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Letter to an Anti-Zionist Idealist



EAR J,

If the proper study of mankind begins with man, as the poet Alexander Pope once put it, then it seems reasonable that the proper study of Israel should begin with the Jew. This, by way of permitting myself

to stand in as that Jew and start with a personal tale: One afternoon in December 1978 in Tehran, only a few weeks before Iran’s cataclysmic revolution, a chain of knocks pounded the door of our home, rattling it in its frame. My father rushed to the living room, where we watched everyone’s comings and goings through the large windows that overlooked the courtyard. I buzzed the caller in. My father’s sister, Monavar, walked in—messily dressed, her hair an untidy mass, her face blurred behind a stream of tears. Alarmed at her sight, my father did not greet her, but cried out, “Monavari”—the added “i” was his diminutive for her—“what’s wrong?”

At the question, she erupted into a frenzy of words, which yielded only to sobs. Two days earlier, there had been a demonstration in Khonsar, a small city in central Iran, where my aunt and her family lived and, along with my uncle's two brothers, ran a fabric business. After a while, the demonstration had devolved into looting. The mob had broken into the store, chanting "Jews get lost!" The store had been far more than a business to the three families. It was also a safety deposit box, for they had been tucking all their savings into the rolls of cloth for years. The store had also been their home, for the three families lived above it. The looters had ransacked the store, then doused what they could with kerosene. The fabric proved more flammable than any kindling. In a matter of hours, much of what they had ever owned turned into a smoldering heap.

It took a long time and a feverish conversation between the siblings in their own Judeo-Persian dialect till my father was able to comfort my aunt. They had thought things through, and by the end, she left our home looking determined, as if she had a plan. Two weeks later, we all caught a glimpse of that plan: My aunt and uncle, along with the other two families and their combined 18 children—a grief-stricken lot whose entire wealth was reduced to several bloated suitcases held together by tightly knotted ropes—boarded a plane bound for Israel.

I know of no "apartheid state," dear J, that has been the sole sanctuary for those who have been turned away by every other country. Do you? I cannot name any colonialists who have been second-class citizens nearly everywhere in the world, including in Palestine under the Ottomans, the very land where the ruins of their own ancient kingdom still stand. On his daily walks to school in Khonsar, my father and his siblings were often pelted with rocks. That was on sunny days. On rainy days, they were not allowed to attend school. The locals believed Jews to be "Najes," unclean, and feared that any splash of rainwater

off their bodies onto theirs could dirty them, too. (Thus was the fate of my father's education tied to the whims of the clouds!) I cannot name any colonialists who ever accepted the terms that other world powers set for them: the first time in 1937, when the Peel Commission recommended that 20 percent of the land go to the Jewish residents of Palestine, then in 1947, when the United Nations raised the allotment to 55 percent in the aftermath of the Holocaust. I know of no colonial power that has been forced into war by several armies of larger and mightier nations, as Israel was in 1948. Nor do I know of any apartheid where the "colonial subjects" have risen to the ranks of university professors, supreme court justices, members of parliament, even cabinet ministers.

Our opposing views on Israel depend, in great part, on which of us has endured history's scorching. You, born and raised in the United States, are the product of a life, as any life ought to be, shaped by the daily struggles of work and family. I, on the other hand, am the product of a life that had to be remade from the ashes. The sharing of these autobiographical details does not come easily to me. If I do so here it is not only because they are at the heart of the divide between us. Rather, it is mostly to trace the roots of why peace, which you fault Israel for not achieving, has, in fact, been unachievable.

The dangerous ideology that Ayatollah Khomeini brought into Iran with the 1979 revolution, which ultimately uprooted some 90,000 Jews from there, declared the destruction of Israel as a core mission. But the initial idea of that mission had already formed in his earliest sermons in the 1960s. You see, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict has had distant and longtime stakeholders far beyond their own borders. Israel stands on one side of this conflict. What it faces, however, is not a single adversary. On our televisions, we see the Palestinian civilians square off with a well-armed Goliath that is the IDF. Widen the lens just a little. Take in the region, and see how David grows beside the

powerful and intractable parties who define themselves by their desire to annihilate Israel and, as far as Khomeini and his successors are concerned, even Western civilization.

What makes you an American is not only the blue passport that gets you breezing through customs at the world's airports. It is also the blindness you have for some of the evil in the world. You have a distinct inability to see other authoritarian regimes' atrocities as an expression of their own political or ideological agenda. You blame America, and by extension Israel, for much of the wrong those regimes commit. This is a privileged defect I think of as "first-world narcissism." You attribute such undue might to America and to Israel, within its own neighborhood, that they become the ubiquitous engines of all the bad, while other regimes turn into perennial victims with no agency of their own. I envy your biases because the errors of your perspective are really the blessings of your democratic upbringing—blessings that you, born into them, often cannot recognize, or that you assume to be universal. Though I am not your contemporary, the gap that exists between us is too great to be explained by the difference in our age alone. For instance, when you were studying for your high school civics exam, learning the Bill of Rights and the importance of individual liberties, I had become invisible under my mandatory Islamic uniform and headscarf. My mornings began by standing single file in the schoolyard, chanting "Death to the Great Satan and its bastard child," metaphors for America and Israel. Individual rights and civil liberties were far from our minds as we were busy spewing hate and wishing so many dead. When the worst image on the walls of your city was graffiti, I was staring at the black triangle painted on the wall of our alley. On each of its corners was the face of the three world leaders who had signed a peace accord together in 1978. Beneath the dark drawing were these words:

Death to the wicked trio: Carter, Sadat, and Begin.

When you were getting days off from school for the Thanksgiving holiday or Martin Luther King's birthday or President's Day, my joyless school calendar—a procession of ghosts—mostly commemorated the death of imams and other figures who had been martyred, which in Iran's clericalese meant that they had committed an act of terror. When you were strolling down Elm Street, I was passing through Khalid Islambouli Avenue—named for the assassin of Anwar Sadat, the slain president of Egypt. The street name and a postage stamp were two of the many tributes the regime paid his assassin. When your presidents were addressing the nation about improving the quality of K–12 education, Iran's supreme leaders were promising paradise to the youth willing to die for the cause of “jihad” and supplying plastic keys to soldiers on the front lines to open its gates. And this was the most unforgettable of them all: In the mid-1980s, when the war between Iran and Iraq was at its peak, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had vowed never to end the fighting until Iran captured Baghdad and then went on to “free” Jerusalem, repeatedly praised the 13-year-old suicide bomber who had thrown himself in the way of enemy tanks. The future, for the ayatollah, was never ahead, but below—in the grave. All these comparisons, I hope, make one badly overlooked point clear: The most formidable of Israel's enemies prize death far above life, which is why they are, first and foremost, the enemies of their own people.

Ayatollah Khomeini's fervor for the Palestinians had little to do with the Palestinians. They were merely pawns in his game of power. His ambition was to prove himself worthy of leading all Muslims everywhere. By casting himself as the champion of the Palestinians, he hoped to distinguish himself—the leader of a Shiite nation—among the global Sunni majority. Even since his death,

Palestine has remained the cause that Iran has used to transcend its status as an Islamic underdog to become the savior of all “oppressed” Muslims everywhere.

By the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988, the ayatollah’s army had not reached Jerusalem, but his ideology had. Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad—which now either directly rule, or wield great influence, over the majority of the Palestinians—are all the evil mongrels he spawned. If peace has eluded Israel, it is, in great part, because the ayatollah’s progeny thrive on chaos, celebrate ruin, and live to die, just as he did. Whatever the origin of the conflict once was, it has now morphed into a war between liberalism and illiberalism, modernity and religious fundamentalism, women’s rights and misogyny. No doubt ordinary Palestinians dream of a prosperous future and of leading peaceful lives like any other people. But in the hands of their current leadership, they are as trapped as I once was, standing in the schoolyard, chanting the diatribe the principal shouted into a bullhorn.

One of the greatest human struggles, the writer Joseph Conrad believed, is the struggle of creating an alliance between the two contradictory instincts of egoism, the moving force of the world, and altruism, its morality. For Jews, the tension has been far more acute and persistent, affecting not only the individual but the larger community, too. To fulfill our moral destiny, the Jewish people are commanded to exercise altruism by being “the host to humanity” and opening our homes and lives to receive the stranger and care for him. But there is also Jewish egoism to consider. To end our perpetual persecution, Jews have had to pursue nationalism and build a safe haven, so that victimhood ceases to be our destiny. Altruism and egoism are also the antagonistic instincts that define our challenge. “What is a Jew?” Martin Buber laments. “I shall not attempt to define here the accursed and all-honored question.” The philosopher

Edmond Jabès sees the antagonism as surpassing the self: “The idea of a Jewish state is a contradiction in terms. To be Jewish is to be dispersed, to be without a home in the traditional sense.”

The desire to find an equilibrium between the two instincts is, in part, the pursuit that gives depth to our lives and keeps us from the indulgences of undue selfishness or selflessness. But often, we seek to relieve the discomfort by abandoning one for the other. Betraying Jewish egoism — Zionism — and turning one’s back on the only Jewish homeland, pretending that the countless mobs that broke windows of Jewish businesses, set fires to Jewish property, and drove out the Jews from their communities are all bygone offenses, would be one way of coping with rising antisemitism and the vehement attacks on Israel, especially on university campuses. Another is to withstand the tension: to stand by Israel’s founding principles, while also striving to reach peace with the Palestinians, so they can build their lives and thrive, too. The second task may prove impossible, but as the Mishnaic wisdom goes, we do not have a duty to complete it, only to not abandon it.

In the end, dear J, your objection to Israel is about much more than Israel alone. It is also an objection, albeit inadvertently, to the plight of those who are fighting for freedom and democracy in some of the lands from which we fled. Your good intentions notwithstanding, you become an agent in the propaganda campaigns of autocratic nations, like Iran, that claim Israel to be the world’s greatest evil. You become an unwitting party to that deception at the expense of far greater and more dire emergencies, including those of women, secular activists, and the various minorities in the Palestinian territories. As Israel’s violations receive disproportionate attention, those fighting for freedom and equal rights will remain in the shadows. Since September 2022 alone, nearly 20,000 demonstrators have been arrested in Iran and more than 600 have been killed or

executed. The demonstrators in Iran have often chanted “Forget Palestine! Think of us!” At a first glance, they may seem to be making a demand from their own government. But they are equally frustrated by an international community, the Western media especially, that seems to quickly move on from every story but that of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Years ago, the founder of Human Rights Watch, Robert L. Bernstein, wrote in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* decrying the record of the very organization he had created, “The region is populated by authoritarian regimes with appalling human rights records. Yet in recent years Human Rights Watch has written far more condemnations of Israel for violations of international law than of any other country in the region.” That trend has only intensified. Israel can be criticized. Every democracy should be. But when the criticism begins to have echoes of the calls from autocrats in the region, you must pause and question whether you have become a pawn in a dangerous game in which countless men and women are valiantly fighting, and dying, without a mention. *