

I submitted this Op Ed to the Los Angeles times in August, 2006. Unfortunately, it was not published.

Opinion Piece

Submitted to: Nicholas Goldberg Op. Ed Editor, L.A. Times

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August 23, 2006

As a professional diversity trainer and facilitator, I have the opportunity to regularly speak with literally thousands of people across the country about current events, and to hear their views on ethnic relations and cultural conflicts. The recent war between Israel and Lebanon is such an event that just came up in one of my sessions. That war has many people thinking once again about what is widely believed to be the root cause of this and most other Middle Eastern conflicts----the war between Israel and Palestine. With regard to that war, due in part to rising American, 911-inspired Islamaphobia, many Americans are extremely biased in favor of the Israelis. That bias, in turn, prohibits them from being able to also feel compassion for the innocent Palestinian victims of the conflict.

Meaningful dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian war cannot happen at coffee shops, in classrooms, in political discussion groups or anywhere else in the United States, until the average person begins to feel compassion for both the innocent Israeli **as well as** the innocent Palestinian populations which are caught in the crossfire of that conflict.

Innocent Israelis, whether going to work, sending their children to school, on their way to the market, attending temple, enjoying a child's birthday party in a public park, sitting shiva, waiting for a bus to the library, or engaging in any other normal life activities, live their daily lives with the constant, never ending threat of Palestinian suicide bombings. Even Jewish bridal parties at wedding receptions have been killed by suicide bombers. The Israeli people, both (and primarily) Jewish and non-Jewish, have suffered **tremendously**, for **many** years now, from **countless** such bombings. Indeed, it is probably true that the majority of Israeli children don't even **remember** a time at which that kind of horrible violence did not exist in their country. The Israeli people deserve to live in peace, without the daily threat of extreme danger to their lives and to those of their children that is being brutally inflicted upon them by Palestinian suicide bombers. That is unquestionably their basic right as human beings.

In order to be fair, however, it is important to also be mindful of the severe suffering of the **Palestinian** people. I saw that suffering with my own eyes when in 1997 while on a government assignment to deliver a keynote address to a Palestinian women's group in Gaza City, I rode in a State Department armored vehicle from Tel Aviv to Gaza. I was shocked by what I saw upon crossing the border from Israel into Gaza. The day before the trip, while in Tel Aviv, I stayed in a very nice hotel, saw high rise office buildings, fancy night clubs, had lunch at a quaint little sidewalk cafe, (of which there were many), saw supermarkets filled with food, and watched people roller skating in the park, and playing soccer on the beach. Tel Aviv was a city as many Americans know cities to be. Then, upon crossing the border into Gaza, I was horrified. On the ride through Gaza to the assembly hall at which I was to speak, I saw human conditions that were as bad as any I had ever seen----people living in what appeared to be aluminum shacks. I saw **no** hotels, **no** high rise office buildings, **no** parks, **no** supermarkets, **no** sidewalk cafes. I saw, rather, what appeared to literally be a bombed-out shell of a society in which the landscape was filled with the dust of the crumbled white cement of half-destroyed

buildings. The streets on which I rode in the State Department van were horrible. I did see a few small outdoor markets and children in uniforms walking home from school. The streets on which they walked, however, (I don't remember seeing sidewalks on most streets), were saturated with filth and squalor.

The hall at which I spoke the next morning was filled with Palestinian women. After my address, during the question and answer period, I listened with a heavy heart as one woman after another described the **tremendous** suffering that the Palestinian people, and particularly Palestinian women, had endured under Israel's occupation of their country. Admittedly, I didn't see all or even most of the Gaza Strip, nor except for Bethlehem, did I see much of the West Bank, but at the end of the program, in a small, informal table discussion with a few women who stayed to speak with me, I was told that the sights that I saw on my way to the assembly hall were not at all uncommon across **much** of Gaza and the West Bank.

Palestinian people, whether going to work, sending **their** children to school, on **their** way to the market, or attending the mosque, enjoying a child's birthday party, burying a loved one, or engaging in any other normal life activities, live with the constant, never ending threat of violence at the hands of Israeli soldiers. The Palestinian people **also** deserve to live without the daily threat of violence to their lives and safety and that of their children. That is unquestionably also **their** basic right as human beings.

In the mid-nineties, I attended, for about a year, meetings of New Jewish Agenda, (NJA). It's slogan was, "a Jewish voice among progressives and a progressive voice among Jews." NJA, (comprised of Jewish members who were both religious and secular), supported the existence of the state of Israel, **while simultaneously** being critical of many of the Israeli government's inhumane policies toward the Palestinian people. New Jewish Agenda no longer exists, but on a personal level, I strongly support all current progressive Jewish organizations in Israel, here in the United States, and abroad, as well as other, non-Jewish organizations such as the Network of Spiritual Progressives founded by Rabbi Michael Lerner, which take a similar compassionate, balanced stand.

There is a lack of maturity and compassion in the governments of both Israel and Palestine, and very angry young men in both societies who violently attack those "on the other side".¹ As a consequence, millions of **both** innocent Israeli **and** innocent Palestinian people are suffering tremendously, in some of the same, and also in many very different ways. There can be neither meaningful dialogue about the crises in the Middle East nor a real chance for peace in the region until a critical mass of people begin to acknowledge and feel empathy for the suffering of both. This is a call for balanced compassion.

Lauren N. Nile

¹ In order to avoid implying a false equivalence between the anger of young Israelis and that of young Palestinians, I fully acknowledge that in addition to the underlying land dispute, many young Palestinians are also angry about the treatment of their people by the Israeli government.