*The Transformative Power of Dialogue and Remembrance in Israel/Palestine*

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If we who lost what is most precious can talk to each other and look forward to a better future, then everyone else must do so too.

—Tzvika Shahak, Israeli Forum participant; former Israeli general who lost his teenage daughter Bat-Chen to a suicide bombing in 1996.

We’re meeting about issues that politicians use to justify killing. No. Don’t use us as an excuse. We’re united.

—Ali Abu Awwad, Early Palestinian Forum participant; imprisoned for involvement in the first intifada, lost his brother Youssef to Israeli soldier at a checkpoint in 2000.

Since 1995, members of the Bereaved Families Forum[[1]](#footnote-1) have been meeting and talking with one another. This group is comprised of roughly the same number of Israelis and Palestinians (now estimated to be about 600 families in total), all of whom have lost a close family member to the violence in the region. Some members have joined readily and others more reluctantly. Regardless of how members find their way to the Forum, one thing is clear. The dialogue that transpires amongst participants can be transformative. Remembrance can be transformative too. This claim about remembrance will propel the second part of my argument as it relates to constructively confronting social and political problems in Israel/Palestine.

Much of the transformative power of dialogue to which I refer and with which I begin my analysis is captured on film in the documentary entitled *Encounter Point*[[2]](#footnote-2) (2005), which was shot over a period of 16 months. I first learned about the Forum’s activities through this film which I saw when it world-premiered at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival in New York. Ali Abu Awwad and Robi Damelin, two prominent Forum participants whose activities and ideas I will discuss below, appeared with the filmmakers Ronit Avni and Julia Bacha for conversation with the film’s first public audience. I have carried the impact of this film’s debut inside me ever since I first saw it. I have used it as a teaching tool to help students see the sheer power the Forum creates by its very establishment. I help my students see that the Forum paradoxically calls for its own destruction. One of the Forum’s on-line videos says “We do not want you here.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This message is repeated in alternating Arabic and Hebrew by various Forum members who have lost loved ones. The Forum does not want new members; to grow means additional grave losses. But until there are no more senselessly bereaved, the Forum serves its purpose to seek alternative paths as it challenges the violence that has come to define the region.

I suggest that the kind of power the Forum participants achieve is akin to that theorized by Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt says: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions, but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (Arendt 200). Create new realities the Forum’s participants certainly do. Such power, as opposed to domination or force, occurs each time Forum members engage with one another. These participants are pressing on to improve the conditions of their lived relations. They resist revenge, as they aspire to “create new realities.”

The very existence of the Forum constitutes an appeal to the world, an ethical plea. In the first epigraph that opens this essay, Tzvika Shahak enjoins others to follow the Forum’s example. He says, “If we who lost what is most precious can talk to each other and look forward to a better future, then everyone else must do so too” (*EP*). And that’s what the Forum members do. They talk with each other. It is through such dialogue that they transform their perspectives and enlarge their views to validate those whom their respective communities frequently diminish, if not demonize to death. Choosing to rise together, they are shifting their ideas about their shared future and regard themselves as a collective force. If their grief has brought them together initially, their joint fortitude seems to ensure their return. Forum members realize that their lives and deaths are intertwined.

Shahak is a former Israeli general who lost his teenage daughter to a suicide bombing. Bat-Chen was on her way to celebrate her birthday and Purim in Tel Aviv. The year was 1996. When his wife Ayelet heard that a bomb had gone off in the neighborhood where Bat-Chen was enjoying festivities, she called her husband. Shahak thought the odds were against their daughter’s demise, and he told Ayelet as much. There were so many others in the area where their daughter was that fateful day. But to satisfy Ayelet’s concern, he went to the morgue to rule it out. Instead of confirming her safety, he found himself saying goodbye to his daughter who was now a corpse.

Since Shahak joined the Forum, he fights a different battle from the militarized one into which he was strongly socialized. He is no longer firm in his belief that a militarized and occupying Israel is sustainable. This former general says, “We’ve occupied, we’ve won and there is still no peace” (*EP*). He has found some new meaning for the future as he has joined forces with others, including many Palestinians who, like him, have lost family members in what is often called the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

The film captures many humanizing moments born of despair. For example, in an exchange between Shahak and George Sa’adeh, a Palestinian man, it is soon revealed that each wishes the other was not bereaved. Like Shahak, Sa’adeh also lost his young daughter. The year was 2003. The Israeli army shot 18 times at the family car. Sa’adeh kept asking the Israeli soldiers “Why are you shooting at us?” But to no avail. They killed Christine. She was 12. Sa’adeh later learned that the Israeli army mistook the family car for one belonging to three wanted Palestinians. Sa’adeh finds his way to the Forum as follows. He describes: “A member of the Bereaved Forum contacted us to ask if we were interested in meeting Israeli families. At first I thought it was a strange idea. But after thinking about it logically, I didn’t see any reason not to meet them and let them know our suffering” (*EP*).

Tragedy brings Shahak and Sa’adeh together. Both men joined the Forum about a year after losing their daughters. They share their grief and aspire to live together without violence. They are translating their mourning into collective power, a unified purpose for peace. The power that the Forum achieves expresses a concrete challenge to popular portrayals of the region’s problems as intractable.

Yet Shahka and Sa’adeh acknowledge each other as fellow human beings who are situated in their specificity. They reveal themselves to one another through their dialogue. They call one another by name, they grieve and remember their daughters in turn, and they reach greater consciousness about what is possible because they are making it so. Shahka says: “There were many things that touched me. We see that there are Palestinians who suffered a lot, who lost children, and still believe in the peace process and in reconciliation. If we who lost what is most precious can talk to each other and look forward to a better future, then everyone else must do so, too” (*EP*).

This is unmitigated power in the Arendtian sense. It stands in utter contradistinction to power defined more conventionally in terms of force, domination or dominion. And it could be argued that in some ways their very togetherness constitutes what Arendt would call a miracle, but one of this world. Action can “create new realities.” Shahka and Sa’adeh are one example of an Israeli and Palestinian who are facing their shared fate together. They are not alone. Like many others who have joined the Forum, they seem to realize they will rise or fall together. And they choose to rise. As Arendt has defined power so the Forum realizes it time and again.

The Forum’s dialogue is a real achievement and demonstrates the power of people joining together. Members use dialogue as a way to cope with their suffering, but the Forum does more than provide a vehicle for compassion. Forum members, by virtue of their very coming together, seem to gain a commitment to create new realities such that their losses are not in vain. More than not, they attain an understanding of one another’s plight. And it is this moment that transforms their perspectives. It is then that they are actualizing power in the Arendtian sense. Consequently they challenge what is so often taught, namely that Israelis and Palestinians are unable to connect to one another or are destined to have antipathy for each other. A key aspect of exemplary leadership in Israel/Palestine today belongs to those who are talking with each other and creating humane circumstances out of their grief.

Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian leader committed to non-violence, is another exemplary figure who is deeply committed to transforming a range of deleterious attitudes through dialogue. He takes the Forum’s slogan “without dialogue, no change” to heart and speaks with anyone willing to engage with him. Abu Awwad advocates for a non-violent future for Israel/Palestine, but his message is not immediately embraced, even by those he loves.

This becomes evident when Abu Awwad visits his nephew Youssef whose leg is healing from an Israeli assault. Abu Awwad speaks with Youssef and other Palestinian young men in the Bethlehem Rehabilitation Center, Occupied Palestinian Territories. They are all young and vengeful as was Abu Awwad when he was their age. They tend to see all Israelis as one, undifferentiated enemy. Abu Awwad encourages the group to resist their oppression non-violently. He informs them that there are many Israelis who are working for alternatives and want peace. His message of non-violence is not immediately powerful to this young cohort. Abu Awwad understands these young people filled with revenge and he seeks to win them over. Skeptical at the beginning of their discussions, Youssef eventually agrees to attend a Forum meeting with Abu Awwad.

About himself, Abu Awwad says he has suffered enough to count as a conventional hero in his community. But he shuns this kind of veneration as misdirected and ultimately unproductive. When Abu Awwad was a teenager, he was actively involved in the first intifada, or uprising (1987-1991). He was later imprisoned for throwing stones and protesting Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Whereas the rehabilitating youth seems to want Abu Awwad to have remained the more familiar type of hero--the stone thrower he once was--he seeks to convince them that he sees this form of protest as futile and in need of replacement with a more collective vision for all involved. He embraces non-violent forms of resistance as best suited for this purpose.

It is around 2005 when Abu Awwad says to the Palestinian male youth: “For 56 years we’ve been talking about slaughtering the Jews, and we’ve only gone backwards. For once, let’s change our tactic. Maybe it’ll work” (*EP*). He is keenly aware of how his turn to non-violence can be read as a disavowal of Palestinian resistance to oppression, particularly to young people with so little hope whose wounds are physical, psychological and historical. But he encourages this youthful group of Palestinians, the third generation to be living under Israeli Military Occupation, to see that his fight against injustice is also a very active kind of resistance and it has precedence in great world leaders.

He puts it this way: “I could be considered a hero by my people. Given what I’ve been through . . . I was shot, imprisoned, my brother was killed. All of this gives me credibility in my society, since I’ve suffered. I could be spreading hate and that would be seen as justified. But this is no longer a personal issue for me, it’s a collective one” (*EP*). This move from personal to collective is quintessentially political. It contains an elevated consciousness about the need to live together and to struggle for a better reality. That this can be achieved, Abu Awwad will not abdicate, but one nevertheless needs to be “a mountain” and “a little crazy” sometimes to keep going in this direction. Dialogue remains crucial for activists such as Abu Awwad.

Abu Awwad is not only taking his message to Palestinian youth, but he is also prepared to speak with anybody. So committed is he to a peaceful alternative to his current lived reality. He works tirelessly to bring people together. In the film, he says that he has never spoken to a settler before, but that he is ready to. And so he does. He meets with Shlomo Zagman, who had been raised in the settlement of Alon Shvut. For 23 years he was more or less living among other settlers. Zagman says: “I’m ashamed to say I never had contact with Palestinians. No debate, no real talks, no connections” (*EP*). For him Palestinians did the work on the settlements that his parents did not want to do. In describing a preponderant view, others put the matter more forcefully. For example, Ilan Pappé has recently testified: “Anyone who has been in Israel long enough, as I have, knows that the worst corruption of young Israelis is the indoctrination they receive that totally dehumanizes the Palestinians. When an Israeli soldier sees a Palestinian baby he does not see an infant—he sees the enemy” (Pappé 31).

About Palestinians Zagman says, “For me, they were figures who would do work for us” (*EP*). He adds, “I saw them as laborers, as cleaners, janitors” (*EP*). And “Arabs did the work my parents wouldn’t do” (*EP*). He shares that his first party was Moledet, which supports the deportation of Arabs. But his outlook started to change after meeting a religious man who was a leftist. Zagman says: “The bottom line of my new outlook is that the price we’re paying today to hold on to the Occupied Territories is so high that it’s endangering the existence of the Zionist Jewish state in Israel” (*EP*). He met some other young religious men and they founded the movement Realistic Religious Zionism. With some others, he put out a petition calling on settlers to recognize the need for Israel to leave part of the Occupied Territories. He himself moved out of the settlement of Alon Shvut, the only place he has ever lived. He says “the move is hard,” and that “he’s not used to it yet.” (*EP*). After moving out of the settlement, Abu Awwad reaches out to Zagman and visits with him.

I share some of their exchange here:

**Shlomo Zagman**: First of all, I want to hear a little bit about you personally. What you’ve been through, what brought you here.

**Ali Abu Awaad**: I was involved in the first Intifada, at age 16. I grew up in a political household. My mother was in jail. My brother was in jail. Another brother was also in jail.

**Zagman:** For what?

**Abu Awwad:** For participation.

**Zagman:** Participation in what?

**Abu Awwad:**  In the struggle against the occupation.

**Zagman:** They didn’t put you in jail for throwing stones and the like?

**Abu Awwad:** Yes, I was in jail for four years.

**Zagman:** You were in jail?

**Abu Awwad:** Yes. Does that surprise you?

**Zagman:** No, no.

**Abu Awwad:** How does that make you feel?

**Zagman:** I was living in the Alon Shvut settlement during the first Intifada.

**Abu Awwad:** Okay.

**Zagman:** *Smiling*. Maybe you threw stones at me?  *Laughs.* Just Kidding. I was lucky that I only had stones thrown at me twice.

**Abu Awwad:** In a private car or in an army vehicle?

**Zagman:** On a bus.

**Abu Awwad:** No, I never stoned private cars or buses. *Smiles.*

They converse like this, getting to know each other a little bit. Their conversation concludes as follows:

**Zagman:** I feel and I think I have more in common with settlers than you. When I speak to them I think it would only be possible to sit and to start with the smallest things. Stop talking about ideals and big dreams and history and background and, you know, 3,000 years. I’m carrying all the Jewish people on my back. I protect all the Jewish people in all history and all we’ve been through. How can I give up anything now after all we’ve been through? I don’t really believe I can change the view of settlers or the right wing.

**Abu Awwad:** You just start.

**Zagman:** *Laughs.*

**Abu Awwad:** Believe me.

**Zagman:** Yeah, you’re right.

Many things are revealed in this exchange between Abu Awwad and Zagman, but that they are even speaking is the major point. Their dialogue is transporting them to new ground. This encounter between Abu Awwad and Zagman develops a human connection and accords with the claim put forward by Gavriel Soloman that “opponents need to be personalized” (Solomon 36). In spite of the fact that each of them has to endure criticism and taunts from within their intimate communities, Abu Awwad and Zagman challenge their own lived narratives that position them to be one against the other. They can even laugh about it. Theirs is not a “dialogue between deaf people,” a Hebrew phrase that simply does not apply to them. Could this not be a prelude to something greater?

It is particularly important for youth to learn about such exchanges. If young people are raised to deny the humanity of others, then it becomes more arduous to connect them later. Abu Awwad and Zagman notwithstanding, it is better to bring youth into encounters much earlier. This is especially important when “narrative beliefs are included in texts for school socialization” (Solomon 34). Research has shown that “developing relationships between Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian youth through encounter groups generally make Jewish participants more willing to have contact with Palestinians and more amenable to accepting the Palestinian perspectives on the conflicts” (Solomon 37).

Just as Abu Awwad, Zagman and Shahak (he was once speaking to a crowd of young Israelis, one of whom told him that he would not speak to anyone associated with those who had killed one of his family members) are ostracized by their communities, so too is Forum member Robi Damelin. But this does not stop her from using dialogue for transformative changes. Damelin, an Israeli via South Africa, lost her son David to a Palestinian sniper. The year was 2003. Damelin struggles with this loss, of course. However, she is long committed to peace and reconciliation. Her uncle was Nelson Mandela’s lawyer and her commitment to reconciliation is palpable in nearly all she says about moving forward in Israel/Palestine. Damelin writes a letter to the family of the sniper and requests a meeting with him. He is in prison. Her motive is to stop senseless killing. She says: “The real reason we’re doing the work we’re doing is to prevent further death” (*EP*). She adds, “We’re here to put all our problems on the table” (*EP*). Damelin does not want any killing in the name of her son, this is for certain. This would not bring her, or her memory of him, any honor whatsoever. She has spoken out many times about her loss and seeks to convince others about the logic of reconciliation. She wants to use dialogue transformatively, but some cannot bear what she says. When she accepts an interview with an Israeli TV station, the interviewer, incredulous that she would even consider talking with the family of the Palestinian sniper who killed her son, or the sniper himself, quickly cuts the interview short. Damelin manages a final question: “Why was David guarding settlers who said their safety was more important than David’s?” (*EP*). She explains that David was a reluctant soldier, called up from the reserves, but his heart was in his commitment to finish his advanced degree in Education. His mother has taken up the mantle of education and part of this contains a renunciation of a militarized and occupying Israel.

It may come as little surprise that Damelin has been reviled by some members of her community, just as have others previously discussed. Yet these Forum participants speak up and out, committed to the power they create in doing so. In recent years, they have spoken together for their collective vision of peace in the region. For example, Damelin has teamed up with Abu Awwad for years visiting high schools and speaking to audiences about the pressing need to find solutions to the senseless killing in the region and to promote their collective struggles for peace. They have also traveled internationally to do the same. In more recent years, she has recruited Seham Abu Awwad (Ali’s sister) and the two of them have traveled together spreading their message of non-violence and reconciliation.

Ali Abu Awwad had since started a non-violent Palestinian movement called Taghyeer (Change) and a set up a Center for Palestinian non-violence called Karama (Dignity) on his family’s property in the West Bank, maintaining that this, not Tel Aviv, is the site of the real struggle. He continues to speak with any who will engage with him, inviting Israelis to participate in his dialogues at Roots, another initiative he has co-founded. Logistical challenges make it difficult for Palestinians and Israelis to meet together in the West Bank because they are very often prevented from setting foot in each others’ communities. But Abu Awwad perseveres and seems to be winning some hearts and minds including Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger who has hosted him and invited dozens of neighbors to listen. One such neighbor said of Abu Awwad: “It’s hard not to be convinced.” Still others have asked why the Rabbi meets with a terrorist.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In any case, what should be clear by now is that Palestinians and Israelis join forces regularly to figure out a way to live together peacefully. In fact, they always have, but it has become increasingly difficult since the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine with narratives that grew up with the state itself that inflect a mutual bellicosity on the past between Arabs and Jews. And yet, even today many still come together under conditions of structural inequality and massive asymmetry. Some might say against all odds, they join together to forge civil connections. Their efforts should be at the front and center of what we teach our youth. Their achievements are particularly noteworthy for communities fraught with violence and militarization. It is imperative, I think, that our youth see these attempts on the ground. For if they are only subject to routine coverage of the conflicts, then they may believe there is no solution, no chance to join with those working to “create new realities.”

These groups of activists who are defying their cultures’ respective dictums to proceed from positions of diminishing “the other side” are certainly “beyond bystanders.” They are not merely looking on in utter despair from once they come, neither are they accepting violence by way of reprisal as a solution to their problems. Instead, they are gathering and thereby showing they are ready for alternatives. They are assuming responsibility for their own conditions in perhaps the only way that may actually work. Thus, they are great inspirations for everyone else. They are role models. These various examples of Palestinian and Israeli connections that are developing every day with the goal that our young people in particular are the greatest benefactors of knowing that alternative relations are not only possible, they are transpiring.

In this regard, the Forum seems aware of its own power. Various members make visits to high schools to share their messages of coming together for alternatives. It is important that the young not only look on as events unfold on their TV screens or on the Internet or, for that matter, in their communities that refuse to acknowledge the struggles of those seeking to coexist by validating, rather than diminishing the lived realities of others. Even despite great odds, there are ways to associate positively and many are so associating.

Despite the violent founding of Israel in 1948 (and here we do well to remember that most states are founded through violence, which raises the further question about organizing ourselves according to state formations in the first place), that killed and displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians,[[5]](#footnote-5) as well as the aftermath that has left so many dispossessed, significant numbers of Palestinians and Israelis are coming together to create better collective experiences for themselves. They are showing how to live together with greater generosity than current political arrangements legally allow or socially encourage. Though my essay has largely focused on the Forum, there are many people involved in peace groups and organizations that seek some sense of humanity and display bravery. There are, for example, the Israeli women who risk arrest to bring Palestinian women, who have never been to the sea though they can see it from their landlocked communities, to the beach.[[6]](#footnote-6) They are also providing an alternative to the nightmarish situation in Israel/Palestine, the overcoming of which is often seen as utterly intractable.

This is all occurring at a particularly grim moment in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government (more than a decade on) is intent on pursuing a Greater Israel. The Israeli state is annexing the West Bank bit by bit such that Israel is increasingly taking over the Oslo-designated Area C to build new settlements. Meanwhile, the Palestinians are offered “incarceration cages” (Pappé 43) in Areas A and B (the other sections so designated from the Oslo Accords in 1993). According to Pappé, the Palestinians can live in these “enclaves” as long as “they do not resist the new state.” Otherwise “they will be treated like the population in Gaza if they do resist” (43). Moreover, at this writing, Bedouin villages in Um al-Hiran and Atir are being readied for destruction to build more Israeli settlements. The Netanyahu government could stop this from happening, but there is no indication that it will, despite pressure from many to do so. The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled in favor of this indignity to these non-Jewish people.

Since the Oslo Accords, the number of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has tripled to approximately 600,000. Such land seizures continue unabated. On March 10, 2016, Israel declared occupied Palestinian land near the Dead Sea and the city of Jericho as “state land,” as a way to appropriate it for more settlements. Added to these affronts of removal and annexation are the everyday horrors that the state of Israel inflicts on Palestinians. Palestinians endure daily abuse under Israeli occupation of the West Bank and have suffered a very violent onslaught in Gaza. And while Israel removed its settlements from Gaza in 2005, its military has since bombarded it in devastating fashion.

Military missions, such as “Operation Cast Lead” (2008-09), a 22-day attack on Gaza left approximately1,400 Palestinians dead, at least 900 of whom were unarmed civilians not involved in the conflict including 300 children.[[7]](#footnote-7) Numerous specific horrors that occurred as a result of this Israeli assault have been recorded in good faith by Amnesty International. Incontrovertible evidence providing the number of civilian deaths reveals these outrageous actions. Let a concrete accounting of but just one of these civilian deaths provide the horror so that these losses are remembered as more than the numerical tallies.

On 6 January 2009 at 1.30 pm, Afaf Mohammed Dhmeida, a 28-year-old mother of five, was killed by a tank round as she was hanging the laundry on the roof terrace of her home in Jabalia. Her husband, relatives and neighbors told Amnesty International that the strike had cut Afaf’s body into two, and that the top half had been flung off the roof, bouncing off the roof of a lower building across a yard and landing in a parking lot across the house. Her five year-old daughter had just reached the top of the stairs to the roof and saw her mother being killed. When Amnesty International delegates visited the house three weeks after the incident, the girl was still not speaking, apparently as a result of the trauma of witnessing her mother’s killing.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This is the ending of but one of the more than 900 unarmed civilians left dead by Israel’s military onslaught. To any who might suspect this atrocity is an anomaly, I counter not so. Not an aberration is this, but the logic of a militarized occupation that produces utter disregard for life. One can read and read and read about the other 899 unarmed civilians killed by the Israeli army in the Amnesty Reports. The separation of Gaza and the West Bank is another difficulty imposed on Palestinians. It is also a violation of the Oslo Accords. And the blockade, created by Israel since Hamas ousted Fatah and gained control of Gaza in June 2007, prevents aid and goods from going in or out. The degradation and utter nuisance of everyday checkpoints takes its toll. Basic resources such as water have long remained in short supply for Palestinians.

The Israeli military continues to attack Gaza. According to Amnesty International reports, Israel’s Operation Protective Edge (July and August 2014) killed 1,523 Gaza civilians. The number of Hamas fighters killed was 669 and the percentage of civilians killed was 69%.[[9]](#footnote-9) The losses are colossal for Palestinians, so far outweighing those of Israel and most of them are civilians. It is crucial we recognize the high number of civilian casualties for they, like Afaf Mohammed Dhmeida, are deemed expendable. Palestinian life has become superfluous. There is no parity in these fights. Where is the moral conscience of Israel?

Israel has become what Judah Magnes long ago feared it would if political Zionists carried the day and produced a Jewish state. Magnes is little remembered today except by the press that bears his name. But this founder of Hebrew University, who served as its first chancellor, was called “the conscience of the Jewish people” by Hannah Arendt. Arendt worked with Magnes in pre-state times and supported his, as well as Count Bernadotte’s, call for a binational arrangement in Palestine. Magnes was not a follower of David Ben-Gurion, the implementer of political, as opposed to cultural, Zionism. Neither was Arendt. She and Magnes supported a cultural center for diasporic Jews in Palestine. As I understand it, their position was close to that of what Noam Chomsky describes below:

For example, in the mid-1940s, I was a Zionist youth leader, but strongly opposed to a Jewish state. I was in favor of Jewish-Arab working-class cooperation to build a socialist Palestine, but the idea of a Jewish state was anathema. I was a Zionist youth leader, because it was not a state religion. You go back a bit further, my father, his generation, they were Zionists, but they were Ahad Ha’Amists. They wanted a cultural center as a place where the diaspora could find a way to live together with the Palestinians. That ended in 1948. From then on, it essentially became a state religion” (Chomsky and Pappé 52).

In 1948, on the eve of Israeli independence, Arendt’s essay entitled “To Save the Jewish Homeland: There is Still Time” was published by *Commentary*. In this essay she claims: “Many opportunities for Jewish-Arab friendship have already been lost, but none of these failures can alter the basic fact that the existence of the Jew in Palestine depends on achieving it” (306). And yet, there are, and long have been, many such achievements despite lost opportunities for more.

More examples of Jewish-Arab friendship have been re-membered by Ariella Azoulay in her highly creative film “Civil Alliances” (2012).[[10]](#footnote-10) It chronicles hundreds of cases from 1947 and 1948 in which Jews and Arabs worked together to address their problems. Restoring these “vehement joint efforts of Jews and Arabs to preserve their shared life” and “find peaceful solutions to conflicts and disputes, reach compromises, be mutually attentive to needs, make agreements and promises—all these did not cease once violence erupted, and these efforts lasted even while some of the agreements were not observed.” As Azoulay shows, “In most cases promises were broken not by the inhabitants themselves but rather by members of national militias who tried to impose a new political reality upon the land.” She concludes, “In May 1948, the founding of the state of Israel put an end to this mutual recognition of Jews and Arabs of their responsibility for their shared life. The new sovereign rule replaced the old civil rules of the game with the new--national--ones” (*CA*).

Yet I claim that even the establishment of the Jewish state, along with its manufactured narratives of an historical past that reduces it to a mutual enmity between Arabs and Jews, has not obliterated the coming together of Jews and Palestinians searching for a better collective life. In some of the darkest hours of Israel’s existence, Palestinians and Israelis forge new realities beyond the death and destruction that surround their lives now. That we can find many more political and neighborly friendships, and “civil alliances” from pre-state times is crucial to remember for envisioning a new future of peace. The past contains redemptive moments that can help point the way to the makings of a better civil reality for the future. Remembering the “civil alliances” of the past and confirming the efforts of today’s Forum members opens up an alternative path for Israel/Palestine.

These peacemakers are the true leaders of the region. I maintain that our youth benefits from knowing about these kinds of social movements. My essay has sought to make the case for sharing this kind of activism so that our students can counteract the otherwise hopelessness that they are likely to embrace if they are mostly listening to the official governing bodies with their scornful narratives and not the real peacemakers on the ground. Yet, what else might move our youth to refuse any kind of demonization of the Other as they embrace a humanizing of the Other? Reaching even further back could provide a potentially productive springboard for future understanding and reconciliation. In a fascinating discussion of Edward Said’s *Freud and the Non-European*, Judith

Butler claims to experience this text as a “gift” (Butler 28). Her description of this book as bestowed inspired me to consult it. Of Said, Butler writes “he leads us back to the figure of Moses, to show that one key foundational moment for Judaism, the one in which the law is delivered to the people centers upon a figure for whom there is no lived distinction between Arab and Jew” (28-9). This is a powerful act of remembrance. The call to acknowledge that Moses was simultaneously Arab and Jew, and non-Ashkenasi as well, poses a profound challenge to identity politics. I find this questioning of identity politics transformative and particularly relevant today as Israel/Palestine lies bleeding. Instead of forgetting that Moses lived intersectionally as Arab and Jew, we are asked to bear this in mind. What can such remembrance achieve?

Butler expresses profound gratitude to Said for putting Freud’s claim that Moses was an Egyptian at the center of his discussion. Cannot the remembrance of Moses as both Arab and Jew act as an invitation to re-think identity politics and what it could mean to share both land and life deemed important to both Israelis and Palestinians? Is the memory that Moses, who lived as both Arab and Jew, an invitation to find more associative ways to live together? Recall that Forum members continue to do battle against so many from their most intimate communities who regard them as traitors of a kind for “dialoguing” with the putative enemy. While the Forum shows us the power of dialogue, there is also the importance of remembrance. For Said, the real challenge of Freud is to see one’s recognized liberator as both “us” and “them,” and this is a perspective-changer. Butler seems to concur with Said’s reading of Freud insofar as it opens up possibilities to scrutinize the dangers that flow from those who maintain an identity that they wish to see as somehow pure, utterly unalloyed. Arabs and Jews share much history, including many efforts to combat violence and live together.

Said’s turn to Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* constitutes a brilliant move for further reflection on the hazards of over-investing in identity politics. A critique of identity is necessary if part of that very identity, singular or collective, rests upon vilifying an other. Lingering upon the lived phenomenon of Moses, who existed as a non-European Arab Jew, might produce insights useful for arresting the contemporary carnage and oppression in Israel/Palestine.

Said suggests that a recognition of Freud’s Moses moves beyond the most “palliative” of solutions plaguing Israel/Palestine (Said ). Freud’s Moses is a challenge to dispense with the far weaker calls for “tolerance” or “empathy” and to opt for the deeper cure of bursting asunder any fixed sense of identity. Toleration is but a partial soothing of an ill that if better diagnosed and remedied requires no treatment. The ill is fixed identity. Without addressing this, the “palliatives” return as sedative-like solutions that do not address the real malady. For Said, “empathy,” and “tolerance” can only salve a festering wound that constantly threatens to re-open without a deeper prognosis for change.

It may be that Said is too quick to dismiss empathy as beneficial since it seems to be the case that Forum members, sharing their grief, have achieved a productive sense of empathy. Recall how Tzvika Shahak and George Sa’adeh seem to connect via their abilities to wish the other was not bereaved. This seems to require empathy on each man’s part. However, Said seems right that a more fundamental questioning of identity is also needed to cut through the learned animosity pitting Israel against Palestinians. In other words, as long as fixed identities are fueling a mutual destruction, calls for tolerance and empathy are limited. They will “palliate” and soothe, but not fundamentally change the structured inequalities, the learned vitriol for the Other.

Freud goes further crediting the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, (who ruled from 1350-1334 B. C.) during the 18th Dynasty, for introducing monotheism. According to Freud, Akhenaten was the inspiration for Moses. Akhenaten tried to bring monotheism to the Egyptians, but they would not accept it. So Akhenaten left Thebes and set up his own monotheistic society about 200 miles north in Tell el Amanna. Here the heretical pharaoh, joined by his major wife Nefertiti and his two daughters, designed an alternative to the traditionally conservative and militaristic Egyptian government. Consumed only by his new and abstract religion, which he represented by the solar disc of the god Aten. Akhenaten was a religious visionary, a believer in one god, unseen but radiating in all things, emanating from the sun and manifest in all things. He was likely joined by many, but by no means the majority that stayed in Thebes. Eventually Akhenaten’s successors returned to a more traditional polytheism. But Moses, posits Freud, knew of Akhenaten’s monotheistic turn and he introduced it to the Jews. Yet the Jews, like the Egyptians, did not accept these beliefs. The Golden Calf story might supply a vestige of this refusal. Just like Akhenaten, Moses did not find a ready audience. It was only centuries later, says Freud, that the Jews embraced monothesism. To what degree these Freudian claims have merit, I cannot say. Freud even claims that the Jews killed Moses, an act later generations came to regret and expiate. A full endorsement of monotheism followed the atonement. Some Egyptologists give credence to these claims, or at least don’t rule them out, while other readers of Freud on Moses are critical.

Nevertheless, Freud, and those such as Said and Butler, who take some insights from him, see some promise here. If the very figure who stands as the symbolic and perhaps very real liberator of the Jews is both undeniably Arab and Jew, then what does that mean for Jewish identity that seeks to extinguish that which is Arab? Freud’s project maintains that Moses was Egyptian. He sets the state with the very first line from his *Moses and Monotheism*: “To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly—especially by one belonging to that people. No consideration, however, will move me to set aside truth in favour of supposed national interest” (Freud 3).

Be this as it may, it seems clear why Butler, following Said, has seized upon this last text of Freud’s. Freud’s tension with his identity is palpable to his readers, and his struggle provides an opening, a provocation for them. What could this remembrance mean for the drama of coexistence in a land fraught with demonizing the Other, when at the same time we have great evidence for Arabs and Jews seeking to live in peace and contesting demonization? Butler and Said find in Freud’s exploration of Moses a rich resource that challenges any hard and fast definition of identity. Or as Butler puts it very compellingly about Said, “it is clear that what he likes most in Freud’s embrace of Moses as the non-European, the Egyptian founder of the Jews, is the challenge the figure of Moses posed to strictly identarian politics” (Butler 31). She adds that “if Moses stands for a contemporary political aspiration,” then “it is one that refuses to be organized exclusively on principles of national, religious, or ethnic identity.” Moreover, such a “political aspiration” is “one that accepts a certain impurity and mixedness as the irreversible condition of social life” (Butler 31).

Said and Butler engage with the lived reality that the leader of Judaism was both Arab and Jew. There is hope in this remembrance. Freud’s struggle, and Butler’s too, over Jewish identity bears fruit for thinking about the ways in which identity is inherently fraught. It appears that this can help any who asks how best to teach such seemingly intractable conflicts such as Israel/Palestine. What lessons are there here for “other besieged communities,” asks Said.

What does it mean to remember that Moses lived at the intersection of Arab and Jew? Or what has been the cost of forgetting this? To appreciate this work for purposes for Israel/Palestine, most particularly, the violence and dangers that often flow from seeking too pure an identity, such that the other needs to be repressed, even made expendable. The point is not to deny a people its history, but to face it and thereby restore it. The dominant narratives do not do this. The interests are different when violence replaces civility.

Would Moses be welcome by today’s Israeli state? How might Israel respond to the embodiment of Moses? Just as Fyodor Dostoevsky asked if Medieval Spain, in the midst of its crusades, would welcome Christ, we could perhaps ask if today’s Israel would receive or refuse Moses?[[11]](#footnote-11) Would he be friend or foe? Would his intersectional non-European Arab/Jewishness appear too much a muddying of the waters? Would his miscegenated personification raise suspicions and suffer checkpoints? Would he be mistaken for a wanted Arab, an enemy to the Jews, and gunned down in the process?

I have no doubt those who make their way to the Forum would welcome Moses, as would the many peacemakers and all those working for “civil alliances,” past, present and future. But what of the state of Israel, with its separation wall and militarized ways? Could this state that forbids any official remembrance of the Naqba, the catastrophe of 1948 that killed and/or sent fleeing hundred of thousands of Palestinians from their homes, welcome the likes of Moses? This is a remembrance so badly needed, yet unrecognized by Israel.

In today’s political and social situation there are profound implications. For the more the Jewish state defines itself through purging Palestinians from their homes, the less the people can dialogue. Yet they do, and they must, if the region is to find an alternative that does not bring more people to the Forum. A new way of governing is needed, an approach that could foster cultural spaces, great and small, while also creating more educational centers that welcome both its Arab and Jewish populations. Separation walls need to come down and alliances further cultivated so that Jews and Arabs may arrange the conditions for building greater civil life together.

As Butler reminds us, one can find resources within the Jewish historical tradition to challenge oppression and work for greater social justice. Thus, it really would be a terribly sad irony if this critical move is characterized as anti-Jewish. Maintaining it has been part and parcel of the Jewish tradition to engage in critiques and to seek greater social justice, Butler writes “it would be a painful irony indeed if the Jewish struggle for social justice were itself cast as anti-Jewish” (Butler 1). What kind of a polity would be most socially just?

Many claim there are two choices facing Israel/Palestine today: a one-state or a two-state solution. The international community has long endorsed the latter. Indeed there is great support for this. Others, such as Noam Chomsky, agree that there are two choices but these are not they. For Chomsky, the choices are either a two-state solution or a Greater Israel. He describes a Greater Israel as a disaster and here is why. It will mean an ever expanding Israel and an increasing diminution of Palestinian territories and population. He describes it thus:

The realistic alternative to a two-state settlement is that Israel will continue to carry forward the plans it has been implementing for years, taking over whatever is of value to it in the West Bank, while avoiding Palestinian population concentrations and removing Palestinians from the areas it is integrating into Israel. That should avoid the dreaded “demographic problem” (Chomsky 191).

Thus, according to Chomsky, the two-state solution, largely imperfect but in place for adoption since 1976, is better than a Greater Israel. The Palestinians will be even more devastated with the triumph of a Greater Israel than they would be with a two-state solution. Chomsky seems to endorse the lesser of two evils.

The two-state solution has the blessings of the supposed Quartet—the US, Russia, the UN, and the EU. For Chomsky a two-state solution, though “a terrible solution” is much better than the alternative. Why? A Greater Israel means more assaults and uprooting of Palestinian people than exists now, and more civilian casualties. I would add that a Greater Israel brings with it a weakening of Jewish culture long associated with deep commitments to social justice.

Arendt shuddered to think what Israel would become if political Zionism held sway. A Jewish state does not a Jewish homeland make.[[12]](#footnote-12) Arendt drew the distinction sharply, putting it this way: “ The real goal of the Jews in Palestine is the building up of a Jewish homeland. This goal must never be sacrificed to the pseudo-sovereignty of a Jewish state” (401). Mistaking the one for the other would bring about a horrible situation, which she foretold with the prescience of one who cares:

The land that would come into being would be something quite other than the dream of world Jewry, Zionist and non-Zionist. The “victorious” Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities. The growth of a Jewish culture would cease to be the concern of the whole people; political thought would center around military strategy; economic development would be determined exclusively by the needs of war. And all this would be the fate of a nation that--no matter how many immigrants it could still absorb and how far it extended its boundaries (the whole of Palestine and Transjordan is the insane Revisionist demand)--would still remain a very small people greatly outnumbered by hostile neighbors (396-7).

Unlike Chomsky, opting for the two-state solution because it is preferable to the only alternative of a Greater Israel, the logical outcome which Arendt had foreseen prior to the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state, Ilan Pappé refers to the two-state solution as the “old peace orthodoxy” and untenable at this point (Pappé 10-21). He argues for a new binationalism. Like his precursors Arendt, Magnes, and Bernadotte, Pappé views this as the most compelling proposal. He is joined by other leading scholars, preeminent among them Judith Butler, who further maintains that the path of binationalism, while seemingly impossible, remains necessary to achieve. What is the meaning of putting the matter this way? It may be impossible, but it shouldn’t be. Its impossibility is not reason to be against it. In Butler’s words: “It may be that binationalism is an impossibility, but that mere fact does not suffice as a reason to be against it” (Butler 30). Indeed Butler goes on to claim that the current situation can be defined as one of “wretched binationalism,” in which Israelis and Palestinians are “bound together” via “a regime of Israeli law and military violence.” She adds that this has led to both nonviolent and violent resistance. Once again, with Said, she points to Freud’s Moses as a “figure of cathexis” and “a living conjuncture” that might help us “think in new ways.” She says: “If we consider that Moses was not European, this means that the non-European Jew, the Arab Jew, is at the origin of our understanding of Judaism—a figure within which “Arab” and “Jew” cannot be disassociated” (Butler 30). We might then be moved beyond the Jew/Palestinian binary that, in any case, is “belied by both the Arab Jew and the Palestinian Israeli” (31).

Yet, is it death for any who might advocate binationalism in some kind of negotiations? Hailing from Sweden Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations’ mediator in Palestine, sought a cared deeply about peace. Indeed he was a pacifist. During Word War II he negotiated the release of approximately 31,000 prisoners from German concentration camps. Among these prisoners were 450 Danish Jews from the Theresienstadt camp who were released in April 1945. Subsequently, he worked to negotiate a binational solution to Mandatory Palestine in 1948. He was murdered by the Revisionist Lehi group or Stern Gang. There are now, and were in Ben-Gurion’s time, other choices than constructing and consolidating a Jewish state, but they are met with violence. Arendt, who called Bernadotte “an agent of nobody,” saw what his assassination would beget. Kohn summarizes:

Already in 1948 Arendt foresaw what now perhaps has come to pass, that Israel would become a militaristic state behind closed but threatened borders, a “semi-sovereign” state from which Jewish culture would gradually vanish. In 1948, Folke Bernadotte, who in mediating between Arab and Jewish interests called for the right of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs to return to the homes from which Palestinian Jews had driven them—the right of Arabs and Jews to live together as neighbors—was shot dead by the Revisionist Lehi group or Stern Gang. Bernadotte, a man of peace and judgment, was in Arendt’s words “the agent of nobody. . .murdered by the agents of war” (Kohn *xxv-xxvi*).

It is not difficult to see why Arendt heaped just praise upon Judah Magnes either. Arendt called Judah Magnes, the Conscience of the Jewish people.[[13]](#footnote-13) She describes him as one who raised his voice on moral grounds and who wanted a binational state. She elaborates:

He was a very practical and a very realistic man; it may be that he, like the rest of us, was also inspired by fear for coming generations of Jews, who may have to suffer for the wrongs committed in our time. But this was not his primary motive. He passionately wanted to do the right thing and had a healthy distrust of the wisdom of our *Realpolitiker*; and if fear did not really touch him, he was very sensitive to shame. *Being a Jew and being a Zionist, her was simply ashamed of what Jews and Zionists were doing* (Arendt 451-2).

Writing in 1952, she adds, “The fact is that nobody among the Jewish people could succeed Magnes.” Her fuller accounting of Magnes as personifying “the conscience of the Jewish people,” all the more necessary because of the Holocaust, was cast as a challenge not to abandon justice:

A people that for two thousand years had made justice the cornerstone of its spiritual and communal existence has become emphatically hostile to all arguments of such a nature, as though these were necessarily the arguments of failure. We all know that this change has come about since Auschwitz, but that is little consolation. *The fact is that nobody among the Jewish people could succeed Magnes.* This is the measure of his greatness; it is, by the same token, the measure of our failure (Arendt 452, my emphasis).

Arendt opposed the establishment of a Jewish state, but not that of a Jewish homeland. To save the Jewish homeland, along Arendtian lines, seems to involve much of what she argued in pre-state days. Indeed she thought that the triumph of the former would spell the doom of the later. Writing in 1948, she says, “Thus it becomes plain that at this moment and under present circumstances a Jewish state can only be erected at the price of the Jewish homeland” (397). These words appeared on the eve of Israeli independence in a piece entitled “To save the Jewish Homeland.”

It was a momentous error, from Arendt’s perspective, that so little resistance emerged from the Jewish community in the United States in regard to the establishment of the Jewish state. About the “readers of the Yiddish press, who for decades had been sincerely, if naïvely, convinced that America was the promised land,” she was critical. She maintained that “all these, from the Bronx to Park Avenue down to Greenwich Village and over to Brooklyn, are united today in the firm conviction that a Jewish state is needed” and “that America had betrayed the Jewish people.” She is most scornful for what she perceived as near unanimous approval by this assemblage of “the reign of terror by the Irgun and the Stern groups.” She regarded the Jewish community in the United States as stamping a kind of legitimacy upon these terrorist groups saying their actions are “more or less justified, and the Rabbi Silver, David Ben-Gurion, and Moshe Shertok are the real, if somewhat too moderate, statesmen of the Jewish people” (Arendt 390).

She feared “this growing unanimity among American Jews” (390). Losing a loyal opposition wreaks havoc, plurality evaporates, totalitarianism and force take over. But for those who did question the establishment of a Jewish state she held great praise. None more highly than that of Judah Magnes, with whom she herself worked to advocate binationalism, as previously noted. Such a system would be akin to a council system. She writes: “Local self-governing are mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine (Arendt). As Jerome Kohn elucidates upon this Arendtian proposal: “The condition of the council system of governing does not entail loving one’s neighbor but rather entering into political friendship with him” (Kohn, *xxvi*). Of course, her great hope for a binational state in Palestine did not come to pass.

Yet the last line of her essay “To Save the Jewish Homeland: There is Still Time,” can be uttered today. It reads: “It is still not too late” (401). While the state of Israel has jeopardized its chances for a homeland by taking so many Palestinian lives and homes, it is not too late to “create new realities.” It should be clear that repudiating state violence and dismantling militarized occupations must occur so that Jews and Palestinians can achieve what they once did much more easily in pre-state times, namely civil existence.

As I have shown, even in these dark days, Forum members are joining together to create better relations among Jews and Palestinians. Their use of dialogue is transformative. I have also demonstrated that many Jews and Arabs have long resisted violence for the sake of sustaining a more collective civil life instead.

We, as many of us as possible, must refute the role of the bystander. Attending to these present and past examples lays bare a strong will for peace and provides mechanisms for sustaining civil life. The point is to identify and then support the peacemakers. Those who work for civil alliances develop a better vision for the future because they refute violence as a means to an end. For what it’s worth, and I think it could be quite a lot, Freud’s remembrance of Moses as simultaneously Arab and Jew might provide yet more inspiration to work for civil coexistence.

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1. Officially named The Parents Circle - Families Forum (PCFF), the group is also known as the Bereaved Families for Peace and Bereaved Families Forum. I will refer to the group as the Forum hereafter. For more information about the Forum, established in 1995 by Yitzhak Frankental and several Israeli families who were joined in 1998 by several bereaved Palestinian families, see its website: http://www.theparentscircle.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Each time I quote someone from this film, the abbreviated *EP* will follow the speaker’s words in parentheses. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the following on-line video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dgo1MpWuwgE [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the following piece that describes some of Abu Awwad’s post-Forum activities: http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Making-a-difference/2015/0612/Ali-Abu-Awwad-chose-nonviolence-over-revenge [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Estimates for Palestinians who were either expelled or probably fled out of fear for their lives vary from 750,000 to 900,000. Displacements of both Palestinians and Israeli Arabs continue and Hobbesian-like life there is rendered more “nasty, brutish and short,” increasingly bereft of art as well. For example, the wildly popular sitcom creator Sayed Kashua, who is Israeli Arab and writes in Hebrew, fled Jerusalem in 2013, after Israelis lighted a Palestinian teenager on fire in an act of reprisal. Kashua feared for the lives of his children. He now lives in exhilically in Illinois with his family. He is deprived of his home and his home of him as artistic life narrows. See Ruth Margalit’s piece entitled “An Exile in the Corn Belt: Israeli’s Funniest Palestinian Writer Decamps to the Midwest,” in *The New Yorker,* Sept. 7, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example, the article entitled, “When Politics are Complex, Simple Joys at the Beach” *New York Times* July 26, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/27/world/middleeast/27swim.html?_r=0the> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Amnesty International, "Israel/Gaza: Operation Cast Lead: 22 Days of Death and Destruction," July 2009, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amnesty International, “Under the Rubble: Israeli Attacks on Inhabited Homes” (London: November 2014), MDE 12/03/2014). p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Amnesty International, *Under the Rubble: Israeli Attacks on Inhabited Homes* (London: November 2014), MDE 12/03/2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Azoulay’s “Civil Alliance,” including her description of her project as cited here as *CA* can be accessed through this URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqi4X\_ptwWw [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Fyodor Dostoevsky’s chapter on “The Grand Inquisitor” in his *The Brothers Karamazov.* Any edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Arendt’s “To Save the Jewish Homeland” in *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Kohn and Feldman. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Arendt’s “Judah Magnes, the Conscience of the Jewish People” in *The Jewish Writings*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)