Holy Land narrativesof lament and hope: Probing Palestinian-Israeli relations

by Marc Ellis in the July 19, 2000 issue

Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948, by Meron Benvenisti
TheEnd of the Peace Process: Oslo and After, by Edward Said

The tumultuous history of Palestinian-Israeli relations has seemed to reach its nadir in recent years. The hope brought by the Oslo Accords has been almost buried by the grief over the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the delays and brokering of the Netanyahu years, and the corruption and dictatorialness of the Palestinian Authority. Yet Jewish and Palestinian history remain intertwined in a knot of suffering and hope. Paradoxically, the present despair is accompanied by a growing recognition that healing can come only through confession and reconciliation.

Meron Benvenisti's book is an example of a burgeoning literature by authors who seek a long-range, in-depth understanding of the present predicament. In the 1970s Benvenisti was deputy mayor of Jerusalem. During the past 20 years or so he has been a prominent critic of Israeli occupation policies. In the '80s Benvenisti became convinced that the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and the West Bank had for all practical purposes become permanent. If and when the occupation came to an end, the integration of Jerusalem and the West Bank into Israeli society and economy would continue. The space left for an independent Palestine or even the foundations for an independent and flourishing Palestinian culture would be minuscule. In effect, and without conscious intent or understanding on either the Jewish or Palestinian side, Israel and Palestine had merged into one entity.

Sacred Landscape is the latest of Benvenisti's exploration of these themes. Its first chapters set the tone for a work that is both a critique of Israel's past and a lament for the lost Palestinian landscape. To have Palestine evoked by a Jewish Israeli may

seem strange at first, but Benvenisti grew up in pre-Israel Palestine. In fact, his father participated in the transformation of Palestine into Israel. As a geographer and mapmaker, he renamed the towns and villages of Palestine. By giving them names that referred to Jewish history, he was part of the process that eventually eliminated Arabic culture and the Arab people from a newly created Jewish state.

To instill a love for the Hebrew homeland in his son, Benvenisti's father took him on excursions in the 1930s and '40s to villages and places inhabited and named by Palestinian Arabs. Benvenisti portrays his father's agenda as aiming to clear physical and psychological spaces for the renewal of this Jewish homeland, and to instill in his son and his people the Zionist ethos of *moledet* (homeland): knowledge of the land's glorious Jewish past, intimate communion with its natural environment, and commitment to a pioneer ethos in collective agricultural settlements. Yet the elder Benvenisti believed that there was room for both Arab and Jew in Palestine. Reclamation of Jewish space would also leave space for a continued and valued Arab presence—room enough, then, for two homelands.

By the time of the 1948 war, however, this vision had disintegrated. During the communal struggle for and the emergence of an empowered and expansionist Israeli state, the landscape was thoroughly Hebraized at the expense of Arab sensibilities and population. Benvenisti argues that it was the loss of Arab population within the new Jewish state that eventually led to the virtual disappearance of Palestine. The disappearance was and continues to be problematic for Benvenisti, for he was born and raised as a Palestinian Jew, the mirror image of the Arabs who remained in Israel after the creation of the state.

Thus Israel's triumph, a triumph in which Benvenisti participated after the war years as a member of the pioneering youth movement, evokes a lament: "My father's map triumphed, and I, his dutiful son, was left with the heavy burden of the fruits of victory. The victory was so overwhelming that it utterly destroyed my childhood landscape, and my sense of loss was mixed with pride in my people's triumph. I often reflected on the irony of the fact that my father, by taking me on his trips and hoping to instill in me a love for our Hebrew homeland, had imprinted in my memory the very landscape he wished to replace."

When Benvenisti visited a Palestinian refugee camp on the West Bank and spoke to people who had originally been displaced in the 1948 and 1967 wars, he had the feeling that the "men talking to me were my brothers—a feeling of sharing, of

affinity. I could not share their sense of loss, but I could and did share deep nostalgia mixed with the pain for the lost landscape and a nagging feeling of guilt, for my triumph had been their catastrophe.”

The details of that triumph may provide a way forward over the next decades, Benvenisti believes. Though not without controversy, the details he gathers, especially of the 1948 war, are affirmed in different ways by many Israeli historians. Yet it is the terminology that Benvenisti uses that distinguishes his analysis and raises the consciousness of those who inherit the Jewish victory. For Benvenisti, the 1948 war can be divided into two parts: the first, a conflict between two communities at the time when the British mandate powers were being withdrawn and the post-Holocaust emergency was at its most intense, when Jews struggled to established their rights to a homeland and to gain the power to achieve it; the second, a struggle to extend Israel’s geographic and political reach beyond its needs for a homeland. In that process, and with forethought and efficient execution, the fledgling Jewish state emptied its borders of much of its Arab population. Benvenisti boldly labels the second half of the war as ethnic cleansing. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs were driven out of the Jewish state to create space for the new political entity to evolve without a disturbing pluralism.

Benvenisti’s point about ethnic cleansing is important for a variety of reasons. First, it deflates once and for all the purity of aims and intentions often claimed for the creation of Israel. Second, it places the Palestinian catastrophe in a wider context than the usual divisions between ethnic groups and the tensions that accompany cultural and religious differences.

The unforgivable fault that Benvenisti claims led to ethnic cleansing is a confusion between Zionist aims to create a homeland for a displaced community of Jews from Europe and the use of state power to continue these aims, as if state power itself were only another vehicle for Zionism: “The direct link between the Yishuv and its volunteering governing institutions, and the Israeli collectivity living in the context of a sovereign state produced norms and laws that were injurious to the basic rights of civil and human equality, were tainted with arbitrariness, and discriminated on an ethnic basis among the people subject to its authority.” Thus Jewish leaders did not differentiate between ethnic actions and goals without state authority and those same actions and goals “perpetrated by heads of state with the ability to pass laws and to enforce them by means of a powerful standing army subject to their absolute authority.”

The inability to differentiate between ideology and state underlies Israelis' denial that there was any ethnic cleansing at the birth of Israel and resistance to a renewed integration of the Jewish and Palestinian communities in Eretz Israel/Palestine (a term Benvenisti uses intentionally throughout his book). With the division between the communities and with the expulsion of Palestinians from their native space, Jews have lost their ethical landscape. It hinders their ability to face an essential question. How can Jews come to grips with the fact that a state has arisen within Jewish history, and that this state, like all other states, has a responsibility to all of its citizens and to those who were injured and expelled in its formation?

Edward Said's latest books carry a message similar to Benvenisti's. Said, an educator and Palestinian intellectual, has argued for a two-state solution to the crisis in the Holy Land. However, he has always held the vision of a reintegrated Palestine. Said's internal landscape, like Benvenisti's, was ruptured by the creation of Israel. His landscape was literally stolen from him and his family. Since that time he has been living "out of place"—the title he chose for his best-selling memoir of his childhood years.

The essays gathered in *The End of the Peace Process* speak eloquently and defiantly of the failure of Palestinian leaders to recognize the need to move from a revolutionary guerrilla entity to a mature democratic movement representing the needs of its constituency within and outside of the occupied territories. If for Benvenisti ethnic cleansing and continual expansion is Israel's original sin, for Said the betrayal of democracy and collaboration with Israel in limiting Palestinian dissent and claims for dignity and rights to land is Yasir Arafat's and the Palestinian Authority's great sin.

Said correctly and passionately raises the question of how Palestinians can be free if a majority of those displaced in 1948 and 1967 are excluded from the final negotiations. Moreover, he asks how Palestinian life can be revived when the very landscape of the proposed Palestinian state is littered with Jewish settlements, bypass roads and Palestinian elites who negotiate away the future in return for favors and status. And how will Palestinians ever be able to accept and live an integrated life with Jews if so little of Palestine is returned to them, and their rights and dignity are ignored by both Jewish and Palestinian leaders?

While Benvenisti and Said stress the large questions of displacement and betrayal, their aim is more localized and achievable: to recover in a new framework the

possibility of an ordinary life for Jews and Palestinians.

Within the Jewish world, such a recognition would be revolutionary and would ultimately lead to a healing that would place Eretz Israel/Palestine as a marginally important event in Jewish history. As the expanded state recognizes its multicultural reality, the homeland envisioned by Benvenisti and his father can be affirmed as a geographic and cultural location of Jewish origins and achievement. It can also be recognized as a place where violence has occurred and confession and reconciliation are needed. Jewish tradition and history can then move forward without the division that Benvenisti describes—a severing of his own internal landscape that mirrors the larger severing of the internal landscape of Jewish life caused by the Holocaust and the origins of Israel. For who can experience wholeness when violence has been done against them? Who becomes whole when the violated community visits its terror upon another?

At the same time, Palestinians can renew their collective life in partnership with the Jews who displaced them and now seek a just reconciliation for a shared future. In the new landscape, a secular state where citizenship rather than ethnic or religious identity is key can create new opportunities for both peoples to transform history and identity into a new synthesis.

Benvenisti and Said call our attention to a sacred landscape that is violated through division and complicity. Their words are a lament and a clarion call to move beyond the denials and the superficial peace process. The narrative of lament and hope prophesies that the judgment of history can be delayed but not denied. The revolutionary call to reconciliation with justice allows us to perceive another path. When the narrative is shared and the revolutionary becomes the ordinary, it is only a matter of time before the sacred landscape becomes a shared homeland for the native, the refugee and the exile. Benvenisti concludes his book with this challenge: “Only one who knows how to listen to the unforgetting silence of this agonized land, this land from which we begin and to which we return—Jews and Arabs alike—only that person is worthy of calling it homeland.”