

Oasis of Storytelling: Narrative as a Tool for Change in Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue

By Doris Bittar

Review of **Oasis of Dreams: Teaching and Learning peace in a Jewish-Palestinian village in Israel**, by Grace Feuerverger
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photographs.

For many centuries the region of the Levant was home to diverse groups of people: Armenian merchants alongside Baghdadi Jewish artisans, Sunni Muslims managing a tolerant society with Eastern Christians who mingled with Crusaders and inadvertently created a haven for other obscure minorities that endure to this day. Could tolerance be achieved among the old and new groups that currently occupy this territory? Is it possible that an inclusive foundation for diversity and social change could begin with the sharing of stories amongst enemies?

Grace Feuerverger's **Oasis of Dreams** gives us theoretical and structural tools to work with the idea of narrative as the main foundation for Jewish-Palestinian relations. In this book narrative is given a backbone that does not confine it to the realm of literature but puts it squarely at the center of true political and social change. **Oasis of Dreams** is not a mere account and compilation of an ethnographic and anthropological study but may be seen as a resource for the fledgling and growing Jewish-Palestinian dialogue in the United States as well as a guide for Palestinian aspirations as they come up with a viable plan. Ultimately the issues covered in **Oasis of Dreams** could serve as a springboard for an analysis of the strategies of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and a future with Israel.

Ethnographer Grace Feuerverger details her experiences, analysis and theories of the village of Neve Shalom / Wahat al Salam, a bi-lingual, bi-cultural experimental village in Israel in which every aspect of life and education is shared equally by Israeli Jews and Palestinians alike. The concept of "thick" narrative as Feuerverger calls it is the main ingredient that lays the basis for a sustained relationship.

Drawing from a wide range of theoretical and literary writings, from Julia Kristeva and Anton Shammas to Edward Said and Toni Morrison, Feuerverger knits together a convincing argument that is poetically rendered. Clifford Geertz' and Robert Coles' guidance on crossing between the terrain of vulnerability and the one of detachment particularly influenced her to develop a more probing process. These writings and evidences support the "claim that narrative refers to the process of making meaning of experience by telling stories of personal and social relevance." The foundation for the village/school is the belief that a moral education based on diversity is possible. Feuerverger explains that "the village and its school as a moral enterprise appear to reflect the need for bridging about an understanding of the 'self' in relation to the 'other'."

Feuerverger, sites the Jewish Holocaust as an "un-mastered past". In fact, she explains "that the hugeness of the catastrophe may never be resolved." She places great emphasis on the importance of the Holocaust as significant for both

Palestinians and Israelis. She does not focus on the Palestinian Al Nakba, when almost a million Palestinians could no longer return to their homes in 1948, as significant to both people. We cannot entirely fault Feureverger because the Palestinians are still gathering their narrative of loss and exile. For the Palestinians, Al Nakba is a past yet to be fully mapped let alone mastered.

Nowhere is this more realized than in her contacts with the Palestinian mayor of the town, Rayek Rizek. Feureverger gains deeper understanding of the Palestinian narrative of diaspora and loss. They shared their deeper fears and found that through recounting the stories of their families a new terrain of redemptive reconciliation could be found. It is clear that Rizek's journey along with other Palestinians within Israel and in the diaspora is one of building and sharing their histories.

Grace Feureverger's **Oasis of Dreams** is provocative and could be a blue print for change. It is sensitively outlined and user friendly. It places the discussions about exile, identity and justice squarely into the realm of individual and collective efforts that can help us decide what our choices and actions could really achieve. She states that those that engage in true dialogue have chosen to become architects in their destinies and not pawns.

Narrative as a strategy for justice

The mapping and mastering of the past is exactly what the Palestinians are finally in the process of beginning. Its significance in our dialogues is not to be underestimated. Palestinians have long relied on the tactics of debate to show, explain and detail their point of view as if their case is being tried in a court of law. It is a rational approach because they know that the "facts" largely support their side as is evidenced by new scholarly research due to recent archival access. However, a shift is taking place in a recent effort to collect the stories from the parents and grandparents of Al Nakba who want to speak before they die. After five and a half decades these stories have left the family milieu and are finally being told in the authentic voices of those who lived them. These testimonies awkwardly blink at the light of day and are building into a collective history that is gaining bulk and snowballing. The ADC (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee) issued a call for the gathering of personal accounts and narratives about the 1948 Al Nakba. They have made it part of their list of priorities before the elders die and all is lost in obscurity. The gathering of testimonies is a significant component that will affect the Arab-American community's struggle over the best strategies to pursue in the coming months and years.

An unexpected yet fertile place for these stories to emerge is within the context of Jewish-Palestinian dialogue. Some of these closeted stories are freed and released into the realm of a larger public that can effectively digest them and eventually formulate a view that takes the human dimension into account.

The shift from political history to personal narrative is crucial in the experience of dialogue so it may be understood on the deepest and most complex level. For example, in the San Diego Jewish-Palestinian dialogue of which I am a part, a leader in the Arab community has been participating in dialogue for a little over a

year. His counterpart is a leader in the Jewish community. These two formidable individuals size each other up month after month and weigh-in as if it were a sporting event. The Palestinian knows every historical detail and mentions them over and over again. The Jews' eyes glaze over as they hear the "Balfour Declaration" speech one more time or the "Zionism" speech one more time. Recently, the Palestinian was interrupted and asked why his family left West Jerusalem. He replied almost casually, "My sister saw her best friend being blown-up by a bomb and was so traumatized that my father thought it best to visit with family in East Jerusalem. 'We would return home when things settled down.' We never came back..." For the first time the Jewish participants listened and allowed this story to enter their consciousness in a way that all other arguments could not. They could not form a counter argument to this story. It ended a cycle of accusation and counter accusation. It grounded our understanding and broke the cycle of retaliation perpetually played out in the public arena and that we tend to mimic.

Among Arab activists and intellectuals the main argument against dialogue is that it is a diversion. Activists may be diverted from the promotion of the Palestinian cause by engaging with and sharing the stage with Jews. The other argument against dialogue is that ideals become diluted and beliefs may be emasculated. On the surface these arguments seem compelling and require us to take a cautionary and self-critical stance. However, in the actual setting of dialogue, we are encouraged to trust our own idiosyncratic thoughts and engage in a subjective process that includes our antagonist and thus includes those whom we will ultimately have to live with. For those that participate in dialogue the sense of individual self and voice are palpable and real. In fact, Jews feel more Jewish and Palestinians feel more Palestinian in a dialogue setting so that dilution does not take place. The dialogue process does not succumb to the lowest common denominator yet room for change and creativity is established.

When we look at the empirical gains of this unlikely alliance we find surprising results. As stated earlier in a dialogic framework Palestinians share the media stage with Jews. The Palestinian narrative, essential to changing public opinion, is heard more often than when they go at it solo. Perhaps it is the sensation and bizarreness of Jews and Palestinians actually coming together in a civil forum that draws this attention. It is not only a novelty and a sense of balance that satisfies a wider audience's curiosity but it gives rise to a feeling of hope as well.

Conclusion

A nation is not solely built on land and power. A people that can gather the stories that lie in the dark corners of their homes, in forgotten mass graves or forsaken refugee camps can create a collective self in exile. A nation that strives above all else to create a broad and complex narrative that it can share with friend and foe alike is a nation that has accepted the challenges to move out of the realm of polemical fantasy and live in the real world among other nations. The Palestinians are on their way to achieving a collective narrative and their growing audience is ready to listen.