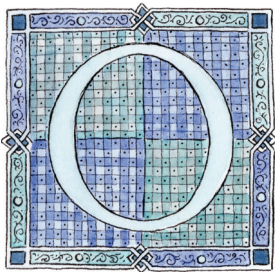


# How Not to Think About the Conflict



OVER A YEAR AGO, pre-COVID, when delegations of students were still coming to Israel on planes, I met with a group to discuss Israel, Zionism, and the conflict. During the Q&A session, I was asked by one student to comment on how “colorism” affects the conflict between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. While I had often heard this question framed in the context of racism, it was the first time I was asked about the conflict as one of “colorism.” Reflecting on this question, I thought that perhaps it had finally dawned on those studying the conflict that, to the extent race means anything, Jews and Arabs definitely do not constitute two separate “races,” so perhaps someone thought variations of skin tone — “color” — would make sense of the conflict in a way that Americans could understand.

Since analyzing the conflict in terms of skin tones made about as much sense as race, and since the talk took place in a hotel meeting room in Jaffa, I simply challenged the young student to go out into the city, where the population is a mix of Arabs and Jews, and, upon her return, tell me whether she could tell Jews apart

from Arabs based only on their “color.” Even without going outside, she admitted she was not likely to be able to do so. Marshalling all my patience gained from years of having to address false parallels and analogies, I explained that Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians are engaged in a century-old conflict that rests on issues of nation, religion, theology, tribes, receding empires, carved-out states, history, and geography — all great and relevant lenses from which to analyze it. Race and color are not.

Normally, we expect people to try to understand things that are foreign to them by placing them in familiar frameworks and by drawing parallels with their own situations. Having discussed the conflict over the years with groups from India, China, Japan, Europe, Africa, and Latin America, I was always struck by the parallels they found between, on one hand, the history of the Jews, Zionism, and the conflict and, on the other, their own countries’ and peoples’ histories. Those were always interesting for me to hear, and I considered them an honest effort by people to grapple with a place and a people that were not their own.

But unlike these earnest attempts to understand a foreign place and people, some parallels are more ill-intentioned, drawn for the express purpose of intervening in the conflict on behalf of one side, or for reasons that are more about the domestic issues of the people drawing the comparisons than about the conflict itself.

Drawing parallels to cast one side in the conflict as evil and the other as good might have the effect of marshaling support and resources for the side that one favors, but such a strategy is counterproductive, and even just plain stupid, if the goal is actually to engage with the real issues at hand, to solve the conflict and attain peace. “Evil” must always be fought and defeated — so to cast the conflict as a fight between good and evil is effectively to argue that no compromise can be made until the other side disappears or signs an unconditional surrender.

For decades, critics have cast Jews, Israel, and Zionism as the evil side in the conflict through their consistent and persistent

employment of the “Placard Strategy”: utilizing simple equations such as those that might appear on a placard in an anti-Israel demonstration. On one side of the equation are Israel, Zionism, and images such as the Star of David. The evil *du jour* is the other side, whether it is Imperialism, Colonialism, Racism, Apartheid or—for the truly determined—Genocide and Nazism. Most recently, White Supremacy was added to the list.

The Placard Strategy is so effective that it is employed everywhere and anywhere, from the UN (Zionism = Racism), to the International Criminal Court (Israel = Crimes Against Humanity), to various media and social media, where anti-Israel speakers invariably manage to respond to any question regarding Israel with the words “Apartheid,” “Racist,” and “Colonialist,” regardless of the question or topic discussed. These words are considered a standard reply to Israelis posting photos of themselves eating ice cream in Tel Aviv.

The Placard Strategy has never been about actual facts and policies. If there was ever a time when it was at least used for purposes that had to do with the conflict itself, that time has passed. Nowadays, the equations and parallels reflect more on the domestic concerns of the protesters than they illuminate any real issues in Israel and the Middle East.

I first saw this phenomenon when visiting Ireland and Northern Ireland several years ago. As I traveled around and met with officials, the analogy emerged: Israel = Protestants/Northern Irish/Britain, and the Palestinians = Irish Catholics. As I visited sites throughout Belfast, the Protestant areas were flying Israeli flags, and the Catholic areas had Palestinian flags, creating an eerie feeling that the Northern Irish conflict, supposedly ended by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was still simmering.

It wasn't just the flags: Catholics and Protestants alike described the Israeli–Palestinian conflict with intense emotion, usually coupled with remarkable ignorance. One Sinn Féin member of Parliament even went so far as to accuse Israel of committing genocide—which is when I realized that these emotions had nothing

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to do with our conflict and everything to do with their own. It was as if, with their struggle officially resolved, the Catholics and Protestants couldn't let go—they needed a new way to channel, experience, and display the full range of intense emotions that had fueled them during their own struggle.

But this time, of course, they bore none of the consequences of these feelings and opinions. My colleague Igal Ram once termed this a “Disneyland of Hate”: For those outside the actual Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it was a safe—Disneyland—way of experiencing a roller coaster of intense emotions missing from their dull post-peace lives. In a world that is actually more peaceful than ever, and where negative, violence-related emotions, such as hatred—and especially hatred of groups and collectives—are less legitimate than ever, the continuing acceptance of hatred for Israel endures. Couching it in terms of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict enabled some Irish Catholics a rare and safe outlet for the open expression of the least legitimate emotion of all, hate, in a world where their own official peace agreement had failed to eliminate intense negative emotions built over decades of conflict.

A visit to South Africa provided me with a similar experience. Especially after the 2010 World Cup, South Africa had successfully rebranded itself as the post-apartheid Rainbow Nation. But the

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situation on the ground was one where apartheid and its effects continued to exist in practice, if not in name. Challenges of rampant poverty, inequality, illiteracy, and corruption plagued the country. Yet, many of the young people I met seemed possessed by what they viewed as the urgent need to fight “Apartheid Israel.”

Noticing once again the intensity of their emotions, I realized that they, too, had bought a ticket to this “Disneyland of Hate.” Their parents and grandparents had actually fought apartheid in South Africa, paying a hard price but also experiencing the glory not only of common struggle, but of victory. Life for their children was not so dramatic — their job, instead, was the dull and exhausting work of solving the deep-seated problems that apartheid had created. Continuing the glorious battle — just transposing it onto a faraway land with no regard for the actual situation there — meant they could tap into the glory without experiencing any of the pain.

In the United States, the discussion of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict increasingly resembles this “Disneyland of Hate.” If American discussions of the conflict were once focused on the conflict itself and on specific policy proposals designed to advance its resolution, this is clearly no longer the case. Like in Ireland and South Africa, the conflict has become a stand-in for American positions, where self-styled social justice warriors substitute the hard and tedious work of addressing domestic challenges with the vicarious heroism of fighting for the grand ideal of “Palestinian Rights.”

America is increasingly removed from its years of glorious global victories and celebrated domestic battles. The last war it won was Cold, and its recent “hot” wars have been a string of sorry messes; even the military-industrial complex has realized that it can sell more weapons by promoting peace. The grand battles for civil rights and liberation have attained so much that the current battles for equity and equality now require a consistent focus on far more tedious issues like infrastructure, health, and education. In the absence of these exciting opportunities to defeat real Nazis in actual wars, or to attain decisive gains for civil rights, those who claim to promote social justice have latched on to the conflict in Israel in a desperate effort to appear, if only to their own in-group, as heroic warriors for “justice.” It is as if the conflict serves as a hallucinatory drug for those seeking to escape a dull reality and tedious long-term challenges, allowing them to imagine themselves engaged in a heroic struggle between good and evil, where victories are swift and definitive — to be Captain America and save the day.

And so, in an act of blatant neocolonialism, the American story is viewed as the universal prism through which all societies should be understood and analyzed. Blithely ignorant of the specificity of their own experience, the neocolonialists fit the square peg of the conflict into the round hole of American history. Jews are bizarrely cast as “white,” and Zionism as a movement of “white supremacy,” while Arabs, who look exactly like Jews (*Fauda*, anyone?), are cast as “people of color.” The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is cast as a mirror of race relations in America, but without the relevant local context of slavery, Jim Crow, or any of the specificities of Jewish, Arab, or Middle Eastern history.

Since these analogies have nothing to do with Israel and everything to do with projections of domestic issues and animosities, the best response is simply to refuse to give them the respect of treating them as honest arguments and dismiss the pretension that these issues have anything to do with Israel or Zionism. At

most, the response should acknowledge and address the underlying domestic issues rather than their anti-Zionist mask.

The irony is that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict doesn’t provide much in the way of heroism anymore either. It is one of the least violent conflicts in the world, leading to far fewer violent deaths than most American cities experience each year. The contours of the slow separation between the State of Israel and an emerging Palestinian state are becoming more defined, and Israelis and Palestinians continue their close security cooperation. The growing normalization between Israel and many Arab states points to a regional exhaustion with “the conflict,” and a sense that Israel is part and parcel of the Middle East. A dull gray envelops a region that once seemed to promise grand battles between good and evil, black and white, Armageddon and salvation.

Yet, in a world where so much is colored in dull gray, the market for black and white is as strong as ever. If actual, real-life Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians are not going to supply the grand battle for right and wrong, then those who are addicted to this hallucinatory drug will have to invent it.

Yes, there are serious, complicated, and appropriate ways to understand the conflict between Israel, its Arab neighbors, and the Palestinians. None of them includes a grand battle between good and evil. But I can testify that when I sit with audiences and talk about the history of Ottoman decline, or the rise of nation-states to replace receding empires, or the interplay of various imperial and Cold War interests with those of various ethnic and religious groups, the eyes of most people glaze over. They want to know: Who are the good guys? Who are the bad? Which side should I root for — who is my team?

But Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, are not sports teams. They are not stand-ins for good and evil, symbols for the struggles in one’s own group much closer to home — they are not a drug for generating intense feelings in a dull reality. Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, are real people. They are struggling to

resolve centuries-long conflicts, which they are slowly doing. That is a far better use of their time than serving as props and collateral damage in the domestic morality tales of other countries, giving an outlet for people to channel negative emotions with which they should be dealing on their own. Which is why, increasingly, Israelis and even Palestinians watch the intense debates taking place half-way across the world in their name and are left wondering: What does all of this have to do with us? \*