

Narrative as a Tool for Change in Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue

Interview with Grace Feuerverger, author of **Oasis of Dreams**

DB: Was the issue of personal victimization and trauma in the larger realm of political and historical victimization a factor for you to consider? From the beginning and throughout in **Oasis of Dreams** you allowed us to get to know your thoughts and your own personal narrative. Why was that important?

GF: My own personal family situation was traumatic because of the fact that my parents survived the Holocaust. I felt I wanted a way out of this bleakness of my family. I wanted the cycle to end but I also could not ignore it. I could not have uncovered these stories if I had come as an “objective” [i.e. distanced] researcher. I learned a great deal about myself during this research process that in a way was a search for “home”. I have always felt like a psychological orphan and when I arrived at Neve Shalom/Wahat Al Salam so many of the people felt the same way I did, so I did not feel so alone. That was one of the attractions of the people in the village. I was born in Canada and I am Canadian but because of the calamity of my parents’ lives this trauma was transferred to me even though I did not actually live it [as is with all trauma]. My parents were from Poland. They survived the ghetto and then the forced labor/concentration camp. Stories about death and loss pervaded my entire family life. The situation in my own family did not give me the luxury of feeling Canadian in the same way as those families who had not suffered World War 2 in a personal way. What saved me is that there were other children in my neighborhood, Jewish and non-Jewish who were of immigrant parents in trauma and shock. I was here and I was not here. I had no real sense of belonging. Growing up in Montreal as a child I was fascinated by the French Canadian language and culture which in a way really saved my life. As an adult at University I studied linguistics because it was life affirming and I could continue to discover other cultures and languages. It gave me a sense of life, of vitality because in my own family the sense of death was always there. Studying language, culture and identity opened up a whole new world, which helped me define an alternative vision for myself.

DB: the Holocaust narrative dominates in your book as important for both Jews and Palestinians to consider and reflect on. Al Nakba is hardly mentioned, only in passing. Do you have a visceral grasp of Al Nakhba’s significance for the Palestinians?

GF: The Palestinians’ narrative is nascent. The Palestinian narrative is unfolding and eventually comes out in my dialogue with the village mayor, Riyak Rizek, [who is Palestinian] It is the first time I witnessed it. That conversation with him was about a human being telling me his story. It was a tender and beautiful conversation. I will never forget it. We touched each other’s hearts and got past all of those layers of masks and we realized that both sides are victims. The whole issue of victimhood as a label is not one the Israelis are comfortable with. The whole mission of the state of Israel was to eradicate the sense of the weak Jew in the diasporah who was slaughtered by the Nazis. Now when the suicide

bombings occur they ask themselves “Are we still the same Jews of the past who could be snuffed out at any moment?” The mayor said that he never spoke about this with an Israeli. He felt more comfortable with me because I shared my own story of suffering. There is a parallel to the emerging Palestinian narrative. The children of Holocaust survivors are beginning to share their stories, too. Time passes, the pain is still there but the passage of time had made it possible to distance oneself from the pain a little bit and eventually one can speak. It is difficult to engage on this level in Israel between Jews and Palestinians because it is not a neutral space.

DB: Do you feel that there needs to be recognition of the limitations of this lack of a neutral space? Do you believe that the dominant Israeli culture will ultimately have to make a decision about this relationship? In other words, make a decision to make peace or is it contingent on both people?

GF: The people of the region have to take matters into their own hands like they have done in this village. The leaders are certainly not doing a good job of it. In the process of dialogue the everyday people become architects of their own destiny rather than the pawns.

DB: What struck you most about your interaction with Mayor Riyak Rizek of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al Salam? What commonalities emerged?

GF: Guilt. Riyak Rizak understood the suffering and the guilt that comes out of victimization. The guilt of having survived trauma and yet not having solved anything around us. The guilt of wondering why you survived when others did not. It opened up a space of real dialogue between us. It helped me see past how the Israelis view the Palestinian.

DB: How do you define and envision the conflict?

GF: I see the huge complexity of it, the many layers of identity and perception need to be acknowledged before real change can happen. In our conversation [with the mayor] those layers were defined and revealed.

DB: This complexity and the time that it takes may be viewed as a delay tactic for real change to occur. In other words, “Let us talk and talk endlessly, feel momentarily better and in the end nothing changes?” There is a sense among Palestinians in dialogue here in the US that the Jewish community is more empowered to make changes. The Palestinians are disappointed and impatient when changes do not happen. What do you think?

GF: They may think that Jews are much stronger than they really are. One can understand that Jews actually feel very vulnerable because of the long history of anti-Semitism, persecution and genocide. This is so much larger than about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Jews are carrying thousands of years of anti-Semitism on their backs.

DB: When can action toward real justice occur?

GF: The conflicting issues need to be defined and then a safe place for dialogue needs to be created. Acknowledgement of personal pain and victimization of each side can take place and that allows for the possibility of miracles on the ground to occur.

DB: Although **Oasis of Dreams** is a relatively new publication, new tensions and “facts on the ground” have occurred in the past year and a half, I wonder if and how it has changed or shifted your perceptions? What has your continued relationship with the community been like?

GF: Well, this book and my connection to the village happened by accident while I spent a little bit of time at the Hebrew University more than a decade ago. After that I went back and forth to the village many times. It kept pulling me back because it opened up a vision of hope. Their stories started to emerge and eventually I could really feel it the way they did. It truly felt like home. They were happy that I wanted to write a book about them and they understand the importance of that because it can be shared with larger audiences. This is a grass roots community and they are in it for the long haul. It may be the only way to peace.