

FROM EXCLUSIVITY TO EXCLUSION: THE CONSTANT INTERPLAY OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN POLITICS

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Ending the second chapter (*Muhammad's Challenge, 570-624*) of the first book of his monumental *The Venture of Islam*², Marshall Hodgson writes: "In any tradition, greatness is in part to be measured by success in overcoming the peculiar failings which necessarily accompany the peculiar excellences of this tradition... A peculiar test of Islam lies in how Muslims can meet the question of war." Hodgson's somehow cryptic assertion puts reconciliation with the meaning of warfare in the core of Islam's nature, prerogative, perspectives, and possibilities. He justifies his choice of preference for Islam's possible "pitfall" as follows: "But warfare ... is at the same time the supreme expression of that claim to exclusive validity for one's own position ..."

Indeed, warfare has escorted Islam from the first steps of the Muslim community to the military expansions and the creation of the empire, to the peak of the classical civilization and then to the downfall through defeat, internecine strife and, finally, subjection to colonization. And it is to the test of war that Muslims have been in the past and are called, again and again, through time, to prove not only their validity, prowess and inventiveness, but, above all else, their strength of character as a community, their open - mindedness and their spirit of tolerance. For, according again to Hodgson, "Muhammad's prophethood ... left his community confronted with that temptation to a

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² *The Venture of Islam - Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Volume 1 - The Classical Age of Islam, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, 186.

spirit of exclusivity that went with any vision of a total community and that received appropriate expression in warfare". This temptation to the "spirit of exclusivity" escorted by and expressed through war, is "fatal to the open search for truth".

In meeting the question of war, the Muslim community has had its successes and its failures. But one can validly argue that gradually, and by allowing this "spirit of exclusivity" to become fully entrenched, absolute and non-receptive to other options, the different Muslim communities, heirs to the religious and political tradition of the umma, have lost their ability to search openly for the truth in its multiple shades and its various fragmentations. And this ultimately led to military defeat, political isolation and cultural degradation.

It is not an easy task to try and determine how and when this happened, but we can safely connect tolerance and security: as long as the armies of Islam were victorious and order and justice prevailed in the interior of the empire, different voices could be heard, voices leading to multiple interpretations of the Holy Canon. Under the strain of military defeat, the gate of Ijtihad closed hermetically. Personal effort and initiative were excluded and the spirit of exclusivity prevailed.

Israel was born out of war again, but the particular circumstances leading to its creation are fruits of events and currents of a totally different nature. Spirit of (and claim to) exclusivity may have been an element of the Jewish community (and then communities) from its very first steps, as an innate element of the whole monotheistic tradition, but in this case the feeling of "being excluded" was fostered upon Jews, as a result of waves upon waves of homicidal anti-Semitic outbursts, which have been (and still are) a constant in Western history³. In the case of Jews, exclusion, throughout history, was not a means of protection. It was exactly the opposite: an encoded, in the core of western Enlightenment and humanitarianism, message of what to expect: libel, injustice, death, a whole series of persecutions that culminated with the Holocaust, an event as monumental in its abhorrence as to, according to Hans Jonas⁴, irrevocably alter the nature of our relationship to God.

The Holocaust accelerated the process of the new state's foundation and its presence looms forever over Israel: it was a state founded as a result of West's collective

³ Bernard Lewis: *Semites and Anti-Semites – An enquiry into conflict and prejudice*, Phenix, 1997.

⁴ *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 1-13.

guilt both for its anti-Semitism as for its politics of détente, it was a state founded as a tribute to the Holocaust victims, as a safe haven of exclusivity against all exclusions. But then why was there no proper commemoration of the Nazi genocide in Israel until 1959, no monuments built for the victims, no collective expression of the sorrow felt for the millions of Jews who perished in the concentration camps? It was as if there was an official policy of memoricide, of Holocaust concealment, an effort to do away with all stereotypes of passivity and with anything relative to the victims' own guilt for allowing themselves to be drawn to their fate, without a fight⁵. At the same period, a systematic effort of national myth construction was undertaken, with at its center Masada⁶ and the citadel's brave warriors who preferred (says the myth) suicide than an ignominious death. So it was the image of the Jew as a warrior (against the desert, the Arab, the world), what G. Rosenberg has called muscular Zionism⁷, not a presentation of the Jew as a vivid particle of history (a merchant, a citizen, a persecuted, a victim, an intellectual), that the state officially adopted for much of its national discourse up until 1967. After the 6-Days war, Israel felt free to make use of the Holocaust memory as an inseparable part of national history. Moral superiority was intertwined to the specific characteristics of an exclusive community persecuted by everyone and destined to live and rule (what is more, as an empire, according to Moshe Dayan).

It is of course war's nature to exclude different visions, not to leave breathing room for separate narratives. The Israeli – Palestinian conflict is an example of the rule par excellence. Both for the Israelis and the Palestinians⁸, feelings of exclusivity and anxieties of exclusion interplay. And constant outbursts of war give full expression to these feelings and help maintain the anxieties, as the opponents change roles and positions. This continuous interplay has often taken on a strange, almost grotesque, character.

For the Palestinians, the fear of their stance being misread by the international community as recognition of the existence of Israel has led them, again and again, to kick major opportunities in, for example, pushing forward effectively their argumentation

⁵⁵ Ilan Greilsammer: *La nouvelle histoire d' Israel*, Gallimard, 1998, Greek edition : Kastaniotis, 2000, 279-285.

⁶ See Nachman Ben – Yehuda: *The Masada Mythical Narrative and the Israeli Army* in Edna Lomsky – Feder and Eyal Ben – Ari (editors): *The Military and Militarism in Israel*, State University of New York Press, 1999, 57-88, especially pages 74-79.

⁷ *L' utopie perdue: Israel, une histoire personnelle*, Paris: Denoel, 2002.

⁸ We use the generalizations in full knowledge of their semantic limitations but, also, in the belief that they have the power to express the tragedy of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

about the illegal character of the settlements or of the occupation of Jerusalem. For Hamas, in particular, this isolation takes on the Islamic characteristics of moral superiority, of the exclusivity of a total community that prefers a valiant death in war to conciliation and peace. For Israel, collective trauma and guilt have been transformed in an almost unanimous claim for pre-emptiveness in the defensive behavior as well as indifference for the moral repercussions of acts that clearly breach the limits of lawful defense. For both camps, the other camp does not exist, is excluded. For Israel, Hamas is just a terrorist organization and not a possible interlocutor. Hamas denies Israel's right to exist.

Both camps brush aside the legal 'niceties' that could redirect the efforts for negotiations. Israel has characterized all international denunciations of its war crimes as "lawfare", the state's third greatest security risk after Hamas and Iran⁹. The Palestinian Authority is afraid of the Law for a different reason: use of the international law rules would signify recognition of Israel's right to exist¹⁰. Hamas was more intransigent than the Palestinian Authority in the rejection of Israel. But the organization had, in the past, proven itself capable of tactical moves that could ensure some kind of peace with Israel¹¹ as well as of a concise policy strategy that could justify these moves as Islamic in their nature. A proclamation, for example, of an unconditional and without limitations state of truce with the enemy (signifying the indirect recognition of his existence) is part of the Islamic tradition, going back to Prophet Muhammad's behavior at Hdaybiyah¹² and cannot be deemed as an unislamic breach of the Jihad obligation.

Feeling excluded and at the same time feeling that they have exclusive rights to truth, justice and morality both Israel and the Palestinians claim total validity for their own position, refusing to leave any room for other options, for other voices. In the Israeli – Palestinian case, war and the spirit of exclusivity are not only fatal for the search for truth, but also for life itself.

⁹ Eyal Weizman: *Lawfare in Gaza*, London Review of Books, 34, 23, December 2012, 28.

¹⁰ See Raja Shehadeh: *Advice to the Palestinian Leadership*, London Review of Books, 36, 13, July 2014, 10-13.

¹¹ See Michael Irving Jensen: *The Political Ideology of Hamas – A grassroots perspective*, I. B. Tauris, 2009. The author believes in the mitigating character that the "civil society" option can have on Hamas.

¹² Marshall Hodgson: *The Venture of Islam*, 193.