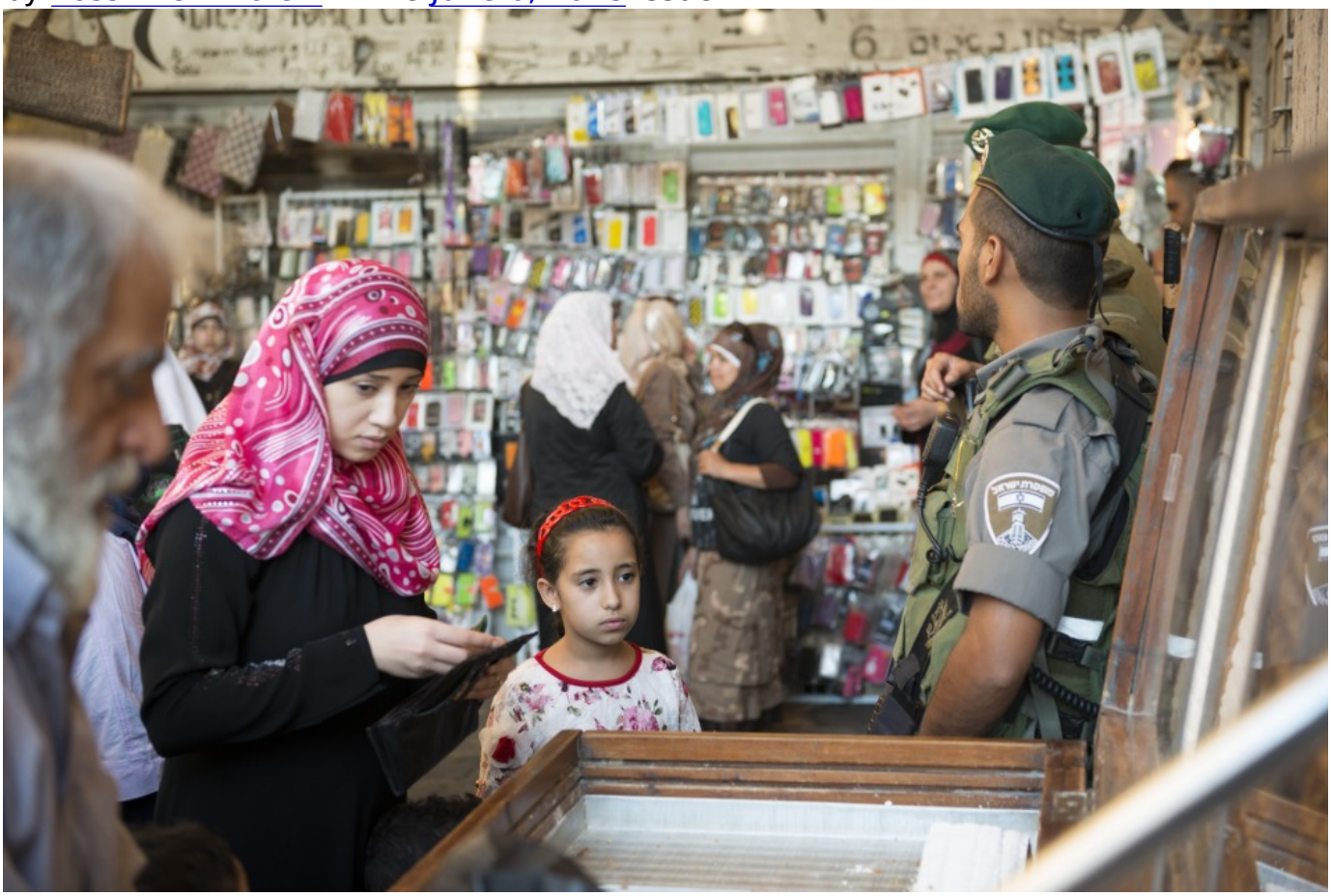
Occupation pierces my Israeli soul

Jewish history tells me to be both compassionate and alert. When it comes to the Palestinian conflict, I don't know how to do both at once.

by Yossi Klein Halevi in the June 6, 2018 issue



Jerusalem. Getty Images.

Dear Palestinian Neighbor: In 1989, at the height of the first intifada, I was drafted into the Israel Defense Forces. My unit was sent into the Gaza refugee camps, where I learned the meaning of occupation. By day we would enter the camps—shantytowns of corrugated roofs held down with blocks, sewage running in ditches—to demonstrate a presence, as the army put it. By night we would search homes for terror suspects—or for those who hadn’t paid, say, their water bills. We

weren’t soldiers as much as policemen, enforcing an occupation that seemed to me increasingly untenable.

One day a chubby teenage Palestinian boy, accused of stone throwing, was brought, blindfolded, into our tent camp. A group of soldiers from the Border Police unit gathered around. One said to him in Arabic, “Repeat after me: One order of hummus, one order of fava beans, I love the Border Police.” The young man dutifully repeated the rhymed Arabic ditty. There was laughter.

This story haunts me. It is, seemingly, insignificant. The prisoner wasn’t physically abused; his captors, young soldiers under enormous strain, shared a joke. But that incident embodies for me the corruption of occupation. When my son was about to be drafted into the army, I told him: There are times when as a soldier you may have to kill. But you are never permitted, under any circumstances, to humiliate another human being. That is a core Jewish principle.

Along with many Israelis of my generation, I emerged from the first intifada convinced that Israel must end the occupation—not just for your sake but for ours. Free ourselves from the occupation, which mocked all we held precious about ourselves as a people. Justice, mercy, empathy: these were the foundations of Jewish life for millennia. “Justice, justice, shall you pursue,” the Torah commands us, emphasizing the word *justice*. “Merciful children of merciful parents,” we traditionally called our fellow Jews. Occupation penetrates the soul.

Perhaps, neighbor, you are asking yourself: Why is this Israeli telling me about the meaning of occupation?

I am sharing with you my experience as occupier because I believe that if our two societies are someday to coexist as equal neighbors, we need to begin talking about this prolonged ordeal that has bound us together in pathological entwinement.

I learned something else in Gaza: the dream of Palestine wasn’t only to be free of Israeli occupation but to be free of Israel’s existence entirely. Graffiti promised death to the Jews. The most persistent image on Gaza’s walls was of knives and swords plunging into a map of Israel, dripping blood.

I veered between moral and existential fears. Both seemed to me reasonable—essential—Jewish responses to Gaza, to our Palestinian dilemma. Jewish history, I believed, spoke to my generation with two nonnegotiable commandments.

The first was to remember that we'd been strangers in the land of Egypt and the message was: Be compassionate. The second commandment was to remember that we live in a world in which genocide is possible, and that message was: Be alert. When your enemy says he intends to destroy you, believe him.

What makes my dilemma so excruciating is that those two nonnegotiable commandments converge on our conflict: the stranger whom we are occupying is the enemy who intends to dispossess us. So how do I relate to you, neighbor: as victim or as would-be victimizer?

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In 1992 Yitzhak Rabin, head of the Labor Party, was elected prime minister. That night, I wept with relief. Finally, here was our chance to end the occupation. A year later, when Rabin shook Yasir Arafat's hand at the White House and began the Oslo peace process, I agonized: Was this a breakthrough to peace or had we just committed one of the greatest mistakes in our history? Arafat had devoted his life to the destruction of Israel, to undermining our legitimacy. No one in this generation had more Jewish blood on his hands. But if Rabin was ready to gamble on Arafat the peacemaker, then so was I.

Yet Arafat and the leaders of what became the Palestinian Authority gradually convinced Israelis that their diplomacy was in fact war by other means. Arafat created his own diplomatic language: to CNN he spoke about the peace of the brave, while exhorting his people to holy war. Meanwhile, Hamas intensified terror attacks against Israeli civilians. Israeli intelligence warned Rabin that Arafat was secretly encouraging Hamas and had created a division of labor: Hamas would continue the violence while Arafat won territory through negotiations.

For many Israelis, the turning point was Arafat's 1994 speech in a Johannesburg mosque. Though the speech was off-limits to the media, a journalist smuggled in a tape recorder. Arafat reassured his critics in the Arab world that he really had no intention of making peace, that the only reason he entered into peace talks was that the Palestinians were too weak for now to seriously threaten Israel and that the Oslo process was nothing more than a ceasefire, to be broken at the appropriate time. The transcript of that talk made headlines in Israel. Arafat's defenders tried to reassure Israelis: he's just playing to the crowd. But the cumulative impact of Arafat's rhetoric reinforced the deepest Israeli fears of being deceived, of lowering

our guard.

Like most Israelis, I came to believe we'd been played for fools. A two-state solution had never been Arafat's intention—except as prelude to a one-state solution, the end of the Jewish people's dream of sovereignty. For Israel there would be no peace, only territorial withdrawals accompanied by terrorism. The Israeli right was vindicated: more Israeli concessions led to more terror.

Rather than view our conflict as a tragedy being played out between two legitimate national movements—as many Israelis have come to see it—the uncontested official narrative on the Palestinian side defines the conflict as colonialists versus natives. And the fate of the colonialist, as modern history has proven and justice demands, is to ultimately be expelled from the lands he has stolen. Tel Aviv no less than Gaza.

And so most Israelis, even many on the left, have concluded that, no matter what concessions Israel offers, the conflict will persist. The goal of the Palestinian national movement, Israelis are convinced, isn't just to undo the consequences of 1967—occupation and settlements—but the consequences of 1948—the existence of Israel. For those of us who believe in a two-state solution, that is a devastating realization.

Our conflict is defined by asymmetries. Israel is the most powerful nation in the Middle East, the Palestinians the least powerful. Yet we are alone in the region, while you are part of a vast Arab and Muslim hinterland. Those are the obvious asymmetries.

Less obvious are the political differences on each side. Among Israelis, supporters of a two-state solution regard partition as the end of the conflict. But from years of conversation with Palestinians I learned that even supporters of two states often see that as a temporary solution resulting from Palestinian powerlessness, to be replaced with one state—with the Jews as a minority, if existing at all—once Palestinian refugees return and Israel begins to unravel. And where Israeli moderates tend to see Palestinian sovereignty as a necessary act of justice, many Palestinian moderates see Israeli sovereignty as an unavoidable injustice.

If you were in my place, neighbor, what would you do? Would you take the chance and withdraw to narrow borders and trust a rival national movement that denied your right to exist? Would you risk your ability to defend yourself, perhaps your existence, to empower him? And would you do so while the region around you was

burning?

Having concluded that every concession I offer will be turned against me, I remain in limbo, affirming a two-state solution while clinging to the status quo. And yet I cannot accept our current state of seemingly endless conflict as the definitive verdict on our relationship.

We are trapped, you and I, in a seemingly hopeless cycle. Not a “cycle of violence”—a lazy formulation that tells us nothing about why our conflict exists, let alone how to end it. Instead, we’re trapped in what may be called a “cycle of denial.” Your side denies my people’s legitimacy, my right to self-determination, and my side prevents your people from achieving national sovereignty. The cycle of denial defines our shared existence, an impossible intimacy of violence, suppression, rage, despair.

It’s a cycle we can only break together.

This article is excerpted from Yossi Klein Halevi’s new book, Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor, *just published by Harper. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Our cycle of denial.”*

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