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EDWARD SAID MEMORIAL LECTURE



DELIVERED BY

DR SARA ROY

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For further information about the lecture please contact:
Associate Professor Bassam Dally
Secretary, Steering Committee
Edward Said Memorial Lecture
The University of Adelaide
SA, 5005, Australia

Email: bassam.dally@adelaide.edu.au
Tel: +61-8-8303 5397
Fax: +61-8-8303 4367

**THE IMPOSSIBLE UNION OF ARAB AND JEW: REFLECTIONS ON DISSENT,
REMEMBRANCE AND REDEMPTION**

SARA ROY¹

After Edward's death Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet who recently passed away, wrote a poem bidding Edward farewell. I would like to read a passage from that poem:

He also said: If I die before you,
my will is the impossible.
I asked: Is the impossible far off?
He said: A generation away.
I asked: And if I die before you?
He said: I shall pay my condolences to Mount Galilee,
and write, "The aesthetic is to reach
poise." And now, don't forget:
If I die before you, my will is the impossible.²

Edward always emphasized the need to aspire for the "impossible" which was an important part of his humanistic discourse. He often quoted T.S. Eliot's poem "Dry Salvages," which reads in part:

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and the future
Are conquered, and reconciled . . .³

At its core the "impossible union" that Edward hoped for spoke to the need for understanding other histories, moving beyond one's own and the boundaries that define it, and seeking alternatives through vision. Edward explains:

That's why I think culture is so important. It provides a visionary alternative, a distinction between the this-worldness and the blockage that one sees so much in the world of the everyday, in which we live, which doesn't allow us to see beyond the impossible odds in power and status that are stacked, for example, against Palestinians, and the possibility of dreaming a different dream and seeing an alternative to all this. . . of always thinking the alternative. Not so much only the dream, which is rather other-worldly, but to every situation, no matter how much dominated it is, there's always an alternative. What one must train oneself is to think the alternative, and not to think the accepted and the status quo or to believe that the present is frozen.⁴

Seeking an alternative, which would allow “the oppressor and the oppressed to belong to the same history,”⁵ is itself based on the critical act, which Edward said is “first of all an act of comprehension . . . a phenomenon of consciousness,” a “humanistic activity” embracing “erudition and sympathy” and a sensitivity to inner tensions.⁶ Edward insisted that the labor of criticism must address “countercurrents, ironies and even contradictions”⁷ and he always warned that “solidarity before criticism means the end of criticism.”⁸ The critical act is essential because it can bring awareness, understanding and finally reconciliation and liberation, actualized in the “impossible union.”

These humanistic ideals, so deeply embraced by Edward, have had a pronounced impact on my work, perhaps most profoundly on the intersection between my experience with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and my understanding of Judaism, my role as a child of Holocaust survivors, and the Holocaust itself. This exploration, which is the core of my address before you today, is animated by—and itself represents—a commitment, which I have always shared with Edward, never to let a dominant point of view prevail in history without providing a counterpoint. As Eqbal Ahmad observed, it is through this counterpoint, hopefully, that “positive and universal alternatives” can be found to “sectarian ideologies, structures . . . claims”⁹ and practices. I shall argue for a more universalist alternative to the dominant Jewish understanding of the conflict but one that emanates directly from within the Jewish tradition itself, a tradition I and many others hold close.

My own thinking has been profoundly shaped by the example of my mother and father for whom dissent, witness and embrace were essential. I shall explore all of these values in turn but allow me to begin with the importance of dissent.

My parents knew horrific fear yet overcame it with courage and dignity. For them, being free of fear meant living and working anywhere they wanted; the right to education, protection and privacy, the right to practice their religion and culture without discrimination or threat of persecution. It meant the freedom to embrace the *other*. Being free of fear also meant dissent: the right—and the need—to oppose the prevailing ideas and policies they saw as wrong. This was a profound part of who my parents were, how they defined themselves, and how they re-imagined the world.

Yet dissent is often considered a form of defection and betrayal, particularly in times of conflict when the impulse to conformity is acute. This is no less true of the Jewish people than of any other. The war against dissent we have witnessed most acutely in recent years threatens not only what we think and how we construct our thoughts, but who, in the end, we become. Whether we are talking about the war in Iraq, corporate globalization, or global terrorism, our right to oppose is being stigmatized and invalidated. Arundhati Roy, the Indian writer and social activist, states it thus: “In the great cities of Europe and America, where a few years ago these things would only have been whispered, now people are openly talking about the good side of Imperialism and the need for a strong Empire to police an unruly world. The new missionaries want order at the cost of justice. Discipline at the cost of dignity. And ascendancy at any price.”¹⁰

Dissent, therefore, becomes equated with subversion, even treason. At a conference held some years ago at the University of California at Berkeley on media coverage of the Iraq war, journalists explained that one reason for their lack of critical reporting prior to the invasion was fear of appearing unpatriotic. President Bush's now famous statement less than ten days after the 11 September attacks, "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,"¹¹ leaves us with no alternatives and, perhaps more importantly, delegitimizes the dissenting views we do express. In such a polarized scenario, what recourse is there to justice? To insist on the legitimacy of criticism of unjust policies is at the heart of democracy.

The legitimacy of dissent is perhaps nowhere more challenged today than in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Yet the ethic of dissent and its crucial importance in remaking a world gone wrong is a core tenet of Judaism. And freedom of dissent has rarely been more urgent than today, when the conflict is descending so tragically into a moral abyss and when, for me at least, the very essence of Judaism, of what it means to be a Jew and a child of survivors, seems to be descending with it.

For me, the Jewish tradition of dissent and its meaning within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be separated from my own personal journey as a child of survivors. The Holocaust has been the defining feature of my life. It could not have been otherwise. I lost over 100 members of my immediate and extended family in the Nazi ghettos and death camps in Poland—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, a sibling not yet born—people from the shtetls of Poland whom I never knew, but who have always been part of my life.

Although I cannot be certain, I think my first real encounter with the Holocaust was when I first consciously noticed the number the Nazis had imprinted on my father's arm. To his oppressors, my father, Abraham, had no name, no history, and no identity other than that blue-inked number. As a small child of four or five, I remember asking my father why he had that number on his arm. He answered that he had once painted it on, but then found that it would not wash off and was left with it.

My father was one of six children, and he was the only one in his family to survive the Holocaust. His name was recognized in Holocaust circles because he was one of three known survivors of the death camp at Chelmno, Poland, where 150,000 Jews were murdered, including the majority of my family on both my father's and mother's sides. I know very little about my father's family because he could not speak about them without breaking down. It caused me such pain to see him suffer with his memories that I stopped asking him to share them.

My mother, Taube, was one of nine children. I know much more about her family, which was deeply religious and loving, from stories told to me both by her and by my aunt. Their father, Herschel, was a rabbi and *shohet* (a ritual slaughterer). He was a learned man who had studied with some of the great rabbis of Poland. As a family they

lived very modestly, but every Sabbath my grandfather would bring home a poor or homeless person who was seated at the head of the table to share the Sabbath meal.

My mother and her sister Frania were the only two in their family to survive the war, except for another sister, Shoshana, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1936. My mother and Frania had managed never to be separated throughout the entire war—through seven years in the Pabianice and Lodz ghettos, followed by the Auschwitz and Halbstadt concentration camp—except once. That was at Auschwitz. They were in a selection line, where Jews were lined up and their fate sealed by the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, who determined who would live and who would die. When my aunt came before him, he sent her to the right, to labor (a temporary reprieve), but my mother he sent to the left, to the group destined for the gas chamber. Miraculously, my mother managed to sneak back into the selection line, and when she came before Mengele a second time he sent her to the labor side.

Despite their extreme closeness, when my aunt Frania decided to go to Palestine/Israel after the war to join Shoshana, because she believed it was the only safe place for Jews, my mother made a painful choice. She refused to go. She often spoke to me of that decision, explaining that her refusal to live in Israel was based on her belief, learned and reinforced by her experiences during the war, that tolerance, compassion, and justice cannot be practiced nor extended when one lives only among one's own. "I could not live as a Jew among Jews alone," she would tell me. "For me, it wasn't possible. I wanted to live as a Jew in a pluralist society, where my group remained important to me, but where others were important to me, too."

I grew up in a home where Judaism was defined and practiced not as a religion but as a system of ethics and culture. My first language was Yiddish, which I still speak with my family. My home was filled with joy and optimism though punctuated at times by grief and loss. The notion of a Jewish homeland was important to my parents, but unlike many of their friends, they were not uncritical of Israel. Obedience to a state was not an ultimate Jewish value for them. Judaism provided the context for Jewish life, for values and beliefs that transcended national boundaries. For my mother and father, Judaism meant bearing witness, raging against injustice, and foregoing silence. It meant compassion, tolerance, and rescue, and always hearing the voice of the victim. It meant, as Ammiel Alcalay has written, ensuring to the extent possible that the memories of the past do not become the memories of the future.¹² In the absence of these imperatives, they taught me, we cease to be Jews. My parents cared profoundly about justice and fairness, and they cared profoundly about people—all people, not just their own. Looking back over my life, I see clearly how they never tried to save me from self-knowledge; instead, they insisted that I confront what I did not understand. Noam Chomsky speaks of the "parameters of thinkable thought." My mother and father constantly pushed those parameters as far as they could, which was not far enough for me, but they taught me how to push them and the importance of doing so.

It was perhaps inevitable that I would follow a path that would lead me to the Arab-Israeli issue. I had visited Israel many times while growing up. As a child, I found it

beautiful, romantic, and peaceful. As a teenager and young adult I began to feel certain contradictions that I could not fully explain, but which centered on what seemed to be the almost complete absence in Israeli life and discourse of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust and even of the Holocaust itself. I would ask my aunt why these subjects were not discussed and why Israelis didn't speak Yiddish. My questions were often met with grim silence.

Most painful to me was the denigration of the Holocaust and pre-state Jewish life by many of my Israeli friends. For them, these were times of shame when Jews were weak and passive, inferior and unworthy, deserving not of our respect but of our disdain. "We will never allow ourselves to be slaughtered again or go willingly to slaughter," they would say. There was little need to understand those millions who perished; there was even less need to honor them. Yet, at the same time, the Holocaust was used by the state as a defense against others, as a justification for political and military acts.

I could not make sense of what I was hearing. I remember feeling fear for my aunt, and also profound anger. It was around that time that I began thinking about the Palestinians and their conflict with the Jews. If so many among us could negate our own history and so pervert the truth, why not our history with the Palestinians? Was there a link of some sort between the murdered Jews of Europe and the Palestinians? I did not know it at the time, but this was where my journey—often painful, but among the most meaningful of my life—began. At my side, always, was my mother, constant in her support, although ambivalent and conflicted at times. My father died young; I do not know what he would have thought, but I have always felt his presence. My Israeli family has been steadfast in its opposition, and we do not speak about my work.

Despite many visits to Israel during my youth, the first time I visited the occupied territories was in the summer of 1985, two and a half years before the first Palestinian uprising. I was conducting fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation, which examined American economic assistance to the West Bank and Gaza Strip and whether or not it was possible to promote economic development under conditions of military occupation. That summer changed my life because it was then that I came to experience the Israeli occupation. I learned how it works, its effects on the economy, on daily life, its grinding impact on people. I learned what it meant to have little control over one's life and, more importantly, over the lives of one's children.

As I had tried to do with the Holocaust, I tried to remember my first real encounter with the occupation. One of the earliest was a scene I witnessed standing on a street with some Palestinian friends. An elderly man was walking along leading his donkey. A small child of no more than three or four, clearly his grandson, was with him. All of a sudden some nearby Israeli soldiers approached the old man and stopped him. One of them went over to the donkey and pried open its mouth. "Old man," he asked, "why are your donkey's teeth so yellow? Don't you brush your donkey's teeth?" The old Palestinian was mortified, the little boy visibly upset. The soldier repeated his question, yelling this time, while the other soldiers laughed. The child began to cry and the old man just stood there silently, humiliated. As the scene continued a crowd gathered. The soldier

then ordered the old man to stand behind the donkey and demanded that he kiss the animal's behind. At first, the old man refused but as the soldier screamed at him and his grandson became hysterical, he bent down and did it. The soldiers laughed and walked away. We all stood there in silence, ashamed to look at each other, the only sound the sobs of the little boy. The old man, demeaned and destroyed, did not move for what seemed a very long time.

I stood in stunned disbelief. I immediately thought of the stories my parents had told me of how Jews had been treated by the Nazis in the 1930s, before the ghettos and death camps, of how Jews would be forced to clean sidewalks with toothbrushes and have their beards cut off in public. What happened to the old man was equivalent in principle, intent, and impact: to humiliate and dehumanize. Throughout that summer of 1985, I saw similar incidents: young Palestinian men stopped in the streets by Israeli soldiers and forced to bark like dogs on their hands and knees or sometimes to dance.

As a child, I always wanted to be able in some way to experience what my parents endured. I listened to their stories, always wanting more. I often would ask myself, what does sheer terror feel like? What does it look like? What does it mean to lose one's whole family so horrifically or have an entire way of life extinguished so irrevocably? I would try to imagine myself in their place, but it was impossible. It was beyond my reach, unfathomable.

It was not until I lived with Palestinians under occupation that I found at least part of the answer to some of these questions. I was not searching for the answers; they were thrust upon me. I learned, for example, what terror looks like from my friend Rabia, eighteen years old, frozen by fear and uncontrollable shaking, stood rooted to the floor in the middle of the room we shared in a refugee camp while Israeli soldiers tried to break down the door to our shelter. I myself experienced the paralysis of terror when I stood by helplessly while Israeli soldiers beat a pregnant woman in her belly because she had flashed a V-sign at them. I could more concretely understand the meaning of loss and displacement when I witnessed grown men sob as Israeli army bulldozers destroyed their home and everything in it because the house had been built without a permit, repeatedly denied by the authorities.

It is perhaps in the concept of home and shelter that I find the most profound link between the Jews and the Palestinians and, perhaps, the most painful illustration of the meaning of occupation. I cannot begin to describe how horrible it is to watch the deliberate destruction of a family's home while that family watches, powerless to stop it. For Jews as for Palestinians, a house represents far more than a roof over one's head; it represents life itself. Speaking about the demolition of Palestinian homes, Israeli historian and scholar Meron Benvenisti writes,

It would be hard to overstate the symbolic value of a house to an individual for whom the culture of wandering and of becoming rooted to the land is so deeply engrained in tradition, for an individual whose national mythos is based on the tragedy of being uprooted from a stolen homeland. The arrival of a firstborn son

and the building of a home are the central events in such an individual's life because they symbolize continuity in time and physical space. And with the demolition of the individual's home comes the destruction of the world.¹³

For the last forty-one years, occupation has meant dislocation and dispersion; the separation of families; the denial of human, civil, legal, political, and economic rights imposed by a system of military rule; the torture of thousands; the confiscation of tens of thousands of acres of land and the uprooting of tens of thousands of trees; the destruction of more than 18,000 Palestinian homes; the relentless expansion of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands; the undermining and then the destruction of the Palestinian economy; closure; curfew; geographic fragmentation; demographic isolation.

Israel's occupation of the Palestinians is not the moral equivalent of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. It does not have to be. The fact that it is not in no way tempers the brutality of the repression, which has become frighteningly normal. Occupation is about the domination and dispossession of one people by another. It is about the destruction of their property and the destruction of their soul. At its core, occupation aims to deny Palestinians their humanity by denying them the right to determine their existence, to live normal lives in their own homes. And just as there is no moral equivalence or symmetry between the Holocaust and the occupation, so there is no moral equivalence or symmetry between the occupier and the occupied, no matter how much we as Jews regard ourselves as victims.

And it is from this context of deprivation and suffocation, now largely forgotten, that the horrific and despicable suicide bombings have emerged and taken the lives of more innocents. Like the settlements, razed homes, and barricades that preceded them, the suicide bombers have not always been there.

Memory in Judaism—like all memory—is dynamic, not static, embracing a multiplicity of voices and shunning the hegemony of one. But in the post-Holocaust world, Jewish memory has failed in one critical respect: it has excluded the reality of Palestinian suffering and Jewish culpability therein. As a people, we have been unable to link the creation of Israel with the displacement of the Palestinians. We have been unwilling to see, let alone remember, that finding our place meant the loss of theirs. Perhaps one reason for the ferocity of the conflict today is that Palestinians are insisting on their voice despite our continued and desperate efforts to suppress it.

Within the Jewish community it has always been considered a form of heresy to compare Israeli actions or policies with those of the Nazis, and certainly one must be very careful in doing so. Yet however vast the difference in scope, however lacking in symmetry the experiences, the Holocaust and the Palestinian issue in a sense *are* related. Among the many realities that frame contemporary Jewish life are the birth of Israel, remembrance of the Holocaust, and Jewish power and sovereignty. And it cannot be denied that the latter has a critical corollary: the displacement and oppression of the Palestinian people. We celebrate our strength but at its core lies a counsel of despair.¹⁴ For Jewish identity is linked, willingly or not, to Palestinian suffering and this suffering is

now an irrevocable part of our collective memory and an intimate part of our experience, together with the Holocaust and Israel. This is a linkage about which Marc Ellis, in my view one of the greatest and most courageous Jewish religious thinkers of our time, has pondered long and hard. How, he asks, are we to celebrate our Jewishness while others are being oppressed? Is the Jewish covenant with God present or absent in the face of Jewish oppression of Palestinians? Is the Jewish ethical tradition still available to us? Is the promise of holiness—so central to Jewish existence—now beyond our ability to reclaim?¹⁵ We find ourselves living in a dissonant place; what text can be used to end the dissonance and create a new way of life?

Today, according to Ellis, renewal and injustice are silently joined, and in their joining Jews are denied a normal life, something they have never truly found in Israel. How then do Jews move forward and create meaning? For some Jews, this meaning is now found in a personal narrative that is slowly shifting from identification with a strong, militarized state to one that embraces a history of displacement and loss. Such a trend, which is documented, could signal an opening to the Palestinians, a path of seeking engagement over disengagement, inclusion over exclusion. But too often it involves closure on the self, a dwelling on one's own displacement and loss at the expense of others.

In this regard, Ellis argues that to place the Holocaust only in the past uncouples Auschwitz from the future, making it directionless. Auschwitz cannot stand alone in a vacuum, as some Jewish theologians believe it should, for it did not occur in a vacuum. Continuity is essential; the past cannot be used as insulation from the present; the dead cannot be used to shield the living. We dwell in memory and use that memory not to protest and restore but to grieve and deny, as a form of separation and distance. We live alongside the dead and mourning them has itself become “a place of hiding rather than confrontation, a place of safety rather than of risk.”¹⁶ How can one continue to be blameless while causing suffering to others, to grieve but not to atone? How can innocence be restored while injustice continues? Are Jews thus guarding “a history that is violated or denied, even as it is invoked?”¹⁷

In a letter to Theodor Herzl written in 1899, Bernard Lazare reproached him for ignoring the impoverished condition of Eastern European Jewry in his vision of a new Zionist nation, and his words have pertinence for Jews today, however different the context: “We die from hiding our shames, from burying them in deep caves, instead of bringing them out into the pure light of day where the sun can cauterize and purify them. . . . We must educate our nation by showing it what it is.”¹⁸

Concerning Auschwitz, the writer Daniel Singer once said that it is both unique and comparable. Auschwitz is a warning and it is a call for comparison. As Ellis asks, do we choose to be among “those who [only] memorialize the dead in institutional and liturgical settings, or those who recognize and accompany the victims created in the shadow of the Holocaust?”¹⁹ Memorialization without justice is hollow. It is not possible to tolerate injustice in the name of peace. Only when “distance becomes proximity, and separation becomes embrace,” writes Ellis, can peace prevail.²⁰

Yet, too often we as a people have refused proximity over distance, we calmly, even gratefully refuse to see what is right before our eyes. We are no longer compelled—if we ever were—to understand our behavior from positions outside our own, to enter, as the British scholar Jacqueline Rose has written, into each other’s predicaments and make what is one of the hardest journeys of the mind.²¹ Hence, there is no need to maintain a living connection with the people we are oppressing, to humanize them, taking into account the experience of subordination itself, as Edward said. We are not preoccupied by our cruelty nor are we haunted by it. The task, ultimately, is to tribalize pain, narrowing the scope of human suffering to ourselves alone. Such willful blindness leads to the destruction of principle and the destruction of people, eliminating all possibility of embrace, but it tragically gives us solace.

Jacqueline Rose speaks of the “stubborn and self-defeating psychic terrain” that Jews have entered, where the

most exultant acts towards—and triumph over—an indigenous people expose them to the dangers they most fear. . . . Israel is vulnerable because it cannot see the people who—whether in refugee camps on borders (the putative Palestinian state) or inside the country (Israeli Arabs), or scattered all over the world (the Palestinian diaspora)—are in fact, psychically as well as politically, in its midst.²²

Why is it so difficult, even impossible to incorporate Palestinians and other Arab peoples into the Jewish understanding of history? Why is there so little perceived need to question our own narrative (for want of a better word) and the one we have given others, preferring instead to cherish beliefs and sentiments that remain impenetrable? Within the organized Jewish community especially, it has always been unacceptable to claim that Arabs, Palestinians especially, are like us, that they, too, possess an essential humanity and must be included within our moral boundaries, ceasing to be “a kind of solution,” a useful, hostile “other” to borrow from Edward.²³ That any attempt at separation is artificial, an abstraction. We withhold mutuality and codify difference. Why is it virtually mandatory among Jewish intellectuals to oppose racism, repression and injustice almost anywhere in the world and unacceptable—indeed, for some, an act of heresy—to oppose it when Israel is the oppressor, choosing concealment over exposure? For many among us history and memory adhere to preclude reflection and tolerance.

Can we be ordinary, an essential part of our rebirth after the Holocaust? Is it possible to be normal when we seek refuge in the margin, and remedy in the dispossession and destruction of another people? How can we create when we acquiesce with such unbearable ease to the demolition of homes, construction of barriers, denial of sustenance, and ruin of innocents? How can we be merciful when, to use Rose’s words, we seek “omnipotence as the answer to historical pain?”²⁴ What happens to a nation, asks the Israeli writer David Grossman that cannot save its own child, words written before his own son was killed in Lebanon?

The history of both peoples is broken, scattered. They inhabit a shared landscape defined by dislocation and death. For repair or restitution—*tikkun*—to take shape, Ellis calls for the creation of a “new ordinary” still unresolved—that can only occur as a shared reality, something Edward called for as well when he wrote, “We cannot coexist as two communities of detached and uncommunicatingly separate suffering.”²⁵

In a post-Holocaust world empowered by a Jewish state, how do Jews as a people emerge from atrocity and abjection, empowered and also humane? How is it possible to move “past the defences of the conscious mind” to use Rose’s words, beyond fear and omnipotence, beyond innocence and militarism, to envision something different, even if uncertain? “How,” asks Ahad Haam, the founding father of cultural Zionism, “do you make a nation pause for thought?”²⁶

Judaism has always prided itself on reflection, critical examination, and philosophical inquiry. The Talmudic mind examines a sentence, a word, in a multitude of ways, seeking all possible interpretations and searching constantly for the one left unsaid. Through such scrutiny it is believed comes the awareness needed to protect the innocent, prevent injury or harm, and be closer to God. Yet, these are now gone from our ethical system. Rather the imperative is to see through eyes that are closed, unfettered by investigation. Where there was purpose there is now vacancy. We conceal our guilt by remaining the abused, despite our power, creating situations where our victimization is assured and our innocence affirmed. We salve our wounds with our incapacity for remorse, which will be our undoing. Within this paradigm it is dissent not conformity that will diminish and destroy us. We prefer this abyss to peace, which would hurl us unacceptably inward toward awareness and acknowledgement.

How can the children of the Holocaust do such things, they ask? But are we really their rightful offspring?

As the Holocaust survivor dies, the horror of that period and its attendant lessons withdraw further into abstraction and for some Jews, many of them in Israel, alienation. The Holocaust stands not as a lesson but as an internal act of purification where tribal attachment rather than ethical responsibility is demanded and used to define collective action. Perhaps this was an inevitable outcome of Jewish nationalism, of applying holiness to politics, but whatever its source, it has weakened us terribly and cost us greatly.

Silvia Tennenbaum, a survivor and activist writes: “No matter what great accomplishments were ours in the diaspora, no matter that we produced Maimonides and Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn and hundreds of others of mankind’s benefactors—not a warrior among them!—we look at the world of our long exile always in the dark light of the Shoah. But this, in itself, is an obscene distortion: would the author . . . Primo Levi, or the poet Paul Celan demand that we slaughter the innocents in a land far from the snow-clad forests of Poland? Is it a heroic act to murder a child, even the child of an enemy? Are my brethren glad and proud? . . . And, it goes without saying, loyal Jews must talk about the Holocaust. Ignore the images of today’s dead and dying and focus on

the grainy black and white pictures showing the death of Jews in the villages of Poland, at Auschwitz and Sobibor and Bergen-Belsen. We are the first, the only true victims, the champions of helplessness for all eternity.”²⁷

What did my family perish for in the ghettos and concentration camps of Poland? Is their role to be exploited and in the momentary absence of violence, to be forgotten and abandoned?

Holocaust survivors stood between the past and the present, bearing witness, sometimes silently, and even in word, often unheard. Yet, they stood as a moral challenge among us and also as living embodiments of a history, way of life and culture that long predated the Holocaust and Zionism (and that Zionism has long denigrated), refusing, in their own way, to let us look past them. Yet, this generation is nearing its end and as they leave us, I wonder what is truly left to take their place, to fill the moral void created by their absence?

Is it, in the words of a friend, himself a Jew, a “memory manufactory, with statues, museums and platoons of ‘scholars’ designed to preserve, indeed ratchet up Jewish feelings of persecution and victimhood, a Hitler behind every Katyusha or border skirmish, which must be met with some of the same crude slaughterhouse tools the Nazis employed against the Jews six decades ago: ghettos, mass arrests and the denigration of their enemy’s humanity?” Do we now measure success in human bodies and in carnage, arguing that our dead bodies are worth more than theirs, our children more vulnerable and holy, more in need of protection and love, their corpses more deserving of shrouds and burial? Is meaning for us to be derived from martyrdom or from children born with a knife in their hearts? Will we ever be able to mourn the devastation? Is this how my grandmother and grandfather are to be remembered?

Where do Jews belong? Where is our place? Is it in the ghetto of a Jewish state whose shrinking boundaries threaten, one day, to evict us? We are powerful but not strong. Our power is our weakness, not our strength, because it is used to instill fear rather than trust, and because of that, it will one day destroy us if we do not change. More and more we find ourselves detached from our past, suspended and abandoned, alone, without anchor, aching—if not now, eventually—for connection and succor. Grossman has written that as a dream fades it does not become a weaker force but a more potent one, desperately clung to, even as it ravages and devours.

We consume the land and the water behind walls and steel gates forcing out all others. What kind of place are we creating? Are we fated to be an intruder in the dust to borrow from Faulkner, whose presence shall evaporate with the shifting sands? Are these the boundaries of our rebirth after the Holocaust?

I have come to accept that Jewish power and sovereignty and Jewish ethics and spiritual integrity are, in the absence of reform, incompatible, unable to coexist or be reconciled. For if speaking out against the wanton murder of children is considered an act of disloyalty and betrayal rather than a legitimate and needed act of dissent, and

where dissent is so ineffective and reviled, a choice is ultimately forced upon us between Zionism and Judaism.

Rabbi Hillel the Elder long ago emphasized ethics as the center of Jewish life. Ethical principles or their absence will contribute to the survival or destruction of our people. Yet, today what we face is something different and possibly more perverse: it is not the disappearance of our ethical system but its rewriting into something disfigured, unrecognizable.

It follows that one of the greatest struggles facing the Jewish people is a search for meaning in a universe that has been violated and shattered in the past, and also in the present.

What then is the answer? How can we as a people reconcile with those we fear and they with us, and realize Edward's impossible union of Arab and Jew?

For many Jews (and Christians), the answer still lies in a strong and militarized Jewish state. For others, it is found in the very act of survival. For my parents, defeating Hitler meant living a *moral* life; if we hate, Hitler wins. They sought a world where "affirmation is possible and . . . dissent is mandatory,"²⁸ where the capacity to witness is restored and sanctioned, where Jews as a people refuse to be overcome by the darkness and turn away from their power to destroy. In this context, I want to share a moment I heard described over and over, and which has inspired all of my work and writing.

My mother and her sister had just been liberated from concentration camp by the Russian army. After having captured all the Nazi officials and guards who ran the camp, the Russian soldiers told the Jewish survivors that they could do whatever they wanted to their German persecutors. Many survivors, themselves emaciated and barely alive, immediately fell on the Germans, ravaging them. My mother and my aunt, standing just yards from the terrible scene unfolding in front of them, fell into each other's arms weeping. My mother, who was the physically stronger of the two, embraced my aunt, holding her close and my aunt, who had difficulty standing, grabbed my mother as if she would never let go. She said to my mother, "We cannot do this. Our father and mother would say this is wrong. Even now, even after everything we have endured, we must seek justice, not revenge. There is no other way."²⁹ My mother, still crying, kissed her sister and the two of them turned and walked away.

What then is the source of our redemption, our salvation? It lies ultimately in our willingness to acknowledge the other—the victims we have created—Palestinian, Lebanese and also Jewish—and the injustice we have perpetrated as a grieving people. It lies in acknowledging histories beyond our own and the common threads that bind them together. Perhaps then we can pursue a more just solution in which we seek to be ordinary rather than absolute, where we finally come to understand that our only hope is not to die peacefully in our homes as one Zionist official put it long ago but to live peacefully in those homes.

I would like to end this address with the words of Irena Klepfisz, a writer whose father died in the Warsaw ghetto uprising after having gotten her and her mother to safety. She writes

I have concluded that one way to pay tribute to those we loved who struggled, resisted and died is to hold on to their vision and their fierce outrage at the destruction of the ordinary life of their people. It is this outrage we need to keep alive in our daily life and apply it to all situations, whether they involve Jews or non-Jews. It is this outrage we must use to fuel our actions and vision whenever we see any signs of the disruptions of common life: the hysteria of a mother grieving for the teenager who has been shot; a family stunned in front of a vandalized or demolished home; a family separated, displaced; arbitrary and unjust laws that demand the closing or opening of shops and schools; humiliation of a people whose culture is alien and deemed inferior; a people left homeless without citizenship; a people living under military rule. Because of our experience, we recognize these evils as obstacles to peace. At those moments of recognition, we remember the past, feel the outrage that inspired the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto and allow it to guide us in present struggles.³⁰

Thus, we must remember those who died—not only to memorialize their deaths but to honor their lives by affirming the ordinary life of people, both Palestinian and Jewish. This then is my visionary alternative, creating as Edward said, the possibility of dreaming a different dream where finally, to quote T.S. Eliot, “the fire and the rose are one.”³¹

¹ A version of this essay entitled, “On Dignity and Dissent: The Journey of a Child of Holocaust Survivors,” will appear in Camille Mansour and Leila Fawaz (eds.), *Transformed Landscapes* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009). This lecture draws on three previous essays: “Living with the Holocaust: The Journey of a Child of Holocaust Survivors,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 2002); “Searching for the Covenant: A Response to the Work of Marc H. Ellis,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 17, no. 3 (September 2003); and “A Jewish Plea,” in Nubar Hovsepian (ed.), *The War on Lebanon: A Reader* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2008).

² Mahmoud Darwish, *Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading*, Al-Ahram Weekly Online: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/710/cu4.htm>.

³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 281.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian* (Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines Press, 1994, pp. 104-105.

⁵ Eqbal Ahmad, “Introduction,” in Edward W. Said, *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian*, p.18.

⁶ Taken from Benita Parry, “Counter-Currents and Tensions in Said’s Critical Practice,” Paper delivered at The Edward Said Symposium: Locations—Readings—Legacies, Berlin, 25-27 September 2008. Original sources cited: *Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); and “Introduction to Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis*,” in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Eqbal Ahmad, “Introduction,” in Edward W. Said, *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Arundhati Roy, “The New American Century,” *Nation*, 9 February 2004.

¹¹ George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 20 September 2001.

¹² See Ammiel Alcalay, *Memories of Our Future: Selected Essays, 1982–1999* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1999).

¹³ Meron Benvenisti, “Systematically Burying Ourselves,” *Ha’Aretz*, 18 January 2002.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Rose, “‘Imponderables in Thin Air’: Zionism as Psychoanalysis (Critique).” Second lecture (of three) of the Christian Gauss seminars on “The Question of Zion,” Princeton University, 16–23 September 2003. The three Gauss lectures were later published as *The Question of Zion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); see p. 63.

¹⁵ See Marc H. Ellis, “The Future of Dissent: A Reflection on *What Shall I Do With This People? Jews and the Fractious Politics of Judaism* by Milton Viorst,” *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

¹⁶ Marc H. Ellis, *Practicing Exile: The Religious Odyssey of an American Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 124.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, “‘Break their Bones’: Zionism as Politics (Violence).” Third lecture (of three) of the Christian Gauss seminars on “The Question of Zion,” Princeton University, 16–23 September 2003. See Rose, *The Question of Zion*, pp. 144–45.

¹⁹ Ellis, *Practicing Exile*, p. 59.

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- ²⁰ Marc H. Ellis, *O Jerusalem! The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 91.
- ²¹ Jacqueline Rose, *Suffering and Injustice Enough for Everyone—On Empathy and the Complexity of Political Life, Essay in Honor of Edward Said*, Draft, May 2004.
- ²² Jacqueline Rose, “The Question of Zionism: Continuing the Dialogue,” Memorial for Edward Said, Paris 2004. This lecture was reprinted in *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 512–18.
- ²³ Edward Said’s favorite poem by Constantine Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” says, “they were, those people, a kind of solution.” See Alik Barnstone (trans), *The Collected Poems of C.P. Cavafy: A New Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).
- ²⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso), 2007.
- ²⁵ Edward Said, “Bases for Coexistence,” in the *End of the Peace Process—Oslo and After* (London: Granta, 2000), p. 208 (cited in Rose, “The Question of Zionism”).
- ²⁶ Rose, ““Imponderables in Thin Air.””
- ²⁷ Silvia Tennenbaum, “Why doesn’t Israel work for peace?” *Newsday.com*, August 4, 2006.
- ²⁸ Ellis, *O Jerusalem!*, p. 123.
- ²⁹ Sara Roy, “A Jewish Plea,” in Nubar Hovsepian (ed), *The War on Lebanon: A Reader*.
- ³⁰ Irena Klepfisz, “Yom Hashoah, Yom Yerushalayim: A Meditation,” in *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1980).
- ³¹ T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* (No 4 of ‘Four Quartets’), www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/giddling.html.