

## INTRODUCTION

Nira Yuval-Davis remembers sitting round the radio with her family in their Tel Aviv apartment, listening as the votes were counted at the United Nations. It was November 1947. If enough delegates voted “yes,” then they, the Jewish people of Palestine, would have a state of their own.

As the results were announced, it seemed like the city could barely contain everyone’s joy. Spilling down onto the street, people danced and sang that night until long after young Nira, finally exhausted, had gone to sleep.

But the U.N. General Assembly’s vote to end Britain’s colonial presence in Palestine by partitioning the land between its Arabs and Jews led to war: nights spent in air raid shelters, days of tension and fear. Nira knew nothing of what happened to the Palestinian Arabs — only that her valiant young nation had stood up against the invading armies of seven Arab nations, David against Goliath, and that it had prevailed.

Each summer, in the years after the war, Nira’s family left the city for Tantura, a small fishing village south of Haifa, where they and neighbours rented an old abandoned house. “We were three families occupying a big building with a yard, a bustan [orchard], a walled garden. We, the children and our mothers, stayed there for about a month in the summer, and our fathers joined us for long weekends,”<sup>1</sup> she writes in her essay, “The Contaminated Paradise.” In Tantura, her parents shed the stresses of their harried city lives. Nira spent idyllic days roaming the beaches and rocky inlets, disappearing for hours into the garden with a book, or

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exploring the old Roman fort and the empty, half-ruined houses of the seaside village. She watched sunsets over the sea, and moonlight rippling on the water. It was here that she learned to swim. For Nira, Tantura was her “magical childhood paradise.”

As she grew to adulthood, Nira began questioning the beliefs that she'd had about her nation's founding. After university she left Israel and eventually moved to London. She was already familiar with the Palestinian history of the 1948 War when, as a Leftist activist, she met Rafiq at a meeting on the Occupation. Rafiq was Palestinian, handsome, politically astute. They had a lot in common, and they laughed a lot together. They became lovers.

One night, Rafiq told her how in 1948, at the age of four, he had been abandoned by his mother as she fled the Jewish soldiers attacking her village. Taken in by relatives, he was raised by them in exile. His mother, in a different country, never claimed him, and he had never forgiven her. Moved by his story, she asked him the name of his village. “Tantura,” he replied.

The revelation was so devastating for Nira that she ended the relationship. Her memories felt “invaded,” “dispossessed,” she writes: “He took away my childhood haven.”

Jewish Israelis and Palestinians both remember the land as their own, but their memories, individual and collective, are utterly different. Two competing narratives of historical suffering frame the conflict between them, two peoples whose dreams of nationhood are bound to the same territory.

Israeli Ashkenazi Jews remember how the vision of a new Jewish society in Palestine germinated out of centuries of anti-Semitic persecution and violence. In the 1880s, state-supported pogroms in Russia and Russian-occupied Poland and Ukraine drove the first Zionist settlers to try to make that vision real. They bought land and worked it in hard-scrabble pioneer settlements that slowly grew into villages and towns. Then the Nazis overran Europe, with their Final Solution to “the Jewish problem.” Forced into death camps, enslaved, starved, and gassed, six million Jews perished. Under the shadow of the Holocaust, or *Shoah*,

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settlers and survivors fought together in the 1948 War of Independence to birth their Jewish state.

But Palestinians remember 1948 as the year of the *Nakba*. In a war that most of them never fought in, nearly three-quarters of a million people fled into an exile from which they have never been able to return.<sup>2</sup> These Arabs of Palestine became a displaced people who lost their historic homeland and everything that went with it: their land, their homes, their possessions, and their entire way of life. Over a million first, second, and third-generation refugees still live in refugee camps in neighbouring territories. Instead of the nation state they too had been promised when Britain's colonial mandate over Palestine came to an end, the land was divided between the new state of Israel, Jordan, and Egypt.

Nakba (in Arabic) and Shoah (in Hebrew) mean the same thing: Catastrophe. For Israelis and for Palestinians, the remembered history of a traumatic past has moulded their common understanding of who they are as a people. These catastrophes continue to mark the generations that follow — the descendants of Jews murdered in Auschwitz or Lodz or Babi Yar, and of Palestinians evicted into impoverished exile — and energize the force fields of collective memory they inhabit.

After the 1948 War, the founding story of the state that took shape in Jewish Israeli collective memory did not include the disquieting narrative of the Palestinian Arabs and their removal. There were few Israelis who had not lost friends or family members in the Holocaust or the War, or been damaged themselves. Their new state was shelter from that traumatic past and security against a similar future, and there was no room for anything that might threaten that — including the story of the Palestinian catastrophe.

As I researched the Palestinian Nakba, I became fascinated by Israel's relationship with this difficult alternative narrative of its founding. How, I wondered, does the shadow of the Holocaust reach from the past into the psyches of Israelis today, and obscure this other history? Some 160,000 Palestinian Arabs remained in the new state after the 1948 War, and now make up some 20 percent of Israel's population — how do these Palestinian Israelis experience the burden of their antagonistic dual identity, and how do they remember the trauma of their past? And

what of Jewish Israelis who hear of the Nakba — how does it alter their perceptions of the politics, and the landscape, of Israel?

The path that brought me to write about this troubled history began in a soup kitchen in New York City. I'd trained as a lawyer in my native Britain, but was dissatisfied, yearning for a practical way of integrating my faith and political commitment. I found it at the Catholic Worker, a lay community with an uncompromising anarchist philosophy of nonviolence, simplicity, political activism, and, above all, hospitality to those in need. At Maryhouse, a rambling former music school, some thirty people lived as a large, sometimes chaotic, extended family. Some had come from the streets or from mental hospitals, others were drawn by the desire to live differently; a different kind of need. Maryhouse was home to me for six years.

It was here that I met Kassie Temple. Kassie, who had studied for her Ph.D. in religion under Canadian philosopher George Grant, had been a mainstay of the community since 1976. She had a fierce intellect and total fidelity to the needs of the people she lived with and who she met through our daily soup kitchen. A devout Christian, she also had a profound reverence for Judaism. For several decades Kassie would travel up to a yeshiva on the Upper West Side for weekly Scripture classes. Tirelessly busy the rest of the time, Saturdays she remained in her room, studying Hebrew scripture, writing, synthesising. Her love of learning spilled over to any who would listen, which I loved to do. While we chopped vegetables for the lunchtime soup-pot, Kassie would passionately recount what she had learned in class that week, or would apply her Jewish exegetical tools to the Christian scriptures. She could talk for hours, and sometimes did.

Kassie taught me about contemporary Christianity's casual erasure of Judaism; how the "Christ-killer" rhetoric of old had largely been replaced by a supercessionist narrative of Jews as the morally rigid and legalistic adherents of a dusty Old Testament, eclipsed by the Christian New Testament of grace, freedom, and love. She lent me André Schwartz-Bart's *Last of the Just*, and I began to learn of the history of

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economic persecution, blood libel, and pogroms that marked Western Christianity's historical engagement with Judaism, and which paved the way for the Holocaust. An avid student of history, I was amazed by how little of this I knew.

I wrote frequently for the community's newspaper, the *Catholic Worker*, and eventually became managing editor. Co-founded by journalist and social-justice luminary Dorothy Day, the paper had a print run of ninety thousand and was one of the most influential voices in the Catholic Left. Though fearless in tackling some of the day's thorniest issues, it nevertheless avoided speaking about the situation in Israel's Occupied Territories. Like other members of our editorial board, Kassie had little time for specifically Christian peacemaking efforts or commentary on the subject. "Let a couple of hundred years pass. Then maybe we can start telling Jews how to be peaceful," she would say, her voice hardening.

That was why, when I volunteered as a Human Rights Observer in the West Bank some years later, it was with a small, secular NGO, the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS). It was early summer. As I walked through Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport with its luminous, Spartan architecture, I saw a stack of tourist brochures and picked one up, looking for a map. Since childhood, I've loved maps; pestering a family friend who worked as a travel agent to send me any spare copies, I would memorize cities and coastlines, trace imaginary journeys through Greece and China. The Israeli tourist brochure did not disappoint. I'd planned a few days travelling in Israel and quickly located my route — Tel Aviv–Jaffa, Jerusalem, Masada. But when I looked for Ramallah, the city I'd be passing through in a week's time, it wasn't there. Nor, indeed, was the West Bank. Everything between the 1967 Green Line and Jordan was unmarked empty space.

IWPS was based in Hares, a village not far from Nablus. I'd read a lot about the political situation in the Middle East, but I was unprepared for the myriad humiliations faced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories: the raw sewage I saw spilling down a hillside from a settlement into a once-fertile valley; the olive groves and farmers' fields torn up to make way for the Wall; the unpredictable, listless hours of waiting at checkpoints; having to apply to the Israeli authorities for a permit to

work or to travel, and risking being coerced into spying on your neighbours in order to get it; the quiet desperation of a middle class who hadn't been paid for months because of economic sanctions.

Perhaps most disturbing were the settlements, sprawling across hilltop after hilltop and dominating the villages and fields beneath them. Hares is close to Ariel, a settlement large enough to be considered an Israeli city. Ariel is primarily an economic rather than an ideological settlement; most people came for the good, cheap housing and tax breaks rather than to reclaim their religious heritage, and most commute daily into Tel Aviv. Yet the impact of their presence is devastating for nearby villagers: the lands around Hares were being ripped by bulldozers for the construction of a new road, parallel to the old, so that commuting settlers would not have to drive on the same roads as Palestinians.

I'd been in Hares for several weeks before it registered that the road sign at the bottom of the hill did not mention this Palestinian village of two thousand people, but only Revava, the settlement outpost a couple of kilometres beyond. In disbelief, I began looking for signs to the neighbouring villages, Kifl Haris and Marda. There were none. Remembering the tourist map, I was stunned at this exercise of power by an occupying force so confident in its domination that it would deny the physical reality of the land.

Though that moment on the road outside Hares was pivotal in this book's inception, this book is not about the Occupation. My focus is on Israel's engagement with the Palestinian Nakba of 1948: how contested histories of the past press through into the lives of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel today;\* and, ultimately, how they affect the possibility of peace between Israel and the Palestinian people. In examining the wounds and scars that defined the original conflict, and have defined its telling, I look through the lens of social suffering, an anthropological perspective that examines how, communally and individually, we

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\* Jewish and Palestinian Israelis are my subject, rather than Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, in refugee camps in neighbouring states, or elsewhere in diaspora.

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experience and respond to social forces of catastrophic violence.\* To me, this approach gives breathing room to the complexities of human experience, the fears and vulnerabilities of human suffering. Two devastating events, the Holocaust and the Nakba, marked Israel's founding, and how each has been remembered and forgotten has infused both the political and the physical landscape of the country. I do not parallel the Nakba with the Holocaust. It is not logically possible to equate the uprooting of over seven hundred thousand people with the meticulously planned genocide of six million. Where echoes pass between these separate yet entwined catastrophes is in the unfinished trauma lived by the survivors.

In writing this book I became more conscious of how vital an element in reconciliation and healing is the acknowledgement of another's pain. I knew this — it was part of my motivation for writing — but being immersed in that dynamic in my research made me more aware of its workings in my own life. When I was heard, I was more open, and saw this also in the people around me. When I felt silenced or invisible, I saw myself close: become defended, hard. It is part of our human nature, this need to be heard, to have a witness to the testimony of our suffering; and this is as true communally as it is for an individual.

From histories of social suffering come collective memories of trauma and displacement, so powerful that they overshadow present-day attempts at repair. The workings of collective memory can tell us a lot about the ways in which people make sense of historical suffering. Collective memory can, for example, be an essential component in the construction of national identity.

Both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are driven by a strong sense of nationalism, all the stronger for being contested. A nation is, in the

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\* This emerging discipline comes under the umbrella of medical anthropology. It suggests that suffering, while generally presented as a pathologised and individual concern, may often be a response to broader, structural issues, such as the violence of war, political oppression, or economic exploitation. While these sufferings are ultimately experienced by individuals, they are suffered collectively rather than singly. How to articulate or bear witness to suffering, one's own or another's, is a central concern; in their foundational work, *Social Suffering*, Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock describe the incapacity to acknowledge another's pain as being "at the bottom of the cultural process of political abuse." *Social Suffering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), xiii.

influential definition of political scientist Benedict Anderson, “an imagined political community.... It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>3</sup> As such, a nation has need of shared self-conceptions, and shared creation stories, to bind its citizens into a cohesive whole. Collective memories of past events fill this need. Individual remembrances of a common experience are varied, contradictory, partial; collective memory, shaped by sources as diverse as mass media, state memorials and commemorations, and history textbooks, presents a comfortingly unified history of the past. Cultural critic Edward Said notes that collective memory works “selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way ... for sometimes urgent purposes in the present.”<sup>4</sup>

Outside the boundaries of the nation lives the Other: the one who is different. The very presence of the Other gives form to the boundaries of the group. Just as a range of hills can mark a territorial boundary, so some perceived difference can act as a barrier to keep the Other out; it also forms the boundaries of the group by defining what the group is not. Jewish Israel, born, like most nation states, of war, has the Palestinians as a common enemy to hold its highly diverse population together. Globally scattered Palestinians are defined as a collective by the shared catastrophe of their 1948 defeat and dispersal by Jewish forces.

Vital to the psychic construction of a nation, collective memory has a tendency to render things in black and white. Historian Peter Novick, who has written on collective memory and the Holocaust, describes how it “simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.... [It] has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the ‘pastness’ of its objects and insists on their continuing presence.”<sup>5</sup> Shared perceptions of the past often stem from one specific memory which, as Novick says, “is understood to express some eternal or essential truth about the group — usually tragic.” For Israeli Jews and for Palestinians that foundational event is the catastrophe that each people suffered in the 1940s.

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Both peoples, crippled by an old, still-present pain, see themselves as burdened by a unique and permanent victimhood. Acknowledging the suffering of the Other might lessen the validity of their own, and comes laden with adverse political consequences. Psychologist Dan Bar-On and political scientist Saliba Sarsar note that:

For the Palestinians, accepting the Jewish pain around the Holocaust means accepting the moral ground for the creation of the State of Israel.\* For the Israeli Jews, accepting the pain of the 1948 Palestinian refugees means sharing responsibility for their plight and their right of return.<sup>6</sup>

The war of 1948 welded into place an asymmetry of power between the Jewish-Israeli state and the stateless Palestinians. While both groups deny the Other's historical suffering, that radical imbalance of power between them means that Israel can take denial a step further, and make good its felt need to "destroy the collective memory of the Other."<sup>7</sup>

The landscapes of the State of Israel — the Judean desert, the hills of Galilee, the ancient streets of Jerusalem — root the collective memories and the nationalist aspirations of both Israeli Jews and Palestinians. The Jewish people have finally returned to Israel as the place of their historical belonging, a refuge from the persecutions of diaspora. Simultaneously, Palestine is the stolen paradise of its longtime Arab inhabitants, for whom the Zionists are johnny-come-latelies, colonial settlers who rode on the coattails of the imperial British.<sup>8</sup> Both these narratives have at their beginning the same piece of land. As a concept, then, that land is highly contested: not only its borders, and its ownership, but also its landscape.

History, as we know, is written by the victors: school textbooks in Israel either made no mention of the Palestinian Arabs, or simply stated that they ran away. Similarly, contested landscapes can be refashioned to make manifest the victors' collective memory of the past. In Israel, as we will see, maps received new legends; Arab names were replaced with

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\* Holocaust denial is rife in the Occupied Territories.

Hebrew by a Government Names Commission. Empty Palestinian villages were demolished and new forests planted over their ruins, ensuring that physical traces of centuries of Arab presence in the land became invisible. Those that remained became part of the landscape: ahistorical ruins, leached of their specific past.

Years later, Nira Yuval-Davis returned to Tantura. The ruined houses had disappeared; the childhood paradise of her memories had been transformed into a tourist spot, and the prefab chalets now dotting the beach were the local kibbutz's main source of income. The old mosque, though, was still there, and Nira went inside. Israeli law forbids the desecration of holy sites, but the building was a hollow shell, full of trash and stinking of urine. Her Tantura was gone, and so too was Rafiq's village: its traces invisible to anyone who did not know to look for them, and its holy place profaned with visitors' garbage. After this, she writes, "I was ready to view Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with somewhat more detached eyes."<sup>9</sup>

Nira's difficult awakening involved not only stepping out of the collective memory, but also renegotiating the memories of her own past. Bearing reluctant witness to the other, hidden, history of her land, she was able eventually to hold the realities of both.

Eitan Bronstein writes of the need to "talk about the Nakba in Hebrew so that our language will be more peaceful and just."<sup>10</sup> Eitan is the co-founder of Zochrot, a small, primarily Jewish-Israeli NGO based in downtown Tel Aviv, whose mission is to make their fellow Jewish citizens conscious of the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. Zochrot creates pockets of resistance in the flow of Israeli political imagination through acts of public commemoration: organizing historical tours to the sites of demolished villages, or amending street signs so that they also include the street's former Arab name. Its members accompany mourning Palestinian Israelis on their commemorative marches to the demolished villages on Nakba Day — commemorations that the Knesset, Israel's parliament, has recently taken punitive steps against.

Zochrot makes visible the invisible past, the villages that lie beneath Tel Aviv or the hilltop ruins overlooking a thriving Jewish town. National

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identity and belonging are rooted in a place, and are destabilized by accepting that another people's history is also rooted there. Zochrot's highly controversial memory-work forces Jewish Israelis to look again at the familiar landscape, undermining the consensus of the past by bringing the hidden history of the Nakba into view.

As Nira and many other Jewish Israelis have discovered, hearing the story of the Other's suffering can initiate a painful process that peels off layers of identity, as much a part of us as our skin. This is a hard, risky thing to do. It's also a sign of hope. The land of Israel/Palestine is small, and for a brokered peace to stabilize and hold there must be some degree of reconciliation between the two peoples, whether they live together in one state or side-by-side in two. Opening oneself to the Other's story, and to the possibility that it may transform one's own story, is an essential step toward reconciliation.