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The Lessons of the Nakba

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I do not need anyone to teach me about the Palestinian Nakba. It is the defining moment of my existence. I do not need anyone to lecture me about it either.

During the war in 1948, my family had already fled our home in Talpiot in southeast Jerusalem and taken shelter in a monastery. I distinctly remember the early morning when, as a six-year-old boy, I was awakened and hurriedly dressed by one of my sisters after our oldest sister had been shot and hospitalized. We quickly gathered some possessions and climbed down and up the mountain to Bethany, and then to Jericho. We eventually resettled as refugees in Arab East Jerusalem.

Because I was a graduating medical student at the American University of Beirut during the war of 1967, I became a double-refugee. After finishing my residency training in the United States, I returned to Jerusalem to practice medicine but Israeli military officials denied me permission to stay. In their eyes I did not qualify as a "resident" because I happened to be studying abroad during the war. My young family and I then embarked on our new life in America.

Thus it is that I became part of the first generation of my family in over 600 years to build a life outside of Jerusalem. Mine is one of three families studied by the Israeli historian Drori Ze'evi in his book about Jerusalem in the 1600s. I did not only lose my home. Our family religious endowment, or waqf, lost 11 properties, demolished to make room for a Plaza around the Wailing Wall after Israel took control of the city in 1967. It was years later, as an American citizen, that I returned to visit the city of my birth.

I recount this not to bewail my fate, or to dwell in the past. The four generations of Palestinians who have lived and died in refugee camps are the real face of the Palestinian tragedy. It is fitting and proper to honor historical truths, but also to learn the lessons they teach us.

Israelis and Palestinians alike are two peoples who have experienced traumatic histories. We must never forget them. But we must not be held hostage by history either. We must care more about the future of our grandchildren than the past of our grandparents, or even ourselves.

We must work together to build a future in which both peoples can enjoy the rights, responsibilities and dignity of citizenship and self-determination. There is only one way to actually accomplish this: ending

the occupation and creating a Palestinian state to live alongside Israel. Palestinians must recognize and accept Israel, which is a legitimate member state of the United Nations. The Palestinians must have one place on earth, the territories occupied in 1967, where they can live freely as first class citizens in their own independent state. There is no other way to end the cycle of bloodshed, pain and hatred has that lasted for so long.

To accomplish this, half measures and partial acknowledgment are insufficient. Both people must fully recognize each other's national rights and states.

Since we established the American Task Force on Palestine in 2003, I have been criticized for being "too soft on Israel," mostly by those who seek to lecture me about the Nakba and trumpet their own Palestinian "patriotic credentials." In an insightful comment about my attendance at a recent Israeli Independence Day event a distinguished Palestinian-American friend of mine noted, "you weren't celebrating the exodus of 800,000 Palestinians, or the destruction of Palestine or the Nakba, but keeping the face of Palestine alive, and keeping the door for negotiations and human contact open."

I well understand the anger that the memory of the Nakba provokes, especially in young people. I remember what it felt like on the eve of war in 1967. We were excited at the prospect of the liberation of Palestine that would allow those of us who became refugees in 1948 to go back to our homes.

I distinctly recall a conversation I had with professor of surgery Dr. Abdel-Latif Yashruti, an urbane, British-trained aristocrat. His sharp blue eyes fixed on mine, he asked, "What makes you think that we will win?" I began boasting about what I imagined to be the overwhelming might of the Arab armies compared to Israel's military. Calmly, he replied, "Look. I left Haifa once. I have lived in many places but I like it here. I don't want to become a refugee again." My response, which was impolite, rash and most regrettable, questioned the patriotism and wisdom of my professor. In retrospect, it's uncanny that he was predicting exactly what was about to happen to me, as the war indeed made me a refugee once again.

In the ensuing years, I have come to recognize that the wars of 1948 and 1967 bracket, like bookends holding together volumes on a shelf, the practical margins for resolving the conflict. The Arabs were unable to prevent the Jewish people from establishing the State of Israel in 1948. But Israel cannot incorporate the Palestinian territory and population conquered in 1967 without losing both its Jewish and its democratic character. That is why only a two-state agreement, which recognizes the legitimacy and limitations of both national projects, offers a conflict-ending solution.

Our histories and narratives are precious. They must not become political bargaining chips, or the subject of negotiations. Palestinians and Israelis will not embrace each other's narratives, nor should they abandon their own. They don't need each other to confirm their own identities. What they need is a workable, ironclad, conflict-ending arrangement to allow them to live side-by-side in peace. Hearts as well as minds must change to make this possible.

This coming Tuesday is Nakba Day 2012, 64 years after I lost my home and suddenly found myself a refugee at age six, the task before us is to make sure that no further nakbas, no more pogroms or unspeakable horrors, ever occur again. The only way to honor our tragic histories is to create a future for our children free of manmade tragedy. This means making peace fully, completely and without reservation, between Israel and a State of Palestine.

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