombing.

On another front, for several months now, Israel has been subjecting more than 1.5 million Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip to not only a draconian siege, but also to slow starvation; terrorizing sound booms; gradual massacres; massive destruction of private and public property; wide scale devastation of agricultural lands; cutting off -- in an increasingly frequent manner -- electric power feeding water purification machinery, hospitals, and sewage pumping equipment; and a virtually complete ban on movement of people and goods from or to the Strip. The Israeli public’s support for these crimes and its utter disregard for the lives of Palestinians inherent in them have rarely been so universal. Even years before this latest, most brutal chapter in the history of the Israeli occupation, Oona King, a Jewish member of the British parliament, commented on the irony that Israeli Jews face today, saying: “...in escaping the ashes of the Holocaust, they have incarcerated another people in a hell similar in its nature - though not its extent - to the Warsaw ghetto.”\(^6\)
After the failure of the occupation army’s tactics in stopping the Palestinian resistance from retaliating for daily Israeli atrocities by indiscriminately firing Qassam projectiles at Israeli cities -- a form of struggle I personally never condoned on moral and pragmatic grounds, Israeli leaders and intellectuals started contemplating radical action. As Gideon Levy reports, a Major General (Res.) has called for dividing the Gaza Strip into squares, destroying one square after every Qassam is fired, while former chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon candidly proposed “cleansing the territory.”

In harmony, leading religious authorities in Israel provided edicts justifying acts of genocide in Gaza. This past May, for example, in a letter addressed to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and published in a pamphlet widely distributed in synagogues all over Israel, former Sephardic chief rabbi, Mordechai Eliyahu, ruled that there was absolutely no moral prohibition against the indiscriminate killing of Palestinian civilians during a potential massive military offensive on Gaza aimed at stopping Qassam launchings. Eliyahu based his legal decision on a biblical story and on a commentary by Maimonides. According to Jewish war ethics, he explained, an entire city holds collective responsibility for the immoral behavior of individuals.

Eliyahu's son, Shmuel Eliyahu, who is chief rabbi of Safad, went even further, advocating the carpet bombing of Gaza. "If they don't stop after we kill 100, then we must kill a thousand," he said. "And if they do not stop after 1,000 then we must kill 10,000. If they still don't stop we must kill 100,000, even a million. Whatever it takes to make them stop.”

Wars, and military campaigns aside, Israel's daily treatment of Palestinian civilians betrayed a prevalent view of Palestinians as relative humans. An exhibit titled “Breaking the Silence,” organized in Tel Aviv in 2004 by a number of conscientious Israeli soldiers who served in occupied Hebron, exposed in photographs and objects serious belligerence towards defenseless Palestinians. Inspired by Jewish settlers’ graffiti that included, “Arabs to the gas chambers”; “Arabs = an inferior race;” “Spill Arab blood;” and, of course, the ever so popular “Death to the Arabs,” soldiers used a myriad of methods to make the lives of average Palestinians intolerable, including spraying whole neighbourhoods with machine-gun bullets if a single Palestinian bullet is fired from that area.

In 2003, a staff sergeant (res.) in the Israeli army and graduate of an arts school, described to Gideon Levy the gradual transformation of every soldier to an “animal” when staffing a roadblock, irrespective of whatever values he may bring with him from home. The sergeant cites how his colleagues degraded and mercilessly beat a Palestinian dwarf just for fun; how they had a “souvenir picture” taken with bloodied, bound civilians whom they’d thrashed; how one soldier pissed on the head of a Palestinian man because the latter had “the nerve to smile” at a soldier; how another Palestinian was forced to stand on four legs and bark like a dog; and how yet another soldier asked Palestinians for cigarettes and when they refused “broke someone’s hand” and “slashed their tires.”

As savage as it is, checkpoint abuse is not the exception. At the height of Israel’s reoccupation of Palestinian cities in 2002, for example, some Israeli soldiers used their knives to engrave the Star of David on the arms of a number of detained Palestinian men and teenage boys. In the same year, at several refugee camps, during mass roundups of Palestinian males, children and elderly included, Israeli troops inscribed identification numbers “on the foreheads and forearms of Palestinian detainees awaiting interrogation." The mainstream media in Israel as well as the great majority of Israeli-Jewish civil society were far too concerned about the "public relations disaster" to express any abhorrence or protestation at the immorality of the act and the irony of it all.
Such blatant racism has become quite popular in the Israeli mainstream, including among military leaders, lawmakers, journalists and intellectuals, even among those who count themselves on the “left,” who make the European right sound liberal in comparison.

The late Israeli academic and human rights advocate, Israel Shahak, traced the roots of Israeli public justification for killing Palestinian and Lebanese civilians to authoritative readings of Jewish law. Whereas the murder of a Jew is considered a capital offence in Halakhah, the murder of a Gentile is treated quite differently. Maimonides, according to Shahak, ruled that a Jew who murders a Gentile should not be punished by a court as he is guilty only of a sin against the laws of heaven.\(^\text{13}\)

A booklet published in 1973 by the Central Region Command of the Israeli army subscribes to this same influential doctrine. In it, the Command’s Chief Chaplain writes:

> When our forces come across civilians during a war or in hot pursuit or in a raid, so long as there is no certainty that those civilians are incapable of harming our forces, then according to the Halakhah they may and even should be killed ... Under no circumstances should an Arab be trusted, even if he makes an impression of being civilized ... In war, when our forces storm the enemy, they are allowed and even enjoined by the Halakhah to kill even good civilians, that is, civilians who are ostensibly good.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1996, Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh, a leader of the powerful Lubavitch Hassidic sect, echoed the same principle, rhetorically asking, “If a Jew needs a liver, can he take the liver of an innocent non-Jew to save [the Jew]?,” answering, “The Torah would probably permit that. Jewish life has an infinite value. There is something more holy and unique about Jewish life than about non-Jewish life.”\(^\text{15}\) Moreover, Ginsburgh coauthored a booklet defending the 1994 massacre of Muslim worshippers in Al-Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron, in which he argued that, according to Jewish law, when a Jew kills a non-Jew the act does not constitute murder, adding that the killing of innocent Palestinians as an act of revenge in a milhemet mitzvah, or obligatory war, is a Jewish virtue. No religious leader in Israel challenged Ginsburgh’s assertion.

More recently, the Knesset unanimously passed a bill prohibiting animal testing in the development of detergents and cosmetics in Israel, in line with European Union regulations.\(^\text{16}\) Ironically, the Israeli army, in collaboration with research centers and manufacturers of weapons and security systems, has continued unabated, testing security and military products live on Palestinians, using such advantage in marketing. American author Naomi Klein said such field-testing treated Palestinians not only as inmates in open-air prisons, but also as “guinea pigs.”\(^\text{17}\)

Israeli experimentation on Palestinians, however, was not limited to the occupied Palestinian territory; it was conducted widely within Israel itself. A recent media report revealed that an Israeli medical professional at a hospital in Kfar Sava have conducted an illegal and unauthorized medical experiment on some 60 women, “most of whom were Arab.”\(^\text{18}\)

Israel may not be unique in using religious fundamentalism to justify colonial greed or racist policies. While settlers have done the same in the Americas and Australia, without doubt. But Israel is doing so in the 21st Century, while still being welcomed as an honorary member of the elite club of western democracies, whatever that term means at this historic juncture. Instead of being treated as a pariah state, subjected to boycott, divestment and sanctions, as apartheid South Africa was, Israel is showered with political, diplomatic and economic benefits from the US and the EU, even though it violates those entities’ own laws, not to mention international law and
universal principles of human rights. This makes the west generally complicit in maintaining the only regime on earth that uniquely claims a “right” to ethno-religious exclusivity and apartheid.

On the other hand, ethically de-colonizing or de-Zionizing Palestine with a vision of establishing a secular, democratic state that allows the Palestinian refugees to return, ends all forms of Zionist colonial oppression and racial discrimination, and transcends the hate and racism engrained in Israel’s particular form of apartheid will also require fighting religious fundamentalism of all types, as it is a chief culprit in feeding this hate and racism. Paulo Freire’s following words should guide us in this noble pursuit:

Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also … those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human… [The] Struggle [for humanization] is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed... In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity both.19

References:

4 Patrick Bishop. Diplomats argue as all of south Lebanon is targeted. Telegraph, July 28, 2006.
7 Levy. Op Cit.
9 Ibid.
14 Ibid. P. 76.
15 Ibid. P. 43.
16 Ronny Linder-Ganz. Israel taking steps to get in line with Europe on animal testing. Ha’aretz, June 22, 2007.
18 Ran Reznick. Widespread illegal experiment conducted at Meir Hospital. Ha’aretz, July 5, 2006.